



The Problematic Quest for Happiness in the Modern World: A Serresian Reading of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*

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The purpose of this study is to explore Shel Silverstein's complex and highly controversial book *The Giving Tree* from a different lens which incorporates the theories of the contemporary French philosopher Michel Serres. This investigation will highlight that this widely popular tale is not merely a narrative about giving as the title unequivocally implies, but it is also a story about happiness. Indeed, the theme of happiness, which has only been mentioned in passing by researchers such as Richard Neuhaus and Jean Elshtain, appears to be the central focus of this short story for children. Specifically, the progressive disenchantment of the character "Boy" throughout the narrative compels the reader to ponder whether the modern world is conducive to any type of genuine or lasting happiness at all. Moreover, regardless of the debatable intentions of this reclusive author, *The Giving Tree* is a poignant representation of the parasitic relationship that the alienated modern subject has with the remainder of the biosphere which provides sustenance to all of the earth's sentient and non-sentient beings. The utter disillusionment of the protagonist later in life [1] after a seemingly pleasant childhood also causes the reader to question the hollow virtues of consumerism that are allegedly supposed to maximize one's happiness.

Carolyn Brodie reveals that before being published in 1964, *The Giving Tree* was initially "rejected by publishers because of concerns that it fell somewhere between children and adults' literature" (22). Although this narrative clearly "provokes quite contrary interpretations" amongst the general public and in literary circles, it has a considerable amount of depth which immediately strikes an adult reader (May, 36). The stark, destabilizing realism of certain passages and illustrations is reminiscent of a European fairy tale. As the male protagonist grows up passing through all of the various stages of human life, it is evident that there is nothing "Disney-esque" about *The Giving Tree*. In other words, no one doubts that Silverstein's work has a considerable amount of substance. However, several scholars are concerned, sometimes even perplexed, about the messages that the author is trying to convey to young, impressionable readers.

In numerous publications partly dedicated to the contentious subject of intentionality in Silverstein's cartoons, poetry, songs, plays, and children's fiction, Joseph Thomas underscores the importance of the enigmatic, eccentric, and befuddling persona "Uncle Shelby." Thomas notes that much of what we know about this mysterious author who deliberately chose to stay out of the limelight has been inferred from this unreliable source. During his time as a cartoonist for *Playboy* magazine in the early stages of his



career, Silverstein begins to develop this raucous persona and to hide behind it. Thomas asserts that "Uncle Shelby" would continue to appear all throughout Silverstein's oeuvre. As Thomas explains, "This somewhat perverse Uncle Shelby persona does rear its ugly (and outrageously funny and bald) head in his children's work, despite his editors' best efforts" ("Reappraising Uncle Shelby" 292). Similar to a Dadaist, the author employs this absurd persona to engage in extreme forms of artistic experimentation that defy literary conventions, to play with the reader, and to mislead people rather deliberately who wanted to know more about his private life in infrequent interviews. Outlining the subversive nature of Silverstein's work, especially his absurdist plays, that recalls the counter-hegemonic Dadaist movement, Thomas posits, "Silverstein's anti-art stance places him squarely in the Dadaist tradition. Like the Dadaists, he revels in contradiction. His loose, accentual meter is used in the service of nonsense ("Reappraising Uncle Shelby" 289). Thomas affirms that it is nearly impossible to ascertain with any kind of certainty the main ideas that the author is trying to express in any of his writings. Even Silverstein's less experimental texts are riddled with apparent paradoxes and outright contradictions designed to challenge and frustrate the reader. Furthermore, the author's epitextual comments are so contradictory, nonsensical, and opaque that every interpretation is predicated upon a somewhat shaky theoretical foundation. In a testament to how little we know about Silverstein's life or values, it should be noted that even the writer's exact age was a source of confusion when he died in 1999 (Thomas "Reappraising Uncle Shelby" 286).

In spite of this ambivalence which implores fans, detractors, and literary theorists to avoid definitive affirmations, feminist and eco-feminist readings of *The Giving Tree* tend to be scathing in nature. Some researchers are deeply troubled by the one-sided, exploitative relationship between the "Boy" and the tree, gendered as female in the text. In the context of teaching children's fiction at the university level, Larry Juchartz asserts that the insertion of Silverstein's most famous work into his course "generated much vehement anger from students of both sexes for its utter exploitation of the woman (tree) by the man (the boy who allegedly 'loves' her)" (339). These kinds of harsh criticisms of the text are not limited to the confines of academia. Some lay readers have even labeled *The Giving Tree* as a "vicious book" about incessant taking and giving nothing in return which ultimately leads to narcissism, self-effacement, and oblivion (Elshtain 44). In this vein, the interview with the publisher Phyllis Fogelman conducted by Leonard Marcus is extremely revealing. In this conversation, Fogelman expresses a profound sense of regret for having played a small part in the publication of *The Giving Tree* during her time at HarperCollins. As the publisher explains, "I must add that ever since then I have had qualms about my part in the publication of *The Giving Tree*, which conveys a message with which I don't agree. I think it is basically a book about a sadomasochistic relationship and that it elevates masochism to the level of a good" (151). Scandals related to *The Giving Tree* have also been fueled by the aforementioned private nature of the author himself. Walter Strandburg and Norma Livo note that, in addition to rarely granting interviews, Silverstein even instructed his publisher not to release any autobiographical information to the general public (17). In the absence of epitextual evidence, researchers and casual readers alike are left to speculate regarding the author's precise motivations. Furthermore, the ambivalent nature of numerous passages has resulted in the creation of a literary work that is open to many divergent interpretations.

Instead of revisiting these well-documented and often polemical arguments in greater detail, this essay analyzes the narrative from a different angle. As opposed to theorizing about what *The Giving Tree* suggests about friendship, love, generosity, selfishness, and selflessness, this investigation probes the problematic quest for happiness in the modern world. In the beginning of this short story, it is obvious that the boy is happy. His friend the tree is identified as being the source of this unbridled joy. In addition to the statement "And the boy loved the tree...very much," Silverstein's illustrations give us little reason to doubt the boy's inner state of contentment or his deep affective bond with the tree (n.p.). [2] Whenever he spends time with the apple tree, the protagonist is constantly smiling according to the images which are just as important as the text itself (Decter 38). In one particular illustration, the smiling boy is running as fast as he can to see his companion. In another picture, the protagonist hugs his playmate affectionately. Based on the written text and the accompanying sketches, it could be surmised that "Boy" tries to spend nearly every waking moment with his friend in the early years of his childhood. As a very young child, "Boy" leads a fulfilling and meaningful existence because he is able to appreciate the simple pleasures of life. Furthermore, in the first half of the narrative, "Boy" wants to taste, touch, feel, smell, hear, and feel everything that life has to offer because he possesses a strong



sense of wonder associated with childhood. The direct, sensorial connection that “Boy” establishes with the tree by climbing it, swinging from its branches, and eating its apples triggers intense moments of elemental euphoria. In ecocritical or ecophilosophical terms, having a primordial relationship with other forms of matter is what seems to render this young boy happy.

The theories of the French philosopher of science and encyclopedic epistemologist [3] Michel Serres could help shed some light on “Boy’s” gradual descent from bliss to misery. Before attempting to ascertain why the protagonist becomes so dissatisfied with his life later in the text, it is crucial to pinpoint the early origins of his happiness. Serres’s complex, interdisciplinary philosophy offers a possible theoretical framework for understanding why the tree fills “Boy’s” life with so much joy in the early years. For Serres, the true roots of happiness are cosmic in an interconnected and interdependent universe to which everything is inextricably linked. In Serres’s philosophy and fiction, exploring the myriad of threads that connect our species to the larger web of life induces powerful instants of pure elation. As Brian O’Keeffe underscores, “There is an ecstasy to being in relation, a joy to be had in contemplating the magic of relations” (28). From a Serresian perspective, perhaps the aforementioned wonder or “magic” is a reflection of having a close connection to other material entities that are part of the same Chain of Being. “Boy” intuitively realizes that he belongs to something (i.e. the cosmic whole) much larger than himself. A sensual bond with the tree fosters the enigmatic jubilation that permeates “Boy.” This pleasure is linked to a form of self-realization that the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss would describe as becoming attuned to our “ecological self” (22).

In his recent work *Biogée*, which unapologetically transcends genres and disciplines blending philosophy, literature, mythology, and science, Serres focuses on the theme of happiness. As the philosopher himself explains on the program *Dialogues littéraires*, “Biogée est un livre de joie, il n’y a pas de doutes” / ‘Biogée is a book of joy, there are no doubts’ (n.p.; my trans.). At the end of this philosophical and lyrical essay, Serres links all of the seemingly disparate elements that comprise this text together. In the final pages, Serres’s vision of what renders a subject connected to a larger object (e.g. the biosphere) content crystallizes. Directly associating the timeless quest for happiness to having an intimate rapport with the “eternal” cosmic forces that predate humankind by billions of years, the narrator muses,

“Tourbillonnant tous deux, le monde et moi nous connections, en hélices visées l’une en l’autre, à l’ouvert de la fenêtre [...] Mêlée à la perfection de l’Univers, mon âme neuve n’a plus taille ni âge. Immense comme l’espace, elle dure [...] plus que la durée [...] Tout est joie [...] Je chante mon âme qui se dilate, aussi grande que celle de la Biogée joie” / ‘Both swirling about, the world and I are connected one in the other in spirals, by the open window [...] Mingled with the perfection of the Universe, my brand new soul no longer has any size or age. Immense like space, it lasts [...] longer than any duration [...] Everything is joy [...] I am singing from my dilating soul, that is as large as that of Biogée joy.’ (159-160; my trans.)

Although the Serresian narrator of *Biogée* is more descriptive and overtly sensual than Silverstein in *The Giving Tree*, the elemental contact which actuates the intoxication that “Boy” feels when nothing separates him from “tree” is the same. For this reason, regardless of the author’s unclear motivations for writing this children’s classic that lines millions of book shelves, a close reading of the text itself suggests that the origins of happiness are cosmic as well.

Serres’s philosophy also offers a plausible explanation for one of the enduring questions that torments the reader long after having finished *The Giving Tree*. During the rather melancholic second half of the book, the reader tries to understand what happened to this boy who was once happy. From a Serresian standpoint, the source of the protagonist’s anguish as an adult appears to be cosmic alienation. According to Serres, the modern lifestyle is not conducive to happiness, given that nearly all of our experiences are now filtered through sterile environments where everything is artificial, including light and the air we breathe. Numerous critics, including William Paulson, Marjorie Perloff, Marcel Hénaff, and Philipp Schweighauser have highlighted the philosopher’s concerns related to excessive globalization and rapid urbanization.

Throughout his oeuvre, Serres posits that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find an authentic privileged space that has not been radically transformed by a heavy human footprint. Incessantly traveling from one edifice of wood, brick, concrete, or steel to another, the philosopher decries the nefarious effects of living entirely in a sort of cosmic bubble completely severed from the rest of the biotic



community of life. Asserting that it is impossible to be happy or to have any sense of ontological purpose when we no longer know what and who we are due to this ecological disconnection, Serres laments, "Nous sommes tous devenus des astronautes, entièrement déterritorialisés: non point comme autrefois un étranger pouvait l'être à l'étranger, mais par rapport à la Terre de tous les hommes ensemble" / 'We have all become astronauts, completely deterritorialized: not as in the past a foreigner could be when abroad, but with respect to the Earth of all humankind' (Le Contrat Naturel 185; 120). For Serres, this total cosmic isolation which is emblematic of modernity prevents the aforementioned elemental euphoria from taking place. In essence, we have uprooted ourselves from the greatest source of happiness.

Nonetheless, Serres does offer a pragmatic ontological remedy for healing this literal and figurative schism. Despite his disquieting anxiety regarding unfettered urbanization, which is palpable in many works such as *La Légende des anges*, the philosopher maintains that the harmonious sensorial unions that he describes in *Biogée* are still possible even in the current era of globalization. However, the modern subject must make more of a concerted effort to (re)-establish a connection with the earth. In this regard, Serres states during an interview, "il faut marcher deux heures par jour" / 'it is necessary to walk for two hours a day' (Zimmerman n.p.; my trans.). In comparison to our human predecessors who lived in a very different world before the rural exodus, Serres affirms that we must momentarily remove ourselves from the ubiquitous human artifice that surrounds us in order to experience material reality more fully. The goal of this simple philosophical exercise is to rediscover oneself in the world of things to which everything is bound. Serres contends that this epistemological quest is inseparable from the search for happiness.

In *The Giving Tree*, we do not know exactly what the "boy" does during the long periods of absence in which he is away from the tree. Nevertheless, the reader gets the impression that the protagonist does not have any more non-human friends as an adult. This cosmic isolation could explain the dark turn noted by Richard Neuhaus in his analysis of the text. Even though the narrative does not explicitly identify the root causes of "Boy's" sadness, the reader can logically surmise what the problem might be based upon his earlier state of mind as a child. When he was a young boy, the protagonist appreciated the inherent beauty of the cosmos. This splendor was undoubtedly a source of immense pleasure for "Boy." The tree, which is a metaphor for the biosphere itself, gradually lost its luster as the protagonist became desensitized to the intrinsic value of other life forms. "Boy's" (mis-) treatment of the tree, which he reduces to a stump or a shell of its former self, confirms that he has internalized the dominant ideology of Western society to such an extent that other material beings have only instrumental importance. If this is how the protagonist relates to his closest non-human friend, then the reader wonders how much respect he has for the remainder of the cosmic threads which sustain his existence.

Yet, as Timothy Jackson reminds us, the reader should be careful to not criticize the protagonist himself too harshly in spite of his evident faults (43). Although "Boy's" appropriation of the tree to fulfill all of his wants and desires is misguided, it is not because of any intentional malice that he destroys this organism. The protagonist does not seem to be a mean, heartless person. "Boy's" irresponsible and disturbing behavior could be interpreted as a symptom of a larger social problem. Although modern science emphasizes principles of interconnectedness and interdependency that apply to homo sapiens as well, the appropriate relationship between our species and the other links in the Chain of Being is still framed in strictly anthropocentric and utilitarian terms in Western civilization.

Thus, instead of judging the boy himself, it would be more useful to condemn the homocentric delusions of grandeur upon which his society is predicated. From birth, children in Western society as a whole are indoctrinated to conceive the species of which they are a member as the center of the universe. According to this pervasive logic which has been thoroughly debunked by contemporary scientists, other material entities only exist for the sole purpose of making our lives more comfortable and enjoyable. As an adult, "Boy" still cares deeply for the tree, but this dominant anthropocentric discourse causes him to treat his friend like an expendable commodity. This homocentric mentality explains why "the tree was happy...but not really" after being virtually relegated to the status of non-existence (n.p.). William May observes that the tree's demise at the hands of the protagonist is "ominously foretold, when, early on, the boy gathers leaves and weaves them into a crown and struts about playing king of the forest, his nose lifted high in the air" (36). In *The Giving Tree*, as opposed to enhancing his appreciation of existence, this incessant, anthropocentric exploitation of anything and everything around him deprives the protagonist of experiencing the happiness that he once knew. After



the revealing statement "but time went by," "Boy's" relationship with the tree will never be the same. As an adult, "Boy" no longer marvels at the inherent cosmic beauty around him of which he is a small part. Human society has conditioned him to devalorize the so-called "world of things" to which he belongs. In reference to these lost ecological sensibilities in Western civilization, the renowned French physicist and philosopher Gérard Gouesbet explains that this "regard lumineux de l'enfant" 'luminous gaze of a child' is progressively withered away by the dominant values that undergird modernity (*Violences de la nature* 28; my translation.) For this reason, the protagonist will no longer smile in the illustrations because "All in all, the boy's life was not a happy life, it seems" (Neuhaus 45). By his own admission, "Boy" is "too busy" playing the role of master of the universe and society's game to be happy (n.p.). The protagonist has forgotten the most important philosophical concept of all: the pursuit of happiness.

In the second half of the narrative, every time that the tree gives the protagonist something she prophetically declares "[...] and be happy." Coupled with the aforementioned illustrations, what "tree" is trying to imply is rather transparent. The tree knows that the path that the protagonist has chosen has yet to lead to any kind of genuine happiness. Additionally, unless the protagonist changes his life radically, then his future looks rather bleak. "Boy" will ultimately squander his ephemeral existence on this planet because he refuses to heed his friend's advice. After the tree urges the protagonist to spend a few moments enjoying her company as in the past ("Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy"), Boy's response "I am too big to climb and play" is a harbinger of the existential suffering that he will continue to endure. From a Serresian point of view, the boy does not make enough of an effort as an adult to remove himself temporarily from all of the artifice that modern society has created to maximize comfort and protect us from the fury of the elements. For long stretches of time, probably even years according to the text and accompanying images, "Boy" abandons the greatest source of happiness that he has ever known. On a metaphorical level, the protagonist leads a wretched, mundane existence given that he is detached from his cosmic roots. Even if Silverstein originally intended to validate anthropocentric, utilitarian logic as Mary Glendon speculates in her interpretation of this complicated text, the actual narrative itself seems to convey the opposite message (39). By examining why the protagonist is filled with such an insatiable *joie de vivre* as a young boy, it becomes apparent to the reader how things have gone so terribly awry later in life. The ontological void from which "Boy" suffers is a concrete example of the searing existential pain inflicted by cosmic alienation. From a Serresian perspective, he relinquishes a way of being in the world that used to render him happy. This is what eventually happens to nearly all Western children because of deleterious social programming that has been demystified by contemporary scientific discoveries. As an adult, the protagonist is no longer able to project meaning upon his absurd existence because he has lost a vital part of himself that he never recovers. In simple terms, "Boy" is discontent given that he has discarded an ontological remedy for the human condition that actually worked.

In addition to the fact that the protagonist initially appears to have a meaningful life because of his direct, sensorial relationship with the biosphere, the empty ideology of consumerism clearly erodes the quality of his existence as an adult. In contemporary Western civilization, children are constantly bombarded by the omnipresent nature of commercial signs which incessantly beckon them to consume their way to happiness. In other words, the all-encompassing doctrine/religion of consumerism creates an automatic association between the endless acquisition of material goods and happiness. Espousing similar philosophical convictions as Jean Baudrillard, Serres denounces the steady brainwashing which trains children to become "consumer citizens" for whom a sense of ontological purpose and fulfillment are tied to compulsive and irrational consumption. As William Paulson notes, Serres deconstructs "an economic logic" that conceives "children themselves as consumers for entertainments that direct their desires toward material possessions and sensational simulacra. Maybe Serres's utopia is simply this: a society in which children are raised to encounter the beauty, variety, and constraint of the world [...]" (224). The philosopher's theories related to consumerism could offer a cogent explanation for the social dystopia experienced by "Boy" in *The Giving Tree*.

Perhaps it is not by accident that the protagonist discovers a powerful form of elemental joy as a child on the periphery of society. Even as a young boy, the protagonist is content when he escapes modernity. Silverstein does not provide a single example of anything related to the modern world that results in any form of self-actualization or an appreciation of one's existence. The narrative itself offers clues as to why the boy is happy away from society. From a Serresian angle, the "soft pollution" or the idealistic simulations of a good(s) life that has been allegedly placed at everyone's fingertips by an array of useful



products and services could be the heart of the protagonist's later existential crisis. For Baudrillard and Serres, the problem with consumerist simulacra is that they derive their seductive force from a fantasy structure that depicts a utopian realm that has never truly existed anywhere with the exception of a TV, computer, smart phone, or tablet screen. The gap between the alluring image and the banal reality of the purchase itself is so great that marketers are selling inaccessible and chimerical pipe dreams to the masses. Serres's disdain for exploitative marketing techniques which disseminate the ideology of consumerism is clear in *Le Mal Propre*. In this provocative text, Serres refers to contemporary marketers as "putains" / 'whores' who are guilty of "prostituting" a meaningless and contrived image in the Baudrillardian sense (5; my trans.).

In *Biog ee*, Serres further explains what he means when he discusses the ideological effects of "soft pollution." In the larger context of information theory, Serres voices his concerns about "l'information, que je viens de dire douce, aux appels, aux signes, au langage [...] Ainsi les publicit es, images et mots [...] Toile, m dias...machines   fabriquer l'invasion" / 'information, that I just called soft, calls, signs, language [...] in addition to commercials, images and words [...] the web, the media...machines which facilitate invasion' (95-96; my trans.). In an era of globalization, the vast majority of our experiences are now filtered through screens. According to Serres, this plethora of screens is the ideal medium for transmitting the ideology of consumerism. Even though certain devices did not exist when Silverstein wrote *The Giving Tree*, transnational corporations had plenty of hegemonic devices at their disposal for manipulating clients and fabricating false needs. Radio, television, newspapers, and billboards had ensured that there could be no reprieve from the onslaught of images which endlessly broadcast the same message: thou shalt consume. When Silverstein published *The Giving Tree*, consumer republics (a term coined by the historian Lizabeth Cohen) were already a reality.

Even though Joseph Thomas clearly problematizes thematic readings of the author's works that do not take into account the previously mentioned paradoxes and blatant contradictions, he also insists that Silverstein often posed disconcerting questions about the catastrophic repercussions of frivolous consumption under the veil of satire. As Thomas reveals, "Just as *Playboy* used Silverstein to increase their cultural cache, Silverstein used them as a forum for speaking out against the playboy lifestyle, for speaking out against the life of material excess and conspicuous consumption; he used the very character-Uncle Shelby-that Hefner helped develop to criticize the problematic consumerism encourages in *Playboy's* pages" ("A Speculative Account" 39). Nothing that Silverstein uttered or wrote should ever be taken at face value, but Thomas compellingly theorizes that the writer seems to have been legitimately concerned about the negative facets of consumer culture. Despite the sometimes bawdy humor that obfuscates Silverstein's subversive, anti-materialistic convictions, Thomas speculates that the author's apprehension related to excessive consumption is palpable. In this vein, Thomas highlights that Silverstein is loosely associated with the Beat generation ("A Speculative Account" 27). As John Tytell explores in his analysis of the aims of this countercultural revolution, one of the most important values that united "beatniks" all around the world was their rejection of "postwar materialism" (308). The Beats were staunchly individualistic and extremely diverse, but they all articulated a common fear about the omnipresence of commercial simulacra and consumerist virtues in general.

In *The Giving Tree*, the protagonist appears to make the fateful mistake of confusing signs of happiness with actual contentment. One particular exchange with the tree reveals that the "Boy" seeks happiness in simulations. As the narrator explains, "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me some money? I'm sorry, said the tree, but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy" (n.p.). If Silverstein were trying to reinforce the prevailing values which undergird Western society including homocentrism and consumerism, then "Boy" should have been happy at some point after all of his "needs" had been met. There is no indication anywhere in the second portion of the narrative that the protagonist ever experienced any kind of bliss or even contentment from rapacious consumption.

As an adult, "Boy" acquiesces to the ubiquitous soft pollution that accosts him from all sides. He will obey the summons to consume until he destroys the tree and effaces his inner self in the process. Serres would describe the protagonist as yet another causality of the "nectar of simulation" (Cline n.p.) that cannot drown out the "static noise" which drives his zeal to consume (Mortley 56). In comparison to Serres, Silverstein is vague regarding the exact nature of the hegemonic forces that control consumer



republics by promoting continuous, impulsive consumption. Nonetheless, "Boy's" behavior is a reflection of the ideology of consumerism and the pathways (i.e. material possessions) that it suggests for enhancing the quality of one's life. If Silverstein wanted to laud anthropocentric exploitation, narcissism, and consumerism, then the final product of his narrative is misleading at best. If the author's intentions were as sinister as some of the previously mentioned critics have asserted, then *The Giving Tree* is a very poorly written story. A critical analysis of both the text and the sketches undermines the main points that Silverstein's many detractors have identified as being the core messages of the book. Silverstein is either a bad writer, or he is asking disconcerting questions about modernity.

The last sentence uttered by the boy "I don't need very much now [...] just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired" seems to be more of an indictment of modernity and consumerist ideology than a euphoric celebration. Similar to Baudrillard, Serres posits that the modern subject now lives in a "Post-Marxist" world where controlling the endless exchange of information is more important than having a stranglehold over the means of production [4]. In a society "where all of the basic needs of the masses have been satisfied," late capitalism suddenly found itself in a state of crisis (Messier 25).

According to Baudrillard, Serres, and other post-Marxist thinkers, commercial signs ensure that the monetary cycle is never interrupted for any reason by assaulting consumer citizens with chimerical representations of happiness. A crucial aspect of this barrage, which begins in childhood, is to blur the distinction between needs and desires. Whereas actual needs are finite, desires are potentially limitless. This excessive consumption strengthens an economic system that depends on constant growth and expansion to survive. In *The Giving Tree*, the protagonist appears to be a victim of simulated reality. In his unending efforts to acquire signs of the good(s) life at all costs, which correspond to fake needs, the protagonist turns away from what made him happy as a child. By equating the fulfillment of needs with the pursuit of material wealth, happiness eludes the protagonist.

The rending final desecration of the tree also seems to suggest that Silverstein was skeptical about modern values associated with the quest for happiness. Bitter and discontent after unsuccessfully attempting to transform consumerist fantasies into reality, the only option left is to flee. As the narrator reveals, "Come, Boy, she whispered. Come and play. I am too old and sad to play, said the boy. I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?" (n.p.). The protagonist's flight from modernity is indicative of escapism. In contrast to the happy years of his childhood before he became inundated with consumerist aspirations, the protagonist's adult life is replete with alienation, existential malaise, and general dissatisfaction. "Boy" does not find any lasting solace or ontological relief from any of the things that modern society literally promotes/sells as sources of happiness.

The bittersweet dénouement provides a faint glimmer of hope that "Boy" has discovered a form of serenity before his imminent death. After allowing the protagonist to cut down her trunk to make the boat, "tree" is sad because she wonders if she will ever see her friend again. Since she no longer has anything else to give in her depleted state, will the boy ever return? Weary due to the effects of old age and a life wasted chasing materialistic chimeras, "Boy" now only wants a tranquil place to spend his last moments before his final resting place. Happy to be reunited with her lifelong companion, who might have finally overcome his consumerist obsessions, tree declares, "well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." In his final days, the text insinuates that the protagonist has stoically accepted his own mortality and made peace with his destiny. Perhaps, "Boy" and "tree" will be able to (re)-establish the same kind of intimate connection that they had before for a few fleeting instants.

Yet, in spite of this cautious optimism, *The Giving Tree* is not a Hollywood fairy tale in which everyone lives happily ever after. Even if the two companions rekindle their friendship, tree will soon be left alone after "Boy's" death. Given that the stump "is in some sense no longer a tree," her identity has been entirely erased (Werpehowski 41). By giving too much to the point of self-destruction, "tree's" ability to lead a meaningful life and her sense of purpose have been taken away. Since a stump is capable of surviving in this decaying condition for years, "Boy" has condemned his friend to suffer for a long period of time. Although "tree" will console the protagonist and help alleviate his physical and cerebral pain during his final days, "tree" appears destined to die alone. Since she barely even exists at all hanging on by a thread, the stump will never have another friend. No other young boy or girl will ever experience the sensorial pleasure of swinging from her branches or partaking of her apples. For all intents and purposes, "tree" is already dead to herself and those around her.



In *The Giving Tree*, the withered stump is a powerful image of sterility that causes the reader to question the myopic rapport that homo sapiens have with the remainder of the planet in the modern world. In addition to the fact that the protagonist’s unrestrained consumption clearly does not make him happy, “Boy’s” ecocidal decisions have rendered it impossible for future generations to enjoy the same elemental euphoria that he did as a child. Not only is this sort of anthropocentric relationship untenable from an ecological perspective, but it is also a salient example of an unsustainable model for happiness. In a universe with limited natural resources that preserve the delicate balance of life, this unreflective behavior could one day reduce everything to rubble, including human beings. Even if this apocalyptic scenario, predicted by all of the world’s leading scientists, does not come to fruition, there will soon be no more natural splendor to experience. Given that a direct, sensorial connection to the biosphere is the only ontological remedy that is effective for the protagonist of *The Giving Tree*, the reader is left to envision a future world without any happiness for children or adults. By unnecessarily removing the tree from this earth and leaving a heavy footprint, “Boy” has further problematized the pursuit of happiness in Western society. Strandburg and Livo assert that Silverstein’s message is that “there is more where that came from” (19). However, the illustrations show nothing but a barren wasteland that remains. If Silverstein intended to justify notions of human centeredness, then the text once again betrays his artistic motivations. The complete absence of life brought about by the protagonist’s homocentric actions is the final enduring image that is engraved in the reader’s memory.

In Serresian terms, “Boy’s” irresponsible parasitism creates a devastating ripple effect on the greater Chain of Being. As numerous scholars including Steve Brown, Brian O’Keeffe, and Julian Yates have underscored, Serres’s theory of the parasite redefines this common term. According to Serres, all living creatures including homo sapiens are parasites given that everything must take from the earth in order to survive. For Serres, the real question is how to be a responsible parasite that does not destroy its host (i.e. the cosmic whole), itself, or future generations. As Serres explains in an interview with Raoul Mortley, “the parasite is a creature which feeds on another, but gives nothing in return. There’s no exchange, no balance sheet to be drawn-up: there’s no reciprocity in the relationship, which is one-dimensional [...] if the parasite eats too much, he’ll kill his host, and it’ll die by the same token” (57). Serres’s multifaceted metaphor is a stern warning of what happens to a parasite after it completely devours its last viable host. Serres’s reappropriation of the word “parasite” perfectly describes the one-sided rapport that “Boy” has with “tree” and the rest of the ecosphere. Several researchers have correctly noted that “tree” is always the one doing the giving. The “boy” never makes an effort to return the favor or to enhance the quality of “tree’s” life through his own generosity. It is tempting to judge the protagonist too severely for his narcissistic parasitism, but “Boy” is once again a microcosmic reflection of Western civilization. This is how our society has been treating the earth since the beginning of the industrial revolution. When the author’s questionable intentions are removed from the equation and we focus solely on the text, *The Giving Tree* is an artistic representation of the potentially lethal perils of unfettered parasitism that is wreaking havoc on the earth and which prevents the modern subject from experiencing true happiness. Moreover, it is evident that “Boy” does care deeply about “tree,” even if many of his actions are misguided, self-destructive, and parasitic in nature. For this reason, *The Giving Tree* is mostly a story about spoiled happiness and losing oneself in an enticing realm of simulacra.

The scholarly community must reengage with Silverstein’s controversial, complex, and ambivalent work *The Giving Tree*. Instead of spending too much time debating the author’s questionable motivations for writing this complicated and often disquieting text, perhaps we should delve further into the narrative itself and the accompanying sketches. Indeed, this exploration has highlighted a theme that has been relatively ignored by previous studies with the noteworthy exception of Thomas Wartenberg’s reflections in *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy Through Children’s Literature*. Nonetheless, more systematic analyses representing multiple perspectives and different theoretical approaches are desperately needed to fill significant research gaps related to this narrative. *The Giving Tree* has been the subject of many polemical scandals for approximately half a century. Silverstein’s classic children’s story will undoubtedly continue to elicit visceral reactions and to provoke anger amongst certain readers in the years to come. However, as this investigation has highlighted, the actual text itself reads like a cautionary tale about the problematic quest for happiness in the modern world.



Notes

1. It could be argued that the tree is the main protagonist. For the purposes of this exploration, I will refer to "Boy" as the protagonist. However, it is evident that the tree is a leading character as well.
 2. The commemorative 1992 edition of the text has no pagination.
 3. In my recent monograph *The Encyclopedic Philosophy of Michel Serres: Writing the Modern World and Anticipating the Future*, I explore Serres's unique conception of philosophy which posits that a philosopher is someone with a vast, interdisciplinary, encyclopedic base of knowledge that allows him or her to predict the future directions that a given phenomenon might assume based upon the current trajectory of humanity.
 4. For instance, in *Le Parasite*, Serres muses, "Bilan, au commencement est la production [...] Encore aimerais-je savoir ce que cela veut dire, produire [...] Notre monde est plein de copistes et répétiteurs, ils les comble de fortune et de gloire [...] La production, sans doute, est rare, elle attire les parasites qui la banalisent tout aussitôt" / 'Appraisal, in the beginning was production [...] I would like to know what production even means [...] Our world is full of copiers and repeaters, they receive fortune and glory [...] Production, undoubtedly, is rare, it attracts parasites that immediately render it banal' (*Le Parasite* 10-11; my trans.).
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