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“So Much Happens between those Two Spaces ”: Focalization and Parent-Child Relationships in the Moth Keeper and the Magic Fish

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“SO MUCH HAPPENS BETWEEN THOSE TWO SPACES”: FOCALIZATION AND PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN *THE MOTH KEEPER* AND *THE MAGIC FISH*

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This thesis identifies and examines how parent-child relationships are established within contexts of power and visually depicted in graphic novels. Establishing parent-child relationships through mutually reciprocal care is significant as a phenomenon because of the difference between the way parent-child relationships operate between the beginnings and ends of texts. The relationship change implies a problem with the relationship in the beginning which is rectified through reciprocal care. Amy Mullin describes the change as an acknowledgment that the other person in the relationship is a whole and unique individual separate from an assumption of unconditional love. Rather than viewing parent-child relationships as transactional and impersonal, Mullin concludes that “both parent and child need to pay close attention to one another, to trust each other enough to disclose who they really are, and to engage in activities that respond to each person’s needs and interests” (197). In the two primary texts I explore regarding this topic, *The Moth Keeper*, by K. O’Neill, and *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen, the trauma and power structures afflicting the characters prevent parent and child from acknowledging, communicating, and caring for each other. However, once these factors are dealt with, both texts naturally conclude with the young protagonists, Anya and Tiến, entering into reciprocal relationships with their parents. Acknowledging different kinds of

parent-child relationships is important for understanding how individuals in different parts of power hierarchies can interact. Reciprocal relationships like Mullin identifies are depicted in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* as desirable, highlighting the importance of reciprocity and care even in disparate power situations.

KEYWORDS: Children's Literature, Graphic Novels, Focalization, Parent-Child Relationships, Storytelling, Power

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between parents and children is often a central point in children's lives both in and out of texts. The necessity of care relationships in young people's lives naturally places them in relation, and sometimes conflict, with their caregivers. The power structures imbued into these relationships greatly influence both the way the individuals conceive of themselves as persons in a relationship and the bases of the relationships themselves. These relationships can vary between positive and negative representations to everything in-between. In many cases, coming-of-age narratives incorporate a moment in which the child character and their caretaker mutually recontextualize their relationship as new information is revealed to them about themselves, each other, and the "universe." The "universe" refers to Roberta Trites' conception of power in adolescent literature that positions the young protagonists within a "universe" of power that they must navigate within. In regard to children's relationship with their parents, the "universe" serves as the power context where both parent and child necessarily interact with each other. In the moment the relationship changes and the "universe" has been disturbed, the individuals involved in the relationship can reevaluate the relationship, changing it from the inside out and reaffirming their love regardless of the power structure.

The primary questions to be answered regarding this phenomenon as it appears in literature, then, relate to how children are presented in relation to the adults in their lives and what these relationships can reveal. When child protagonists are positioned as the focalizers who are interpreting the "universe" which includes their parents, how the relationships are focalized is important to understanding the interiority of said relationships. Focalization visualizes characters' minds and contextualizes their actions against their interiority. The questions to be asked are: how are these relationships presented in the text, and what do they reveal about the

characters? How do the changes that occur over the course of the story affect these relationships, and how are these changes focalized? These questions all point back to the central question I am posing which asks what happens to the relationships between parent and child when the "universe" is shaken and new information is revealed. I argue that the destruction of previously believed power structures—both implicit and explicit—can result in a new connection that recognizes the individuals as equal participants in a reciprocal relationship. These questions also point towards the medium I am exploring in my thesis, graphic novels. Graphic novels use visuals to focalize the characters and their relationships, offering unique methods to explore parent-child relationships.

In graphic novels, these parent-child relationships are visualized through focalization which exposes one or more characters' interiorities and adds nuanced meaning to the way the relationships are presented, potentially offering new avenues to depict the relationships and their changes more precisely. More complex ideas can be communicated through methods like light/dark or color focalization as seen in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* respectively by revealing the interiority of the characters visually. In addition, the relationships themselves can be depicted and focalized to not give preference to one character over the other as the narrator, conveying the relationships as multifocal. The visual elements of the primary texts serve to add complexity to the ways characters' interiorities are presented, including their relationships with other characters like their parents. For the purposes of my inquiry into parent-child relationships, graphic novels offer a unique way to explore these relationships and how they change, combining the narration with the illustrations in order to add depth to the understanding of the interiorities being explored.

The primary texts I examine in this thesis are *The Moth Keeper* by K. O'Neill and *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen. I chose these texts to analyze two different aspects of focalization and explore how their child protagonists conceive of themselves and their relationship to their parents. *The Moth Keeper* focalizes the protagonist, Anya's, mind using light and darkness, reflecting her feelings of liminality and un-belonging about herself which causes her to reject her father figure. *The Magic Fish* uses color to bridge temporal gaps between the mother— Hiền—and son—Tiến—protagonists and visually express their similarities despite their inability to speak directly to each other. Despite the differences in focalization, the texts are united in their theme of fantasy and fairy tales which allow the texts to make use of exaggerated settings and visuals to focalize the interiority of characters more effectively. I have found the diversity of the texts and their familial structures to be useful in the exploration of the ability of focalization to express nuances in relationships.

In *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish*, the child protagonist redefines their relationship with the parent near the end of each novel. For *The Moth Keeper,* the protagonist recognizes her father-figure as someone who has a direct relationship with her as opposed to only being a member of their shared community. In *The Magic Fish,* the mother and son both come to understand the other as similar to each other through a shared narrative. These moments re-establish the relationship as one between equally contributing individuals rather than parent-child. These points do not necessarily indicate that the child has taken power from the parent but instead a realization that the divide between parent and child is artificially constructed and thus broken by the knowledge that the other is an individual. These shifts coincide with the characters' reframing of their understanding of their parents which, in turn, reframe their conceptualization of the relationship. Changes in these relationships can be attributed to the

internal adjustments in perspective represented through focalization which neither raises the child to the level of adults nor drags adults down to the level of children as might be suggested in an aetonormative response. Instead, the equating of children's narratives to their parents' identifies the unity in interpersonal interactions based on individual responses to one another.

Methodology

Focalization in graphic novels is important to examine the nuances of how parental relationships can be represented in texts written for and about children and adolescents. Given the significance and prevalence of parent-child relationships in children's literature, the representations of parent-child relationships are an important component in the study of graphic novels aimed at young readers. Since these relationships are often depicted as fundamental to the child character's story, the relationships' portrayals in texts also affect the continuous formation of the field. Further, this study expands on the ways power is represented in children's literature, specifically how power can influence the relationships between children and their caregivers. The study also contributes to the investigation of focalization and power, exploring how power and relationship dynamics influenced by power can be depicted visually. Graphic novel criticism is a growing field, and it is therefore important to study children's graphic novels and how their unique presentations of relationships impact preexisting conversations about power, focalization, and care relationships.

To explore the topic of focalization in parent-child relationships, I have chosen two central texts—Kai Mikkonen's *The Narratology of Comic Art* and Amy Mullin's theory of parent-child care relationships—to investigate how parental relationships are presented in a graphic format and the nuances implicit in the presentations. Paramount among these theories,

Mikkonen's concept of focalization is fundamental to understanding and contextualizing the questions I have put forth. Focalization is defined as a theory of narratology expounding on the idea of "point of view" (Bronzwaer 195). Focalization pertains to not only who sees but also who speaks, differentiating between the focalizer and narrator which then extends also to the focalizee (who is seen; who is listening) (195). The central question of my thesis hinges on the way child protagonists behave as focalizers understanding their parents both before and after their perspectives of each other shift to change their understanding. Focalization functions in graphic narratives by exposing the disconnect between characters' interiorities and the power structures composing their contexts. In *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish,* focalization visualizes the protagonists' minds against the constraints the "universe" places on them as children.

In the process of using focalization to understand parent-child relationships, four other theories relating to power, person-to-person understanding, and trauma are necessary to recognize the protagonists' perspective shifts. These four theories include Roberta Trites' conceptualization of power in YA literature, Michelle Balaev's theory of trauma, Marshall Gregory's understanding of the power stories have, and Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy. Trites' idea of power proposes the idea of the "universe" that young protagonists either adapt to or die from (2). The struggles that result from navigating around and existing within such power structures lend themselves to trauma. Balaev explores trauma's ability to render a character wordless and dissociated from themselves because of their trauma with far reaching consequences regarding inter- and intrapersonal relationships. Within the narratives, characters' trauma must be dealt with in some way. Gregory offers storytelling as a particularly powerful method of connecting to and affecting readers; the method connects their own stories with others. Keen also deals with reader response, exploring narrative empathy and the ways readers can

empathize with characters. These theories all contribute to the ways characters navigate their relationships with themselves and their parents/children, stitching focalization to the kind of parent-child relationships detailed in Mullin's theory.

The second foundational theory for my arguments is Amy Mullin's theory of familial love which investigates parents and children in how their relationships are between unique individuals who must be cognizant of each other. Using reciprocal care relationships as the basis, empathy, time, and awareness of the other are necessary factors for those in parent-child relationships to produce intimacy in the relationship (182). Mullin further argues that these relationships, while necessarily reciprocal, do not need to be equal. Due to differences in ability and conscious awareness, children may not be able to be purposeful participants in the relationship, unlike their parents. Regardless, the intimacy that is produced unconsciously still contributes to the idea of reciprocal love Mullin is cultivating (183-4). The uniqueness of each other's individuality is slowly revealed over time by functioning within the context of a relationship. From that point, the value of the relationship is rooted in the relationship itself, "a kind of love that responds to the quality of the relationship rather than simply the worth of the other person" (197). For both *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish,* the children and their parents mutually come to identify the other as individuals who share a valuable relationship. Specifically, *The Moth Keeper's* protagonist must learn to both see her father figure as an individual and value the unique relationship they have. In *The Magic Fish,* both mother and son use fairy tales to come to an understanding that their relationship is more important than their differences in age or narratives. This theory thus poses an answer to my inquiry into what happens at the moment children and parents mutually reconceive of their relationship. In my arguments, I assume this theory as a basis and work towards it by contextualizing the characters'

feelings using theories of power, empathy, trauma, and storytelling. Focalization reveals the examples of Mullin's theory and its components by revealing the minds and feelings of characters.

The innate imbalance Mullin identifies connects to Trites' investigation of power imbalance present in adolescent literature. Trites' conceptualization of power positions adolescent protagonists in relation to the "universe" and its relative power against them. Trites examines Max Weber's definition of power in conjunction with Foucault and Lacan's to establish power as "imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons" with imposition framed as "repress[ion]" (4). Trites explores power specifically in the ways it causes conflict between characters and systems which seek to exert their power over others. For characters within "universes," narratives become questions of where power is distributed and how power struggles play out. In the context of *Disturbing the Universe,* the power of adolescents is put at odds with the "universe" as they question their positions and relative agency within it. Because they are necessarily positioned within systems which utilize power as repressive forces, "the social power that constructs them bestows upon them a power from which they generate their own sense of subjectivity" (7). In YA and children's literature, the young protagonists must "reckon with both their sense of individual power and their recognition of the social forces that require them to modify their behaviors" (6). I specifically reference Trites' theory in the chapter exploring *The Moth Keeper* to explain the way the Anya views her community and its power structure as a "universe" where she feels she doesn't belong. The "universe" is not as explicit in *The Magic Fish* but still plays a part in the homophobic and oppressive context that kept Tiến from coming out and Hiền from seeing her mother after she was forced to flee her home. Through this context

of power, I consider how focalization is used to designate positions and expressions of power in the protagonists in conjunction with Mullin's theory of reciprocity.

Power as repression positions power structures as potentially traumatic systems that reproduce the "universe" Trites details. In order to explore this possibility in the primary texts, I have reviewed Michelle Balaev's theory of trauma as it relates to literary studies and identifies the wordlessness and alienation that can result from traumatic experiences. Balaev defines trauma as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (150). For the child protagonists, their trauma thus disturbs not only their sense of self but also their place in the "universe," causing an othering both within the child and between them and their context. This alienation and inability to internalize the origin of the trauma makes it "unrepresentable due to the inability of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the event" (151). Trauma in graphic novels can be expressed visually without dialogue, exploring the nuances of trauma while maintaining trauma as it is described by Balaev. In both the primary texts I am examining, each of the protagonists either has experienced or is experiencing trauma that affects their ability to both communicate with others effectively and empathize with those closest to them. Their interpersonal relationships can be contextualized by their own interiority through understanding trauma and acknowledging the characters' traumatic lens. All of the protagonists I study in the following chapters must navigate their traumas before they can renegotiate their relationships with others, making trauma a central issue in this thesis.

Marshall Gregory theorizes about the power of stories to help readers understand themselves. These theories explain how readers can find unity in stories which, in my thesis, leads to the resolution of their traumas. Gregory's exploration of storytelling identifies stories as

wielding power for readers. Since Gregory connects stories to human commonality and understanding, his theories position stories as empathetic pieces for readers. Specifically, Gregory writes that "I can recognize, understand, and sympathize with what is represented because the referents are universal to my species" in reference to the use of stories and their contents which are "universal" (46-7). This universality is what allows stories to connect with readers which in turn allows readers to take up many stories from a variety of contexts. Understanding through stories, as Gregory also writes, is brought about because "human beings rely on narrative's capacity to pattern the chaotic 'stuff' of raw experience into intelligible and meaningful shapes" (62). Stories thus occupy a significant part of readers' identities and relationships with themselves, connecting and ordering real and potential events in a way that can be understood and internalized. The stories Gregory examines can also be used to refer to spoken stories from others. These references, in turn, connect back to empathy and its ability to connect individuals together through shared feelings. Storytelling thus connects to both of the primary texts through how the protagonists take in the stories of others, as they become the readers Gregory identifies. The theory then gives insight into how the characters and their relationships shift as a result of taking in and being changed by the stories. In *The Magic Fish,* storytelling is a major component of the plot, and storytelling becomes the main nexus for power in the story that Hiền and Tiến must learn to navigate and understand. *The Moth Keeper* also includes storytelling as a component in the narrative, allowing Anya to understand Lioka's motivations against her own.

To understand how characters bridge the imbalances of power and love, I use Suzanne Keen's theory of empathy. Keen has written about narrative empathy and the ways that readers can "feel with" characters and situations in texts. This theory also applies within the narratives to

explore empathy between characters which is represented through focalization. In her article, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," Keen identifies empathy and the narrative methods that are used to evoke emotional, empathetic responses to characters. She articulates two particular methods by which readers may come to feel empathy for characters in a text. The first, character identification, poses that readers may identify with characters and their goals in such a way that they empathize with them. This idea is especially true for readers who share particular experiences with characters, Keen noting that "readers who linked themselves to story characters through personal experiences were more likely to report changes in self-perception, if not actual empathy" (217). The narrative context and metatextual elements all contribute to empathy and whether or not readers empathize with characters and are invested in them. The second, narrative situation, explores how empathy can be brought about through the narrative employed by the author to "give a reader access to the inner life of characters" (220). Using techniques like free indirect discourse and first-person narration, even non-realistic texts can be made empathetic through narrative technique. When viewing the primary texts, Keen's empathy can be applied both within the text and outside in its focalization. In many cases, texts' settings encourage empathy for the characters as presented through the focalization. Within the narrative's context, empathy can also be brought about within the characters as they consider and reconsider their feelings towards other characters. In my thesis, I focus on the ways characters empathize with other characters, particularly their parent/child. In *The Moth Keeper,* Anya learns to empathize with her father figure over the course of the story, using empathy to connect herself to others in the community and thus find a place for herself. Similarly, Hiền and Tiến empathize with the fairy tale characters in *The Magic Fish* to inform how they think of themselves. Empathy can

then be explored through focalization and used to explain shifts in power and perspectives for children towards their parents.

In order to examine the theories of empathy, power, trauma, and reciprocal love in the primary texts, I use the theory of focalization to explore the interiority of characters through the visual components of texts. Using all these theories as a framework to explore the primary texts, I explore the internal struggles of parents and children and the way they are focalized in texts. Empathy, power, trauma, and relationships are all internally felt by characters in a text which are then represented by the focalization. The texts use focalization to visually show the characters' perspectives on others by making their interiorities clear. Power serves as an overarching context the protagonists must navigate, which informs the way they empathize with others and consider their familial relationships. Over the course of the narratives, these theories each contribute to the moment in which the relationship between parent and child fundamentally shifts. Mullin's theory, which I largely support, contextualizes the shift as a realization of awareness for the other person as an irreplaceable individual with whom an intimate relationship is shared (182). My methodology seeks to explore how the relationship between interiority and exteriority can lead to this conclusion and answer what this conclusion means for graphic novels for young adults and children.

Literature Review: Graphic Novels

The study of YA and children's graphic literature involves understanding how the genre has developed and is defined. Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox, editors for *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults: A Collection of Critical Essays,* write in the introductory chapter that graphic novels can be defined as "long-form comics that feature compelling

narratives" (10). Traditionally, comics were aimed at adults instead of children before a "resurgence of comics geared toward a youth readership" emerged following a period of "concern among parents and educators that children's minds and bodies were being harmed by over-exposure to lowbrow influences" (3). This resurgence has been highly successful to the point of influencing children's and YA literature in general, Abate and Tarbox noting an increase in likelihood in "both in text-only and in comics narratives" to "employ child focalizers, provide indeterminate endings, and foster other forms of postmodern ideation, including deviations in terms of narrative coherence and a furtherance of the expectation that readers need to be challenged to fill in interpretative gaps on their own" (5). They further stress how "hybridity" has become important to the children's and YA literature genre because of the rise in graphic novels and comics (5). *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* contribute to this "hybridity" by intermixing meaning-laden imagery with written text to create meaning particularly in the spaces between the panels.

Hillary Chute explores the history of comics more broadly in her book, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere,* and specifically engages with how readers interact with comics and graphic novels. In response to theories that reading graphic novels is "subpar literacy" or "'an evasion of reading,'" Chute argues that reading graphic novels "requires active and involved literacy" because readers must actively be "looking for meaning" (22). Connecting to Abate and Tarbox's understanding of graphic novels, graphic novels' hybridity lends them to deeper examination directly resulting from the relationship between visuals and text. Chute further notes that reading comics "involves a substantial degree of reader participation to stitch together narrative meaning" (22). The idea of stitching relates to both chapters of my thesis in my study of focalization and in-betweenness which require stitching to understand the meaning

implicit to the light/dark of *The Moth Keeper* and mixed colors of *The Magic Fish*. My thesis focuses on YA and adolescent graphic novels particularly in how they represent parent-child relationships through the connection—or stitches—between panels.

Literature Review: Power and Belonging

One of the most important aspects of parent-child relationships that are represented in graphic novels is the idea of power. Maria Nikolajeva writes in the introduction of her book, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, the definition of aetonormativity which proposes a theory in which childhood is othered and positioned as abnormal compared to adulthood. The power dynamics between parent and child are thus weighted heavily towards adults and away from children. These dynamics can apply to both how the relationships are depicted visually and how they are narrated. Nikolajeva argues that "the child/adult imbalance is most tangibly manifested in the relationship between the ostensibly adult narrative voice and the child focalizing character" (8). This argument supposes that the framework of literature is aetonormative, taking the narrative power away from children. Within *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish,* an aetonormative lens informs the understanding of the "universe" and its occupants. The normalization of adulthood and othering of childhood affects how the child protagonists conceive of themselves and their parents which in turn affects how their relationships shift.

Clémentine Beauvais also writes about power theories in children's literature. In "The Problem of 'Power': Metacritical Implications of Aetonormativity for Children's Literature Research," Beauvais provides definitions for two specific forms of power she identifies as significant for children's literature, expanding on the power Trites and Nikolajeva define in the

"universe" and aetonormativity. Particularly, Beauvais distinguishes authority and might from the base definition of power before attributing authority to adulthood and might to childhood. Authority is defined as "a set of sometimes numinous properties of a person or institution which enables it to counsel, influence, or order, from a position which all parties accept as being in some way legitimate" (79). Might is defined in contrast as deriving its power from potential, "dependent on the existence of a future for them in which to act" (82). My analysis reveals the nuances of these power dynamics and their effects on relationships in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish*. The difference between authority and might adds depth to the relationships central to the primary texts and how the child protagonists navigate their "universes," their might pushing up against their parents' and other adults' authority.

In "Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguity of Childhood," Beauvais also explores some of the intricacies of childhood as a condition, identifying Simone de Beauvoir's theory of children as temporal others. Beauvais explains de Beauvoir's theory as alienating children from adults, Beauvais referring to childhood as "condition[al]" (332). Related to Beauvais' previous conception of power and Nikolajeva's theory of aetonormativity, the power associated with adulthood serves to isolate and oppress childhood specifically because of the might and potential associated with it. This article then goes into more detail in exploring the reasons behind why adults engage in this othering. Specifically, adulthood is characterized by Beauvais and de Beauvoir as being oppressive due to the assumption of futurity childhood represents. Because of the potential future childhood represents for adults, "the adult look forces the child into a struggle with otherness. But the child, in return, offers the adult moments of unhindered freedom, moments to recapitulate one's personal history, in all its facticity and bad faith" (Beauvais 343). In this way, adulthood and childhood are positioned as deeply invested in each other in spite of

the imbalance in power between them. In fact, this imbalance in power actually facilitates their investment with each other. For the primary texts in this thesis, this tension and otherness can be seen in the way the children are represented against the adults. The stress caused by childhood's ambiguity is acutely felt by the child protagonists which incites, in some ways, their questioning of the "universe" and their parents who potentially perpetuate the otherness they feel. The feeling of otherness contributes to the protagonists' trauma in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish,* created by the power differences between adults and them.

In "Belonging and Narrative: A Theory of the American Novel," Laura Bieger proposes a theory of belonging that looks at how power imbalances affect the child protagonists. Bieger examines the way belonging is a need integral to humans, a need which must be answered. Belonging, as Bieger defines it, refers to "the desire for a place in the world without which both place and world would crumble," as this desire identifies belonging through the uncertainty born from its absence (13). This sense of belonging and the lack thereof common to child protagonists becomes all the more significant in how they navigate their relationships with others when belonging is recognized as an integral part of human experience. Bieger then connects belonging to narratives and the ways in which narratives can answer the "desire" previously identified (13). Narratives, as also suggested by Marshall Gregory, fulfill an innate need in readers, the narratives helping them place themselves within the world. To Bieger, narratives then settle the tension created through a lack of belonging. In *The Magic Fish,* this idea applies to both protagonists as they use fairy tales to contextualize their understanding of their places in the world. For *The Moth Keeper,* the protagonist consumes various legends and personal accounts in an attempt to find her own sense of belonging.

Literature Review: Empathy

Two gaps children's literature narratives attempt to bridge are childhood othering and problems of power that separate parent and child. These gaps are bridged through theories of empathy that can help facilitate communication that goes beyond power imbalances. C. Daniel Batson, like Suzanne Keen, looks specifically at empathy and the various types of empathy that can be experienced in "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena." He seeks to answer the question of "what leads one person to respond with sensitivity and care to the suffering of another" (3). The most significant concepts to my study are concepts 1, 4, and 8. Concept 1 refers to "knowing another person's internal state" (4) which itself connects to focalization by engaging with the interiority of others. Concept 4 is defined as "projecting oneself into another's situation" (6) which can build from the first concept of knowing about another's interiority. Concept 8 defines "congruence" to specifically refer to empathy which positions the self in relation to others, feeling positive or negative *with* the other to match the other's feelings (8). Batson thus provides a foundation of theories about different examples of empathy which can then be used in conjunction with Keen's methods. The nuances in empathy seen in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* can be pieced apart and studied to determine how they contribute to changes in relationships more specifically by distinguishing between kinds of empathy. It is important to identify how precisely characters empathize with each other to understand why empathy is significant for both the person they are empathizing with and themselves since they are similarly affected by it.

Literature Review: Focalization

Shifting from content related theories to form related articles, focalization theories exploring texts without images generally are concerned with focalization in a symbolic sense. Kai Mikkonen articulates in *The Narratology of Comic Art* how comic art expands on writing-based focalization by including not only internal perspectives but also external perspectives only available through the visual panels. In his chapter on focalization, the scope of "who speaks" gains new layers when it must also be compared to the visuals on the panel, placing "importance [on] the relation between what the characters are presumed to be seeing and the image field as a whole" (151). Deeper and more nuanced conclusions about narratives can be drawn by examining the layering of multiple focalization components (background, foreground, verbal component, internal monologue, narration, color, space, relationship to other panels, etc.). In these cases, layers upon layers of meaning can be cultivated and represented in panels, allowing narratives to explore the multiplicities present in texts. The two other chapters I particularly focus on when exploring the primary texts are "Time in Comics" and "Presenting Minds in Comics." In "Time in Comics," Mikkonen distinguishes between "story-time" and "discourse-time" which are concerned with the "real" order of events and the presented order of events respectively (35). Using this understanding, he goes on to articulate the significance of not just panels and their immediate neighbors but panels in their relation to other panels in the text which indicate something about the narrative's temporality. In his later chapter exploring how characters' minds are represented, he identifies three methods by which minds are presented. The first, mimesis, examines how a character's interiority can be mirrored in part by their environment. Mimesis includes both the setting within one panel and how the setting changes across panels to reflect a change in mind (204-5). The second, free indirect discourse, focuses on

the way texts can slide between the internal and external narration of potentially multiple characters present in a panel (209-10). FID can include nesting perspectives and narrations within each other and mixtures of more subjective and objective perspectives which reveal information in their discrepancies. The third, the interactions between verbal and visual narration, follows from the previous point but narrows the scope to first-person perspectives. The narrating self and experiencing self can be made separate which further adds to the discourse between the subjective and objective viewpoints (216). All these ideas come together to inform how I examine the primary texts and their nuances in narration which contribute to the study of parent-child relationships. *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* specifically use light/dark and color focalization respectively to express what the protagonists are feeling. For Anya in *The Moth Keeper,* the vast landscape shots at night express how alone and disconnected she feels to her community and herself. Hiền and Tiến in *The Magic Fish* are both focalizers whose perspectives are conveyed via color to express different temporalities and realities which blur the lines between past, present, and fiction.

Instead of visually seeing and interpreting who sees and what is seen in graphic novels, these questions must be answered in words through the narration if the text does not have images. Literature on this subject has significantly influenced the theorists that engage with focalization in graphic novels, the literature expanding on the theories as a base. Kai Mikkonen, as well as other focalization theorists I have reviewed, mentions Mieke Bal as a foundational theorist in focalization who refers to free indirect discourse in focalization but does not apply it to the possibility of visual texts. In the article, "The Narrating and the Focalizing: A Theory of the Agents in Narrative," which was authored by Bal and translated by Jane E. Lewin, Bal breaks down how focalization is defined and the components that go into it. The article explores the

relationship between mood and voice which correspond with who sees and who speaks respectively (234). After exploring these ideas, Bal goes on to examine the various parts of focalization (focalizer, focalizee, narrator, actor, author, and reader) and stratify them into a model that all interacts with each other, the narrator and focalizer particularly working together as one to convey the story and its parts. For focalization, Bal identifies internal and external focalization, differentiating the two as "the *subject* of the *presentation*" and the one who "sees only what a hypothetical spectator would see" respectively (248). My thesis specifically involves internal focalization and how characters-as-subjects are presented. By breaking down focalization as a layered structure that works within texts, Bal comes to the conclusion that "the rules *of* narrative produce the rules of *a* narrative, and these produce *the* particular narrative, its system of signs" (264). Narrative rules are established in both *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* via "system[s] of signs" that indicate Anya's trauma in darkness and Hiền and Tiến's connections to the fairy tales expressed in color-coded panels respectively.

In "Focalization in Graphic Narrative," Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri provide the history of focalization in graphic texts as well as theorize different ways focalization can be utilized in the examination of primary texts. They argue that the foundational conceptualizations of focalization fail to encapsulate all that is needed to explore graphic texts since they do not account for the multiplicity of narrative devices working simultaneously in narratives with pictorial elements. The temporality involved in storytelling is complicated by diegetic narrators, the authors noting that "graphic memoir may introduce gaps and lags not only between the experientiality of the experiencing-I and its retrospective reconstruction by narrating-I, which is necessarily tinged by the aspectuality of the latter, but also between the two semiotic tracks" (350). They go on to discuss the complications of studying the main aspects of graphic texts

which cannot be answered by focalization as it has been previously conceived. They argue that "visual content in multimodal narrative is not marked with grammatical pronouns and thus cannot be attributed to a specific person with any degree of certainty. Similarly, the visual track in multimodal narrative is not in and of itself temporally marked, and so all attributions are interpretive much more so than in linguistic narrative" (351). Aside from speech bubbles which are directly connected to specific characters, the visual content of graphic novels—including the shape and location of the speech bubbles themselves—contribute to graphic novel's interpretive nature. Because of this, the study of focalization must work to encompass a wider range of theories to account for these issues. This theory is useful to my study by identifying some of the potential spaces certain definitions of focalization can miss which then require more attention.

Nancy Pedri also wrote another theory on the topic of graphic focalization in "What's the Matter of Seeing in Graphic Memoir?" which explores the effect studying focalization can have on the study of graphic memoirs, a prominent subsection of graphic novels. Seeking to distinguish the usage of focalization and the study of visualization in graphic texts, Pedri writes that "questions of perception need to extend beyond the optical domain to include cognitive processes, beyond sight to include the subjective filtering of information, beyond seeing to include thinking" (26). By focusing specifically on ocularization—a term referring to "a character's actual visual experience" (10)—Pedri argues that ocularization is important to the study of graphic narratives but, at the same time, insufficient for the depth of study the visuals require. Ocularization alone is shown to require the inclusion of focalization to fully encapsulate the interiority of the characters. Pedri thus calls for ocularization to not be held distinctly from focalization but used within the umbrella of it so that it may be used to "[impact] the reader's identification and sympathy with characters" (26). Ocularization fits into my examination of the

primary texts as a technique within focalization that focuses on "seeing" while still accounting for the complex interiority of the focalizing characters.

Henry John Pratt writes about how narrative functions within comics, answering some of the questions relating to how focalization can function in graphic texts. Pratt places importance on the relationship between the words and images of a graphic text, stressing the importance of the temporal aspects between panels. "Closure," as Pratt defines it, refers to "the mental process whereby readers of comics bridge the temporal and spatial incompleteness of the diegesis that occurs in the gutters between panels, thereby participating in the creation of narrative" (111). Since comics depict time uniquely in the relationship between panels, as Mikkonen also notes, the significance of that space cannot be ignored. Pratt goes on to articulate that comics are more than the sum of written and graphic formats, arguing in favor of a quote by Scott McCloud which writes "'It's a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create'" (114). This theory continues to support the theory of "closure" which suggests that a not insignificant portion of narrative in comics comes from the blank space between panels. I have found that the primary texts I am studying, particularly *The Magic Fish,* support this idea, playing with temporality between panels to meaningful narrative effect. *The Magic Fish* uses different colors to denote different time periods that, when placed side by side, create meaning through the difference seen between panels since the periods are connected visually and narratively but not temporally.

In visual texts like graphic novels, theories of focalization investigate aspects of texts like perspective, space, time, and movement. These theories help expand earlier theories of focalization in purely written texts to encompass how visuals outside of the focalizing character can reveal their interiority. Who speaks, who sees and who is seen applies to visual texts as well

as literary texts while still exploring the written out visual components in storytelling. Mikkonen's theory of focalization in graphic texts extends back to a prior article he wrote titled "Graphic Narratives as a Challenge to Transmedial Narratology: The Question of Focalization" which specifically examines the ways graphic novels uniquely engage with focalization. Using Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* as an example, Mikkonen notes "the careful attention to the placement, shape, and color of the graphic words and letters, functions as a form of perspective-making, for instance when the narrator's discourse appears as if it were literally placed on the surrounding walls and surfaces" (640). Later, this notion is furthered through the direct inclusion of the narrator's influence within the text, tying narrators' direct addresses to "the way the reader sees and interprets the images, including their coloring and other significant features, as being inevitably tied to the narrator's (and not just the author's) activity and perspective-taking" (646). These quotes together show how Mikkonen sees the form of the graphic texts as contributing uniquely to their focalization. Coupling this idea with the "closure" idea from Pratt paints a particular picture of what graphic novels can do with focalization. I use these theories as a foundation to understand the meaning brought about in the primary texts.

Chapter Summaries

In exploring what critical work has been created previously for my primary texts, I found one article about *The Magic Fish* that explores many of the same topics I engage with. This article, "'And Now This Story is Ours': Fairy Tale and Collage in Trung Le Nguyen's *The Magic Fish,"* looks at the intersection of "content and form" while examining the fairy tales told in the story and their queerness (Tannert-Smith 22). The author, Barbara Tannert-Smith, argues that the

text "offers a collage of visual, realistic, and fairy tale narrative forms as an alternative means of communication, connection, and empowerment for readers and characters alike" (28). My work differs from this article in that the author does not explore the central parent-child relationship as significantly as I do. However, I have found that this source agrees with my assessment of fairy tales in *The Magic Fish* as significant in their adaptations for the main narrative. The other primary text, *The Moth Keeper*, has no scholarship I could find. Therefore, I believe that there is a large gap that I can start to fill through my work with this text. There is much to be said about this text not only as it relates to focalization, family, and empathy, but also a multitude of other intersections.

In the first chapter, I investigate *The Moth Keeper's* use of light to represent the protagonist's journey to negotiate herself within the "universe" of her community. The main character, Anya, struggles to relate to others in her community, particularly to her father-figure and mentor, Yeolen. Her internal struggles are rooted in the trauma she experienced from her mother abandoning her in the past, a trauma that she has yet to overcome. Her trauma contributes to a growing sense that she does not belong in her community which compounds with the physical isolation she experiences in her job as the Moth Keeper. As she navigates her new role as the Moth Keeper, her isolation coincides with her continued attempts to assuage the feeling of un-belonging, manifesting as a fear of the dark and obsession with light. As a result of her trauma, she refuses to form a connection with Yeolen and his story despite their shared role as Moth Keepers and his past's similarity to her own. Over the course of chapter one, I explore this relationship and how it changes alongside Anya's growth as a character. As she works through her trauma and begins to empathize with others, her relationship with Yeolen improves, evidenced by her beginning to rely on him. She comes to appreciate his story that she previously

rejected and stories in general as seen when she connects Lioka's story to her own. Drawing from her previous knowledge of Lioka's story as a legend, Anya can relate her story to Lioka's in a similar way that Yeolen tried to relate his experience to hers. By the conclusion of the text, she comes to acknowledge her mentor as a unique individual outside of his role as Moth Keeper and as a person involved in a mutual relationship with her.

The dichotomy of light and dark is a central theme that plays with the ways space and time is presented through Anya's perspective. I examine this theme throughout the chapter to determine what the light/dark expresses about the narrative and Anya's relationship with Yeolen. In large part, the vast, dark landscape panels either depicting Anya as very small or not present at all are focalized through Anya's traumatized mind and exaggerate the isolation she feels. The light, on the other hand, represents the mental lightness Anya feels throughout the story, diminished by her isolation but strengthened when her trauma is resolved. The secondary theories I use in examining this text include theories of focalization, power, belonging, trauma, empathy, and reciprocal relationships. I see the focalization of Anya's mind in this text through Mikkonen's theory as an expression of her representation of belonging. Biological family is not as explicitly important in this text so much as community which itself functions as a pseudo-family. Given this element and coupled with her mentor's role as a father to her, this text provides an interesting conversation about the meaning of "family" especially given Anya's trauma from being abandoned by her biological mother. As I continue to explore this text, I make use of various power theories to elucidate how the "universe" operates in the story. Trites' theory establishes the idea of the "universe" which explains how Anya operates around the community and its power. Beauvais' article differentiating between authority and might explains how power shifts between Anya and the community, the community wielding authority over the villagers

and Anya possessing potential through her individual might. Beauvais also explores de Beauvoir's ambiguity of childhood which feeds into the alienation Anya experiences as a child othered by her community but given might through her role. Balaev's theory of trauma, Keen's theory of empathy, and Mullin's theory regarding reciprocal parental relationships then contextualize how power functions. Balaev's trauma explains Anya's inability to speak about her troubles to anyone, and I use Keen's empathy to explore how Anya interacts with others, and the effect her interactions have on her once her trauma is resolved. As a result of Anya's beginning to empathize with others, Anya and Yeolen's relationship becomes a mutual acknowledgement of care for the other through their shared experiences.

In the second and final chapter, I explore how *The Magic Fish* uses focalization via color to explore the parallel narratives and temporal differences between characters. The mother, Hiền, and son, Tiến, share fairy tales between them which both connect their narratives and visualize parallels between them despite the perceived differences between mother and son. Both characters' respective traumas are brought to the forefront over the course of reading the three fairy tales, "Allerleirauh," "Tấm Cám," and "The Little Mermaid," which individually resonate with both of them. These tales are different from their conventionally accepted versions, and these differences allow Hiền and Tiến to not only be affected by the stories but also take control of the tales. Although the two believe their personal issues to be isolated, the fairy tales connect their stories and resolve their traumas. In this chapter, I explore how their relationship develops over the course of the novel as they come together and realize that their narratives are not only parallel but actually very similar. The two come to acknowledge the other outside their parent/child role, anchoring their relationship in love for the other individual.

The theories I specifically employ in this chapter include Balaev's trauma theory, Gregory's theory of how stories affect readers, Roof's theory of systemized stories, and Matz's "No Future" and "It Gets Better" outcomes for queer narratives. Like in *The Moth Keeper,* trauma manifests as unspeakability for the protagonists as they try and fail to communicate their issues to each other. Given the metanarrative elements present in the forefront of this narrative through the fairy tales, Marshall Gregory's narrative theories regarding storytelling are an important aspect of studying *The Magic Fish*. Though this theory ostensibly is applied to real readers, it also applies to the mother and son protagonists as "readers" of fairy tales being told within the text. Their understanding of the tales is coupled with both scenes of the present and memories of the past. These three categories are divided by the colors of the panels which are then intermixed to express the internal journeys both characters go on through the narrative. To examine these panels, I use Mikkonen's theory of the focalization of the mind to explore the relationships between panels and how they represent space and time via how the colors are presented. To contextualize this focalization and create meaning from it, I use Gregory's ideas of storytelling as explanations for how the characters are internalizing the messages they receive from reading the fairy tales. The fairy tales in this text specifically gain power in the ways they are different from the "original" tales. Roof explores how stories retain their original power by viewing the tales as systems that can be modified to suit the context. Finally, I use the queer outcomes Matz discusses to explore the queer themes present explicitly in Tiến's coming out journey that recontextualizes the entire narrative through the happy ending. The end of this story unites the pair as individuals, bridging their believed boundaries when Hiền purposefully changes the ending of "The Little Mermaid" to show her support for Tiến's sexuality. The growth in this central parental relationship is one of connecting individuals, destroying the line between

parents and children to make the two synonymous with each other through their parallel narratives. The use of intermingled colors breaks down the communication and power barriers between them by merging their narratives into one.

There is a tradition in fairy tales to vary depending on the culture it came from. Maria Tatar, Iona Opie, and Peter Opie write about this tradition to alter and change to suit the cultural context of the story's tellers. Tatar writes about how different versions of fairy tales can be wildly different since "Angela Carter reminded us that no one person can claim to be an authoritative source for a fairy tale" (*The Classic* xiv). This reminder positions fairy tales as a shared and varied experience outside the control of authors. However, *The Magic Fish* does give power to authors, separating the fairy tales told in the story from Tatar's explanation of fairy tales. The Opies write about different versions of "Cinderella," looking at the core story beats of the tale. They note that the different cultural variations of the tale "not only do…have details in common, but their structure and message is similar" (Opie 158). The Opies' claim supports Judith Roof's concept of systematization by noting the multitude of tales from various cultures and time periods that all bear a similarity to each other while retaining their identity and message. The way fairy tales have variations is significant for how they function in *The Magic Fish* since the tales are unique to the story. However, the way the fairy tales function as stories via Roof's concept of systematization is important because the authors/speakers of the tales are significant along with the fairy tales' function as stories that impact readers.

The common themes of trauma and parental relationships in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* dictate the actions of the characters while creating a common thread between the two graphic novels. Despite the differences in storylines and relationships, both books center around the growth of their protagonists and the changes to their parental relationships. Additionally, both

texts are backgrounded by significant myths and fairy tales, placing importance on stories and their ability to cross the spaces between individuals. Separately, their different focalization styles highlight different aspects of the protagonists' minds. The binary of light and dark indicate the relative emotional tone of Anya's mindset, and the intermixed colors of *The Magic Fish* serve to bridge differences in time and space for Hiền and Tiến. *The Moth Keeper's* narrative centers exclusively on Anya's perspective and her growing understanding towards those around her. Because of this, the theme of belonging is made significant through the lens of trauma and isolation. For *The Magic Fish,* the emphasis is on the dual perspectives of both mother and son, leading to a focus on their duality synchronously connected through the fairy tales. This dual focalization gives rise to themes of trauma and stories' influence on readers. Ultimately, however, the conclusion both texts aim towards in their parent-child relationships is the same. Through the events of the story, both Anya and Tiến come to realize that their relationship with their parent is a mutual relationship between individuals underneath the power dynamics contextualizing them.

In focusing on the child characters as focalizers trying to navigate their places in relation to their parents, I seek to explore the child characters' interiorities, as well as the interiority of the adults significant in their lives, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of their relationships. The various theories pertaining to power, storytelling, empathy, trauma, reciprocal relationships, and focalization contribute to the particular examination of parent-child relationships in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish*. I conclude that the change I identified between child and parent reflects the structure of care that Mullin proposes in which each individual identifies the other as a unique individual. I further this conclusion by elaborating that not only are parent and child identified as unique individuals but also as equals. By breaking

down the power structures in place, parent and child can acknowledge the other beyond their role and as individual persons. This acknowledgement then allows the relationship to change into one between two individual persons who care for and love each other "as whole and not interchangeable persons" (Mullin 197).

CHAPTER I: DISTURBING THE UNIVERSE BRINGS US CLOSER TO OUR PARENTS IN *THE MOTH KEEPER*

In graphic texts, the inclusion of visual elements decreases the number of written elements which emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the two mediums. With the addition of visual communication, the implicit language of the visual elements is made even more significant. In *The Moth Keeper* by K. O'Neill, the visuals of the graphic novel couple with a theme of wordlessness from the protagonist to create meaning. In the desolate environment of the community in which Anya belongs, works, and lives, spoken dialogue is less common both incidentally and on purpose. Wordlessness allows the text to emphasize the importance of the focalizing elements both within and between panels. This theme informs every part of the protagonist, Anya's, life including how she navigates her sense of power as she begins to disturb the universe and its status quo with her actions. The system of power the community operates within includes the authority of the village which contrasts with Anya's own power represented by her potential. As this system becomes disturbed, her sense of belonging and identity are also altered as she renavigates how she relates to those in her community, particularly her father figure and mentor. In service of this, the focalization of the text is vital in understanding the nuances of characters' interiority. This interiority is exposed for Anya and, in turn, reveals her struggles with her power in the universe, trauma, and empathy for others. In exploring all these topics, the lack of words and abundance of space is used to give presence to unspeakable influences that motivate Anya and ultimately affect her relationship with her father figure. In disturbing the universe and the powers it possesses, she navigates herself and her identity which allows her to acknowledge her father figure as an equal with whom she has a close care relationship.

The basis of *The Moth Keeper's* narrative surrounds Anya's relationships with herself and others in the power climate unique to the setting. Anya's journey in this text is rooted in her trauma surrounding her past, causing her to struggle to navigate her role as the Moth Keeper and relationships with others because of it. She feels like she does not belong anywhere, and this feeling fuels her desire to be a Moth Keeper so she can have a place to belong. However, being the Moth Keeper just makes her feel more isolated since her duties include spending most of her waking hours alone in the desert outside of the village with only the Moon-Moths for company. Her desolation drives her to further separate herself from the members of her community that try to connect with her, specifically her father-figure, the previous Moth Keeper Yeolen. Despite their inherent closeness because of their shared role, she pushes him away since she views him solely as a member of the community and not as an individual. As she tries to navigate the liminal spaces she exists in, she disturbs the universe the village exists in and endangers the community. Her actions push her to tackle her trauma head on and change the ways she views her relationships.

By the end of the text, Anya recognizes Yeolen as an individual with whom she shares a unique relationship. She bridges the disconnect between the spaces she is othered by and takes control of her might. As a result, Anya relieves her trauma surrounding her mother abandoning her and opens up to the idea of recognizing Yeolen as a real parental figure for her. Once she has renegotiated her place in the universe through her newly realized might, she regains a sense of belonging that allows her to meaningfully create relationships. She finally reciprocates the care relationship he is offering her, recognizing him as an equal participant.

Power

In the first chapter of *Discovering the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature,* Roberta Trites establishes power as a core concept at work in adolescent literature. Power is defined in relation to both oppression and enablement, positioning power as the dominant landscape entities in literature must navigate because it "comes from everywhere" (Trites 4). Power manifests within institutional and societal models as they work to oppress, forming systems which exert pressure over all those who exist under it (4). However, power also possesses the ability to incite action and empowerment even as it oppresses, triggering action through the conflict. In a separate but related theory of power relating to society, power is granted to the individual based on the acknowledgement of positionality within the power structure. This theory thus shifts the focus from power as universal to a more localized account of power as individuals exert control over their own power in relation to the universe and others within it. Trites suggests that the question of whether or not to disturb the universe "reckon[s] with both their sense of individual power and their recognition of the social forces that require them to modify their behaviors" (6). The question then becomes one of not only learning about and navigating in "the social forces that have made them what they are" (3) but also one of individual power interconnected with those social forces. Trites' conceptualization of power thus forms the backdrop for *The Moth Keeper* as the adolescent protagonist struggles with her individual power against the societal power levied onto her. While the night village relies on unity and cooperation, it fails to account for individuals like Anya who feel disconnected from the community as a whole.

In order to expand upon the meaning of power in Trites' conceptualization, Clémentine Beauvais differentiates between "authority" and "might" in the article "The Problem of 'Power':

Metacritical Implications of Aetonormativity for Children's Literature Research." Beauvais identifies power not for its oppressive qualities as Trites does but for its base definition as a "capacity to do something" (79). As such, the specific capabilities of power as defined by "authority" and "might" still pertain to the overarching idea of power despite their differences and opposing positions. Authority is defined as a specific form of power which naturally affects particular groups of presumably willing participants. Rooted in "a degree of mutual agreement," authority is smaller in scope than more general definitions of power while also holding more "legitimacy" to empower it (80). Might, in contrast, is defined as power rooted in potential, thus linking it to the unknown future (81). Beauvais specifically attributes might to children and authority to adults, contrasting the two ideas in the study of children's literature. For Anya in *The Moth Keeper,* the distinction in powers helps to explain not only the behaviors of the adults in her life but also the power unique to her role. The night village she lives in has cultivated its authority through the legends they tell which uphold their collectivist ideals by devaluing individualism. Anya's isolated role encourages both individualism and might since she lives and works separate from the community's influence and authority. After she begins disturbing the universe using the power and opportunities of her role, the authority of the village is undermined.

In another of Clémentine Beauvais' articles, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguity of Childhood," Beauvais explores Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualization of childhood, considering childhood to be a condition and reducing it to its "otherness" compared to adulthood. Beauvais reflects and elaborates on Beauvoir's insights which question the relationship between adult and child, focusing on childhood as a condition imposed by adults onto children. Childhood is defined as being a point of tension where conflict is ignited due to its perceived connotations by adulthood that position children as sources of great potential but also as representatives of

loss (331). Beauvais identifies this context of childhood as a "temporal otherness" which encompasses its duality against adults. Childhood is then pulled in opposite directions by both connotations, resulting in it occupying a difficult space as children are supposed to represent an unknown future while simultaneously being bound to the world and its systems (339-40). As a result of this tension, Beauvais argues, children occupy a liminal space which alienates them from adults. When they realize that they exist in relation to others and the world at large (335), they tend to resist their strained position, which further adds to the discomfort of existence. This state, as explored by *The Moth Keeper,* pertains to Trites' conception of the universe and power which is, in turn, explored further by Beauvais' ideas of authority and might. The relationship between adults and children goes beyond opposition into a state of normalcy versus otherness that expands on the binary of opposition. Anya's feelings of isolation and otherness are, in large part, due to this temporal otherness caused by her community and, more specifically, her mother who abandoned her. As the Moth Keeper, her potential as a child is stifled by the expectations of being a Moth Keeper and othered physically through her isolation as she works out in the desert. However, she is also given power and responsibility within the community's system by becoming the Moth Keeper. Anya is pulled between these two identities which other her by representing the potential power she has but cannot effectively use because of the isolation.

Beauvais's discussion of aetonormativity proves important for *The Moth Keeper*'s narrative. Aetonormativity, as it was defined by Maria Nikolajeva in *Power, Voice, and Subjectivity,* assumes the normalcy of adulthood while alienating childhood as being abnormal and connects the idea to Beauvais' concepts of power and otherness to Trites' theory of the universe. The universe is a metaphor for the non-physical but very real power climate present in stories, highlighting the scope of power climates and its effect on those who live in it. By

understanding the structure of power in the setting, the main conflict of *The Moth Keeper*—which is largely internal—can more easily be seen and understood as it is told via the panels and the spaces between them that are focalized through a scale of light and dark. Looking at the world of *The Moth Keeper* through an aetonormative lens, Anya's struggle against the universe and the particular powers at work within it is recontextualized by the assumptions she believes she is fighting against. Because her trauma from being abandoned continues to affect her present, Anya pushes back against the authority she perceives while misattributing it solely onto the village's authority. However, over the course of the graphic novel, the characters begin to question aetonormativity's place in the story at the same time the universe is disturbed and reset. Once Anya's relationship with herself and Yeolen reaches a new level, the relationship between authority and might in the setting also changes, blurring the lines by bridging the gap between individual and community.

Focalization, Trauma, Belonging, Empathy, and Conditional Love

The Moth Keeper tells the story of a young girl, Anya, who lives in a nocturnal desert community charged with the care of Moon-Moths that are vital to the village's survival. The night village she lives in values the community over individuality, a theme which affects Anya's sense of belonging in the village since she feels separate from the village. Due to her traumatic past having been abandoned by her mother, she retains that feeling of not belonging despite living in the same village she always has, never forgetting being left behind. This connects to her borderline obsession with light and moth keeping, having been rescued by the previous Moth Keeper before her mentor, who found her after she was left by her mother in the desert at night. In the present, she does not value the relationships she has in the present with her mentor and

father figure, Yeolen. Although his past mirrors her present, she only sees him as a part of the village because of his relationship with his partner that ties him more directly to the village. While he tries to connect with her, her journey involves understanding her place in the universe and with him by proxy. Because of Anya's abandonment, she does not feel like she belongs in the village despite her desire to be a significant part of the village as the Moth Keeper.

Moth keeping, though an important part of the village, also serves as a liminal space where Anya both belongs and does not belong. In contrast with the night village, the other settlement in the area is the day village, a diurnal counterpart to the night village with opposite values, prizing individuality over community. Since Anya more closely aligns with the day village's values, she becomes torn between the night village she lives in and the day village's allure. Anya's conflict in the story thus centers around her struggles with her relationship between herself and the others in her village. She is dedicated to the village not because of a personal connection with another person but out of a desire to hold the light of the Moth Keepers. Because of her past and her present, she comes to occupy the liminal spaces between night and day, between power and authority, between the village and herself, and between herself and her sense of identity. As the Moth Keeper, her role facilitates some of the liminality since she must work alone outside of the village.

The Moon-Moths, as stated by the legend at the beginning of the text, are required to pollinate the Night-Flower tree which makes life in the night village easier. The Moon-Moths were given to the village by the Moon-Spirit as a gift, making the villagers regard the Moon-Moths as sacred (O'Neill 8-9). As such, the Moth Keeper's role is described as "essential to [the village's] way of life as a hearth fire" (10). Due to the necessity and importance of the Moon-Moths, the village has a position dedicated to "herding" the Moon-Moths to ensure their

prosperity. Anya's story centers around her role as the newly ordained Moth Keeper wherein she must contend with the desert at night alone. As a Moth Keeper, she must leave the village at night to take the Moon-Moths out into the desert before returning at dawn. The story focuses on the night village as being a difficult place to live from the beginning, noting that the Moon-Moths' existence "ma[de] their life by night easier" (8). This perspective of the night feeds into the theme of light and dark by positioning the dark as negative relative to light as positive.

In *The Moth Keeper*, the relationship between authority and might is displayed via focalization to give specific insight to Anya's mind through large panels of space and the interactions between light and dark. While Anya works to obscure her true feelings on her face and in her words, the focalization of the setting visualizes her thoughts and feelings through the light/dark and space. Kai Mikkonen explores in *The Narratology of Comic Art* how the relationships both between and within panels can represent the minds of characters in the panels. The panels within a text make use of the characters present, the setting of the panel, and the relationships present between two panels. The environment may mirror the focalized character's mental state to the extent that a verbal expression of said state would become unnecessary and "redundant" (204). This empathetic environment can include the manipulation of time between panels which may overly extend or condense time as well as the physical state of the environment which may be exaggerated to express and evoke certain feelings (205-6). The direction of such panels involves the character, the environment, and the narration in order to create a multifaceted image of the mind which may or may not be congruent within itself. Mikkonen stresses the importance of the interactions between verbal and visual elements, stating "that impersonal points of view, though revealing things that the character could not see, are often related to, or encompass, or are synchronized with, the character's field of vision" (217).

The Moth Keeper presents broad environments in its panels that Anya cannot see herself but still articulate her intrapersonal journey through the parallels between the imagery and her mental state. On a whole, the narrative is shown to place less importance on spoken word as evidenced by Anya's rejection of spoken comfort from those in the village in favor of her own actions. This narrative emphasis then intersects with the relative lack of spoken dialogue and narration to create a nuanced relationship between the visual and verbal aspects of the text that derives meaning from absence and the space both within and between panels.

Contextualizing Anya's emotional responses, which are marked by focalized wordlessness in the text, is the idea of how trauma affects minds and how the traumatized mind can be represented in literature. Certain trauma theories, such as Michelle Balaev's "Trends in Literary Trauma," focus on trauma as an intrapersonal alienation resulting from a "traumatic experience [that] produces a 'temporal gap' and a dissolution of the self" (150). The gap created within the self houses the traumatic event itself as the mind fails to incorporate or internalize the trauma into itself. In separating or removing identity from the self, the self is then left wordless without internal congruence. Those who are not connected to themselves thus also cannot connect to the outside world that created the trauma. Balaev identifies a major component of trauma to be the self's struggle to reconcile its new relationship with the world and context because of this loss/distortion of identity (150). Along with the removal of identity comes a distancing from the time before the traumatic event, the self then needing to relearn how to navigate in the world from a fundamentally changed position which further increases the tension between the self and identity. Balaev goes on to pose a solution in trauma narratives which places less significance on verbal communication and instead on non-verbal actions. Working with the flow of wordlessness as opposed to fighting directly against it may work to solve the

intrapersonal conflicts and the wordlessness by extension, allowing for a gentler approach (164). The narrative emphasis on action in Anya's story supports the focus on the wordlessness she experiences and on the importance of non-verbal actions throughout the text.

In graphic texts, trauma's symptoms of un-speakability and alienation are given space through how the setting is depicted. Wordlessness is expressed in the many scenes of empty spaces, which both emphasize the lack of words and make space for the lack to expand beyond an acknowledgement of it. *The Moth Keeper*, for example, employs the use of large, empty spaces to create meaning and feeling through absence. These representations of space emphasize characters' actions over conversation, a theme central to Anya's character and growth beyond her wordless trauma. Through the events of the story, she improves her relationship with herself and others, her alienation soothed by repositioning herself within the universe.

Anya's trauma from being abandoned at a young age fuels her desire to be a Moth Keeper, a job which continues her trauma by isolating her from the community. She sees her world through her trauma and believes she should remain isolated and alone because she was isolated by her mother and later by her chosen profession. Her trauma and its consequences disturb not only her power but also her intrinsic feeling of belonging within her village and the universe as a whole. In the act of disturbing the universe, including whatever provoked the need to disturb it, adolescents also disturb their own position in that universe. Regardless of the state the universe ends up in by the end of the story, the adolescent must discover where they now stand within it. This question then becomes a concern not only of power but also belonging in relation to the universe and others in it. Belonging can thus be defined in this context as a longing for a suitable place in the universe which feels safe and fulfilling relating to individual power versus the structure's power. Laura Bieger suggests in the first chapter of her book titled

Belonging and Narrative: A Theory of the American Novel that belonging is "an inescapable condition of human existence" brought about due to a lack of harmony and congruity through structures like narratives (13). She goes on to argue that "human beings are incomplete" and so carve out places to belong by engaging with narratives (25). Narratives are thus framed as harmonizing solutions to the problem of feeling out of place within the universe, and those searching for belonging through narrative become narrators searching for narratees to position themselves with (28). I argue that the narrative structure Anya longs for, and eventually creates, helps her find a position in the universe that eases her individual power struggle and also grants her a new perspective of Yeolen as a narrator/narratee and human being involved in a reciprocal relationship. By coming to belong with a pseudo-parent to replace her mother, she is also able to find belonging with her community.

Suzanne Keen explores character identification and narrative situation in narrative empathy, examining the different ways emotions are evoked in both characters and readers. Keen's theory explains Anya's responses to others and how Anya conceives of her own belonging in relation to her community. Character identification is defined as a phenomenon that occurs in readers that sees them relate their experiences, views, and feelings with those expressed by a character (217-8). In reading and learning about a character's interiority, readers may come to empathize with them based on this resonance. This technique also holds true within *The Moth Keeper* with Anya taking the place of the reader towards the people in her community, specifically Yeolen and Lioka, the spirit who helps her later in the story. Throughout the narrative, Anya resists this empathy until the end of the text despite repeated attempts by her community to get her to empathize with her mentor and father figure. Narrative situation is defined as a method by which authors can intentionally evoke empathy through the narration

which pointedly uses free indirect discourse and psycho-narration to grant more insight into characters' interiority (219). Readers may be more enticed to feel empathy for those involved in the narrative when the author purposefully controls how the story is told through its narration to evoke empathy. This can be seen through both the verbal and non-verbal narration in *The Moth Keeper*, which uses focalization to evoke empathy. In the narrative, Anya makes attempts to feel empathy for both those in the night village and the day village by learning about them and their ways. While she does not succeed until the end, her desire for companionship is expressed through the empathy she tries to create within herself. Outside the narrative, the focalization of the text encourages character identification for Anya and empathy towards Anya's mental state as it is expressed by her environment.

The foremost person Anya comes to empathize with is her father-figure, Yeolen. Over the course of the story, she comes to identify with and understand him which leads to empathy. As she struggles to define herself in relation to the culture of power contained within the universe, she must contend with her parent's preexisting place within that universe. The relationship between parent and child thus becomes strained as the child begins to disturb the universe that includes both their parents' and their own position, potentially leading to a conflict of interests. This strained understanding of parent-child relationships examines parents and children as being involved in a reciprocal relationship of care which requires the mutual acknowledgement that the other is a whole person. Amy Mullin defines the nuances of these relationships by exploring the concepts of care ethics and reciprocal relationships in her article "Parents and Children: An Alternative to Selfless and Unconditional Love." Care is distinguished between giving care and receiving care and defined by ensuring that the object of care's needs is met (Mullin 181-2). However, care also extends beyond needs to encompass the

care of the individual as a person in their entirety. In the case of parent-child relationships, parents and children must mutually understand the other as "a particular (not interchangeable) person" with whom they are in relation (182). The relationship of care is reciprocal as both parties must contribute in some way to the other person in the relationship. This includes not only overt interactions with the other person as an individual being but also unconscious, empathetic responses in which the other's "standpoint is incorporated into one's response" (183). Due to the differences in power and position in the universe between parent and child, care relationships can be "asymmetrically reciprocal" which results in potentially disproportionate interactions. These already uneven relationships are distorted when the universe is disturbed, so the adolescent's relationship with the parent must be renegotiated as the universe resettles around them. In Anya's case, she fails to recognize Yeolen as a legitimate parent until the universe has been turned on its head and she has the self-awareness to recognize not only his individuality but also their unique relationship as parent and child.

To fully explore how power in the universe of *The Moth Keeper* is exemplified, theories of trauma, belonging, and empathy are needed to explore the various facets of the story which point back to the power structures at work. Trauma, belonging, and empathy are all filtered through focalization, which itself examines the interiority of the protagonist who is navigating the power of the universe against her own. Because Anya feels like she does not belong in her community, she must use empathy to bridge the gaps left by her previous and ongoing trauma. These theories then culminate in the understanding of the parent-child relationships Mullin articulates. Anya comes to empathize with Yeolen and his story as person who began as an outsider and came to accept a place in the community since "the other villagers saw that [he] was helping in [his] own way" (O'Neill 61). Through this understanding, their relationship develops

into one of equal individuals caring for each other. Aetonormativity and its components form the background for these relationships, and the issues of trauma, belonging, and empathy are symptomatic of the systemic power struggle implicit in the setting. Anya's relationship with her father-figure is determined by her relationship with herself which is, in turn, molded by the landscape of power of *The Moth Keeper*.

The Moth Keeper

The Moth Keeper centralizes its theme around light and dark, providing stark contrasts which are used to indicate power and belonging within the text. The desolate landscape of the desert at night forms the backdrop of the story, creating a sense of isolation which is deeply felt by the protagonist, Anya. Her new role as the apprentice Moth Keeper narratively and focally separates her from the rest of the village as she physically leaves the village to go out every night. As such, both the narrative itself and the setting depict Anya as being apart and alone from the community, her loneliness amplified by the darkness she works in. This focalization continues throughout the story, the dark of the seemingly perpetual night broken up by three different kinds of light in accordance with the state of the universe. First, the warm-tinted lights of the night village's lanterns provide warm, comforting light which Anya rejects before she recognizes their worth to her and the village at large. Second, the cool light of the Moon-Moths and the Moon-Spirit mark the supernatural parts of the text and denote power within the text. Finally, the saturated light of the day village and the dawn threaten the integrity of the night and its lights just as they threaten Anya's position within the universe. As the story progresses and comes to an end, the focalization of the light in the novel reflects both Anya's mental state and the state of the universe once it has resettled.

Anya's positionality within the "universe" of *The Moth Keeper* shifts in line with her positionality related to the night village. Since the night village represents her whole world and everything in it, her disturbing of the universe equates to the disturbing of the village. In the beginning of the story, her position in the universe is shifting as a result of gaining a new role, upsetting her already tenuous sense of belonging in the village. This coincides with her power shift which grants her more individual power and might but reduces her presence through her isolation. As the narrative progresses, so do her internal urges to disturb her otherwise peaceful universe which results in her fully breaking the universe and renegotiating the ecosystem of powers for the whole village. This, in turn, continues to affect her positionality in terms of power and belonging as she struggles to right the universe while dealing with her internal trauma. By the end of the text, the universe is changed and stabilized through Anya's actions to save the Moon-Moths and the night village, coinciding with her acceptance of her power and might which allow her to belong in the village. Her relationship with her father figure, which charted the same path as her relationship with her village, ends with her awareness of not only their shared loneliness but also the love he has for the village that she comes to share.

Establishing the Universe

The beginning of *The Moth Keeper* establishes how light is used in the text from the first page that introduces the Moon-Spirit. The Moon-Spirit and the Moon-Moths surrounding her are depicted in a colder, green-white light to contrast the warmer-colored orange lanterns tied to her tail (O'Neill 1; see appendix A-1). These lanterns become the ones used by the night village, the warm lights attracting the white Moon-Moths which frames the lanterns and their lights as vital and powerful. After this legend is established, the story proper begins as Anya is being

inaugurated as the next Moth Keeper, further solidifying the lantern and Moon-Moths' importance in the text. Anya's lantern is lit from the light of her mentor's own lantern, passing the power associated with it to her to suit her new role (12-3; appendix A-3). At this stage, the framing of light present in the panels reflects Anya's mind, specifically her feelings towards herself and the village. Many of the panels take place either during dusk/dawn or include the company of others which brightens the dark sky. This is most emphasized in the ceremony which, while taking place at night, is filled with lighter colors from the villagers and their lanterns (14). This lightness correlates with Anya's relatively lighter mindset at this point, not yet isolated by the darkness of night. Her comment after first putting the Moon-Moths to bed, "I think I can handle this" shows her optimism and belief in herself in the beginning (21).

The depiction of the panels in these beginning chapters is significant for establishing both the setting and Anya's mind represented as light and dark. When Anya goes out for moth keeping, the panels remain predominantly light due to her and her mentor's lanterns, mirroring her lighter mental state at these points. During this time, the light present in the panels is doubled by the inclusion of his lantern with hers, illustrated most clearly in the spread showing the first months of moth keeping shared between Yeolen and Anya (32-3; appendix A-5). At this point in the story, the world Anya lives in is established at the same time it is changing immediately because of Anya taking on a new role. Her mental state is also established via her interactions with the villagers which reveal her place among them and how she feels about it. Specifically, she is depicted as appearing nervous until she is waved at by her childhood friend, Estell, foreshadowing both her concerns about her role in the universe in addition to the eventual solution to repairing the universe (11).

At this stage, Anya's position within the universe is naturally shifting due to her change in job while the universe itself largely remains the same. From both the ceremony and her mentor's own account, Moth Keepers and their apprentices are normal parts of the village's culture that occupy a unique role in the village. As such, Anya has a place to belong in the village, and her sense of belonging is not yet disrupted by the change, allowing her to still feel connected to the village. In addition to the focalization of the text giving insight to her mental state, the text also hints at her frame of mind through the narrative itself. This is evidenced by her ability to care about and empathize with others outside of herself. Within the village, she is depicted interacting with various members of the community. Outside the village, she asks her mentor about his predecessor to learn her story, displaying a desire to understand and feel *with* others. Not only does she take an interest in the village, but she is invested in individual villagers as opposed to thinking of the village as a monolith. Her desire to be "a light for others" (62) is rooted in her experience of being on the other side of moth keeping as part of the village. The act of her taking on the same role comes with the goal of being just like her mentor's predecessor, causing Anya to develop a specific empathy for Moth Keepers via their narrative situation. When her mentor describes his own journey to be a Moth Keeper, the account encourages both Anya and the readers to empathize with Moth Keepers because of his personal account which grants greater awareness of his inner feelings (Keen 219). Yeolen frames his story through the comment that moth keeping is "a role so few are willing to choose" (61), connecting all Moth Keepers together via the choice. Because of this connection, Anya's understanding of Yeolen is in sequence with his mentor and herself, attaching her to the community through the role.

The culmination of the interconnectedness between herself and the village is her relationship with her mentor, predecessor, and father figure, Yeolen, who remains by her side for

the beginning of her time as Moth Keeper. Since the two are mentor and apprentice, their relationship is necessarily deeper than her connection with other villagers. In this part of the narrative, their relationship is displayed prominently because of their shared excursions into the desert with the Moon-Moths. This is most clearly seen in the two-page spread depicting Anya's first month as a Moth Keeper (O'Neill 32-3). Yeolen establishes that aside from Anya and himself, there are no other Moth Keepers by stating "since my mentor passed, it's only been me. And before me, it was only her" (58), setting the two apart from the rest of the village and forming a connection between them. As the only person who shares this role and leaves the village as she does, he serves as the tether keeping her connected to the village. Anya enjoys his company but refuses to empathize with his past which creates tension between Yeolen and herself. While she does acknowledge him as her mentor, she fails to connect with him on an individual level. This gap results in a relationship that should be closer than it is for Anya and Yeolen. The tenuous, back-and-forth relationship she has with Yeolen mirrors her relationship with the village. Although she tries to enjoy being part of it, she does not accept the sense of community and belonging it initially offers.

The beginning of the text establishes the "universe" of *The Moth Keeper,* articulating the different powers that operate in and around the night village. The night village wields the authority within the text, controlling the culture of the village and the stories that get told. On the other hand, Anya's might is shown through her role as the Moth Keeper, the isolation of the role allowing space for Anya to question the authority and what she can do. Anya is depicted as still existing within the community, but she is also shown to struggle with that position. Her complicated relationship with Yeolen highlights this struggle since she separates herself from him despite him offering the belonging she seeks. The panels represent her mind through the

light and dark of the panels and the in-between spaces she exists in, hinting towards the conflicts later in the story.

Disturbing the Universe

The nuances of the universe and its powers are made clear in the first two chapters of *The Moth Keeper*. By beginning the text with the legend which brought the Moon-Moths to the village, the story is based in the authority of the village and the Moon-Moths. Because of the scope of the village in the setting, the village's authority constitutes the universe for those that live in the community. With this premise, authority, which is described by Beauvais as being smaller in scope than general power, comprises the entirety of the power structure for this setting. Anya's individual power and might are obscured by the authority of the universe which she, at this point, goes along with as a willing participant. However, the unique power contained in her role and her person both separates her from the influence of the authority and makes way for her might to grow and manifest. This connects to the temporal otherness Beauvais defines since Anya is torn between the responsibilities of her role in society and the unknown future she fears.

In the period before she is left solely responsible for the Moon-Moths, there is a hint towards the eventual conflict of the story suggested by the focalization of Anya when she puts the Moon-Moths to bed. This is the first time in the text she is depicted alone, and the panel uses space and the light of dawn to hint at the danger and isolation Anya is prone to feeling (O'Neill 23). When she begins walking back to the village, her smile falls into a wistful expression as her shoulders hunch over. This is coupled with the focalization of the panels progressively moving away from Anya, depicting her with less detail and making her appear smaller compared to the

landscape (23; appendix A-4). These panels reflect her mind by using space to convey the feeling of isolation which continues through the rest of the text, using the vast setting to depict how small and alone she feels. This kind of focalization then continues through the rest of the text, empathetically depicting the panels in a way that reveals Anya's mind without dialogue or written narration.

After Anya begins to go out on her own, her sense of belonging is rattled by her isolation with only her own lantern to provide light. This isolation is exacerbated when contrasted with the glow of the village, Yeolen now joining the village and leaving Anya alone. The first night she goes out alone, her isolation and creeping desolation is seen through her framing against the desert night which focalizes her mind through the large panels of empty space. Now alone with the darkness that traumatized her when she was abandoned, her feelings about returning to the dark alone are manifested through the way the panels are drawn—empty and dark. Unlike before when she was largely framed up close or in the light, her first night with the Moon-Moths alone positions her as being small and dark in contrast with the light of her lantern and the glow of the Moon-Moths. Her figure with the Moon-Moths is further dwarfed by the vastness of the landscape and sky, her silhouette becoming smaller and darker as the night goes on (66-7; appendix A-6). This scene thus establishes the main issue of the text that conflicts with the power of the village, the seclusion and darkness of moth keeping kept away from the lights of the village.

With her sense of belonging now shaken, Anya's individual power begins to clash with the authority wielded by the night village which ignores her might in favor of viewing her as her role. Early in the text, the village refers to Anya exclusively as "young Moth Keeper," the village storyteller, Jaellara, wondering "what stories shall be told about [her]" (54). This question

references a cautionary legend just told about a girl, Lioka, who became obsessed with the moon and lost her way, foreshadowing both Anya's own journey and her interactions with Lioka's spirit later in the text. By referring to Anya in relation to the legends who do not name Lioka, Anya is similarly reduced to her role and actions through it. Anya is seen as a representative of Moth Keepers as opposed to as an individual with potential outside of her job. These expectations heighten her growing feelings of isolation and put increasing pressure on her to perform as the Moth Keeper. Even though she acknowledges that she had "gotten used to being alone," she feels the strain of her isolation coupled with the power granted by the village's authority and associated with her responsibility to be "a light for others" (62). Her individual might is boxed into her role and its obligations, causing her liminality to further destabilize her sense of belonging. Without her mentor and father figure to care for her and give her a sense of belonging through the narrative of their profession, her perspective of the universe begins to dim which causes her to begin doubting the validity of her place in it.

After her first night alone, Anya's work in the dark nights reveals more and more of her struggles with her sense of belonging and power, the text including two such instances that highlight her faltering faith in both herself and the universe. In the first, Anya questions "if my lantern went out right now…would I even exist anymore?" (94; appendix A-7), the panels becoming increasingly dark as her lantern is actually depicted as growing dimmer. The focalization follows her imagination and feelings by showing her lantern going out, expressing her mind visually despite the scene not being real. The following panels show the Moon-Moths swarming around her, her lantern still lit, implying that it never went out as she imagined. Through this scene and the way it is focalized, her individual power is questioned against the power of her role as a part of the village's universe, further destabilizing her sense of belonging.

In addition, her might—focalized through her lantern—is depicted as fading away as her belonging within the universe is destabilized in her mind.

In the second instance of faltering faith, Anya's imagination summons the warm light of the village and brightens the scene (109, 117; appendix A-8, A-10). However, her imagination gives way again to the bleak darkness of reality which further breaks her spirit (appendix A-9). This scene shows that her might may be stronger than she thought, able to light up the entire space by herself which depicts her potential. However, that might cannot function in the universe as it currently is, the lights going out. The next time she sits alone with the Moon-Moths, she wonders why "the darkness scare[s] [her] if it's all [she's] ever known" (122) before seeing the cold wisp of a spirit, representing a potential shift in power (124-6). This coincides with the dawn which itself foreshadows the danger due to the Moon-Moths and night village both being nocturnal (126). Unintentionally, Anya begins to question the fabric of her universe which positions her as isolated and alone while everyone else is positioned as a whole community. Because she feels that she doesn't belong with the rest of the individuals, she also doubts how much potential she really has. Her physical and mental isolation plays a significant role in contributing to how she relates to herself and others due to a lack of connection to someone else who could confirm her belonging and might. As she questions her belonging and might in her isolation, she inadvertently begins to unravel it as she unravels herself.

Unlike when she lived within the village, Anya's isolation gives room for her trauma to fester away from the community which affirmed her belonging and identity. At the height of her mental isolation from the village (despite physically being there), she looks at Yeolen's lit lantern which sparks her memory of the traumatic event that caused her obsession with the light and fear of the dark. In her memory, she recalls her mother leaving the village and leaving her

behind in the complete darkness. Her obsession connects to the legend of Lioka Jaellara told about a girl who "faded into a half-existence, trapped on earth forever by her obsession [with the moon]" (53). After seeing the brightly lit spirit of Lioka, the girl from the cautionary tale recounted by the village, she stumbled around wondering "where are the lights?" (141; appendix A-11). In this panel, her thoughts are depicted as coming from out of the ground with Anya herself nowhere to be seen, fully obscured by the landscape. This choice to depict her thoughts without her physical presence focalizes her perspective of herself, diminishing the reality of her physical body and emphasizing her thoughts and feelings. Her panic was only alleviated by the lights of Yeolen's mentor and the Moon-Moths, which draw her to them. She was comforted by the Moth Keeper, Yura, which gave her an affinity for light and moth keeping in addition to initiating her fear of the dark. In contrast with the green light of the spirit which scares her, the Moth Keeper's lantern and music were both depicted with a warm light (143). This incident is shown to affect her both positively and negatively, motivating her to become a Moth Keeper but clearly influencing her mental state as is depicted throughout the narrative.

Anya's refusal to speak about this event with anyone, indicated by those closest to her not knowing much about her family and her own admission that "she was used to being alone" (76), aligns with the un-speakability of trauma Balaev proposes. This inability fuels her desires to both become a Moth Keeper and soothe her trauma, her memory depicting the origin of her desire. While the younger Anya was being carried back to the village, her eyes lingered on the previous Moth Keeper's lantern (147). This moment unites her trauma from being abandoned and her desire to be a Moth Keeper, contextualizing her journey around her obsession with the Moth Keeper's light. However, Anya's journey towards being a Moth Keeper culminates in her complete separation from her own sense of self. Since she occupies a space both inside and

outside the village as the Moth Keeper, she feels that she does not belong to either which contributes to her ongoing trauma. Earlier in the story, she had Yeolen to guide her and be a companion, and although she did not necessarily appreciate his presence then, his absence is clearly felt through Anya's deteriorating mental state once she begins to take the Moon-Moths out to the desert alone. Without Yeolen, her self-doubt comes to the forefront of her issues, coupling with her trauma and resulting in alienation between herself and her identity. This alienation between herself and her sense of belonging are caused by this trauma, creating her feelings of isolation that are displayed via the focalization. Balaev notes that recalled traumatic events are necessarily biased due to being filtered through the alienated mind of the traumatized (150). This makes the dark focalization of the flashback, which reduces her presence while expanding her feelings, all the more important since the light and temporal space of the panels is shown to be influenced heavily by Anya's biased recollection. When the text reveals this event, her trauma is reiterated and fresh in both her mind and the minds of readers as she decides to sneak away to the day village.

Up until the moment she reflects on her past, Anya largely considered Yeolen as a part of the night village community rather than as an individual connected to her as another individual. However, when she watches Yeolen leave the village to take a shift as Moth Keeper (O'Neill 130), it reminds her of their shared position that sets them apart from the village but connects them to one another. This difference is most evidenced by the fact that before this moment, she does not call attention to him specifically, referring to him as a member of the community by picturing him along with other villagers as she worries that "everyone's looking forward to seeing the flowers in bloom" (120). Anya's insistent terminology comes despite the repeated acknowledgement that she and Yeolen are both "soloists...cut from the same cloth" (101).

Despite knowing Yeolen's story, which largely mirrors her own through their shared rejection of the village and occupation, she rejects this sameness to dwell on her traumatic past being rejected by her mother. As a result of this dual rejection, she is caught between the two parents, belonging to both and neither at the same time.

Spurred on by her hatred of the darkness and longing for the light, Anya gives into the temptation to go to the day village as an extension of her desire to find belonging based on her own individual power as opposed to her role. She slips away and spends the day with the day villagers, wondering who she would be "if [she] could live in the light" (O'Neill 150) and be a part of the community. However, the day villagers note to Anya that the sun during the day is too hot to be outside without burning, indicating that they are envious of the night village's cooler and darker conditions (160-1). This statement exposes the true issue behind the light and dark which is that both extreme light and dark are damaging. When she leaves for home, she curses herself since she feels guilty over taking a break when "everyone else is working so hard" (164), displacing herself in her own view of the community and her place in it. Her exhaustion from being outside all day visibly shows in the bags under her eyes and furrowed brow, physically indicating the weight and tiredness she feels (167-8; appendix A-12, A-13). As she struggles against her disturbed sense of belonging by trying to find alternative places to belong—like the day village—the universe becomes more and more disturbed by proxy. Given her position in the universe as a vital but unseen part of the community, her individual power pushing against the universe also stretches her own role's power and disturbs it from its own position. This scene sets the stage for Anya's full breaking of the universe which follows directly as a result of her decision. It not only sets up the breaking of the universe but also her resolution of it which requires the experience she gained.

Because of the small scope of the universe present in *The Moth Keeper,* Anya's actions significantly disturb the landscape of power. The authority of the village cannot reach her when she is alone which gives her own might a chance to grow. However, due to the trauma she carries, her power begins to undermine the village she longs to be a part of. Her power in the role of Moth Keeper is vital to the community but not directly under its authority, the potential of her power as an individual amplified by her role. As such, the universe's stability is slowly undone by Anya's growing might as she begins acting outside its authority. Her discontentment with herself and her position in the universe fuels her to question herself which, in turn, questions her role and the entire community it depends on. Without her mentor to care for her as an individual, her attempts to negotiate her belonging manifest as disturbances to the universe.

The Universe Disturbed

After spending the day in the day village, Anya fully breaks the universe that night when she falls asleep from fatigue which results in her lantern going out and the Moon-Moths being lost. The universe breaking is represented by the moon shattering in her dream, crashing into itself and turning into the Moon-Moths, symbols of power and change (171; appendix A-14). With the loss of the Moon-Moths which represent a vital part of the village's power, the fate of the village is thrown into question, endangering the entire population. Anya's part in breaking the universe is largely unintentional but still fueled by her questioning and discontentment with it. Due to this event, Anya loses the power inherent to her position entirely which in turn makes her belonging within the system precarious. The night and day villages are framed as being the only systems in existence in the world, and so Anya's rejection of both, however momentary, causes her world to crash around her. With the universe broken and all that goes into it, Anya is

left only with her individual might and the relationship she has with the villagers. When Anya awakens, it is Yeolen who finds her, the only light in the panel provided by his lantern (173). Although the apparently full moon is depicted high in the sky, it fails to illuminate the night, Yeolen and Anya only lit up by his lantern (173; appendix A-15). The vastness of the page distances Anya from the moon and its light in a similar way to her flashback. However, unlike her flashback, she does have access to light in Yeolen's lantern. This change indicates a change in her interiority from the past through focalization. The lack of complete darkness is indicative of the fact that she is not entirely alone, because she can rely on Yeolen who came to get her. Although she has thoroughly disturbed her universe and endangered the lives of those she cares for, she is saved by her father figure who brings her back to the village before she goes out to repair her mistake.

Isolated from both parents through her actions as the Moth Keeper, Anya emphasizes her own individual might as opposed to the authority Yeolen and her mother were a part of in the village. When this results in her disturbance of the universe, she is left truly isolated from the universe's system through her own actions. However, Yeolen finds her, reestablishing her connection between the two as a father-daughter relationship of care. Previously, after he stopped going out with Anya, he was presented as being a part of the community with his lantern unlit. Even when he tries to step in as the Moth Keeper for a night, Anya stops him before his lantern can be lit and before he leaves the light of the village (115). His leaving the village and finding Anya marks his departure from the village's lights in order to provide his own light as a father for Anya. Her previous refusal of him connects to her past running to accept the previous Moth Keeper's light, positioning them as opposites. However, Yeolen's finding of Anya mirrors that past moment when she was abandoned by her mother and found by Yeolen's own mentor,

Yura, and brings the repetition of Anya's relationship to other Moth Keepers full circle. Anya's need for a parental figure was precluded by her mother leaving her alone in the desert in the dark. The absence of light and a parent in both scenes frames Anya as being both powerless and without belonging, much like her loss of the Moon-Moths. Both scenes are resolved by the light of a Moth Keeper coming to save Anya and bring her back to the village. In this way, coupled with Yeolen's role as pseudo-father and mentor, the role of Moth Keeper is established repeatedly as embodying a parental role for Anya, the singular light of the Moth Keepers' lanterns representing care only when the light from the lanterns isn't in her hands. However, this sentiment begins to change with Yeolen's actions, reframing Anya in a now reciprocal relationship with him and the rest of the village by extension. With this reaffirmation of her connection to others coupled with a revelation of understanding related to her status as a temporal other, her breaking of the universe also sets the stage for her to repair the universe herself.

In the void that is left when the Moon-Moths are lost, the power and authority wielded by the village is also lost, since their survival hinged on the Moon-Moths. This power vacuum leaves room for Anya's individual might which is now supported by Yeolen who, despite being part of the now-broken system, shows individual care for her. Anya finally acknowledges others in her life because of the broken universe, forced to contend with the vulnerabilities she had been hiding up until that point. As such, the breaking of the universe provides the needed motivation and setting for Anya to renegotiate her place in the universe through her might, repairing the universe in the process.

Repairing the Universe

After being found, Anya goes back out into the night now having reframed Yeolen as not just a part of the community but as an individual in relation to her. Allowing Yeolen to light his lantern from hers in a reversal of the beginning of the story causes this realization, directly offering him some of the might she has (194). Up until this point in the story, her lantern had been a physical manifestation of her might that she kept away from others through her job. Earlier in the text, her mentioning "I want to hold my lantern up high for everyone" (123) suggests that she wanted to be a beacon of light but not touched directly, mirroring her fascination with Yura's warm lantern light which she only observes. In the present, this action of giving away the light represents Anya regaining her footing both regarding power and belonging, taking her mentor's place in the village as an authority. Instead of isolating herself as the Moth Keeper holding up her individual light, she willingly gives up that position to instead place herself in relation to Yeolen as an individual and Moth Keeper. This, in turn, further bolsters her individual power that she then uses to speak with the spirit of Lioka whose lights she saw repeatedly throughout the story. This spirit, which is consistently depicted as being green, represents Anya's potential both to lose her way and also to find it again. After finding most of the Moon-Moths through her own powers and abilities, Anya finds the Moon-Spirit. The Moon-Spirit's light represents power and shifts in power, the Moon-Spirit appearing only when large shifts occur as in the opening. In this moment, Anya takes control of the power through the Moon-Moths which directly results in the Moon-Spirit helping both Anya and Lioka (225-31). In this way, Anya takes on the role of Moth Keeper formerly presented by Yeolen and Yura. She rediscovers her positionality which resolves her feelings of disconnect regarding power and belonging, exerting her individual and universe-given power to care for others as she was cared

for. Anya thus discovers, through disturbing her universe, that her issues with the universe were a result of the trauma and lack of belonging caused by her abandonment which she must resolve. In the present, the imbalanced authority and might present in the community exacerbates her preexisting issues but also allows her to form new connections that soothe that trauma.

In the moment when she has lost the Moon-Moths and is at her lowest point, her individual might is exposed and empowered by her unique position as both the Moth Keeper and a child. In exploring the state of childhood as a temporal other to adulthood, Beauvais identifies a duality in childhood which applies to Anya and her power. The feeling of "inadequacy" Anya struggles with is caused by her mother's actions as well as "adults' omnipresence" in her community which result in her feelings of alienation (Beauvais 332). The loss of the Moon-Moths can be directly attributed to her emotional issues caused by the othering she experienced in her childhood which she still exists in. However, the other side of the childhood ambiguity coin is the potential that children have to become, their futures unknowable and thus significant since they haven't happened yet (335-6). For Anya, this ambiguity removes the power from the universe which failed her and places it directly into her hands. Unlike Yeolen who is an adult and thus established in the community, Anya has the potential to change not only her community but also the entire universe. Her otherness becomes a strength as she works to repair the universe by using what she has learned from being othered by it.

The focalization of her journey to find the Moon-Moths contrasts with the other nights spent in the desert by largely framing Anya and Lioka closer to the focal point, focusing on the two in company as opposed to in isolation against the landscape. Also contributing to this is the night which is colored lighter since it is close to dawn. The Moon-Spirit describes the night as "soft but strong" (O'Neill 229) which is depicted by the sky being blue and purple as opposed to

the black and navy of previous nights. This presents the sky as being in-between night and day, continuing the theme of liminal spaces stuck in-between. However, unlike previous instances where Anya's liminality caused her trauma, this instance becomes a space of potential and might. Liminality is defined by Michael Joseph as "the quality of being socially segregated, set apart, and divested of status" (116). Liminality describes the condition both Anya and Lioka occupy, stuck in-between the community and themselves as well as between the night and the dawn. In this liminal space, Anya can finally take control over her individual might and resolve her trauma from being in stuck in-between. The sky is depicted as lighter than the dark nights to represent how far she has come in her journey and the new feeling of connectedness to others that contrasts with her previous isolation. The liminality of dawn and the time just before dawn are used in the text to mark the changes in Anya which have allowed her to succeed. Anya's return to the village with the Moon-Moths takes place during this time, bridging the dark and light which mirrors Anya's uncertainty but determination to right the universe. Her conflicted feelings between dark and light are resolved through the intermixing of the two which includes the protection of the night and inevitability of the day (229). The text narratively engages with this in order to display Anya's might both in her role and as an individual who saves the village.

As a result of this new instance of liminality, Anya's responses to others regain the empathy she previously expressed before her isolation. Now that the in-between space has become a place where might can thrive, Anya can begin negotiating her power and belonging through connecting to others as individuals. This is most clearly seen in the way she convinces Lioka to give up the Moon-Moths. After learning about her situation compared to the cautionary tale about Lioka told by Jaellara earlier in the story, Anya uses that knowledge to appeal to Lioka's own empathy. Presenting Lioka's past as a story allows it to be a narrative situation

Anya can empathize with, seeing her own situation in Lioka's. She specifically evokes empathy by connecting the two perspectives, stating, "I know how hard it is to realize you've already let something slip away" (222). In the act of saying this, Anya acknowledges her own empathy for Lioka's situation and their shared experience, noting that the pain "makes you want to hide and forget" (222). This engages with both Balaev's idea of trauma and Keen's idea of character identification. By acknowledging her feelings related to her trauma, Anya resolves her wordlessness to the point she can share her experience with others. Relating to empathy, both Anya and Lioka realize that they share the same "goals and plans" in finding the Moon-Moths and the belonging they can offer (Keen 217). This climactic conversation serves to display how Anya has grown and developed, now wielding her power on her own and understanding where she belongs within her community, finally finding the position she longed for to feel complete (Bieger 25).

Also contributing to her reaffirmed sense of belonging is Anya's exchange with Yeolen before she goes off to find the Moon-Moths which proves significant to her repairing the universe and her place in it. She notes that "the villagers need to see the light of [his] lantern" (O'Neill 192) which is the first time in the text that she acknowledges his individual merit as a person. Anya's acknowledgement of Yeolen's unique abilities refers not only to her empathy for him but also the reciprocal care relationship she now engages with him. In realizing her own role in the village as a child with might, she recognizes and acknowledges that he is irreplaceable as an individual, "respond[ing] to... the entire person" as opposed to the facets of the person that are useful at the time (Mullin 189). By finally responding and reciprocating the care he showed to her, she acknowledges their relationship and strengthens it. Unlike before when Yeolen was framed exclusively in relation to the village, Anya now recognizes his individual relationship

with her which informs her relationship with the rest of the village. This later connects to her return to the village wherein Yeolen is the first to notice and acknowledge her. In repairing the universe and repositioning her power in relation to it, Anya comes to realize and act upon the knowledge that her relationship with her father figure was valid and valuable in her quest to find belonging and soothe the wordlessness of her trauma.

As Anya operates within the vacuum of power left by the Moon-Moths' disappearance, she proves her might and its ability to change the universe. In using her might to find the Moon-Moths and resolve the wordlessness of her trauma, she reframes the universe as one that relies not only on the village-created authority but also acknowledges an individual child's might. Anya ensures that the village must now contend with might as a very real force that can both make and break the universe by stressing both her needs as an individual and the importance of individual child might to Lioka. This action also resolves the otherness of childhood, manifesting the ambiguous future as a real future that can be changed. Anya's relationship with Yeolen furthers this idea, her changing relationship with her father-figure focusing on their individuality which itself is tied to might as opposed to authority. As shown by the final panels of the text, authority still has a place in the village, but its supremacy is diminished with the recognition that belonging and empathy are important to individual might.

The Universe Restored

In the newly resettled universe, Anya's position within the universe technically has not changed, but the entire universe has shifted around her instead. Changes are made to the boundaries previously uncrossed before Anya made the community realize the flaws in their power system. Instead of relying on single Moth Keeper to bear the burden of moth keeping

alone while portraying the rest of the village as a monolith, the village now acknowledges the isolation of the job and seek to remedy it. The village's authority over the villagers is pulled away from it and given to the individuals themselves, represented by the group of Moth Keepers at the end. Their might as individuals is recognized at the same time they are given authority by becoming a group dedicated to the cause of moth keeping. The final panels of the novel depict Anya and other villagers holding lanterns as they begin moth keeping as a group. In the bottom panel spread across both pages, Anya and the villagers are shown in silhouette, their lights illuminating the night. In contrast with previous panels which depicted Anya isolated in the dark with only her lantern, these panels depict her in the same style but focus on the group of villagers that join her (O'Neill 256-7; appendix A-16). The text uses the same method of showing space but fills it with a different meaning, using focalization to represent not only the physical change but also the emotional change felt by Anya. With her power and belonging established, Anya's trauma regarding the darkness is placated by the company of others to share the burden. Her act of disturbing the universe reconstructed not only the universe but also her intrapersonal identity which most notably affected her relationships with others, exemplified by the reciprocal care relationship she found in Yeolen. In the moment she acknowledges him as an individual, she goes from rejecting his care and story to empathizing with him and others.

The Moth Keeper, while not depicting a traditional family structure, explores a very real parental relationship between Anya and Yeolen. Because of her mother's abandonment and the related trauma, Anya finds a more legitimate parent-child relationship in her mentor-turned-father who cares for her and alleviates the isolation she feels from the tension of her job and potential. The liminal space she occupies between authority and might, her job and her desires, the night village and day village, her mother and Yeolen, and her identity and self are all bridged

through her journey to renegotiate her place in the universe. Anya acknowledges that Yeolen is a unique individual separate from the community and is involved uniquely in a relationship with her, and she learns that she belongs not only in relation to him but also to the community at large. Connecting to the main ideas of the thesis, *The Moth Keeper* presents the interiority of its protagonist through space and the dichotomy of light and dark to represent the liminality of her position as a child and specifically as a child in relation to her parental figures. The conclusion of this chapter connects to the thesis in that Anya's reconceptualization of her relationship with Yeolen positions both of them as unique individuals involved in a reciprocal relationship of care.

CHAPTER II: FAIRY TALES COLOR OUR MEMORY IN *THE MAGIC FISH*

The Magic Fish is a YA graphic novel written by Trung Le Nguyen following a mother and son pair, Hiền and Tiến, as they navigate their personal identities and relationship with each other. The novel depicts two parallel narratives of voicing seemingly difficult aspects of character, using modern variations on traditional fairy tales to create an "It Gets Better" queer narrative not only for the queer son but also the immigrant mother, both of whom share the tales through focalization and ocularization. In the previous chapter, I explored focalization through Anya's singular perspective. *The Magic Fish* expands the number of focalizers to two, and this chapter explores both Hiền and Tiến as equal focalizers for this text. Additionally, Anya's relationship with Yeolen was a new connection built over the course of the narrative, while the relationship between Hiền and Tiến is pre-established by their bond established early in the story. Finally, in *The Moth Keeper,* the environment represented Anya's mind through how it represented light and dark. *The Magic Fish,* by contrast, uses color-coded panels to denote different times and spaces. The color of the panels represents nuances in Hiền and Tiến's interiorities as their minds cross between time and genre. *The Magic Fish* is significant for the study into focalization and parent-child relationships primarily in how, despite the differences from *The Moth Keeper,* the outcome of this narrative is very similar in how the central parent-child relationship depicts the individuals in the relationships as equals. By the end of the text, Hiền and Tiến are positioned as equals in the relationship, their shared focalization of the fairy tales connecting their perspectives together. Instead of viewing each other solely as mother and son, both recognize the other's unique struggles and love for them.

The foremost theme in *The Magic Fish* is parallelism between the characters and their experiences, hopes, and traumas. The fairy tales Hiền and Tiến tell each other reveal their shared

experiences beyond their relationship as mother and son. These fairy tales also disturb the power dynamics inherent to their relationship which allow them to see each other outside of their perceived roles. While reading and listening to the fairy tales, Hiền and Tiến both find themselves resonating with certain aspects of the tales and their characters. Their resonance brings their respective traumas and inner desires, which ordinarily divide them, to the surface so that they can deal with them. Both characters experience this resonance with the fairy tales—albeit for different parts—which allows them to bridge the divide between them generationally, culturally, and personally by working out their uncovered issues. The fairy tales come to parallel their real-life events and experiences, and the two change and grow their perspectives about themselves and each other through the parallel narratives told in the tales.

By the conclusion of *The Magic Fish*, both mother and son have reached a point where they are fully ready to cross the boundaries between their parallel stories, acknowledging each other as individuals with whom they share a mutual, loving relationship. Because they no longer are self-involved with their own struggles, they can see their parent/child's struggles as similar to their own, allowing them to see the other's resemblance to themselves as individuals. The lines between the parallel narratives being told by Tiến and his mother are blurred with the implication that they were always one and the same. Their sameness comes from an acknowledgement that their struggles to overcome their trauma and their desires to connect and be accepted by their parents are the same despite the temporal differences. This acknowledgement connects their mindsets since they realize their experiences are similar. The characters focalize and are affected by the modified fairy tales which intersects their perspectives and stories. Once the two have overcome their personal challenges regarding their traumas, they are able to engage and

communicate their love more directly, culminating in their relationship repairing and deepening through a greater mutual understanding.

The Magic Fish is situated in the conversation of focalization in graphic texts, specifically children's and YA graphic texts, in the ways it focalizes the characters' journeys along with the nature of their parallel experiences. Its significance comes from the clear ways it engages with unspoken meanings generated from the spaces between images which bring significance to the differences in perspectives represented by the colors. Focalization in this text derives meaning not only from implied shifts in time that Mikkonen explores but also from separate times interacting through both interpersonal and intrapersonal connections, exploring how different times and stories can be connected visually and narratively. The author/illustrator purposefully intersects present and past in the fairy tales through the interconnected perspectives as indicated both in the text itself and the author's own words in the back of the book. These interconnections can be understood as focalization since the panels depict a character's interiority. This story provides exemplary illustrations of focalization which purposefully disturb the temporality and spaces within the intermingling texts conversing throughout the narrative. The parental relationship is given clearer focus despite not being the overt, main focus of the narrative because the focalization of time emerges from the interconnected panels to purposefully depict differences in Hiền and Tiến's perspectives. The subtleties in the parent and child's personal perspectives are connected in some areas solely through the focalization, not unlike how *The Moth Keeper* focalized Anya's trauma and perspective without words, creating a unique method of expressing the complexity of their relationship and its evolution. In certain panels, the colors representing present, past, and fiction are blurred together which shows that Hiền and Tiến's perspectives are interconnected through the fairy tales. The focalization thus

marks Hiền and Tiến's progression as characters and points them towards each other as opposed to separating them like they initially believe.

Theories of Narrative, Queer Identity. And Trauma in *The Magic Fish*

My theoretical methodology for *The Magic Fish* revolves around how Hiền and Tiến understand themselves and the fairy tales they hear. Kai Mikkonen and Nancy Pedri propose focalization and ocularization as the ways in which characters not only see but contextualize what they are seeing against their own interiority. Thus, focalization highlights Hiền and Tiến's trauma which initially prevents their open communication. According to Marshall Gregory's ethical theories of narration, stories are positioned in places of power in relation to readers, inciting change through their reflections of reality. Hiền and Tiến are affected by the fairy tales they read which change how they view themselves and each other. Judith Roof's theory of modification in fairy tales facilitates the re-creation of meaning by placing meaning in the core of stories as systems. The three fairy tales of *The Magic Fish* each feature differences outside the base forms the tales take, but they retain their original power since the systems of the tales remain intact. All the previous theories then ultimately feed into Jesse Matz's discussion of "No Future" vs. "It Gets Better" outcomes which are common in queer narratives. The happy ending of each of the fairy tales and the main narrative all contribute to the "It Gets Better" theory that believes queer outcomes will passively improve over time. Both the main narrative and the three fairy tales told in this novel engage with these theories of story making and telling in order to craft a narrative which uses focalized color and ocularization to bridge present, past, and story for the characters. The fairy tales mark the growth of both characters in separate but equal ways, each serving as the catalyst for some change in the characters after they are told. These changes

prove significant when the main narrative also subverts Tiến's expectations for the ending, mirroring the modifications made to the fairy tales. The meaning that is created between mother and son shows both that their stories are, in fact, one, which brings them together and projects into the future.

The concept of focalization in *The Magic Fish* particularly explores the ideas of ocularization, time, color, and the mind. As I explained in Chapter One, Kai Mikkonen's *The Narratology of Comic Art* defines focalization as a form of perspective, answering the questions of "who sees" and "who speaks" (150). In visual texts, focalization is used to determine not only the focal point for each panel but also the focalization of the panels over the course of the text that string together to create a cohesive narrative. This concept of focalization encompasses the focalizer, as they may or may not physically appear in the panel; the narrator; anything shown within the panels; and the relationships among all these elements. Because of this multiplicity, multiple internal focalizers—who "are limited to some character's mind" (151)—and the external focalizer—who "is spatially limited to the role of the witness, without direct access to characters' psychology." (151)—are possible at any given time, allowing for multiple simultaneous perspectives of any one panel. The multiplicity of focalizers can cause tension within the text when certain focalizers know or can see more than others despite being simultaneous witnesses (161). One such way this multiplicity causes tension is in the temporality of panels and how they are focalized. In order to determine temporal shifts in between panels in *The Magic Fish*, the relationship between graphic novel panels can be examined more closely in order to derive meaning from the panel-panel relationship and what is not expressed visually (39). Nancy Pedri's "What's the Matter of Seeing in Graphic Memoir?" further explores these focal relationships and their ocularization. Ocularization is a term used to encompass not only

the "seeing" focalization of a text but also the further mental processes involved in the internalization of what is being seen. The visuals then not only depict the actions and objects in the panel but also reveal the "beliefs, emotions, motivations, [and] biases" of the focalizer through their ocularization. Together, the theories proposed by Mikkonen and Pedri support my argument that focalization in *The Magic Fish* creates a series of relationships between Hiền and Tiến *and* among various panels, as both characters focalize the fairy tales as well as their own narratives. Focalization's role in this text serves to visualize the minds of the protagonists as they read and internalize the fairy tales' messages. The colors of the panels contribute to the ocularization of how Hiền and Tiến focalize the story specifically when panels colored differently from the surrounding ones appear, indicating that the panel is being "seen" in one of the characters' minds separate from the adjacent panels.

Connecting both Hiền and Tiến's focalized narratives through the fairy tales is their shared experience of trauma. Trauma in literature, as it is defined by Michelle Balaev and mentioned in Chapter One, refers to the emotional response of a person to trauma which causes some sort of alienation from themselves and their identity (150). Trauma's ability to alienate makes trauma "unrepresentable" and so trauma is most often depicted as repeated glimpses of the traumatizing event itself as a way to visualize the trauma without identifying or internalizing it (151). In the previous chapter, I used Balaev's article to highlight Anya's inability to speak about her trauma. For *The Magic Fish's* Hiền and Tiến, Balaev's concept of trauma as repetitive and transmittable is more relevant. While their trauma still renders them unable to speak, the real significance comes from how Hiền's trauma gets repeatedly brought up for her. Trauma is made to be "repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable" which affects not only the individual but also their relations in the form of intergenerational trauma (151). The concept of intergenerational trauma

explores how trauma can extend out from the individual to others, "recreating… the experience for those who were not there" (152). In this way, trauma walks the line between individual and shared experience, separating both individuals and whole groups from themselves. In *The Magic Fish,* Hiền's trauma informs her focalization by conjuring memories from the traumatic event that intermix with the fairy tales. Tiến does not enter the conversation with explicit trauma but engages with it through the course of the story, both his own related to coming out and his family's generational trauma. Their responses to the tales along with the focalization itself are intertwined with their trauma and facilitated through the taking up of stories proposed by Gregory. The repetitive trauma Hiền and Tiến experience affects both of them despite their individual beliefs that their experiences are un-shareable with each other. By the end of the narrative, Hiền and Tiến acknowledge each other's trauma, and Hiền specifically decides to put a stop to one part of the trauma by communicating her acceptance of Tiến's sexuality.

Chapters three and four of Marshall Gregory's *Shaped by Stories* examine some of the intrapersonal relationships and interactions formed around reading a text, particularly regarding stories as experience, a need, representation, and meaning. These chapters are aimed at readers for the purpose of understanding these relationships with texts and thus apply not only to readers of *The Magic Fish* but also to Hiền and Tiến as they read the stories within the story. Gregory argues that stories have the power to influence readers' realities, and he blurs the line between "second-hand" stories and "first-hand" experiences (42-3). This blurred line allows stories to be "educational" in a way real experiences cannot since they uniquely wield "intimacy and distance at the same time" (44). Gregory goes on to establish stories and the consumption thereof not only as an educational tool but also as a "primal need," necessary for readers to witness and internalize the "universality" contained in stories (45). Universality, as Gregory defines it, allows

readers to not only connect stories to their lived experiences but also bridge cultural differences through common human emotions, motivations, actions, and existential conditions (45-6). Following from the universality of stories, the "unity of [its] parts" can soothe the intrapersonal turmoil produced by the disorganization of real life (58). The culmination of these theories seeks to glean what meaning is derived from stories and what value it has for a person. Gregory ultimately suggests that, in the quest to be happy, humans gravitate towards stories to make sense of the confusion of life and its mysteries while exploring divergent "lines of action and thought" (62) which may satisfy some of the primal need sensed in readers. In *The Magic Fish*, Hiền and Tiến's experience of stories engages with these theories to contextualize their understandings of the fairy tales and themselves. Particularly, Hiền engages with stories as blurring between her first-hand experiences being a daughter, mother, and refugee and second-hand experiences of the fairy tale protagonists that mirror her own actions, first relating to her trauma and later to her ambiguous identity. Tiến internalizes the fairy tales as sources of education because the narratives of the fairy tales affect him simultaneously very personally in relation to his feelings towards his crush and at a distance since the relationships depicted in the fairy tales are largely heterosexual up until the end. This affect most clearly is seen in how he reacts to "The Little Mermaid" which depicts two girls showing romantic interest and thus reducing the space between the story and his personal experience. Together, both Hiền and Tiến engage with stories as universals and as needs as their personal journeys progress since they both resonate with the fairy tales despite the differences in their experiences and necessarily use the stories to understand themselves.

The power of stories depends on the reader connecting to some aspect of the main narrative. Hiền and Tiến both question these connections at different points of the main story,

Hiền when she is told a version of "Cinderella" and Tiến when Hiền changes the ending of "The Little Mermaid." However, Judith Roof's article, "Out of the Bind: From Structure to System in Popular Narratives," proposes an answer to these questions by exploring the nature of stories as changeable but no less powerful. Roof positions narratives as basic systems rather than rigid structures, an approach that lends legitimacy to alterations and modifications to texts. Rather than seeing texts as products of a rule, the texts themselves produce the rule based on the bare minimum requirements of the story to be recognizable, so that the story can then be modified and reproduced. In structures, texts may be binarized and limited on their ability to adapt and be adapted to damaging effects on readings of said texts (Roof 46). Roof claims that, by examining texts as a system rather than a structure, "changes in elements, cause-effect relationships, and actors," are all allowable without disrupting the narrative (47). The example of a story system Roof gives is the tale of "Little Red Riding Hood," a popularly adapted fairy tale. According to Roof, "the rule of the "Red Riding" system consists of three elements: (1) Host and guest characters whose relation is interrupted by a third, (2) the serial ingestion of characters, and (3) the transformability of characters" (47). According to this rule, adaptations that end with the protagonist dead are as valid as ones that end with the protagonist alive and well. As long as the rules remain intact, the details unrelated to the rule are free to change. Through the rule created from this text, the characters and their actions can change which may also ultimately alter the ending and its message while still retaining the system of the story (49). Therefore, understanding texts like the ones found within *The Magic Fish* as systems creating rules rather than structures beholden to them explains why they are different on a cultural level in addition to the other alterations imposed by the speakers of the tales. Fairy tales are known to be changeable already, owing to differences in culture and tradition, and Roof's explanation of stories as

systems expands the ability to change beyond fairy tales to encompass stories as a whole. She uses a fairy tale to exemplify the point since they are flexible and continually reached for by authors and readers. *The Moth Keeper* also engages with the idea of stories as significant, begging the question of how stories in particular derive meaning for readers/listeners. For Hiền and Tiến, this systemization changes their perspectives on fairy tales they thought they knew so that they can still derive meaning from the changes. Doing so allows the tales, produced by their own rules, to change whole endings and meanings while retaining their significance as traditional stories for the individuals engaging with the texts regardless of culture or community.

The idea of endings and their significance connects to two theories Jesse Matz discusses, "It Gets Better" and "No Future," both of which examine queer texts as contributing to the discourse around queer narratives. "The Little Mermaid's" story in *The Magic Fish* is notably changed in the ending—accounted for by the systemization of stories—and connects specifically to "It Gets Better." These theories and the systems they represent specifically involve the endings of queer narratives like "The Little Mermaid." Matz positions the two in their relation to temporality: "It Gets Better" is concerned with the future, "No Future" is concerned with negating the future. "It Gets Better" largely examines the progress made which allows queer children to be accepted in society while theorizing that the progress's trajectory will naturally continue and thus improve the overall ideological state of queer narratives (229-30). "No Future" refutes this theory by arguing that such focus on the future can cause real ramifications for the present by discouraging real efforts for change while waiting for the future (230). The two theories thus use narrative temporality to explore whether or not narratives argue for an optimistic present and future or for a pessimistic perspective on inaction in the present. Following Matz's argument that "It Gets Better" narratives "[avoid] the future tense…stress[ing]

the present existence of the future state to come" (234-5), *The Magic Fish* also points towards the future in spite of remaining in the past and present. The ending of "The Little Mermaid" suggests a better future through the story it tells in the present. *The Magic Fish*, both from its setting and ultimate outcome, supports the "It Gets Better" outcome through its narrative which resolves both Tiến and Hiền's inner conflicts and unites the two with their parallel shared experiences of feeling unaccepted and wanting to be loved by their parent. As is true of other queer narratives, this text joins the conversation between "No Future" and "It Gets Better" by picking a side. This perspective is significant because it means that the text was written into a conversation about how queer narratives are shaped which in turn shapes other queer narratives.

Methodology

In connecting the theories from Mikkonen, Pedri, Balaev, Gregory, Roof, and Matz, focalization creates binds between unspoken, traumatic events and feelings. Focalization exposes Hiền and Tiến's trauma that results in unspeakibility. This unspeakability results from the inherent power and systematization of stories; however, these same elements ultimately lead to hopeful queer outcomes. The focalization in *The Magic Fish* reveals the hidden meanings and traumas Hiền and Tiến are hiding which are then made sense of through theories of narrative, which contextualize the conflicts in their relationship. In the novel, the colored panels provide meaningful expressions of meaning in the ways the colors cross over. I am investigating them via the theories of trauma, story internalization, systematization, and queerness in order to exemplify what focalization is capable of using only color. This analysis also reveals how relationships can be both wordlessly communicated and changed in the physical spaces between panels and thus the metaphorical spaces characters. The theories of trauma, storytelling, story systemization, and

queerness clarify what the two feel and experience, and their experiences are indicated and emphasized by the focalization but left for interpretation. Specifically, understanding trauma as repetitive and transmittable contextualizes Hiền and Tiến's responses to each other as unspeakable yet continually brought up. Their trauma feeds into how they understand the fairy tales through Gregory's ideas about stories as primal needs and access to universals. The two connect to each other unknowingly through this universality despite their separate issues. The specific fairy tales that they internalize are notably changed but retain their base meaning and power because of systematization as a story theory. Despite the tangled ideas presented in the story, the text points towards the "It Gets Better" through the unambiguously happy ending contextualized by the rest of the narrative that supports it. These multiple moving parts which initially divide mother and son are unified in the end with the understanding that their perspectives were not as different as they originally thought. While the focalization suggests this change via the cross-colored panels that depict the shift, the implicit narratives are exposed and integrated into the meaning gleaned from the focalization. The other theories, in turn, contextualize and give significance to the seemingly subtle changes to the central parental relationship that forms the backbone of the text.

The intrapersonal change in Tiến and Hiền that translates to an interpersonal change in their relationship is based on their parallel growths through the narrative. To fully examine these changes, it is important to explore both how the fairy tales affect Hiền and Tiến individually and how their personal experiences influence how they engage with the fairy tales. Specifically, trauma and queer theories explore the internal struggles Hiền and Tiến respectively face. Hiền must navigate her trauma being a refugee in-between cultures that hinders her ability to communicate, and Tiến wrestles with his sexuality that he thinks his mother will not accept.

These issues of trauma and queerness couple with the "present" experiences of the death of Hiền's mother, Hiền's trip to Vietnam, and the events of Tiến's dance. The theories thus connect also to the fairy tales told synchronously with these events and the theories related to understanding stories. Theories of how stories affect readers and the potential to alter stories explain why Hiền and Tiến are affected by the stories the way they are and how the differences from familiar tellings of the fairy tales are still acceptable through a model of systemization. Because stories can order the chaos of a person's reality, the importance of stories for a person is likened to a "primal need" that Hiền and Tiến both share (Gregory 45). This need drives them to not only continue consuming stories but also to add the fairy tales to their changing images of themselves. However, the changeability of the fairy tales (Roof) allows the two—as both tellers and listeners—to influence and be influenced by the versions of the tales that do not align with what they thought they were, opening avenues for growth in unexpected places. The focalization of how the multiple parallel storylines are told and cross over brings together the above theories and how they influence Hiền and Tiến's interactions with each other. Their personal journeys explain how mother and son dismantle the power structures between them and come to a mutual understanding through the fairy tales. Their relationship with each other is contingent on their relationship with themselves which in turn is influenced by their experiences coming to the fairy tales and how they internalize them after reading.

The Magic Fish

The Magic Fish, written and illustrated by Trung Le Nguyen, is a semiautobiographical graphic novel about a young queer boy, Tiến, and his immigrant mother, Hiền. After coming to the United States as a refugee with her husband, Hiền is determined to make a good life for her

family while remaining in touch with her mother back in Vietnam. She reads fairy tales aloud with her son in order to better learn English and connect with him despite the difference in culture between them. The first fairy tale they read together, "Allerleirauh," highlights the difference between Hiền and Tiến since the protagonist's flight away from home reminds Hiền of her own past, which she does not share with her son. However, "Allerleirauh" also connects mother and son together through their conversation about romance brought about by the love story in the fairy tale. Unfortunately, their connection is severed soon after when Hiền gets news of her mother's death and leaves for Vietnam. While Hiền is gone, *The Magic Fish* splits into interlocking yet parallel narratives following Hiền in Vietnam as she listens to a version of "Cinderella" called "Tấm Cám," the story of "Tấm Cám," and Tiến's experience of the dance at his school. Although Tiến feels isolated and voiceless after these events, Hiền leaves Vietnam with an understanding of how to change the fairy tales to better communicate her feelings to her son and a renewed desire to be close to him. After Tiến is forcibly outed to Hiền, they sit down to read the final fairy tale, "The Little Mermaid." The modern telling of "The Little Mermaid" ends with Hiền changing the ending from the Little Mermaid dying from her love of a man to being loved by a woman which is different from what Tiến expected the ending to be since Hiền is using the fairy tale to convey her feelings about Tiến's queerness. Their relationship at this moment shifts with the understanding that not only do the fairy tales connect them but also that their personal journeys are parallels since they both were fearful of being rejected and seeking to connect to their mothers despite their respective traumas which separate them from their mothers. With this knowledge, the two fully reconnect as individuals who now understand each other outside of their roles and personal matters.

The Magic Fish is a story of coming out, detailing the parallel journeys of Tiến and his mother, Hiền, as they struggle with the parts of themselves they feel they cannot express to each other. As Tiến wrestles with how to come out as gay to his parents, specifically his mother, Hiền begins to work through her trauma associated with being a refugee now separated from her own family. The two hide their personal battles from each other out of fear of not being understood or accepted by the other. This is most obviously evidenced by Tiến's hesitance to tell his parents about his sexuality out of fear that "they [won't] love [him] anymore (Nguyen 47). For Hiền's part, she is shown to struggle with her memories of her life in Vietnam which translates to an inability to articulate her past to her son. Seen via the focalization of her past in "Allerleirauh," she brushes off her feelings about the past to Tiến since she's "not very good at talking about these things" (67). At the beginning of the story, the two are positioned as being separate from each other, their personal stories disconnected from each other despite the significance of their stories to themselves. However, their relationship as mother and son is still shown to be strong and warm based on their conversations which range from joking and causal to more personal and serious. The end of the story removes the separation between them and returns the relationship to its original strength by connecting their narratives and resolving their traumas.

Ostensibly to help Hiền learn English, Hiền and Tiến read the fairy tales aloud, a process that also teaches them about each other and bridges their experiences via the tales themselves. The three tales they read over the course of the story, "Allerleirauh," "Tấm Cám," and "The Little Mermaid," serve to subconsciously speak to their similar experiences and expressions, visualizing their parallelism without them knowing it. Through these tales juxtaposed with real events and memories, both mother and son discover that, although their pasts are different, their trauma surrounding being othered and desire to be loved by their families are much the same. As

the characters relate their stories to each other, the growth and change within both Hiền and Tiến occurs simultaneously with the burgeoning understanding that their concerns are rooted in similar fears and shared contexts. In the end, linked through the tales themselves, the two find themselves in situations where, although no direct words regarding their issues are actually spoken, their unspeakable traumas are resolved with a renewed promise of love as they both simultaneously realize that the other is an individual going through similar experiences regarding identity and acceptance.

The color-coded focalization of this text contributes to the examination of the parallel narratives by exemplifying and codifying the intertwining stories presented in the text. The role of focalizer in this text is shared between Tiến and Hiền which is represented in part by the color of the panels. The red-colored panels are focalized either by Tiến or Hiền in the present, the perspective following one character or the other, even when the two are in the presence of each other. The yellow-colored panels are focalized solely by Hiền reminiscing over her memories from Vietnam. The indigo-colored panels are representative of fairy tales and focalized by both Hiền and Tiến as they read aloud/hear the stories. These three colors are intermixed with each other through the narrative, showing how "the braided tales inform one another" to create meaning (Burt). Despite only one character speaking at a time, these panels are implied to be taken up equally by both characters as they interact with and internalize the stories since Hiền is listening to what Tiến is experiencing. This implication is indicated best by the end of the tale when Tiến reacts to his mother's change to the ending of "The Little Mermaid." In addition, ocularization further blurs the lines between Hiền and Tiến's internally focalized panels as the physical gaze of characters crosses the boundaries set by the coded colors. The only exception to this rule of focalization is the story of "Tấm Cám" presented to Hiền but unseen by Tiến. Despite

Hiền and Tiến not physically sharing the experience of listening to the story as in "Allerleirauh," the narrative implies that Hiền is actually sharing the story with him since she is focalizing the story visually alongside Tiến's experience. Tiến is embodying the story of "Tấm Cám" which is visually connected to Hiền's hearing the story in Vietnam. Through the intersections of the coded panels throughout the narrative, storytelling's universality and possibility for change in readers is made apparent by the focalization of the text.

Fairy tales and reality are highlighted and blurred together to create meaning within this text, displayed through the color-coded panels representing memory, present, and tale. *The Magic Fish* begins with one such blurring of lines, Hiền narrating over images of the present with Tiến, her memory of the sky in Vietnam, and a scene from the fairy tale contained in the book that is sitting in Tiến's lap in the present (Nguyen 1; appendix B-1). This beginning later is compounded by a second blurring when Hiền learns of her mother's death, Hiền depicted in the indigo synonymous with fairy tales as the narration calls back to the first lines of *The Magic Fish* regarding spaces and distance (117; appendix B-5). The two scenes together thus situate reality and fiction as interchangeable, granting significance to the stories in a similar fashion to Gregory's claims that stories intermix with experiences, thus strengthening understanding (43). As such, the three tales told in the story are used in conjunction with the main plot to create meaning for Hiền and Tiến which is then furthered by the changes made to the tellings which serve to deepen the connections and resultant meanings. The relationship between the fairy tales and their progression throughout the novel work to not only align themselves with the protagonists but also with the ultimate message of the story, culminating in the ending which suits the "It Gets Better" theory through its continued assertion that happy endings are inevitable regardless of what precede them.

The three fairy tales told over the course of the text each mark a significant change or development in the characters' journeys within the main narrative. Both Hiền and Tiến can be tracked through these significant moments where their character development is articulated through the fairy tales. The progression of these fairy tales, including their alterations, both facilitates and embodies the character development of mother and son protagonists, simultaneously representing Tiến's struggle with coming out and Hiền's struggle to communicate her experiences fleeing Vietnam. Each tale is fleshed out from the more common, barebones tellings by the speakers which contributes to the theory of systematized modification even before examining any major plot changes. As stated by the author, the tales are "read through the imagination" (Nguyen 233) which further feeds into the idea that stories are modified within their own system and rule to "host as well an emancipation from the kind of thinking that assumes structure at the cost of non-oppositional multiplicity, variety, and possibility" (Roof 56-7). Since Hiền and Tiến both read/hear modified tales and modify them themselves, their connection to the fairy tales is intrinsic to the tellings. These tales and their tellings interact with Hiền and Tiến's storylines as devices meant to stimulate change as they themselves are changed by the stories, changes which are visualized in the interactions between the tales and reality. The colored panels are manifestations of Hiền and Tiến's perspectives of their world and so display the characters' changes throughout the story. The three tales thus form the cornerstones of *The Magic Fish's* narrative, necessary for the characters and plot to progress even as they cause introspection into Hiền's past and Tiến's present.

"Allerleirauh"

The first fairy tale functions to establish Hiền and Tiến's respective troubles and fears along with their inability to effectively communicate with each other. This function is shown where their own stories intersect within the narrative of "Allerleirauh." For Hiền, her trauma connected to her past fleeing Vietnam as a refugee is evoked by the imagery of the Old Man of the Sea pursuing Alera as she escapes his grasp. She is reminded of leaving her own family behind as Alera does, compounded with the fear of being found that is represented by the Old Man of the Sea rising up from the water (Nguyen 26-8; appendix B-2, B-3). Although the fairy tale resonates more strongly with Hiền, Tiến personally engages with the question of love brought up in the text. Hiền's past trauma also touches upon this topic related to her wedding held prior to escaping, but she refuses to elaborate to Tiến at that point of *The Magic Fish's* story. Tiến's relationship to the text forms around the masculine disguise Alera adopts when interacting with and falling in love with the prince, modeling the kind of relationship he imagines for himself. Juxtaposed with the prince and Alera falling in love is Tiến's burgeoning crush on a classmate represented by the star patch on his jacket and Hiền's trauma-tinted memories of marrying Tiến's father. By the end of the tale, both characters' problems are established along with where they stand in relation to each other, neither communicating despite their obvious affection for the other.

The story of "Allerleirauh" is "a very loose adaptation" of the story "Tattercoats" (Nguyen 33), but it still includes the hallmarks of the tale that make it recognizable and give it weight as a story. As in other versions of the story, the protagonist must flee an unwanted marriage with three dresses and a coat to disguise her. She wears the three dresses at three balls and ends up marrying the prince who threw the balls. *The Magic Fish's* "Allerleirauh" follows

Alera, a young girl on the run from the Old Man of the Sea who wants to force her into marriage. Because of her father's deal with the Old Man to hand over his first-born, Alera must flee from her home and the sea to somewhere the Old Man will not find her. Alera finds herself in a castle and makes a new life there as a cook, befriending the prince while using a masculine disguise. The prince holds three balls for his birthday, and she thus ends up leading a double life as a cook and a princess. The prince doesn't know she is both his friend and the lady he has been dancing with and so confides his feelings to her. After the third ball, Alera leaves to confront the Old Man, and she is saved by her aunt who gets rid of the Old Man for good. With Alera free of the threat, the prince learns of her identity through her mother's magical ring. Despite her concerns that the prince wouldn't like her if he knew her entire identity, the conclusion of the tale affirms that his affection for her was real.

While Hiền and Tiến read through "Allerleirauh," the narrative follows their everyday lives and sets up their inner struggles that they have not revealed to each other. Part of the red coded present narrative establishes Hiền's love for her family both in the United States and in Vietnam but also makes clear that she is traumatized by her journey to the United States. When she confesses her feelings to her aunt, she says "my past and present selves speak two different languages" (Ngyuen 176). Her struggle between her family in the United States and her family in Vietnam—particularly regarding her mother—fuels her actions and influences her interactions with her son since she cannot bring herself to tell him the details of her escape or marriage to her husband. For Tiến's part, the narrative establishes that he knows more about his mother's troubles than he lets on, indicated by his watching his mother on the phone with her family when he's supposed to be asleep (41). Even though he knows some of what she is going through, he doesn't feel like he can tell her about his queerness since "[he] doesn't think she'd take it well

right now" (47). When talking to his friend Claire, he worries "what if [his parents] don't love [him] anymore" if he comes out to them since he has never spoken to them about it (47). Similarly to his mother wanting to hide her traumas from him, Tiến wants to save his mother's feelings by not revealing parts of himself she might not respond positively towards. Their narrative confirms that Hiền and Tiến care for each other but cannot speak about their respective issues despite this mutual care.

Hiền's focalization centers around the past and her trauma relating to it. The most notable panels depicting this focalization occur when the Old Man of the Sea pursues Alera after she flees her home. When Alera's nanny and aunt tells her, "don't forget me," the focalization shifts to Hiền's memory of a similar phrase being said to her by her family (Nguyen 26-7; appendix B-2). The focalization of the page then shifts panel by panel between past and fiction with Hiền as the focalizer until Tiến verbally calls out to Hiền, bringing her back to the present with the question, "Hey…mom? Are you feeling okay?" (28; appendix B-3). In these panels, Nguyen makes use of eyeline image/match cut focalization in which a character, Hiền, is depicted as looking while subsequent panels show what they are looking at (Mikkonen 167-8). This also connects to ocularization since her focalization is specifically related to what she "sees" visually connected to her interiority. The Hiền of the past is positioned as the looker "seeing" the Old Man of the Sea emerge from the ocean since the panels go back and forth between past Hiền and the Old Man, indicating that she is the one seeing him (Nguyen 28; appendix B-3). The panels alternate between yellow and indigo, signaling that the story takes place in the past and in fiction. However, present Hiền is framed in the same pose and serious, wide-eyed expression as past Hiền, showing that the previous panels depicting the past and fiction were all being focalized in present Hiền's mind (28; appendix B-3). The implications of this scene suggest the trauma she

experienced is like the horror represented by the Old Man of the Sea. Hiền is refocalized in the present by Tiến, his speech bubble reaching across the panels representing Hiền's focalization and connecting to a panel in the present where he is depicted physically calling out to her. Her framing and facial expression remain the same as her past self, the color and her different outfits indicating the change in temporality but not mindset, linking the sequence not only in her mind but also as extending into the reality of the present. These panels serve to exemplify both the inexorable connectedness between past, present, and fairy tale and the unspeakable reality of trauma for Hiền. However, later panels also continue to seamlessly cross over between present and past, flashing back more concretely to individual memories that, while framed by her trauma, are not necessarily as alienating as the traumatic event relating to the boat. With the boat experience established as the point of trauma Hiền must negotiate her identity around, the alienation she feels inside herself and passes on to Tiến is tied to the repetitive and transmittable nature of trauma. Both characters' identities are wrapped up in this trauma and represented by the in-betweenness of the boat, calling back to the quote "so much happens between those two spaces" from the beginning of the story (Nguyen 1; appendix B-1) and connecting to the initial distance between mother and son.

Tiến's focalization of "Allerleirauh," in contrast to his mother's concern with the past, is depicted largely in the realm of imagination and storytelling, speculating on the future based on his present. His focus while taking in the story is centered around his focalization of his classmate, Julian, who is depicted in indigo multiple times as Tiến thinks about him, his red-colored head sticking out in front of indigo-colored Julian in the background (Nguyen 69). This coloration marks the Julian in Tiến's mind as being fictional while also juxtaposing him with the prince of "Allerleirauh." In contrast with his mother who struggles with the trauma of her past

brought up by the tale, Tiến's perspective is much more optimistic as he daydreams about Julian. Hiền's focalization connects her red present to the yellow past while Tiến's focalization connects his red present to the indigo fantasy of his crush. Both Tiến and Hiền's focalization positions them as Alera in the story, but Tiến's fears are mitigated by his real-world experiences with his friends who verbally support him and allow him to focus less on the conflict of "Allerleirauh" and more on the romance represented in it that he himself hopes for.

The effect the tale has on Hiền comes in how "Allerleirauh" evokes Hiền's own memories, blurring the line between first and second-hand experiences. On the page following her emotional flashback to when she last saw her family, the panels representing past, present, and fairy tale are intermixed, visualizing the collide of first-hand experiences with the second-hand fear told through the story (Nguyen 28; appendix B-3). This back-and-forth memory, present, and story speaks to Gregory's assertion that consuming stories helps readers understand real life as real life helps them understand stories (43). Outside the reading of the tale, Hiền thinks about her family in the present, spurred to remember her past through the Old Man of the Sea and questioned about the past by Tiến who himself was motivated to ask by the tale. Focalization is represented in these moments by creating a sequence of past-past-fiction-past-fiction-past-fiction-past-present when Hiền focalizes the Old Man of the Sea (Nguyen 28; appendix B-3) and by presenting present characters in fiction-coded indigo when Tiến thinks of his crush (69, 87; appendix B-4). The concept of blurred experiences also applies to Tiến as he tries to use the tale to understand and normalize his reality, connecting his crush to the love story in the fairy tale. Because he feels he cannot talk to his parents about his sexual orientation, he leans on the text and its happy ending despite the deception, connecting both to his crush on Julian and his hope of acceptance from his parents. Through this telling, Hiền and Tiến's

connection to the stories (beyond reading them to improve language skills) is made apparent, since both are intimately affected by the tale which directly influences their emotions and actions.

"Allerleirauh" is based on the German fairy tale commonly referred to as "Tattercoats" (Nguyen 233), and it does not traditionally include a crossdressing plotline in tales recorded from the Grimm Brothers (Tatar, *The Grimm* 202-8). As a system, the tale can be broken down to its most basic motions and themes, allowing whole plotlines and characters to be added or changed. In the Grimm Brothers' telling, Alera does not meet with the prince in between the balls, their interactions isolated to the balls themselves in the Grimm version in contrast to *The Magic Fish's* (Nguyen 205-7). Alera bonding with the prince while disguised as a male cook named "Al" is an addition to *The Magic Fish's* version in order to both give Tiến a connection point into the story which fuels his inner battle while also giving him reason to connect to his mother. This point is most evidently seen when he thanks Hiền for sewing patches into his jacket because his crush complimented him, connecting to the fairy tale since Tiến focalizes his crush in the indigo that represents fiction (Nguyen 69). The tale's telling coupled with his curiosity surrounding love ignited by the altered tale itself kickstarts Tiến's portion of development necessitated by the added scenes. In addition to the change to the plotline, the Old Man of the Sea is also not native to this tale, included as an extra, persistent threat to Alera's happiness. However, the added scenes and characters remain in line with the system of the tale, their inclusion serving alternative purposes for the characters outside of it. These alterations to the characters and plotlines of the tale ultimately lead to the changes in the ending which add nuance to the story's message for Hiền and Tiến. Connecting to how readers derive meaning from stories, the

additions to the core tale allow the readers to more overtly relate their unique experiences to the events in "Allerleirauh."

Although positioned in the beginning of the story before the characters have developed and changed, "Allerleirauh" foreshadows the happy ending of *The Magic Fish* through its own. This foreshadowing, in turn, contributes to the "It Gets Better" narrative for the overarching story by connecting the happy ending of the tale to Hiền and Tiến as readers, granting more power to stories and their influence. Specifically, the fairy tale's ending compounds with both the alterations made to the traditional telling and the interconnected relationship between stories and readers in order to expand the story-within-a-story's reach into the main story. The necessary inclusion of the Old Man of the Sea and the doubly disguised love story through Alera's disguises both as "Al" and as "Princess Alera" facilitate the tale's ability to relate more personally with the reader-characters, intertwining the tale's characters' fates with the readers.' The effect of this inclusion is seen in the page immediately following the ending of "Allerleirauh" in which Hiền and Tiến are seen connected both physically and emotionally, represented by Tiến putting his head in Hiền's lap while stating "I liked [the story]" (113). Tiến's comfort is further depicted through his beginning to say "I have something to…" with the implication being that he was about to confess his sexuality before being cut off by the phone ringing (113). While this moment of happiness does not last, the fairy tale is shown to have direct influence over the characters' feelings and actions. This happy ending is later enforced by the subsequent tales and the overarching narrative, setting the precedent for happy endings in *The Magic Fish.* As such, much of "Allerleirauh's" place within the "It Gets Better" theory comes from its relation to the other tales and the eventual happy ending. *The Magic Fish* is shown to be a novel with no unhappy endings in either the main narrative or the fairy tales,

perpetuating a narrative of exclusively positive outcomes despite the traumas that precede them, sidestepping obstacles to reach the ultimate happiness. Alera's happy ending is gained without taking any direct action and Hiền and Tiến experience the happy ending just by reading through the story, all of which contributes to the "It Gets Better" theory. Matz also argues the position that bad circumstances may be circumvented by contrasting them retrospectively with happier outcomes, minimizing the impact of the bad (228-9). Despite Alera's troubles, her happy embrace with the prince ends the fairy tale on an optimistic note which negates the troubles she went through to get there, Nguyen explicitly stating "Tám lived happily ever after, for the rest of her days" (183).

In examining where this fairy tale fits within the narrative and the overall focalization of this text, "Allerleirauh" serves to establish Hiền and Tiến's personal struggles while also reiterating how warm and affectionate they are as a family as evidenced in their verbal and physical affection at the end of the first fairy tale. Regarding focalization in particular, the significance of this central parent-child relationship is made clear through the interconnectedness of the past, present, and fiction. Through the intermixed colors, how Hiền and Tiến internalize the tale is made evident despite their disparate perspectives and focuses. For the narrative, this tale displays both mother and son's experiences and their respective fears that they struggle to hide from the other. Many of the themes present in *The Magic Fish*, like the changeability of fairy tales, the importance of family, trauma, unspeakability, and the significance of storytelling are first presented in this tale which sets the stage for the rest of the narrative while also hinting at the eventual ending. The ability of stories to be changeable while retaining their power to influence readers is shown in a limited capacity at this point in the narrative because of where Hiền and Tiến are in their character development. By the end of "Allerleirauh," the main

narrative has established Hiền and Tiến's traumas but not explored them in depth yet, opening the possibility for the fairy tales to engage more with their traumas in the future.

"Tấm Cám"

Following "Allerleirauh," Hiền and Tiến are separated, and both must contend with their traumas head-on. The second fairy tale told in *The Magic Fish* is a variation on "Cinderella" culturally specific to Vietnam known as "Tấm Cám." This tale visualizes Tiến's trauma through the focalization which mirrors his experience with the protagonist of the fairy tale's trauma. The story is told to Hiền by her aunt on her trip to Vietnam and represents both her experience and growth as an immigrant seeking refuge. Tiến's relationship to the tale is more metaphorical and intimate since his experiences are closely linked to the events of "Tấm Cám." While he does not read/hear the tale in person, he remains intertwined with the narrative through the presentation of his own story alongside "Tấm Cám." Both Hiền and Tiến connect to the story's theme of death and rebirth in addition to their personal relationships to specific aspects of the text. Hiền listens to this story following her mother's death and considers her own life to be missing a happy ending because of it, complaining "my happy ending never came" (Nguyen 131). However, her concerns are assuaged on both counts, her aunt reassuring her about the pride Hiền's mother had for her and reminding her that she is still young which connects to the passively achieved better future of "It Gets Better." Hiền's concerns mirror the death and surprising rebirth of the tale's protagonist, Tấm, as Hiền finds metaphorical new life through the story's revelations. This theme is cemented in the ending of the story which Hiền does not expect but which reignites her passion for stories and life.

The story of "Tấm Cám" appears in the text intertwined with Tiến's experience even though Tiến is not physically present to hear it. The events of the story occur simultaneously with Tiến's, connecting the two via focalization. Like Tấm, both protagonists of the graphic novel experience a form of death that leads to rebirth. While his mother's "death" refers the death of her old self upon leaving her home country and her own mother's death, his "death" comes in the form of the exposure of his secret when he is forced to come out by the school. The priest brought in to speak with him even likens children coming out to death, saying "it always feels like a death in the family" (172). The motif of death for Tiến is a threat that is not resolved by the end of the fairy tale's telling, the knowledge of rebirth saved for his mother. Regardless, his story is inexorably intertwined with Tấm's, the protagonist of the tale, since *The Magic Fish* delivers their narratives side by side. The idea presented to Hiền and made implicit for Tiến is the promise that the story is not over when they believe it will end, subverting their expectations for the ending in a positive way. The turning point of *The Magic Fish* comes in this retelling of the traditional Vietnamese "Cinderella" tale known as "Tấm Cám" told to Hiền, the effect of the tale inspiring the development of both the characters and the story. While Tiến's involvement in the tale ends prematurely since his part of the narrative stops being visually depicted before the ending of "Tấm Cám," his participation in the story does not end there. The fairy tale continues past where Hiền thought it would end which—given that Tiến and Tấm's stories are equated to each other—implies that Tiến's story is similarly not over yet. Hiền comes to understand the power of stories and inspires her to alter "The Little Mermaid" tale told later in the story.

"Tấm Cám's" story, as told by Hiền's aunt, is framed as "our story. Our Cinderella" after Hiền worries that her story doesn't have a happy ending (131). Like other "Cinderella" stories, the tale centers around a girl suffering under her abusive stepfamily. She is helped by animals to

make it to a ball where she falls in love. Hiền's understanding of the tale ends when the protagonist reaches a happy ending, but her aunt assures her that "there's always more" (164). This version of the fairy tale follows a young Vietnamese girl under the tyranny of her stepmother and stepsister. Every day, she speaks to a magical talking fish who gives her solace following her parents' death. This talking fish may be a reference to the titular "magic fish" the graphic novel is named after, the reference giving credence to "Tấm Cám's" power. However, her stepmother finds out about the fish and kills it, feeding it to Tấm for dinner. She buries its bones under a tree; trees are indicators that the dead will not stay gone in this story. Later, she is tasked to sort grains of rice while her stepfamily is at the fête for a merchant who serves as the prince in the narrative. After the merchant finds Tấm again, Tấm marries him and leaves her household. The story continues past this point despite Hiền's surprise, chronicling Tấm's death when she is literally backstabbed as she returns to the house to pay respect to her deceased father. Following her death, the stepmother and stepsister are tormented over her death until they cut down the tree she was buried under which inadvertently resurrects her without their knowledge. She later returns to the house, and her stepsister is tricked into boiling herself to death. After her stepmother realizes that her daughter is dead and that she unknowingly ate a part of her daughter, "she dropped dead in shock" (183). Unlike the "Cinderella" story Hiền thinks she will be getting, "Tấm Cám's" significance comes from the differences to the base story she is expecting, connecting the story to both Hiền and Tiến.

Hiền and Tiến experience separate events that both correlate with "Tấm Cám's" narrative despite mother and son being on different continents. Hiền identifies with the character archetype of Cinderella Tấm represents because her mother said she was "like Cinderella" (131). Because she resonates so strongly with Tấm's story, Hiền's comments and feelings while listening to her

aunt revolve around her feelings of losing touch with her Vietnamese culture. Her comment that "it feels like I died on that boat" connects her to Tấm's death while alluding to the theme of resurrection (176; appendix B-8). This comment is also the first moment she explicitly acknowledges the division between Tiến and herself, noting that she is "far away from [her] son" and concerned about their differing cultures and experiences (176; appendix B-8). As Hiền sits and listens to the story with her aunt, Tiến experiences mirror Tấm's experiences, specifically regarding the school party/merchant's fête. The events surrounding Tiến's school dance closely resemble the same significant moments of Tấm's story getting to the fête, meeting the merchant, and eventually being killed. Like Tấm, Tiến struggles to find something to wear for the dance but is helped by his friends. While at the party, he receives disapproving looks from his teacher who does not approve of his dancing with another boy. Finally, he is told that coming out can be "like a death in the family" (172). These three events are placed alongside "Tấm Cám's" corresponding story beats, relating the two narratives together. Hiền and Tiến's experiences during the story of "Tấm Cám" both correspond to the fairy tale's narrative, and both resonate with the theme of death and rebirth in the tale.

This telling of "Tấm Cám" has the most examples of intermixed focalization in the text, the story marking significant change in addition to significant meaning for both Hiền and Tiến. The story not only connects Hiền's current experiences with her past which allows her to reconcile her trauma with her present, but also links them with Tiến's present experiences as they occur simultaneously with the events of "Tấm Cám." Unlike the other two fairy tales, this tale is unique in that Tiến is not a witness to the storytelling. His focalization of his reality mirrors the fairy tale which grants readers insight into his mental state even though he is not acting as a focalizer of the fairy tale. Tiến is the focalizer only of his experience at the school dance—but

that experience is woven into Tấm's experience at the fête. So, although he is not focalizing Tấm's story, the focalization of his and her experiences can be aligned with the other since they are visually positioned identically in their respective stories. Although Hiền and Tiến are physically apart during the telling of this story, they are still shown to be internalizing the story simultaneously through the focalization which continues to connect the two despite the distance. The distance allows the characters to both undergo a change in response to the same story separately from each other, both making progress regarding their traumas which previously separated them and preparing them to overcome the barriers the trauma made between them. Hiền's focalization merges Tiến's story to Tấm's, which depicts the turning point in the text for both protagonists, setting both up for the conclusion of the story.

As Hiền comes to understand and internalize the fairy tale told by her aunt, she begins to come to terms with her trauma and grief over losing her mother. "Tấm Cám" blurs the lines between "first-hand" and "second-hand" experience for Hiền since Hiền was referred to as "Cinderella" by her mother, allowing her to view the story as both a first-hand account of her life and second-hand story that went beyond her understanding of it (Gregory 42-3). Prior to arriving in Vietnam, she is depicted in her imagination in indigo which represents both the ocean and fictionality despite following a panel from the present. The narration from Hiền's perspective references the liminality of her grief and trauma, "the space between two shores is the ocean...and being caught in between feels like drowning" (Nguyen 117; appendix B-5). Her liminality expressed through the overlapping colors thus represents her trauma and inability to stay in one place mentally. Over the course of the story, she is forced to reconsider her understanding of her trauma as well as storytelling as a medium, both issues coming to a head at the ending of the tale which continues past the point she remembered. Her concern over her

liminality, which encompasses her relationships with both her son and mother, boils over as she notes the traumatic boat trip referenced earlier, stating that "I died on that boat" (176; appendix B-8). Her taking up of the fairy tale allows her to move on from this space, the story representing a continuation that she wishes for herself. Hiền connects to the "universality" Alera's escape from the Old Man offers, relating to Alera's need to flee as a universal experience (Gregory 45). This point marks the last time yellow is used in the text, showing that Hiền is ready to move past the alienation she experienced and connect to Tiến. In this panel, the present Hiền is depicted in profile facing away from the past Hiền. Present Hiền is looking back at her past self with her head down in contrast to her past self who is looking ahead and up which depicts the difference in her attitude towards herself, comparing her former determination to her current regrets (Nguyen 176; appendix B-8). After this panel, present Hiền continues to look down until her aunt says, "if you don't know the ending, then I'll have to take us there," after which she looks up (177). Her aunt's comment not only changes the ending she expected but also guides her in the same way Alera's aunt helped her in "Allerleirauh," as Hiền's aunt takes the place of her mother and solves her unresolved issues surrounding not connecting with her mother before the end. The ending of "Tấm Cám" answers her troubles surrounding her past, and she no longer looks back on her past after finishing the story. Her acceptance of storytelling's power leads to a resolution of her trauma through the empowerment changing stories offers since, as her aunt tells her, "things change. And now this story is ours. Yours and mine" (184). Hiền learns from her aunt that "Tấm Cám's" story belongs to her even if she didn't remember it before, giving her power and agency through the stories which she can use to later change the ending of "The Little Mermaid."

Tiến's experience with the text, in contrast with his mother's involvement in the meaning-making part of the storytelling, depicts the production of his individual trauma. His actions and their focalization overlap with Tấm's, merging the two stories into one. This merging is first seen when Tấm flies to the fête, as the blanket she is riding on crosses over the indigo panel into one that is indigo on the top-left corner but fades into red in the bottom-right corner. The transition panel also depicts the powerlines next to Tiến's house, and the sequence implies that Tấm's departure for the fête is the same as Tiến's departure for his dance (155). While Tiến is at the party with Julian, the merging begins as one of the partygoers in the present appears in the foreground of the panel in which Tấm meets the merchant. The motion of the partygoer's form as she walks then bridges the panel into the present scene of Tiến with Julian (158; appendix B-6). Later, when Tiến and Julian are dancing together, the text once again employs the use of eyeline image/match cut focalization to show Tiến's teacher and another adult watching them disapprovingly followed immediately by a panel depicting Tấm and the merchant (160-1; appendix B-7). The implication is that the disapproval expressed by the adults is the same as the disapproval shown by Tấm's stepfamily who are revealed to be the ones looking at her in the story. The last time Tiến is visually depicted while Hiền is listening to "Tấm Cám," he is resigned to the idea that his coming out will cause his mother grief. His last appearance coincides with the point in the story in which Tấm is still dead and has yet to be revived. Tiến's portion of the narrative does not extend to the ending of "Tấm Cám," meaning he does not get the benefit of the story's continuation like Hiền does. He is thus left in the "death" state via the narrative which focalizes him as Tấm and leaves him dead.

The systematization of the "Tấm Cám" story is purposefully evoked by Hiền's aunt who subverts Hiền's expectations while retaining the story's integrity. Her aunt claims that the stories

are changed and that they work in service of the readers to become whatever the readers need. As she argues, "[the stories]'ll change when they need to" (147). Subordinating stories to the readers and their needs justifies their systematization by giving them a reason to both change while also retaining their identity. Barbara Tannert-Smith agrees with this assessment in her article exploring *The Magic Fish* as a collage, claiming that "the fairy tale narratives adapted and transformed within the text…create a structure capable of contesting dominant discourses of cultural identity and sexuality" (23). The story of "Tấm Cám" is recognizable and so a comfort to Hiền since it generally follows the expected formula but continues past the ending she expected to then change her perspective of both stories in general and that story in particular. In addition, it is allowed to connect both Hiền and Tiến by crossing their cultural and personal divisions with its "universality" (Gregory 45). It is the systematization of the story that allows it to create change in Hiền and Tiến. This systematization bridges the focalization and taking up of the story with the "It Gets Better" ending *The Magic Fish* is heading towards.

The "It Gets Better" narrative is most apparent in "Tấm Cám" via the "alternate present" promised as the "better," in which Tấm comes back to life. The ending remains temporally *with* the rest of the story, separated not by the speculative future but only by the patience to listen to the rest of the already created story in light of the tale as a complete entity, ending included. Hiền does not expect the ending, but the ending is unequivocally positive despite the hardships Tấm faces. Hiền's interruptions slowing the story down are the only thing keeping her from the happy ending as opposed to the happy ending not existing at all. Following from this tale standing temporally with the rest of the story, the fairy tale continues the trend of no unhappy endings despite the various dark turns within "Tấm Cám's" text. The inevitability of its happy ending is foreshadowed by Hiền earlier in the text when she mentions "we have [a version,] too" (Nguyen

4). This inevitability is established in "Allerleirauh's" happy ending and continued into "Tấm Cám," indicating that the fairy tale—ending included—exists as an "alternative present" wherein the better future "rewrite[s] the present as a place for friendly attention very different from the one where bullies await you around every corner" (Matz 235). "Allerleirauh" had previously set the precedent since Hiền and Tiến only needed to continue the story to achieve its happy ending, and the same holds true for "Tấm Cám." While Tiến is suffering during the duration of the story, the story's happy ending promises him his own happy ending if he can simply wait for his mother to come home. This waiting parallels Tấm's happy ending the fish achieves for her while she is dead, the bird that harasses her stepfamily potentially representing the magic fish returned in a new form. This story facilitates the "It Gets Better" ending by its focalization, narrative function in the story, and its ending.

Like "Allerleirauh," "Tấm Cám" presents the differing ways in which mother and son take up and are affected by the fairy tales. Unlike the first tale, the focalization of this text engages with Hiền and Tiến differently, Hiền taking the position as the focalizer, and Tiến taking the position of both the focalizer of the school dance event and as a subject of Hiền's focalization of "Tấm Cám." As Hiền works through the interconnected focalization linking past, present, and fiction, the power of stories is exposed and cemented for her which is only possible because of her understanding represented by the focalization. Meanwhile, Tiến serves as both the subject and object of focalization in relation to the tale, further intertwining fact and fiction. His experiences inform and are informed by the fairy tale, the focalization identifying the two as the same through the panels seamlessly moving between them. Within the overarching text, this fairy tale serves to showcase the themes of trauma and identity issues from the text and Hiền and Tiến's development through the focalization. The intricacies and complexities of both their

internal struggles and relational problems are put to the forefront externally for Hiền through her conversation with her aunt and internally for Tiến through the focalization of "Tấm Cám." The tale itself causes the two to begin shifting their perspectives of themselves as a result of the systematization of stories. Hiền solves her trauma about her past and desire to connect to her mother, and the solution intertwines directly with Tiến's experience at the dance that affirms his queerness but directly leads to the traumatic meeting with the homophobic priest who tells him to reject it. Hiền's resolution also sets the stage for the rest of the text, positioning Hiền and Tiến's character arcs in open and vulnerable places respectively in preparation for the final fairy tale.

"The Little Mermaid"

The final fairy tale, a modern rendition of "The Little Mermaid," explores the aftermath of Hiền's growth as she shares what she has learned about stories with Tiến. The story of "The Little Mermaid" relates to both characters in similar ways to the other tales but is also taken a step further when Hiền modifies the ending. For Hiền, the narrative in "The Little Mermaid" of moving to a strange new world through trauma speaks to her experience as a refugee. Her growth is also depicted both within and outside the text by the happy ending in addition to her alteration of the ending. Tiến's connection to the story is made apparent through the silence imposed on Ondine and the happy ending his mother makes for him. By the end of the story, Hiền takes over the telling of the story from Tiến who had been the predominant speaker up until that point, allowing the ending to change and fully commit to an "It Gets Better" outcome. Her growth and lessons learned from her trip to Vietnam are transferred to her son, resolving the turmoil Tiến had been wrestling with throughout the main narrative. The final panel of the novel cements the

story's ultimately optimistic narrative by offering both Tiến and Hiền solace in each other with the promise of the future presented in this and the past fairy tales.

The version of "The Little Mermaid" that Hiền tells Tiến is a modern rendition of the tale that nonetheless features a mermaid protagonist who makes a deal in order to go on land and be with the one she loves. The story is also familiar in that the object of the protagonist's affections does not return those feelings, and she must decide what to do in the face of rejection. In *The Magic Fish's* version, the titular Little Mermaid—who comes to be named Ondine—goes to the surface to meet the man she loves—Brandon—only to be put in the care of his crush and the one who found him on the beach, a young ballerina named Bertie. Ondine stays close to both Brandon and Bertie by joining the ballet the two are a part of, impressing both of them with her performance. Ondine ends up playing opposite Bertie in the ballet, the two playing the lead couple in the show. Because of this, Ondine watches Brandon from afar as she continuously practices the ballet with Bertie. After a successful performance, Brandon proposes to Bertie while Ondine is visited by her sisters who give her a knife to kill Brandon which would undo the magic that made her human. Ondine rejects the offer as Bertie returns to say that she rejected Brandon's proposal because she is in love with Ondine. Ondine accepts, regaining her voice which she gave up as part of the spell, and "so they lived on, together. And they were happy" (Nguyen 228).

Outside of the story, Hiền and Tiến navigate her coming home and the meeting at school with Mrs. Flynn to forcibly out Tiến to Hiền as events surrounding and cutting into "The Little Mermaid's" narrative. To avoid speaking about their unspeakable issues that they aren't ready to express to each other, they instead start reading "The Little Mermaid." Midway through reading the fairy tale, the story is interrupted by Hiền and Tiến going to his school. Hiền is told about

Tiến's sexuality while Tiến expresses upset at being outed to his friends. Hiền and Tiến do not speak after the meeting, and Hiền picks up the story of the Little Mermaid where Tiến left off. When Hiền changes the ending from what Tiến expected it to be, Tiến interrupts the story to question the change. Hiền quiets him before finishing the story, indirectly confirming that she accepts his queerness. *The Magic Fish* ends with Hiền affirming her love for Tiến, stating "I love everything you are" (229). This ending correlates with the altered ending for "The Little Mermaid," changing a potentially tragic ending into a happy one.

Unlike the previous two fairy tales, *The Magic Fish's* retelling of "The Little Mermaid" includes very little cross-color focalization. The only instance of the colors crossing is the red-colored blood and potion resulting from it that Ondine gives up to the sea witch—who is also called Ondine's grandmother—in exchange for human legs (201-3). Prior to giving Ondine the potion, the sea witch warns her that "[her] yearning, [her] desire to be other than what [she is], may well be [her] undoing" (200). Given the sea witch's concern about Ondine wanting to be something she isn't coupled with Nguyen's assessment of "The Little Mermaid" as a "story about immigration" relating to Hiền's (236-7), the red potion represents not only Ondine's desire and trauma but also Hiền and Tiến's as they are similarly unable to communicate. When viewed in light of the rest of the story, this focalization finally marks the end of the trauma since there is no further cross-colored focalization to indicate internal strife for either Hiền or Tiến. I believe the lack of overlap is due to the characters having already experienced change in the last story and so there is less in this tale to focalize, Hiền having moved past her trauma while Tiến is actively withholding his feelings, both indicating no further need/desire to extend the focalization outside the indigo color. In comparison to the other tales, this tale's lack of cross-colored focalization is significant because readers cannot gain access to Hiền and Tiến's

interiority. The lack allows Hiền's changed ending of the tale to come as a surprise to both Tiến and the audience since she gives no hints about the change via her focalization. When Bertie unexpectedly returns to confess to Ondine, the ending releases the tension from Hiền and Tiến's non-communication and jolts the tale out of fiction and into the present reality, represented by Tiến verbally interrupting Hiền's narration with "that's not-," shifting the focalization out of fiction and into the present (225-6; appendix B-9). The final scene of the story depicts Hiền and Tiến embracing which ends the narrative squarely in the present, connecting to the "It Gets Better" outcome that shows the better outcome was already passively present for Tiến. Both characters have gotten what they needed from the fairy tales to finally cross the temporal and traumatic gap between them.

The way that "The Little Mermaid" is focalized, or rather, the way it withholds focalization in contrast with the other tales feeds into how the story is taken up specifically by Tiến. Hiền and Tiến are the dual focalizers of the fairy tale which unites them in the continued themes of trauma and unspeakability and less cross-color focalization since both are momentarily withholding their feelings from the other. This withholding of feelings connects to "It Gets Better" since it forms a momentary distance between Hiền and Tiến and their happy ending. Despite Tiến and Hiền being equal focalizers of the tale, the altered ending disturbs who exactly is making meaning from the tale. After Hiền begins changing the story, the role of focalizer is given more squarely to Tiến who is most affected by the additions. For Hiền as a reader of "The Little Mermaid," her past resonates with Ondine's story which she then shifts to become a story that resonates with both Tiến's and her own happy ending. Because of the way stories engage with "intimacy and distance at the same time" (Gregory 44), Hiền is able to tell the story in a way that is both intimate and distant to Tiến. The guise of the story allows her to explicitly

express her approval and acceptance of Tiến's sexuality without confronting him directly and potentially disturbing his trauma "as a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain" (Balaev 151). Hiền does not directly interfere with his traumatized mind, instead allowing him to work through his personal trauma. Tiến, for his part, can relate to the story with the knowledge that his mother is telling the story, now recognizing that the intimacy he shared with his mother over their focalization of the stories has extended to this story. In a mirror to the end of "Allerleirauh," Hiền and Tiến feel closer to each other and are willing to express the feelings they had previously kept hidden. This closeness is represented by Hiền and Tiến embracing—not unlike their physical closeness at the end of "Allerleirauh"—and Hiền's willingness to change the ending to a story she also connects to in order to better suit her son's need.

Like her aunt before her, Hiền recognizes the purpose of stories as being in service of readers. Consequently, she changes the conclusion of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" to suit Tiến's situation and needs. The story is shown earlier to contain alterations such as taking place in a modern setting and surrounding a ballet show, already placing the text in an untraditional space. These differences expose the unaltered system of the text which produce the rules as opposed to being bound by contextual paradigms. When he realizes the story is heading towards an ending he wasn't expecting, Tiến complains that, "that's not-," with the implication that the end of his sentence is something to the effect of "how the story ends" (Nguyen 225; appendix B-9). However, examining the core system of the fairy tale reveals that the story does not have to end with Ondine's death to preserve the integrity of the story. *The Magic Fish's* "The Little Mermaid" is identifiable as an example of "The Little Mermaid" stories because of Ondine's deal to become human and Brandon's rejection of her rather than by a definitively happy or

tragic ending. The story remains recognizable in its form even with its adapted ending, the tale retaining its power as a relatable story regardless of the characters' sexuality or ending.

This tale and the ending of the overarching narrative manifest the "alternative present" the "It Gets Better" theory proposes and is promised throughout the previous fairy tales. Since the only distance between Tiến and a happy ending is finishing the fairy tales, "the future becomes an alternative present, rewriting the present as a place for friendly attention very different from the one where bullies await you around every corner" (Matz 235). Tiến's greatest fear over coming out to his family is assuaged not by any profound change in his mother or far away "speculative future" but by his mother who never gave any indication of not accepting him in the first place. The distance separating him from the happy ending he desires is not temporal but physical, his trauma occurring in his mother's absence and the solution coinciding with her return. This example of distance specifically relates to Dan Savage's—originator of the "It Gets Better" theory—account that "[he] was riding a train to JFK Airport when it occurred to [him] that [he] was waiting for permission that [he] no longer needed" (229). "It Gets Better" involves not only waiting for a better future but also realizing that the better future already exists in the present. Seeing as the fairy tales and storytelling elements reflect Hiền and Tiến's realities, the happiness Hiền describes for Ondine and Bertie thus mirrors the promised happiness for Hiền and Tiến. Further contributing to the "It Gets Better" narrative is the temporality already explored in the text engaging with the temporality of the theory. The natural trajectory of acceptance experienced in the fairy tales is exemplified most obviously in Ondine's relationship with Bertie which satisfies the conditions of Ondine's spell. In "Tấm Cám," Tấm's unaccepting stepfamily are both killed, leaving her with a happy ending. "Allerleirauh" ends with Alera being accepted by her prince despite deceiving him twice over as a male servant and foreign princess.

The fairy tale endings combine with Hiền's acceptance of the past which involves the acceptance of her present, including her power and agency through stories. The endings and Hiền's contributions to "It Gets Better" correlate with the idea that "kids who once might have been unable to think past the bully around the corner now can imagine how easily he will become a thing of the past" (Matz 229). Despite the hardships Tiến faces in his queerness, his narrative is nestled in between multiple happy endings, ensuring that he too must have a happy ending. Hiền and Tiến's growth and happy endings intertwine, as did the rest of their stories, giving both hope for the future and feeding once again into the hopeful futurity of "It Gets Better."

The happy ending Tiến achieves is promised by the rest of the text and framed by every aspect of the text. His internal struggle with his sexuality is largely downplayed and pacified by his peers, including his crush, dismissing the possibility of being rejected early and unequivocally. While it may seem that the narrative disproves this inevitability by forcibly outing Tiến after this meeting with the homophobic priest, the consequences of these interactions are negated by one particular part of "Tấm Cám" told around this scene. This scene includes when Tấm's stepmother eats the bird accusing her of Tấm's murder, but the scene does not conclude with the bird's death since "Tấm Cám's" story continues with Tấm's resurrection (Nguyen 170, 174-5). Hiền's reaction by the end of the story cements the ending while also following from the rest of the story. She is never suggested to question her love for Tiến at any point which leads directly into her explicit acceptance of Tiến, saying, "I love everything you are" (229). The fear surrounding the question of whether or not Tiến will be accepted is shown and reinforced to be unfounded through Hiền's overt acceptance of him at the end as well as her continual love for him throughout the main narrative; the story was always going to end happily.

The function of this fairy tale, as it was with the previous tales, is to both mirror Hiền and Tiến's stories while visualizing their unspoken feelings and beliefs. This tale specifically represents the culmination of the themes and lessons learned over the course of the narrative now brought to fruition in its telling. Hiền's taking over of the narrative signifies her own willingness to accept change in addition to her acknowledgement of love for her son. Up until this fairy tale's telling, multi-colored focalization was used to denote the interconnectivity between past, present, and fiction in such a way that reveals the internal conflicts within both mother and son that they felt they could not express verbally. The focalization of this text exposes that these conflicts are now resolved/in the process of being resolved. This shift from the previous tales is noticeable and places readers in the same boat as Tiến as he neither can engage with his mother's interiority nor express his own during "The Little Mermaid's" reading. The ending of the tale bridges both of these gaps, leaving the two in a state of open communication and new understanding once the fairy tale ends.

One and the Same

The revelation exposed continuously through the fairy tales is that Hiền and Tiến's narratives were parallel, positioning them as equals. The two not only occur side-by-side but also merge into one, the two engaging with the same characters in the same tales. Their equality is most obviously evidenced in "Tấm Cám" wherein Hiền relates directly to Tấm at the same time Tiến is portraying events synchronously with Tấm's experiences. This experience gives credit to the idea that mother and son, despite their temporal and personal differences, have actually been going through mirrored struggles with their identity traumas and concerns over connecting to their mothers. Their relationship can thus be repaired with the understanding that they are

working towards the same goal—love and understanding—from the same starting position—traumatized and isolated from each other. The beginning of the text introduces the parallels in their traumas and desires which are used to depict the separation in their relationship through their separate focalizations, but the universality of the texts overpowers their separation by showing that both characters are taking up the text by relating to the protagonists and their narratives. As the two navigated their separate personal journeys, the text implies that they were always the same and united in their efforts to overcome their struggles and connect deeply to their family. The end of the novel allows the two to directly see this closeness, ending the text on a high note in which they find new understanding for each other both as parent/child and as individuals because of their similar journeys.

The main conflict between mother and son centers on their lack of understanding between them which causes each to believe that they are an island. However, the focalization, the established mother-son relationship central to the main narrative, and the fairy tale endings all make it clear that this was never the case. The parallels in their fears about family and acceptance are rooted in the same concern over if they will be accepted and loved by their respective parents which is expressed both in the fairy tales and in conversation with those that know them. In the moment the two embrace, both Hiền and Tiến accept this connection which breaks down their fear of being rejected by the other as mother/son to boil down to the love between individuals who share the same struggles and story. The temporally charged trauma, the past for Hiền and prospective future for Tiến, that previously separated them closes, and their connection matches the interconnectivity of the multi-colored focalization present in the first two of the temporally ambiguous fairy tales.

The Magic Fish represents the ability of texts to use focalization to expose not only one character's interiority but multiple characters focalizing the same text in different ways. This ability gives multiple protagonists simultaneous significance while also connecting them within the text. Although the characters themselves are unaware of their connection, the text uses focalization to implicitly link them together and create more complex meanings from the visualizations. This way of presenting parallel narratives complicates the ways focalization can be presented and used within narratives, using color to create complex meanings across characters and time. By connecting the colors to time (past and present) and genre (reality and fiction), the author then can disturb these conventions to construct new meanings which expose nuances in the focalizers' interiorities. Other studies in focalization (Bal, Bronzwaer, Horstkotte, Pratt) present in graphic novels largely focus on single characters who are the sole focalizer of the text. *The Magic Fish* has two focalizing characters and creates meaning between them and from both of them individually through very purposeful colored panels. Therefore, this text is significant as a text both for the use of color and the use of multiple focalizers engaging simultaneously within the text. The purpose of this focalization is thus also unique in that it is used to continuously connect the two together as focalizers and characters, the complexities of their relationship made apparent.

The relationship between Hiền and Tiến depicted in *The Magic Fish* forms both the central conflict of the story as well as the main connection between the fairy tales. Having the two both serve as the focalizers of the text allows unique ways to explore not only their individual interiorities but also their shared relationship as mother and son. It is through their connection to each other through the stories that they are able to come together at the end to understand each other more fully. Unlike *The Moth Keeper,* the parent and child both are the

focalizers and so equal participants in the meaning-making of the story. This difference in focalizers also contributes differently to aetonormative power structures than *The Moth Keeper*. Instead of granting more power to children and raising their status, *The Magic Fish* positions adults like Hiền in a more child-like power capacity. Rather than adults being perpetrators of the power structure that alienates children, *The Magic Fish* proposes that adults—like children—are victims of power. Additionally, other differences between *The Magic Fish* and *The Moth Keeper* center around the characters and their journeys. While Anya's relationship with Yeolen was cultivated from the ground up, Hiền and Tiến's loving relationship is already pre-established from the beginning of the text meaning the change in their relationship is backgrounded by their mutual desire to connect. Finally, Anya's motivation was to find belonging in the universe while Hiền and Tiến's motivation was to be accepted by the other. However, both *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* are rooted in their parental relationships and traumatized protagonists. The two stories end in a connection between parent and child that is changed by the plot and character development that resolves the protagonists' traumas. This connection can be identified as an understanding that the other is an equal despite differences in power or experiences. By the end of both texts, both parent and child acknowledge the other as equal participants in the relationship. The relationship is then able to become a relationship of mutual, reciprocal care.

CONCLUSION

Parent-child relationships are central to stories following child protagonists, especially as the children navigate their burgeoning identities against the power structures they operate within. Since their relationships with their parents is embroiled in power "universes," children and their parents are unable to freely interact with each other because of the power differences between them. Under this assumption, parents—and adults in general—have more power than children, who are expected to conform to these power structures since failure can lead to death The "universe" positions children in opposition to their parents who are part of the broader "universe" that oppresses them. In order to bridge the gap in power, children and adults must work to dismantle the assumptions made about children and their relative power. Once the overarching power structure is overturned, both the parent and child can view each other outside of their expected roles, leading to a new perspective that fundamentally changes their understanding of each other.

Both the "universe" and the nuances of parent-child relationships require examination to determine how they interact not only with each other but also other ideas that contextualize the individuals in the relationships. My examination of these topics, specifically in graphic novels, centers around focalization and how it presents the interiority of the characters. Focalization in graphic novels represents the interiority of characters' perspectives visually on the page, and studying these exposed interiors traces the characters' mentalities throughout the narrative. Focalization allows how the protagonists feel about themselves, the "universe," and their parents to be charted over the course of the story, signaling intrapersonal changes even if the characters themselves are unaware of them.

In order to examine the question of how parent-child relationships are presented, I looked into both how the relationships are represented visually and what the representations mean for the individuals involved in the relationships. All of the protagonists of *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* experience some form of trauma that inhibits their ability to communicate with others and understand themselves. However, empathy provides a solution to this inability by allowing characters to feel *with* each other, connecting to the other through shared feelings. One specific way characters can come to understand themselves and each other is through stories. Stories, according to Gregory, are both intimate and distant at the same time which allow readers to both take the stories to heart and understand them as universal. Since stories are distant but intimate, readers can view them from a more objective perspective and apply it to themselves personally. While trauma separates readers from themselves, stories can close the distance between readers and their traumas.

In the first chapter, I explored how *The Moth Keeper* uses light and dark values to express Anya's trauma and feelings of isolation she works through in the text. Her trauma surrounding being abandoned by her mother motivates her to become a Moth Keeper despite her fear of the dark. However, her role as Moth Keeper physically removes her from the village that provided her some semblance of belonging, leaving her isolated physically and mentally every night through her work. As a result, she cannot speak about her trauma because of her alienation from herself and feels she does not belong with her community. The darkness is focalized as a representation of her traumatized mind, the small amounts of light dwarfed by the vast dark skies and landscapes. Light, specifically the "soft but strong" lights of the night village and Moon-Spirit (O'Neill 229), becomes representative of her positive feelings and might in contrast to the barren darkness. The story follows Anya's struggle between the light and the dark, wanting to

both "hold [her] lantern up high for everyone" and "hide and forget" (123, 222). Unable to reconcile her differing desires and her trauma, Anya struggles and fails to connect to others in the community, particularly her mentor and father figure, Yeolen. While he and Anya both share a similar past as loners and a job as Moth Keeper, Anya begins the story not acknowledging the similarity, instead concerned entirely with her own experience. Both her role as the Moth Keeper and her status as a child imbue her with might manifested as potential, and she uses her might to disturb the "universe" around her by making attempts to soothe her trauma. Her might ultimately results in her losing the Moon-Moths vital to the community's survival but also sets up Yeolen to save her in the same way she was saved in the past after being abandoned. Through his intervention and continued care, Anya realizes that he is not just simply another member of the community but also a unique individual positioned in a particularly close relationship with her. She is then able to empathize with him and others, reaching out to Lioka to share her experience and put Lioka to rest with the Moon-Spirit. The story concludes by revealing that Anya's role of Moth Keeper is now shared with others in the community, her might having resulted in real change to her "universe." Anya's growth and change in the story is facilitated by her changing relationship with Yeolen, and she recognizes him as her father-figure which positions the two in a reciprocal relationship of care.

In the second chapter, I looked at how *The Magic Fish* differed in how the central parent-child relationship is represented and how the protagonists are focalized. Unlike *The Moth Keeper, The Magic Fish* features two protagonists, Hiền and Tiến, who both focalize the fairy tales they read to ostensibly help Hiền better learn English. Despite beginning with a warm and loving relationship, both Hiền and Tiến suffer from traumas they feel they cannot share with the other. For Hiền, she struggles with being a refugee who had to flee her home and the pain she

feels being separated from her mother. For Tiến, he worries over how to come out to his parents when he isn't confident that they would still love him if he did. Since neither character is prepared to share their issues, the narrative connects them together through sharing fairy tales. These fairy tales are colored indigo and differentiated from the red colored present and yellow colored past. These three colors intermix over the course of the story to visualize how Hiền and Tiến are focalizing the fairy tales. The three fairy tales—"Allerleirauh," "Tấm Cám," and "The Little Mermaid"—mark different moments of change for Hiền and Tiến, both influencing and influenced by where the characters are in their personal journeys. While the first fairy tale establishes the two characters' desires and traumas, "Tấm Cám" connects Hiền's perspective of her own life to Tấm's story which itself is directly focalized next to Tiến's experience at his school dance. Marshall Gregory's understanding of what stories can mean to readers argues that stories employ "intimacy and distance at the same time" (44) to connect readers to themselves through the messages in the text. Hiền and Tiến come to understand both themselves and each other through this understanding, and Hiền particularly learns that stories retain their power even if they are not what readers expect them to be. Using this knowledge, Hiền changes the ending of "The Little Mermaid" to implicitly express her support for Tiến's queerness. The story ends with mother and son embracing, now open to communication with each other through the acknowledgement that the other is a unique individual who loves them no matter what. This happy ending ties to the happy endings each fairy tale has, building the entire narrative around positive endings.

Both *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* finish on the same conclusion where the child protagonist realizes that their parent exists outside their perceived role and so is involved in a more equal relationship with them. My purpose in writing this thesis was to identify and

examine how these kinds of relationships are established and what occurs when they are formed. Despite the differences in Anya and Tiến's journeys, both come to a similar understanding of their parents over the course of the story. This understanding may be attributed to their shared experiences going through traumas which redefine their perspectives on society and their places in it. In addition, both characters also witness how their parents are affected by being members of society, discovering that the parents are also going or have gone through similar struggles. Reaching this level of mutual understanding with the parent allows the child to renegotiate the relationship into a mutual and reciprocal one. Establishing parent-child relationships through mutually reciprocal care is significant as a phenomenon because of the difference between the way parent-child relationships operate between the beginnings and ends of texts. The relationship change implies a problem with the relationship in the beginning which is rectified through reciprocal care. Mullin describes the change as an acknowledgment that the other person in the relationship is a whole and unique individual separate from an assumption of unconditional love. Rather than viewing parent-child relationships as transactional and impersonal, Mullin concludes that "both parent and child need to pay close attention to one another, to trust each other enough to disclose who they really are, and to engage in activities that respond to each person's needs and interests" (197). In the two primary texts I have explored regarding this topic, the trauma and power structures afflicting the characters prevent parent and child from acknowledging, communicating, and caring for each other. However, once these factors are dealt with, both texts naturally conclude with Anya and Tiến entering into reciprocal relationships with their parents. Understanding reciprocal parent-child relationships is necessary to not only identify factors in children's lives that influence their relationships with their parents but also to acknowledge how different parent-child relationships can be formed. Acknowledging different kinds of parent-child

relationships is important for understanding how individuals in different parts of power hierarchies can interact. Reciprocal relationships like Mullin identifies are depicted in *The Moth Keeper* and *The Magic Fish* as desirable, highlighting the importance of reciprocity and care even in disparate power situations.

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APPENDIX A: IMAGES FROM *THE MOTH KEEPER*

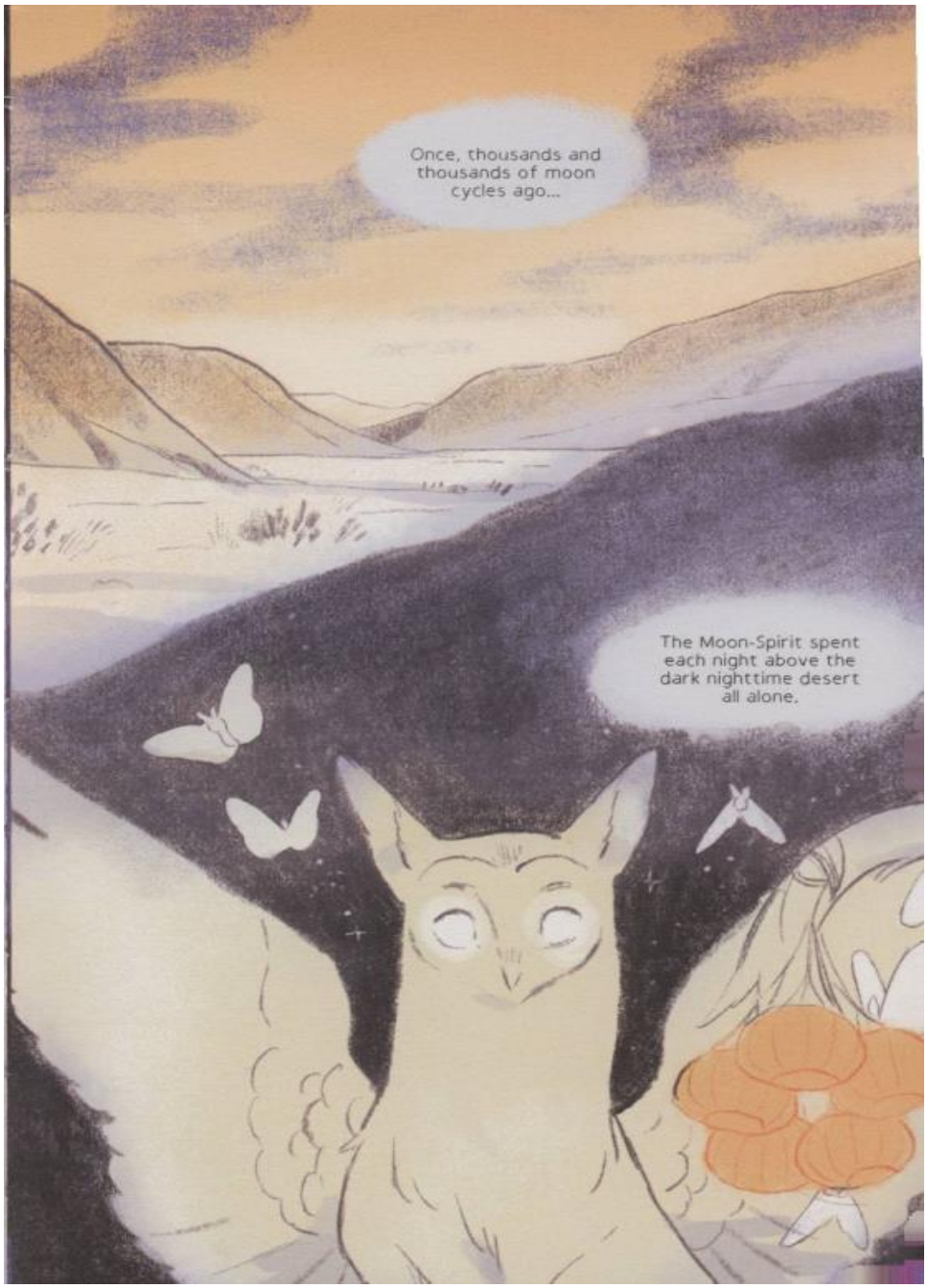

Figure A-1. P. 1: The top of the page shows the desert, intersected diagonally with an illustration of the Moon-Spirit with the Moon-Moths.

Figure A-2. Pps. 2-3: The top of the page depicts night villagers in silhouette walking towards a cave and a close up of the Moon-Spirit looking downwards. In the bottom half of the page, two villagers look up at the sky. On the right side, the Moon-Spirit descends in front of a group of villagers.

Figure A-3. Pps. 12-3: Anya declares that she is ready before Yeolen smiles and lowers his lantern. A close up shows him taking light from his lantern and putting it into Anya's. The opposite spread shows the Moon-Moths swarming around Anya's light as she receives support from Yeolen, Jaellara, the villagers, and Estell.

Figure A-4. P. 23: Two landscape panels; a close up of Anya smiling followed by three increasingly pulled back images of Anya as she begins to walk towards the village. Her expression falls as she opens her eyes, looks down, and frowns before she heads off.

Figure A-5. Pps. 32-3: A two-page spread with bands at the top and bottom of the pages representing the lunar cycle to show that time is passing. Each panel shows different scenes of Anya and Yeolen moth keeping: sitting among the Moon-Moths, playing music, watching the Moon-Moths, and being together.

Figure A-6. Pps. 66-7: A two-page spread beginning with Anya in profile looking serious. The next panel pulls back to depict the precipice she is sitting on. The bottom two panels reduce her to a silhouette, still followed by the Moon-Moths but even smaller against the desert landscape.

Figure A-7. P. 94: Anya stands with her lantern; the next three panels show the panels getting progressively darker until the next panel when a Moon-Moth lands on her head, and she looks up in surprise.

Figure A-8. P. 109: The first two panels show a part of Anya's face and her feet; the next panels show imaginary banners. The bottom panel shows Anya smiling among the desert flora with the banners and an enlarged moon in the background.

Figure A-9. P. 110: The first panel shows a flower followed by two panels showing Anya's face with eyes closed and then opening. The bottom panel shows Anya with her ears down facing the moonless sky, the Moon-Moths in the background.

Figure A-10. P. 117: The first panel shows the branches of a tree; the second panel depicts the same kind of branches covered in imaginary banners with Anya below them. The bottom panel shows Anya with her arms outstretched and a calm expression. She is glowing the same light the moon previously was shining on page 109.

Figure A-11. P. 141: The top panel shows a young Anya running across the dark desert, the moon high in the sky. The middle-left panel shows Anya crying as she runs around in the dark. The middle-right panel shows the desert landscape with Anya's thought bubble coming out of the ground. The bottom two panels depict Anya tripping and falling onto her face.

Figure A-12. P. 167: The top two panels depict Anya bringing the Moon-Moths out of their cave and going out into the desert. The middle panel depicts the Moon-Moths flying around the desert cacti. The bottom-left panel shows Anya turned away with her expression obscured. The bottom-right panel shows Anya's face with a determined expression and her brow furrowed and bags under her eyes.

Figure A-13. P. 168: The first panel shows Anya close-up in profile with a black background. The second panel pulls away to show her whole face, the bottom half of the panel is dark blue. The third panel shows Anya's full body as she sinks to her knees using her lantern as support and surrounded by glowing flora in front of a lighter blue background. The final panel shows a smaller Anya hunched over herself with her lantern on the ground as the number of glowing flora grows from the previous panel.

Figure A-14. P. 171: The top three panels depict the moon cracking with Moon-Moths coming out of it. The background becomes increasingly dark as the moon cracks more and more Moon-Moths come out of it. The bottom depicts the remnants of the moon falling while Moon-Moths surround the speech bubble on a black background.

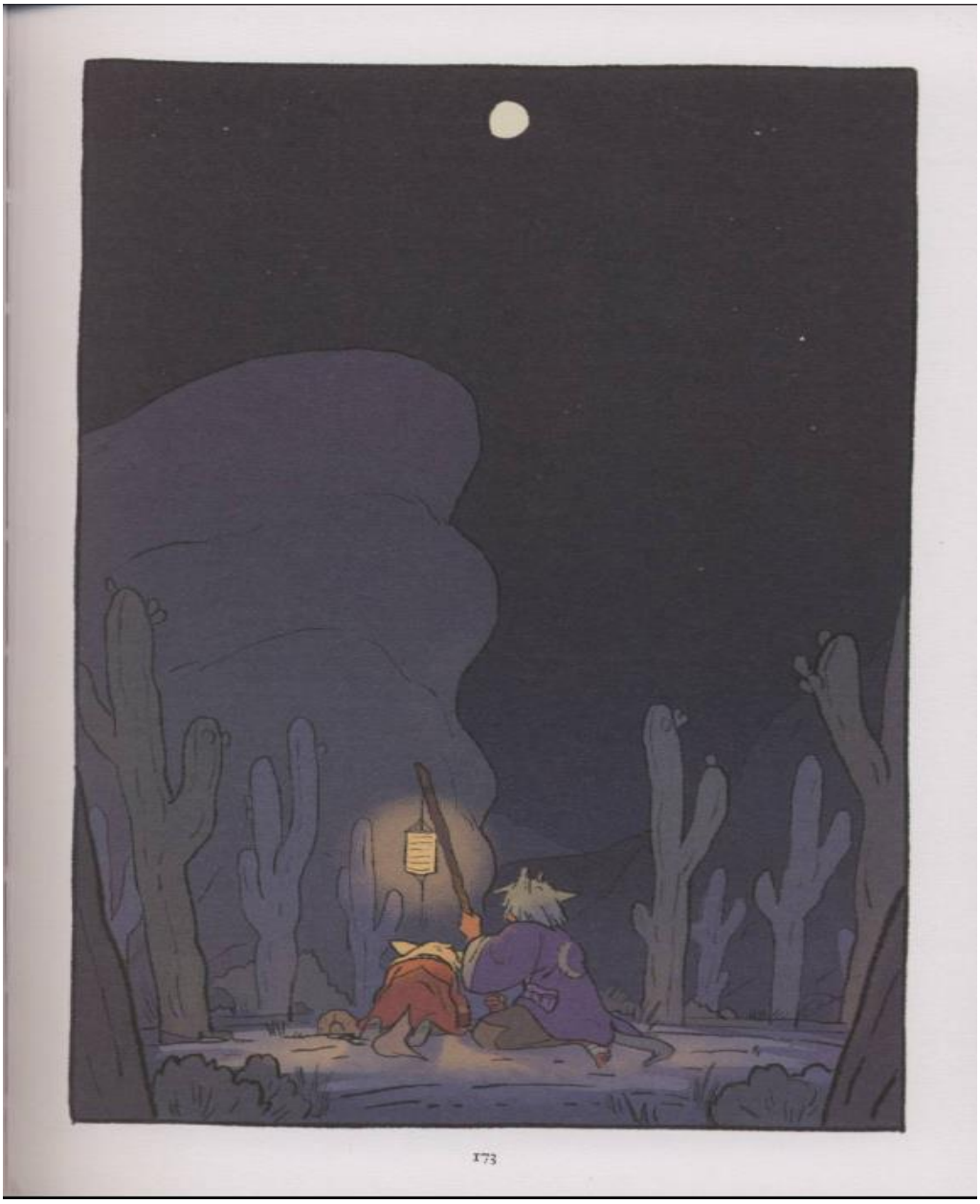

Figure A-15. P. 173: The panel depicts the full moon high in the sky and Anya and Yeolen at the bottom, Yeolen's lantern providing light on the two. The rest of the background is dark and depicts desert rocks and cacti.

Figure A-16. Pps. 256-7: The two-page spread depicts the group of villagers leaving the Moon-Moths' cave led by Anya in the front. Each villager has a lantern, and the sky is full of stars. The bottom panel depicts the village in silhouette on the left and the villagers on the right walking towards the mountain, illuminated by their lanterns.

APPENDIX B: IMAGES FROM *THE MAGIC FISH*

Figure B-1. P. 1: The top panel is red and depicts Hiền and Tiến's legs with the book "Allerleirauh" on Tiến's lap. The middle panel is yellow and depicts birds flying away from a cloudy sky. The bottom panel depicts a scene from "Allerleirauh" when Alera is in the forest with her cloak. There are text boxes in the top and bottom panels of Hiền's narration.

Figure B-2. P. 27: This page is in yellow and depicts Hiền crying as she leaves her mother in their home, her mother telling her not to forget. Hiền is depicted running from an armed soldier before meeting up with her husband and getting on the boat.

Figure B-3. P. 28: The top row of panels is yellow-yellow-indigo. The first two panels depict Hiền and the other refugees on the boat. The third panel depicts bubbles coming from the water. The middle row of panels is yellow-indigo-yellow. The left and right panels depict Hiền as she gazes out into the water, the right panel being a close-up of the left one. The middle panel depicts the Old Man of the Sea's head beginning to emerge along with more bubbles. The bottom row is indigo-yellow-red and is cut across by Tiến's speech bubbles. The left panel is the Old Man's face now fully out of the water glaring upwards. The middle panel is another close-up of Hiền, focusing on her eye. The right panel is Hiền holding the same expression as the past in the present and Tiến in profile calling out to her.

Figure B-4. P. 87: Tiến is depicted lying in bed and sighing, the speech bubble attaching to his imagination of Julian who is depicted in indigo and surrounded by stars. The other panels include the cord of the phone Hiền is using to call her family and the conversation they are having. In the bottom right panel, Hiền is depicted on the phone looking pleased as indicated by her relaxed eyebrows and smile.

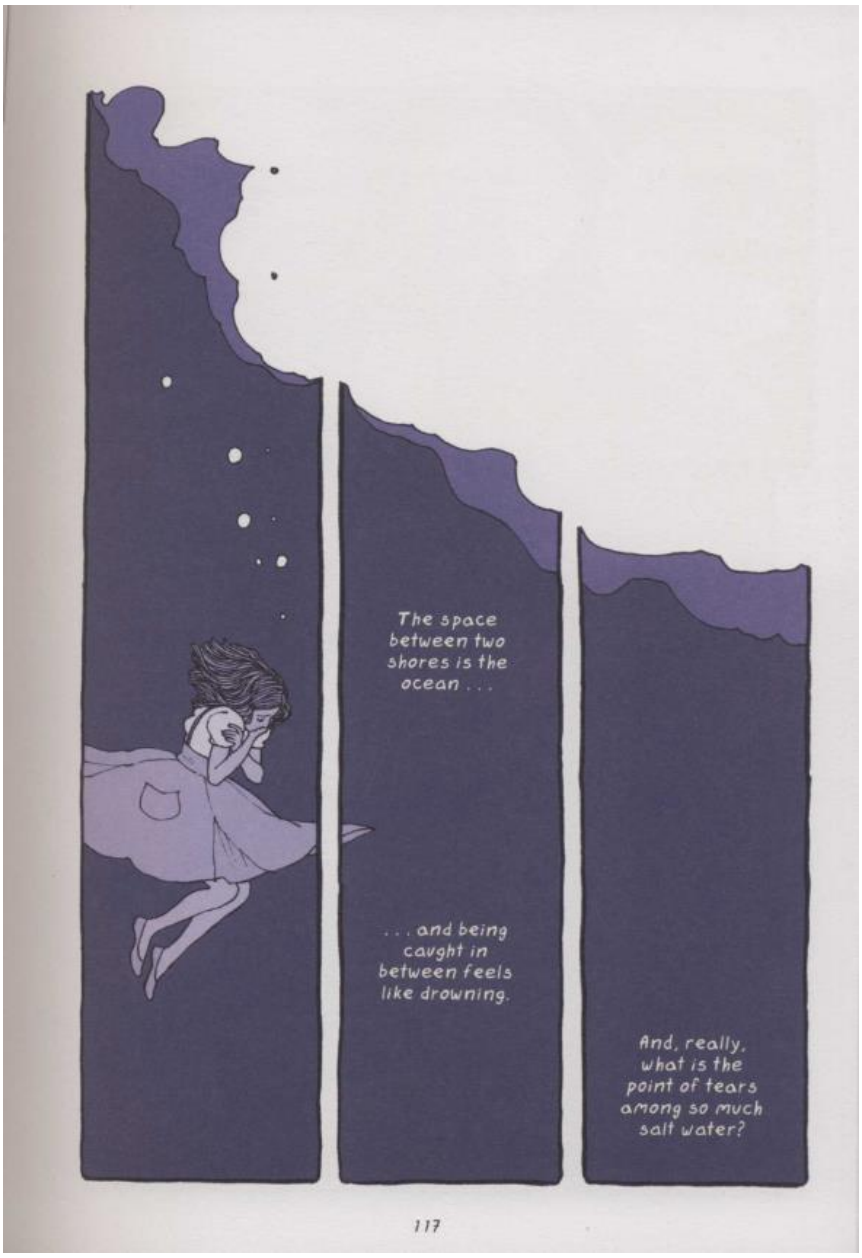

Figure B-5. P. 117: The three panels are separated by white space but depict a congruent image of Hiền underwater colored in indigo. There are air bubbles above her, and she is posed with her hand covering her mouth. The middle and right panels include text from Hiền's narration. There is white space at the top of the page indicating waves or the top of the water.

Figure B-6. Pps. 158: The top row of panels is in indigo and depicts two partygoers at the merchant's fête looking at Tấm's arrival. The middle and right panels depict Tấm surrounded by stars which continues into the indigo left and middle panels of the middle row when the merchant is implied visually to see her and go to her. The middle panel of the middle row depicts Tấm and the merchant in the background as a partygoer from Tiến's party is depicted in the foreground in red. This panel marks the transition from indigo to red as Tiến is depicted in the background of the middle right panel. The bottom row of panels is red and depicts Julian asking Tiến to dance which pleases Tiến since both he and Julian are smiling. Both Tiến and Julian are surrounded by the same kind of stars Tấm and the merchant were.

Figure B-7. P. 160: The top row of panels is red and depicts Tiến's party. Tiến's friend, Claire, is depicted listening to Tiến and Julian's conversation as they are dancing before she walks past Mrs. Flynn and another adult in the background. The top right panel shows an adult presumably pointing at Tiến and Julian while both the adult and Mrs. Flynn frown. The bottom row is in indigo and depicts the merchant's fête. The bottom left and middle panels depict Tấm standing with the merchant before looking to behind her. The bottom right panel depicts Tấm's stepmother and stepsister looking angry as indicated by their lowered eyebrows in the background.

Figure B-8. P. 176: Hiền is depicted in red in the top left talking about her feelings of in-betweenness, her speech bubble extending into the space between panels. Her aunt is shown looking at her as Hiền continues to talk about her "past and present selves." The bottom left panel shows present Hiền looking down and behind herself while standing in front of and outside the confines of the yellow panel which depicts past Hiền looking upward with the moon and water in the background. The bottom right panel shows present Hiền in red crying while she speaks.

Figure B-9. P. 225: The top row of panels depicts Ondine struggling holding the knife her sisters gave her while looking stressed as evidenced by her lowered brow and tension around her mouth. The next panels depict her lifting the knife up before using it to stab a stream of cloth that previously floated above her into the ground. The bottom left panel is indigo and depicts a sad Ondine being called out to. She looks up and notices it is Bertie who says she has been looking for Ondine. The bottom right panel is red and depicts Tiến saying "That's not—" in a speech bubble.