



Hedera helix 2007

Literary Journal of Sigma Kappa Delta

*The National English Honor Society
for Two-Year Colleges*



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Hedera helix

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The National English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges

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Purpose of Sigma Kappa Delta

Sigma Kappa Delta serves two-year college students who achieve academic excellence in English. Members need not be English majors but must demonstrate an interest and proficiency in literature and writing. ΣΚΔ offers members opportunities for

- Scholarships
- Awards
- Leadership
- Competition
- Publication
- Travel
- National Conferences
- Networking

Access www.english2.org for complete eligibility requirements.



Hedera helix – the scientific name for English Ivy and the national plant of ΣΚΔ, symbolizing resilience and individual growth. In keeping with the Greek spelling, we use the lower case “h” for helix.

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Closets

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Langston Hughes' 'On the Road'

Cierra Lowery

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From the editor . . .



The 2007 *Hedera helix* takes a different form from previous editions. The Board of Directors examined options for publication and decided that we will publish yearly now. Although this will result in a thinner volume, the Board thinks the value of more timely publication will better benefit our chapters and our members.

We are proud of ΣΚΑ members who have submitted outstanding writing to our contest this year and applaud their talent. These writers have explored a variety of subjects which give us a glimpse into the world of the twenty-first century.

In addition to the winning papers and other outstanding entries from our writing contest, this edition of *Hedera helix* publishes ΣΚΑ member papers which were submitted to Sigma Tau Delta and accepted to be read at the 2007 national conference. What an honor and what a testament to two-year college excellence when our students compete on level ground with four-year university students!

I look forward to receiving entries for the 2008 writing contest and hope sponsors will encourage their members to submit. Please see the submission guidelines and deadlines on our website at www.english2.org.

Jan Anderson
Director of Publications

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Water the plants

Wash the dishes

Clean the clothes

Cry

Feed the dogs

Open the bottle

Drink its contents

Dry

Find a realtor

See an attorney

Pay the bills

Cry

Shampoo the carpet

Divide the assets

Tell our children

Why



Lynn McMahan
Lambda Beta Chapter
McLennan Community College
2007 Poetry Winner

black blue

white
surrounds
me

silence
has found
me

praying
it's not
you

slowly
they walk
through

funny
how mouths
move

when telling
the bad
news

screaming
it's not
true

as white
turns to
black blue

*Lynn McMahan
Lambda Beta Chapter
McLennan Community College*

The Fall

Roll me over easy
For I've survived the fall
Broken bones are nothing
But hearts don't mend at all
Living high the promise
My soul, the devil's call
Wingless angel save me
From Hell's eternal thaw

Roll me over easy
Darkness be my fate
Hear my prayer dear Jesus
I beg my soul to take
I hear the angels singing
The light it shines too late
For I'm a lowly sinner
Too far from heaven's gate

Lynn McMahan
Lambda Beta Chapter
McLennan Community College



Closets

Secrets are sacred. They build bonds, destroy lives, and drive us crazy. Sometimes, the worst secrets are those we keep about ourselves from others, those so momentous, it feels like there won't be a tomorrow if we do not tell someone. However, I have learned that sharing one's pain and feelings with trusted friends may bring alienation. This possibility is insignificant compared to the struggle of keeping secrets bottled up inside. No matter what the other person's reaction, we can find satisfaction in knowing they are no longer alone.

The summer before ninth grade, I suspected my whole life and existence was leading up to the conversation I was finally having. I found myself in my small closet, sitting on a box of some sort. The darkness surrounding me was almost tangible. Clothes shrouded my face, but I didn't mind.

I was talking with my best friend, Eric. Throughout junior high, we had shared everything in our friendship, from the loss of his virginity, his basketball dreams, my teaching career plans, and drama with my father. Conversation between us usually flowed easily and went on for hours, but not tonight. There were long silences as I formed words in my head, words I had not dared speak to anyone, words I had thought about for months in regard to Eric. But they were words I could not say casually, and I initiated a game of "I Never."

"Okay, you go first," Eric said.

I closed my eyes and said the first thing that popped into my mind: "I've never been ice-skating."

"I have," he responded. "We were in the mountains. It was fun, I guess. Alright, I've never had sex on the beach."

I rolled my eyes. Eric was always one to cut straight to the dirt. I told him I hadn't either, and the next few moments were give-and-take sexual banter any fourteen-year-old would find intriguing. I grew weary of his random sexual comments and searched for a way to selfishly turn the spotlight on me. Finally, I blurted out, "I've never been with a girl."

"Yeah, you know I've been with a girl. Um, I've never been with a *guy*," Eric declared.

I took in shallow breaths and could feel the tears starting to form. He said nothing, and neither did I. Nothing was uttered for three excruciating minutes until my words shattered the silence that had fallen on the conversation. I managed a whisper: "I have." I broke down, tears flowing in abundance.

I felt a deep pain in my stomach. I figured it was my fear of what he might think and an ache that represented my own self-hatred. I was mortified over what those words meant about who I might become. Any derogatory word I could ever be called, I had already called myself. I knew if I felt so disgusted about myself, Eric must, too.

After I'd calmed down enough to talk, Eric asked me questions. Now that I had gotten over the worst part, it seemed easy enough to answer his inquiries. I felt I owed him that much, having kept the secret so long from him.

“So, do you think you’re gay?” he asked.

“Um, I don’t know. I mean, I look at girls. I think they’re pretty. I just don’t know if I want to have sex with a girl. I guess I’m more confused than anything. I’m so confused, and I am pissed this is happening to me.”

Eric asked, “So, when did you first know? I don’t really understand any of this, but how did it start?”

I took a breath and began. “I guess at the end of sixth grade. Nothing really set it off. I just started noticing guys more than girls. I don’t know. I’ve tried everything to change, and I hope I do. I just don’t know what to do. I’ve prayed so much I’m blue in the face, and I don’t think God is listening.”

“Have you told anybody else?”

“No, and I don’t plan on it. I don’t want anyone to know. It could ruin my whole high school career. You have to swear you won’t tell anyone,” I said with urgency.

“Dude, it’s cool. You’ve never told any of my secrets, and I sure as hell won’t tell this one. We’re friends, and this isn’t going to change that. Nobody’s perfect, and I don’t expect you to be, either. You know I love you like a brother.”

I exhaled, and a smile began to form across my face. “So, you don’t care about what I told you?”

“You told me this is a two-year thing now, and we’ve been friends for way longer than that. If this is a phase, that’s cool, but if not...I guess we’ll have to cross that bridge when we get to it. Just know that I love you like a brother no matter who you want to have sex with.”

After about an hour more of comforting conversation, we said goodbye, and Eric told me to keep my head up. I hung up the phone and rubbed my bloodshot eyes. Having been enclosed in my closet for hours, I now reached for the doorknob. Darkness filled the closet but light permeated my room beyond the door. I pulled the closet door open and squinted; the light shining on me was so bright I momentarily forgot about the darkness.



Jesse Cosper
Phi Alpha Chapter
Bevill State Community College
2007 Narrative Essay Winner

Where I Belong

“Are you a city girl or a small town girl?” was the question giddily asked by my girlfriend as we drove through Atlanta last month. I pondered the question as she informed me she was “a city girl through-and-through.” The truth was, I didn’t know. My town is of medium size, and I hadn’t experienced enough of a large city or small town to be sure. A few weeks after the question was asked, I took a vacation to Europe with my family. While there, I had the chance to spend time in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and St. Goar, Germany; thus, I can now answer my friend’s question. Though Amsterdam and St. Goar are each awe-inspiring European cities, the contemporary liveliness of Amsterdam suited me better than the quaint stillness I discovered in St. Goar.

My journey began as soon as I stepped off the train in Amsterdam. That first day made such an impression; I remember it like yesterday. The blue and yellow bullet train whizzed to a stop, prompting my jetlag-weary eyelids to blink open. I heard the hum of rolling suitcases and jumbled conversations beyond the window of our compartment as my eyes fluttered closed once more. Finally, a loud thump jolted me fully awake. My father had just removed a suitcase from the overhead compartment. I gathered my bags, followed my family through the narrow corridor, and attempted to corral my jostling luggage as I made the foot and a half leap onto the platform. Disregarding my rushed family, I stopped in my tracks to absorb the panorama. I was inside a wide, elaborately decorated glass dome, surrounded by the echoes of international accents: French, Spanish, African, and of course, Dutch. Trains of all lengths screeched and roared in and out of the station on the eight tracks before me. It was my first experience inside a train station, and it was grandiose.

During the next few days, my family and I explored the city of Amsterdam. We were surrounded by canals lined with houseboats and fishing boats, roads swarming with motorcycles and bicycles, and uniquely fashioned townhouses which walled the city. The city itself was a breathtaking kaleidoscope of flowers. Flora overflowed from each window-box, bicycle basket, and crack in the sidewalk. With each step I trod in Amsterdam, I sensed the ghosts and angels of history. I walked through mansions boasting Rembrandt covered walls, heard stories of Van Gogh’s sorrowful paintings, and immersed myself in the life of a teenage girl, much like myself, while touring Anne Frank’s modest secret annex.

The people who hurry about Amsterdam seem to be a different species. They are friendly, youthful souls, who chatter in Dutch with their contemporary neighbors. I passed them everywhere. They pedaled past me with good posture on their bicycles, scampered on and off trams which zipped through the city, and took my order at each charming pastry shop or lively bar and grill. When they realized my family was American, their faces lit up, excited to practice speaking already-fluent English. Amsterdam comprises seven hundred thousand of these people.

I thrived on the hustle-bustle life of modern Amsterdam. Hopping trams, filing in and out of tiny shops or towering malls, and conversing with college students at any time of night or day is a life I would love to live. I felt free in Amsterdam. However, our family soon had to move on. Our next stop was St. Goar, Germany.

The train we rode to St. Goar was a short, charcoal colored, local train. It was stuffy with no air conditioning, but the windows propped open with a little elbow grease. We ventured through the misty mountains in early morning. Small gingerbread houses lay sprinkled at the bases of hills along the sparkling Rhine River. A subtle stillness blanketed the towns, making me hesitant to mutter even a whisper. Gradually, our train came to a stop only a street's width away from several of the old-world buildings. When my parents ushered me to gather my things, I was confused. There was no train station. We stepped off the train onto a long slab of concrete beneath a wooden pavilion. A man in a brown coat and his son exited the train with us and went on their way without a word. The train crept away too, and we were left there, not a soul but us in sight. To my right was a large metal box which took the place of a ticket clerk, and to my left was a staircase leading underground beneath the railroad tracks. A flickering fluorescent light greeted us as we made our way down the stairs and around the corner. Eerily, the Thomas Kinkadee countryside we had observed from the train returned with a step beyond the platform.

Soon, my family and I were venturing inside one of the most charming villages I had ever laid eyes on. We slept in a two story mom-and-pop hotel above one of the two restaurants in the city. Our view was of the Rhine River, only one hundred feet away. Slow moving barges and large ferry boats labored along night and day. As far as the eye could see, the mountains were quilted with wine vineyards, and ever so often, there rested a castle lingering from the 1400s. A walk through the winding cobblestone roads led us past doll shops and bakeries fashioned in the German way with wooden planks and light-colored brick. Steep trails with hundreds of steps directed us up to the ruins of a cathedral, and before I realized it, we were walking through rows of grapes. While looking over the picturesque town from the mountain top, I felt I was gazing into a fairy tale from long ago. I half expected a white horse to come escort me back to the hotel.

A no-nonsense atmosphere was apparent whenever I heard the frank conversations exchanged between locals. Most of the Germans we met in St. Goar were older with a stern air about them. They were conservative and kept to themselves. As if the town wasn't still and ghostly enough, there was an unwritten rule requiring St. Goar's people to be sound asleep by half past eight at night and to rise again at six in the morning. The lonely, quiet atmosphere didn't suit my personality. I was ready to move on to a larger city by the time our days were finished in St. Goar.

The next time I see my friend, I am going to let her know that I, too, am a city girl. I thrive on seeing new faces everyday and enjoy ever-changing activities. The big city fulfills my need for spontaneity. On the contrary, waving at the same few people I greeted yesterday or being in a place where nothing new happens stifles me. If I'm in a small town, I won't stay there long. It's wise to discover the surroundings one feels most alive in, and I'm a city girl.

Meagan Mathews
Theta Beta Chapter
Calhoun Community College

A Simple Wallet, or Something More?

This morning, I sat in the passenger's seat of John's parked Camaro, waiting as he searched his house for his library card. I was perfectly content there, drinking in my surroundings like a fresh glass of water. The sharp morning sun fired down onto the maroon hood and black interior of the car. In certain areas, the heat was cut by icy air gusting from the dashboard vents. The deep rumble of the engine and air-conditioner made the glove compartment latch vibrate, so I touched it gently to stop the rattle. A thought occurred to me then; I had placed John's library card in an unusual pocket of his wallet last week.

To the left of me, the modest black wallet resided in a cup holder, paired, as usual, with his five dollar, blue-tinted sunglasses and loose pennies. I pulled the lump of leather from the cup holder with a "clank" as the shades fell onto coins. Rubbing my thumb across the softly worn leather, I looked down at the wallet. The half moon shape that had formed over time molded to my palm naturally. As I held the wallet, I felt I was holding a reflection of the boy himself.

Then I gently flipped open the first fold, revealing thoroughly flattened, plastic photo pockets. The first picture was only slightly bigger than a postage stamp and damaged in blotches. After squinting, I made out two smiling figures posed in front of a barely recognizable baseball field. *Of course!* This was the first photo ever taken of me and John together. As I peered at it, the story of the locket-size photo came back to me. It was taken at Palmer Park on a humid day in August, years ago. John and his family were leaving town to visit his grandparents the next day, and John wanted to have a picture of us before he left. The following equally hot summer, while on a canoe trip, the picture was almost ruined when John jumped from our boat and into the river, forgetting that his wallet was in his pocket. I smiled to myself and took a deep breath. I could almost smell the glistening water and hear the clatter of canoe oars.

Suddenly, I remembered my search for the library card and moved on to the second flap. The first item showing was a worn piece of paper with a simple, "I love you" scrawled in loopy, girlish handwriting. Far more elaborate notes have been exchanged between us over the years, but this sincere statement says it all. Behind the note, his various credit cards were stuffed into pockets. In a clump, the sleek, plastic rectangles were pulled out and fanned into my palm. In the stack, there were various membership cards to Beta and government clubs, movie cards, and photo IDs. I wondered if he would ever throw away these high school tokens which mean so much to him.

The last card in the stack was not the library card, but a new, flashy identification card with a recent photo of wavy-haired John smiling straight ahead. The word "Student" appeared under his photo, and the card sported a wind-blown maroon flag with bold white letters that read "STATE." I moved the shiny card back and forth in the sunlight, thinking about its meaning: college, a new adventure, long distance phone calls, tears, new memories, our future...growing up.

Finally, I stacked the stiff cards in my hand and pushed them back into their pockets. The pouch where I suspected to find the library card was hidden behind the other pouches and opened to the side rather than from the top. Sure enough, when I felt inside the pouch, my fingers found the desired card and pulled it out. As the flaps of his wallet smacked closed in my hand, I paused reflecting on its contents: the history of a life. Memories of illuminated baseball diamonds, canoe trips, and love letters are all still inside, welcoming the new items of today and showing signs of an exciting tomorrow.

Meagan Mathews
Theta Beta Chapter
Calhoun Community College



Langston Hughes' '*On the Road*'

Langston Hughes' *On the Road* concisely exposes the suppression of African Americans during America's most desperate time, the Great Depression. Hughes leads his main character Sargeant and his audience into a tangible dream which asserts the white church's racial discrimination and provides Sargeant with a method to cope with his imprisonment and cling unwaveringly to his faith. The narrator's unique perception and strategically poised words shake a white church to the ground while confining a desperate and starving black man in prison. Hughes brilliantly intertwines the theme of black versus white, the tenacious African American spirit, and the personification of Jesus Christ to capture the period.

Sargeant's encounter with the white Reverend instantaneously establishes the black race as underprivileged and socially inferior when the white man flips on his porch light, standing above the impoverished and homeless black man. Sargeant's poverty sets him below the Reverend; however, the chasm between the two widens as the Reverend peers out his door to see "a human piece of night with snow on his face" instead of a suffering man. The Reverend's dogmatic perspective equates Sargeant with an element of nature, illustrating the attitude with which someone may look at a stray cat or dog. Next to the Reverend's cozy parsonage, Sargeant encounters Hughes's most powerful and imposing white symbol, the church. The church's "Broad white steps in the night all snowy white," "high arched doors," "pillars," and "lacy window" visually present the color white and portray the white race's prestige and contempt more effectively than the Reverend's indifferent denial. The repetitive diction, "white," "snow," and "pale" sharply contrasts the dark night that encompasses Sargeant's persona and clearly draws the battle line between white and black. Before Sargeant desperately knocks and pounds at the church door, the diction and the imagery tell the reader that Sargeant is unworthy of this sanctuary and will face white opposition. White discrimination fervently climaxes when Hughes reveals the inner thoughts of white people on the street who are appalled at "A big black unemployed Negro holding onto our church! The idea!"

While the theme black versus white suppresses Sargeant as an African American man, it provides an outlet to express the courageous tenacity of the African American spirit. By no accident the name Sargeant possesses a strong and commanding connotation, and the physical makeup of the character embodies these qualities. Sargeant's unabated persistence pushes him onward as he trudges through the snow, seeks dozens of soup lines, holds fast to the church's pillar, and threatens to tear down the bars that hold him in jail. Sargeant's desire for survival, despite snow falling on his head, sliding down his neck, and sloshing in his shoes, and his abysmal odds of reaching shelter, present an admirable journey. However, more powerful than his instinctive desire to survive is his apparent commitment to excel beyond subsistence. Sargeant's threat to break down his cell door, and his dream of bringing the white church crashing to the ground and then triumphantly striding away, express his desire and the universal African American desire for radical change.

Sargeant sustains his spirit and strength throughout the story with encouragement

from the vision and the reality of a man who walked the most humble, faultless life on earth, Jesus Christ. As Jesus Christ strides alongside Sargeant in the form of an animated crucifix, he plays a direct role in the story and reveals his characteristics through personal and poignant interaction. Christ casually chats with Sargeant in the black man's familiar jargon, revealing Christ's eagerness to meet those who seek him wherever they are physically, emotionally, and mentally. Christ praises Sargeant for pulling down the church, an allusion to the biblical story of Samson, and laughs with him, reflecting Christ's desire to rejoice over the success of his children and walk intimately together through every hour and every trial. Symbolically, the image of Christ bearing the cross for mankind is mirrored when Sargeant shoulders the church's pillar. The passage's most profound message lies within Christ's words as he declares, "I'm gonna make it on to Kansas City." The story literally indicates that Christ is physically moving to the geographical heart of America during this time period; symbolically, the words of Christ declare his desire to move into the heart of every member of humankind for whom his blood was shed.

When the reader initially meets Sargeant, the narrator reveals that he does not see the pure snow falling in sharp contrast against the ebony sky. The snow remains negligible in Sargeant's eyes next to his desperate attempt to survive during his exhausting solitary trek through the night. The white Reverend and later the white people gathering on the street, who are not facing the opposition and struggle Sargeant faces, see and feel the snow. Symbolically, the white people experience this privilege while Sargeant's perception is limited to his impending and dire circumstances. This symbolic veil of suppression is torn away when snow falls into his eyes as he looks up at the church window towards the figure of Christ, the equalizer of all men through his blood. While Sargeant's eyes were fixed on Christ, he saw the snow as acutely as the white Reverend, from the security of his own door and front porch.

Hughes' diction and imagery brilliantly display the black and white feud, and develop profound layers of interpretations. Each time the reader rereads the passage, the relentless African American spirit grows stronger and the characteristics of Christ become more evident. The passage in its entirety and, specifically, the threat from Sargeant promising, "You wait, Im gonna break down this door, too," foreshadows the success of the civil rights movement when doors of opportunity were opened and equality was gradually attained.

Cierra Lowery
Psi Gamma Chapter
Tyler Community College
2007 Literary Analysis Winner

Opposites Attract

Authors often use foils to highlight the traits of certain characters. William Shakespeare, in his play *Othello*, does this with Emilia and Desdemona. Ironically, although the characters are opposites in almost every way, they share the same tragic flaw that leads to their deaths.

Seemingly, the differences between the women stem from their husbands. Othello and Iago are contrasted when the play first opens in Cyprus. For Othello, the sight of his wife “is too much joy” (2.1.192). He absolutely sings her praise, calling her his “fair warrior” (2.1.177), “soul’s joy” (2.1.179), and “sweet” (2.1.200). Moments earlier, Iago has insulted Emilia by calling her a nagging wife (2.1.100-2) whose only use is “to suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (2.1.159). It is easy to see why Emilia, who has been married to Iago for several years, laments men “are all but stomachs and [women] all but food” (3.4.98) and thinks adultery is “a small vice” (4.3.68). After all, it is “husbands’ fault if wives do fall” (4.3.82-83). Her husband mistreats and cheats on her, and she believes it is only fair and natural that she does the same to him. The newlywed Desdemona, on the other hand, believes that her “noble Moor is true of mind and made of no such baseness” (3.4.20-21). Even when repeatedly confronted with evidence to the contrary, she will not cheat on him for all the world (4.3.63).

So how is it that these opposite women die the same way, murdered by their opposite husbands? They share one key trait: they are both very loyal. Emilia refuses to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief even though her “wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed [her] to” (3.3.293-94) because Desdemona “so loves the token” (3.3.294). She decides to have the handkerchief copied so that both Iago and Desdemona will be happy, illustrating how a cherished virtue can turn into a tragic flaw. Emilia is serving two masters. She keeps silent about her knowledge of the handkerchief at Iago’s behest, leading it to be used as false evidence against Desdemona. This action reveals Iago’s machinations in the end, sparing Desdemona her honor and costing Emilia her own life. Desdemona also has divided loyalties, although it doesn’t seem so at first glance. In fact, it seems the exact opposite. Desdemona tells her father, speaking about “a divided duty” (1.3.180), “so much duty as my mother showed you...I may profess due to the Moor” (1.3.185-88). She chooses Othello over her own father, even though it hurts to leave her father. She truly seems to believe that speaking for Cassio is a “profit to [Othello’s] own person” (3.3.80-81). However, it is her loyalty to Cassio that leads to her death. She speaks to Othello for Cassio at every possible occasion, even when it obviously upsets him, because she promised to “perform [the task] to the last article” (3.3.21-22). That promise ultimately proves prophetic.

In the end, Emilia and Desdemona’s loyalty is the one trait they share, and loyalty leads them to the same end.

Megan Caniglia
Theta Beta Chapter
Calhoun Community College

Nightmare at the Bar

Clouds of tobacco smoke fill the air around you, hanging motionless in the stuffy bar as a lower ceiling over the people milling about, talking, drinking, dancing and playing pool. The thump of the music pounds into you like a vibration down to your bones, and after a few seconds your head has begun to beat in time with the bass—one painful throb after another. A man across the crowd, probably twice your age and clearly missing several teeth, is looking your way; when he catches your eyes, he raises one of his eyebrows in a “come hither, pretty thing” gesture. Self-consciously you reach down to check that your tank top has not slipped lower and avert your eyes from his gaze, quelling the gag threatening in the back of your throat.

Your friends are just ahead of you, making their way to the dance floor, chattering away happily, their tongues and hips loosened by the alcohol running through their bodies. The bottles are still in the car—even at a bar like this you would get in trouble for having alcohol as minors—most of them emptied swiftly in the parking lot before we went inside. You are the designated driver—you always are—so you watch, a forced half-smile on your lips, as they down the vodka, beer and rum with silly grins plastered on their faces.

Finally, you make it to the dance floor, which is lower than the rest of the bar—a sunken pit in the center of the building—and find a spot far enough away from the other people that you can stand in a semi-circle and begin to dance. Slowly you move your hips, the only thought coming to your mind is how much of an idiot you must look, and you allow yourself to be twirled and rubbed against as the song plays out. For a brief five seconds when the song ends and the thumping ceases, the only sounds in your ears are the hum of conversation around you and the internal pounding of your heart. Then the speakers blare again, pouring forth some techno-dance song—filled with swearing and offensive phrases—that you would never listen to anywhere but here. And the torture begins again.

Walking in the parking lot, you pull the keys out of your back pocket and squint in the darkness to find the one on the ring that will open the car doors. You reach the parked two-door car and are still searching. One of the other girls leans over your shoulder, flipping open her cell phone to shed some light on you. The glow is faint and bluish, but enough that you see the key you want and separate it from the rest of the mass. Hurriedly, you push it into the lock on the door and twist, the latch inside sliding upwards. The door creaks open and you flop inside, flicking the switch to open the rest of the doors.



There is a moment of silence in the car as the other girls register that their doors have been unlocked, but it is shattered as they pile in, the smell of smoke and alcohol flooding the small space. Closing your door, you roll down your window all the way—even though it is November and freezing outside—and start the car. The engine turns over without protest, the only good thing to happen so far tonight.

Putting the car into reverse, you turn to see four half-veiled faces—expressions heightened by drink and cheeks pink from the heat of the bar—the bodies connected to them slumped against the back seat. One of them leans forward to retrieve the bottles at her feet; smiles coming back to all of their lips again, they pop the proffered drinks open and take a good long swig. Looking over their heads out the back window, you reverse out of the parking spot, switch to drive, and pull out of the lot.

Once you are on the road, headed back for school, the girl in the front seat next to you rolls down her window as well, thrusting her head out the opening. Coming back in for a second so she can turn the radio up—so loud you cannot hear your own thoughts over it—her head juts back out and she proceeds to sing along, her voice cracking and out of tune, piercing the silence of the night. The four in the back soon join her, and you are surrounded by the harsh discords of drunken female voices, the mixed, nauseating stench of alcohol assaulting your nose.

Mentally steadying yourself, you swallow hard and concentrate on the road. Just a few more minutes and you will be back, and you can close the door on all of them for the night.

Once you have made sure that they are all in their beds—propped on their sides to sleep, a glass of water on their nightstands, and offer reassurances that they will feel better in the morning, you finally open the door to your room and disappear inside. Shutting the door, you switch the lock, leaning back against the wood for support; the feeling has suddenly gone out of your legs. Your throat tightens and your eyes cloud over. Gritting your teeth, you fight the tears and anger welling up inside, a growing fountain of bitterness and frustration that grows stronger every week, every day.

The comfort of the bed is only a few feet away, and you half-stumble, half-fall forward into its soft embrace. Lying on your stomach for what seems like hours, your mind goes blank, thoughts forbidden from forming. At two a.m. there are no sounds outside—the only noise is the clunking of the heater pipes as they bring warmth from the boiler to your room. Rolling over, you kick your shoes off, letting them fall wherever they may on the floor; you can pick them up in the morning. Next you push off your jeans, shoving them to the floor with a thrust of your leg. Having no energy to bother with anything else, you drag the covers out from underneath you and crawl into the cocoon of your bed.

Minutes, perhaps seconds, pass and you are asleep. Dead to the world until morning.

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The Waters of Life and Learning

“We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (Twain 88). Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a classic in American literature because of its intriguing and endearing protagonist, Huck Finn. One of the main elements of the novel that gives rise to the identity of this beloved young boy and his adventures is the Mississippi River and all that it represents. Connected strongly to the major characters and themes, the river is a symbol of freedom, but also much more. The river is a world free from Huck’s society; a world where he is able to simply be himself and follow his heart, where Jim, his fellow traveler, is not a piece of property but a human being, and where the people embedded in society and their morals have little to no influence and power.

The presence of the river and its meaning is most closely tied to the character of Huck and his changing and developing identity. A young boy who grew up within the bounds of society, influenced by his father and later by the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, Huck has been taught what it means to be good and “sivilized.” Submerged in the biases and ways of the time and place that he lives, Huck has been socialized as any other child is. Yet while he is on the river, he questions in his heart many of the rules and norms he has been taught from his society. Part of his questioning comes out of the fact that Huck is struggling with the physical, emotional, and hormonal changes of adolescence. The ageless transformation we all must face growing up, as he travels down the river Huck is moving out of the realm of childhood innocence into experience and maturity. One of the most universal questions anyone seeks to answer is the one that is most prominent during this time of life: “Who am I?” Huck strives to find an answer for himself on his journey down the Mississippi. During times in the story where Huck must venture back onto the shore and interact with others of society he takes on different identities, ranging from a girl to even Tom Sawyer. At very few points when Huck is on land is he actually acting as himself—he is always pretending and carefully constructing an image to present to those around him—yet on the river Huck always remains Huck. Because there are no pressures and rules on the river to dictate how Huck must behave and think, he is free to act as his heart and mind direct him. The truest moments of insight into his character can be seen in the little scenes Twain gives us between Huck and Jim when they are alone on the river. “It’s lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened” (90). In these moments, Huck is stable, and the audience can clearly see the changes and



struggles he is going through. The river is essential to this stable identity because if he did not have the experience of being free and then going back into society, Huck would not have the sense of what it means to be acting and to truly be himself, whether he is completely sure of who he is, or not.



Aside from discovering his identity and wading through the changes of adolescence, Huck must also make some important life decisions, the most important of which concerns Jim, the runaway slave. From the members of his society Huck has learned that as a slave Jim belongs to Miss Watson, and that it is his responsibility to enable Miss Watson to retrieve her missing property; by not turning Jim in, Huck is acting as an accomplice to a crime. However, the time for Huck to make this decision about whether to return—betray—Jim or not, comes during their time together on the river. Estranged from the bounds of society, Huck considers what he has been taught and “knows” to be right, but he also listens very strongly to the calling of his heart and own sense of right and wrong. An important scene, which determines the course of Jim’s future in Huck’s hands occurs on the river with Huck sitting alone on the raft contemplating what he should do about Jim. He eventually decides to write a note to Miss Watson telling her Jim’s whereabouts, but as soon as it is written, Huck’s conscience intervenes, and he tears the note up, saying “All right then, I’ll go to hell!” (162). After the note is written, Huck remembers all the good adventures and experiences he has had with Jim; Jim has been his sole true companion on his journey down the river, and here Huck cannot ignore the fact that Jim is his friend and a human being, and because of that he cannot simply send him back to slavery. As a slave in society Jim does not have the power to make others see him as human and equal. While living with the Widow Douglas, Huck might have been persuaded of Jim’s inhumanity, but when he is outside his society, he clearly sees beyond the veil that society throws over Jim’s status to the fact that Jim is as human as he is. Being on the river gives Huck clarity to judge situations and people according to his own heart and beliefs.

As Huck spends more time on the river, experiencing and growing, the influence of society over him wanes. The lack of societal influence on Huck is seen most clearly at the end of the novel in Huck’s final interactions with Tom Sawyer. In this last section, the distinctions between Huck and Tom become very clear. Tom has been a member of society all his life; he understands society’s rules, and even manipulates them to his own fancy when he wants to, but Tom has never experienced the freedom that Huck has when he was on the river. Tom’s decisions are completely guided by what society, and his education, has taught him—he is a representation of societal norms. This contrasts sharply with the sense of right and wrong in Huck, which has bloomed while he was on the river. Although Huck never actually challenges Tom on his thoughts and actions, the audience is given an insight into Huck’s responses to Tom, and it shows that he no longer thinks in the same terms as he did at the beginning of the novel, which would have put him in accord with Tom. Huck does

have the option of following in the path society wants him to, and he does for a time with Tom, but from his journey through freedom he has learned that he does not always agree with that path and where it leads. Interaction with others of society, the people on the shore, is not impossible for Huck, but it has been redefined in his mind's eye, and now he comes to situations in his society with a different viewpoint and set of beliefs.

From his time on the river, Huck is freed from many of the constraints of his society, and learns that he prefers freedom over structure, which is evident in his last words in the book: "But I recon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before" (220). Here the "Territory" stands for the same things that the Mississippi river does— freedom from the pressure of society— and this is something that Huck now craves, and will run away again to possess.

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