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Lucija Periš
0000-0001-7290-5309
University of Osijek

Reconceptualizing the Ill Body: Laurie Brooks's Jack McCall as the Hero of the Romantic Mode

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Abstract

This chapter considers the idea of illness as depicted in Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* (2019), an adaptation of the short story "Imaginary Friends" (1991), written by Terry Brooks, which illustrates the experience of a teenager, Jack McCall, who is diagnosed with cancer. The plot takes an unexpected turn when, following his diagnosis, the protagonist enters a magical world, a utopia which represents a means of reestablishing his identity and overcoming his fears, including illness. On his journey, Jack encounters mysterious creatures, such as trolls, elves, and ghosts, as well as an evil demon with whom he fights to save the magical realm. The paper employs Northrop Frye's theory of myths established in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* to show that Brooks's play follows six phases of romance: the birth of the hero, the innocent youth, the quest, the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience, an idyllic view of the experience from above, and the end of a movement from active to contemplative adventure. Drawing upon Frye's theoretical reflections, the paper aims to prove that Brooks offers a new paradigm of observing illness by portraying Jack McCall as the hero of the romantic mode, as opposed to earlier stereotypical literary representations of illness which equate the condition with inability.

Keywords: Theory of myths, mythos of summer, romance, *The Secret of Courage*, Laurie Brooks

1. Introduction: Narrating Illness

Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* (2019) is a part of a growing body of American mainstream drama which destigmatizes illness and disrupts the ideal of a healthy body, which emerged at the dawn of industrialization, when humankind was subjected to production standards grounded on "statistical projections of what an average worker should 'normally' accomplish within a given set of parameters" (De Poy and Gilson 23). In a society of evolving market demands, health became a decisive factor in exercising economic and social freedom, a prerequisite for entering the labor market, and an indicator of one's ability to actively participate in society. Ostracism of the ill subject was underpinned by pseudo-scientific premises which associated illness with wickedness. For centuries, poor health had been regarded as a consequence of a moral lapse and "a manifestation of human original sin and individual wrongdoing" (Herndl 774). This fact mirrored in literature, which reinforced the polarization of human bodies into able and disabled, stereotyping the latter as undesirable and the characters who embody afflicted subjects as either villains or victims.[1] In line with the scientific

[1] The centuries-old practice of treating "physical deformity, chronic illness, or any visible defect" as a symbol of "evil and malevolent nature and monstrous behaviour" (Dahl) spawned countless villains within the Western literary canon, such as Shakespeare's Richard of Gloucester (*Richard III*, 1597), Melville's Captain Ahab (*Moby Dick*, 1851), Barrie's Captain Hook (*Peter Pan or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, 1904), or Maugham's Philip Carey (*Of Human Bondage*, 1915). On the other hand, numerous afflicted characters, like Hugo's Quasimodo (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, 1831), Dickens's Timothy Cratchit (*A Christmas Carol*, 1843), Alcott's Beth March (*Little Women*, 1868), and Pomerance's John Merrick (*The Elephant Man*, 1979), were simultaneously portrayed through the lens of martyrdom, which generated the ailed victim trope, equally harmful for people affected by such medical conditions. The polarization of the ailed subject ceased in the second half of the twentieth century, when the focus shifted to protecting the rights of marginalized members of society due to an increase in health problems that followed the Second World War, as evidenced by Dore

progress of the late nineteenth century, notably, the development of the germ theory, which established a link between diseases and pathogens, contemporary narratives discharged the practice of portraying ill subjects as deviant figures, which, on the other hand, gave rise to the trope of "the passive patient attended by the heroic physician" (Herndl 773). In the light of the above, scholarly endeavors have been made to explore the representations of maladies in literature in order to clarify both their metaphoric uses (Sontag 1978; Mitchell 2015; Wohlmann 2022) and their impact on the reader's sense of self and his/her community. Scholars agree that certain ailments still carry a stigma as a result of insufficient medical advances, that is, a partial understanding of the nature of the condition that would provide the patient with effective treatment. For instance, "the fantasies inspired by TB in the last century, by cancer now, are responses to a disease thought to be intractable and capricious—that is, a disease not understood—in an era in which medicine's central premise is that all diseases can be cured" (Sontag 5).

In order to challenge the stigma associated with certain illnesses, this chapter focuses on the unconventional portrayal of illness in Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage*, a dramatization of Terry Brooks's short story *Imaginary Friends* (1991), which tells the story of a teenager diagnosed with acute cancer of the blood and bone marrow. Although writers of commercial fiction have progressively sentimentalized the idea of leukemia by depicting it "as the romantic disease which cuts off a young life" (Sontag 18), Brooks's adaptation calls for a different reading. The play opens with the McCall family gathered at Roosevelt Junior High to celebrate Jack's receipt of the so-called Susan G. Levitt Award for excellence in creative writing, granted annually to the most talented eighth-grader of the generation. The idyll is disrupted following Jack's fourteenth birthday celebration, when the family learns that the boy has leukemia. The plot takes an unexpected turn when, following his

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Schary's *Sunrise at Campobello* (1958), William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1959), and Leonard Gershe's *Butterflies Are Free* (1969).

diagnosis, the protagonist enters a magical forest, a utopian realm in which he discovers his inner strength and reestablishes his identity. On his quest to defeat the illness, Jack demonstrates prodigious feats of bravery and encounters mysterious creatures, such as trolls, elves, and ghosts, including an evil demon with whom he fights to save the enchanted land. Since it illustrates events and characters defying natural laws, *The Secret of Courage* can be regarded as a work of fantasy, a genre which "feature[s] an idealizing quest narrative that often pits the hero against society, and in which his progress is continuously undone by obstacles and delays" (Fuchs 128). Protagonists of this genre are extraordinary individuals of superior power, often stimulated by magic, on a mission to fight evil and protect both their own integrity and that of the community to which they belong. As the supernatural forms its core, fantasy overlaps with other literary traditions, genres, and modes of writing. Contemporary fantasy writing, for example, "preserves many of the appealing surfaces and philosophical depths of the romance tradition while creating new structural and thematic dimensions of its own" (Mathews 472). This paper relies on Northrop Frye's theory of myths to show that Brooks's play mirrors six phases of the mythos of summer: the birth of the hero, the innocent youth, the quest, the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience, an idyllic view of the experience from above, and the end of a movement from active to contemplative adventure. By analyzing *The Secret of Courage* through the lens of Frye's myth theory, the paper aims to prove that Brooks offers a new paradigm of depicting illness by portraying Jack McCall as the hero of the romantic mode, as opposed to the previous stereotypical literary representations of illness which equate the condition with inability.

2. The Mode of Romance

In her book *Romance* (2004), Barbara Fuchs describes romance as "a notoriously slippery category" because critics cannot unanimously agree

whether it is a genre or a mode (1). This paper relies on theoretical reflections of the literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, who in the first essay of his book *Anatomy of Criticism* (2000), titled "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," provides an overview of the categories, or modes, into which literary works are classified, basing his division on "the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less or roughly the same" (Frye 33). Frye's classification of literary modes bears a strong resemblance to Aristotle's canonical dramatic theory elaborated in the *Poetics*, in which the Greek philosopher divided works of fiction into different genres based on the protagonist's virtuousness, claiming that fictions depict characters who are either better, worse, or on the same level as us. Following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Frye established his categorization of narrative modes, basing his division on the hero's power of action rather than a moral paradigm and, accordingly, distinguished myth, romance, the high mimetic mode, the low mimetic mode, and the ironic mode while describing the hero of romance as follows:

> If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. (Frye 33)

The aforementioned modes of narration have varied in popularity throughout history in parallel with the shift of literary epochs, with romance experiencing its expansion during the medieval era in the form of secular chivalric narratives and miracle plays celebrating saintly figures, "both lean[ing] heavily on miraculous violations of natural law for their interest as stories" (Frye 34). Even though the dominance of the romantic mode ceased with the emergence of the Renaissance, when the figure of the courtier was portrayed through the lens of the high mimetic

mode, romance has continued its tradition in an unaltered form until today, without deviating from its original pattern: "Initial equilibrium is shattered by the call to adventure; the hero crosses the threshold into a special world; he or she struggles with various adversaries and problems, and returns to the normal world, more mature and more firmly integrated into his or her society, usually as some kind of leader" (Hume 488). With this premise in mind, the following sub-chapters will try to ascertain that the protagonist of the contemporary drama *The Secret of Courage* is quintessentially a romance hero, "superior in degree" to his environment and The Demon, a wicked, inexorable force residing in the Sinnissippi Park serving as an analogy for a vicious illness that has to be tamed.

As Robert Louis Stevenson suggests in his essay "A Gossip on Romance," romantic formulas seem to run the risk of creating a gap between the reader and the protagonist since, due to the hero's superiority, there is no possibility of complete identification between the two (1925). According to Stevenson, through in-depth reading, the consumer of a literary piece develops a critical attitude and distances him/herself from the characters, growing more aware of the disparity in their degree of power: "Now in character-studies the pleasure that we take is critical; we watch, we approve, we smile at incongruities, we are moved to sudden heats of sympathy with courage, suffering or virtue. But the characters are still themselves, they are not us; the more clearly they are depicted, the more widely do they stand away from us" (113). Despite the disparity between the reader and the romantic hero, the reader is drawn to this type of literature as it often reveals his/her innermost desires or fears. It thus follows that it is not the romantic hero who attracts the reader's attention but the quest around which the piece is centered, an adventure which frequently resembles the realization of the reader's dream: "It is not character but incident that woos us out of our reserve. Something happens as we desire to have it happen to ourselves; some situation, that we have long dallied with in fancy, is realized in the story with enticing and appropriate details" (Stevenson 113). As noted

earlier, fiction of the romantic mode also reveals the other side of the subconscious, including the fears and anxieties agitating the writer and his/her contemporaries, which corresponds to Vladimir Biti's view of literature: "Since literature, even through the play of imagination, must express some experience of reality—otherwise it would be completely incommunicative—the concept of reality must consequently be understood as a common experience, which means that what will be valid as a reality must be established, among other things, precisely by creative imagination" (53, translation my own). For instance, in Brooks's adaptation "the science-fiction images about cancer (a disease that comes from deadly rays, and is treated by deadly rays) echo the collective nightmare" (Sontag 68) as Jack McCall is not merely plagued by the ailment itself but also by the anticipation of the medical treatment he is about to receive and the damage it may cause to his body: "JACK. I keep thinking that if I go into the hospital, it'll be like it was with Uncle Frank. I'll never get out. They'll blast me with chemo and radiation and all my hair will fall out and then I'll die" (Brooks 25).

3. Frye's Taxonomy of Myths and Mythoi

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye aims to systematize the structural principles of the literary canon and provide "a grammar of literary archetypes" (Frye 135) by relying on the pillars of Western heritage, which are Biblical symbolism and mythology. On that account, he establishes a classification of poetic imagery and lists apocalyptic, demonic, and analogical images as three types of images that are alternately employed in the romantic mode, depending on the author's propensities and the requirements imposed by the genre of a literary work in question. Apocalyptic and demonic images represent the dichotomy of the afterlife, reflected in the contrasting worlds of heaven and hell, while analogical imagery "presents a human counterpart of the apocalyptic world which we may call the analogy of innocence" (Frye 151). The latter forms the basis of the romantic mode as it depicts an idealized world

remote from the mundane routines of ordinary life, populated by valiant heroes, charming heroines, devoted helpers, and sinister villains. Notable representatives of such a world are the characters of children, as they embody the virtue of innocence closely associated with romance. Along the same line, the hero of *The Secret of Courage* is a teenager who journeys into the magical realm in order to overcome a health crisis. On his journey, he is joined by guardians from the supernatural sphere, whose task is to preserve the uncorrupted nature of the endangered child. According to Frye, "In the analogy of innocence the divine or spiritual figures are usually parental, wise old men with magical powers . . . or friendly guardian spirits" (151). The figure of the sage protector of innocence in Brooks's play takes the form of enchanted animals, imaginary beings, and anthropomorphic spirits and forces; thus, a barn owl and an elf accompany Jack McCall throughout his quest, even during the transitions between reality and fantasy. In addition, the relationship between human and supernatural beings in romance is reciprocal—in their endeavors, the heroes are assisted by the creatures from the supernatural stratum, who, as the legitimate inhabitants of the world of romance, equip humans traveling through their realm with powers necessary to restore balance and combat the evil forces residing in their kingdom.

Frye's narrative modes significantly differ in terms of their correspondence to real-life events, ranging from completely abstract to pronouncedly realistic ones. For instance, the world of myth is "an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience" (Frye 136), and is thus unattainable by human beings, whilst the low mimetic mode is essentially an artistic mimesis of real life. Frye studies myth within the framework of storytelling and points out that, in a literary narrative, the myth manifests as "the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire" (136). Whilst myth is governed by

metaphorical logic and realism by the principle of verisimilitude, romance represents an in-between category:

> Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean, not the historical mode of the first essay, but the tendency, noted later in the same essay, to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism," to conventionalize content in an idealized direction. The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like. (Frye 136–37)

Frye distinguishes *myth* from *mythos*, a Greek term he appropriated from Aristotle to denote literary formulas or generic plots found in a text. Mythoi are "narrative categories of literature broader than, or logically prior to, the ordinary literary genres" (Frye 162). Since each mythos consists of six phases occurring in a cyclical pattern, Frye describes the aforementioned narrative categories using the analogy to the rotary movement of the divine, fire, human, animal, vegetable, poetic, and water worlds, which unfolds in four phases. Namely, there are four seasons of the year (winter, spring, summer, and autumn), four parts of the day (morning, noon, evening, and night), four types of water movement (rain, fountains, rivers, and sea or snow), four periods of life (youth, maturity, age, and death), and so on (Frye 160). As shown above, knowledge of cosmology is vital for understanding literature since, according to Frye, there is an inherent connection between the natural order of the universe and poetry, meaning that both cosmology and mythology are concerned with the creation of the universe. Since cosmology forms the nucleus of mythopoetic thinking, the previously listed cyclical symbols can as well be interpreted as poetic images. Frye, therefore, establishes a link between the above-mentioned narrative categories and four phases of cyclical movement of the natural world and delineates "four main types of mythical movement": comedy or the mythos of spring, romance or the

mythos of summer, tragedy or the mythos of autumn, as well as irony and satire as the mythoi of winter (Frye 162).

4. *The Secret of Courage* as the Mythos of Summer

The essence of the mythos of summer is a heroic exploit comprised of a series of smaller adventures, indicated by the six autonomous phases of the mode which "form a cyclical sequence in a romantic hero's life" (Frye 198). The initial phase focuses on the myth of the hero's birth, which is typically accompanied by curious events shrouded in secrecy or even the unknown, thus leaving the hero's true ancestry obscured. The young protagonist of romance is, therefore, usually "of mysterious origin, his true paternity is often concealed" (Frye 199). In this regard, Laurie Brooks demonstrates consistency with the mode of romance by simultaneously providing a detailed insight into Jack McCall's life and yet omitting any references to his father. In fictional works that belong to this mode, "the true father is sometimes represented by a wise old man" (Frye 199); likewise, the void created by the absence of the biological father in *The Secret of Courage* is filled by Uncle Frank, who mirrors the paternal figure as he helps both Jack's mother, Amanda, raise the boy and Jack fight the illness. The bond they share becomes evident in the subsequent stages of the play, after Frank's death caused by leukemia, which not only proves that there is "a hereditary factor in cancer" (Sontag 38) but also demonstrates that there is a special nexus between the two since the boy is the only one able to communicate with the spirit of the deceased uncle:

> UNCLE FRANK. It's good to see you.
>
> JACK. But you're. . . .
>
> UNCLE FRANK. Dead? Yep. Couldn't help it, buddy. Don't go thinking I wanted to leave you because I didn't. (Brooks 16)

Set in a pastoral world secluded from the influences of modern civilization, "generally a pleasant wooded landscape, full of glades, shaded

valleys, [and] murmuring brooks" (Frye 200), the second phase of romance dwells upon the idea of innocent youth. The images of bucolic scenery, unspoiled nature, and ethereal atmosphere coincide with the idea of an earthly paradise, i.e., the Garden of Eden, before the Fall as evident from the setting of Brooks's play. The analogy to the Biblical Garden is reflected in a tree that forms the nucleus of the Sinnissippi Park and signifies the dual nature of the tree of life found in the Old Testament, since it is the residence of the initially hidden demon: "The entire space is transformed into the park, using lights, sound, and set pieces. The audience feels as if they are [sic] surrounded by the flora and fauna of the woods. In the space is a massive tree, its branches mottled white as bone, crooked, seemingly dead. . . . Throughout the performance, the low sounds of the park—birds, insects, the wind in the trees—are heard" (Brooks 7). The Arcadian ambience mirrors the carefree childhood and the blithe spirit of the youthful hero and his entourage prior to the assault of the enemy, and it is usually amplified by the impetuses of first love, both friendly and platonic: "The archetype of erotic innocence is less commonly marriage than the kind of 'chaste' love that precedes marriage; the love of brother for sister, or of two boys for each other" (Frye 200). In the light of Frye's considerations, the most prominent exemplar of the innocent love in *The Secret of Courage* is Jack and Waddy's friendship but also Jack's subtle romantic interest in Joanna Farrell. The pastoral phase usually ends with an event that marks a break with an insouciant childhood, which is often anticipated, albeit rather subtly, earlier in the text. The omen, or a portent, is a "device of making a whole story the fulfilment of a prophecy given at the beginning" (Frye 139), and it implies the idea of inevitable fate. The same device is used in *The Secret of Courage* in the scene when, on the day of Uncle Frank's death, Jack experiences a headache and faints after being "distracted by the sound of wings in flight" and "the shadow of a huge owl" (Brooks 10), which foreshadows his later medical condition.

Although the archetypal pastoral phase of romance portrays the hero living in a world of "desirable law" (Frye 200), as evident from Waddy's assertion that his and Jack's priorities are "the important things in life—food, girls, and *Shadow of Darkness*—in that order" (Brooks 24), youthful characters at this stage contemplate the world of lower order, symbolized by the video game *Shadow of Darkness* and role-playing games that foreshadow the quest occurring later in the play: "Waddy grabs Jack's writing award and holds it like a shield. Waddy brandishes Jack's baseball bat like a sword. An imaginary slaughter ensues" (Brooks 21). Since departure into the imaginary realm is often preceded by daydreaming about the world of unconventional order in the safety of one's home, the romantic fiction writer introduces the reader to "a kind of prison-Paradise or unborn world from which the central characters long to escape to a lower world" (Frye 200), which is usually a childhood home. In such a metaphorical dungeon, figurative prisoners are ensured all the comforts but are denied the right to independent decision-making, since the young hero is "still overshadowed by parents" and usually "dominated by his mother" (Frye 200) in this phase. Likewise, after being visited by Dr. Mueller and informed about her son's diagnosis, Jack's mother, Amanda, refuses to tell Jack that he is ill right away with the aim of preserving his innocence, even though this approach is discouraged by the physician: "DR. MUELLER. That's not a good idea. Jack's fourteen now, and kids are smart. They always know more than we think. Best to be straightforward with this kind of information" (Brooks 14).

Since the mode of romance is marked by a perpetually nostalgic mood, the pastoral phase is often recalled as a "lost happy time or Golden Age" (Frye 200) as it addresses the serene period that precedes the complexities of growing up. To emphasize the contrast between the effects of pernicious ailment and the idyllic childhood that preceded it, Brooks interrupts the action of the play with episodes that highlight the most memorable moments from the McCall family's past, indicated by sudden flashes of camera, such as "Jack, holding a plaque" (7), "Jack,

Uncle Frank, and Waddy sing[ing] last lines of 'Happy Birthday' to Jack" (8), and a photo showing "Uncle Frank, Waddy and Jack hav[ing] baseball mits" (9).

According to Frye, the third phase of romance involves the theme of quest, which refers to a number of smaller adventures paving the way for the ultimate or decisive battle. The romance "tends to limit itself to a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story. We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest" (Frye 186–87). Jack's expedition to the enchanted Sinnissippi Park appertains to the romantic quest described by Frye, given that it consists of a series of successful and failed endeavors that lead the hero towards the antagonistic Demon, the most notable one being the pursuit of an owl feather that imparts courage, which demonstrates that "power is the prerequisite of justice" (Frye 201) in the mode of romance. The hero and his enemy usually epitomize the good/evil dichotomy by appearing as two opposite poles of morality. More precisely, the protagonist is ascribed messianic characteristics and the antagonist is vested with demonic features. The hero is "analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world" (Frye 187). Since Frye discusses literature within the framework of cosmology, he points out that the protagonist and the antagonist of romance can be analyzed through the prism of the rotary movement of nature, as the opposite sides of natural cycles: "The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth" (Frye 187–88). Being "young and full of magic" (Brooks 43), Jack McCall can be seen as the personification of virtue, whilst "an evil, unrelenting force" (Brooks 32) such as The Demon incarnates "the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion" (Frye 147). The polarity of the hero

and his enemy is highlighted, however, in the subsequent phase of romance, which portrays the anticipated conflict. Whilst Jack prepares a shield and a sword for the battle, that is, the writing award and the baseball bat Uncle Frank gave him to protect himself, The Demon tries to trick Jack to avoid the fight. He does so by alternating his form and voice in order to resemble people close to Jack: "Its voices constantly change and, during the following, include among anonymous voices, Dr. Mueller, Mom, Waddy, Pick, Uncle Frank and Jack himself" (Brooks 48), telling him he will not succeed.

Cancer imagery has been rather frequently employed in contemporary fiction to express "fairly complex feelings about strength and weakness"; thus, whatever seems "ruthless, implacable, predatory, could be analogized to cancer" (Sontag 61). Just like Jack's illness, "The Demon [symbolizing cancer] has to be locked away, and that takes a special kind of magic" (Brooks 32), a secret indicated in the title of the play. Moreover, the symbolism behind the demonic figure is the uncorseted power of nature superimposed on human beings and manifested in conditions such as illness that, in its more severe form, is beyond human control. As Sontag points out, demonic characters found in fictions can always be interpreted as some kind of overwhelming force: "Cancer was never viewed other than as a scourge; it was, metaphorically, the barbarian within" (16). Just as the scenery in the pastoral phase mirrors the temper of the young hero, so does the setting in the quest phase reflect the enemy that dwells in it. Inhabited by the figure of the tyrant-leader, "the vegetable world [of the demonic realm] is a sinister forest" (Frye 149), which is why Brooks again evokes Biblical references connected to the wasteland to describe the world of lower order controlled by the ignoble Demon. Echoing Frye's observation that "In the Bible the waste land appears in its concrete universal form in the tree of death, the tree of forbidden knowledge in Genesis, the barren fig-tree of the Gospels, and the cross" (Frye 149), the landscape of the Sinnissippi Park during the quest phase is characterized by sparse flora,

uncultivated land, and a barren tree analogous to the tree of death, described in the play with adjectives such as "dead" and "white as bone" (Brooks 51).

According to Frye's typology, characters involved in the romantic hero's ventures are divided into either helpers or detractors, that is, those who are "either for or against the quest" (Frye 195). They are subjected to black and white characterization; namely, the characters helping the hero are idealized and depicted as "as simply gallant or pure," and those hindering the progress of the quest "are caricatured as simply villainous or cowardly" (Frye 195). Besides human helpers, the mode of romance sees supernatural beings as an equally legitimate entourage of the hero, as evidenced by the barn owl Deirdre, the ghost of the Warrior Spirit, and the guardian elf Pick, who prevents the evil troll Wartag from hurting Jack upon his arrival at the enchanted park: "Wartag tries to run, dragging Jack behind him. Pick brings the magic again, stronger, closer. Deirdre screeches. Wartag, wounded, derrière smoking from the lightning strike, drops Jack" (Brooks 29). On the other hand, Deirdre represents a tacit companion, as indicated by the shadow of an owl that accompanies Jack both in the real and the magical world. "The faithful companion or shadow figure of the hero has his opposite in the traitor" (Frye 196), a moral antithesis to the guardian figures represented by the sinister troll Wartag, who wants to set The Demon free. During the quest phase, characters who support but do not actively participate in the quest also emerge, usually in the form of an "old wise man . . . who affects the action he watches over" (Frye 195). In Brooks's play, this character is represented by Uncle Frank, who supports Jack during his ventures with words of encouragement: "JACK. Uncle Frank? Is there some way you could look after Mom for me if . . . you know . . . she doesn't have anybody else. I don't want her to be alone. / UNCLE FRANK. She won't need me because you'll be there" (Brooks 47–48). This dialogue demonstrates that the figure of the old sage, who most often appears in masculine form, has a feminine equivalent in "the sibylline wise mother-

figure . . . who sits quietly at home waiting for the hero to finish his wanderings and come back to her" (Frye 195). In *The Secret of Courage*, this figure is embodied by Jack's mother, Amanda.

The fourth phase of romance includes the defense of the hero's integrity, and it builds on the preceding phase as it begins only after the hero has successfully completed the quest for "an owl feather [which] brings courage to its owner" (Brooks 36) and enables him to consolidate his heroic status. Since the underlying theme of this phase is that of "the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience" (Frye 201), the play takes shape of a moral allegory as it resembles a test of moral endurance with a subtle lesson in ethical values. The body to be safeguarded against the sinister figure can be "individual or social" (Frye 201) or, in this case, both, since Jack physically defends not only himself in the duel with The Demon but also common virtues of all children, such as youth and innocence, which are threatened by the lethal force. Metaphorically, The Demon symbolizing cancer can be observed as a force assaulting an entire collective body, which is the youth, "since this form of leukemia is often found in children and young adults like Jack" (Brooks 14).

This phase is the key part of romance as it focuses on the combat itself; everything that precedes it is the preparation for the battle that unfolds, and the phases that follow are merely a recognition of the hero for his accomplishments. The decisive battle, that is, the conflict that takes place in this phase of romance is called "*agon*," and it usually ends with "*the pathos* or death-struggle" (Frye 187),[2] a physical fight between the hero and the enemy which ends with the death of either the hero or

[2] The Greek term *pathos* was also used by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* but with a different meaning, as a mode of rhetorical persuasion which, together with *êthos* and *logos*, forms a triad of artistic proofs. According to Aristotle, a speech consists of three elements: the speaker, the subject addressed, and the audience, and "each provides a distinct means of persuasion or sources of belief" (Aristotle xlix). *Êthos* is a Greek term employed by the philosopher to denote a persuasive technique based on the character or credibility of the speaker, *logos* on the reasoning or logic behind the argument, and *pathos* on the emotions of the audience (Aristotle 190).

the leviathan: "Jack swings the sword, working to force The Demon back into his prison. Finally, Jack swings his sword in a mighty arc, and The Demon disappears into the huge tree. Lights and sound climax. There is an awful scream and the voices are silent" (Brooks 51). Although the decisive battle in the mode of romance occasionally ends with the hero's death, it is always marked by the victory of moral virtue represented by the hero. The fight depicted in *The Secret of Courage* ends in favor of the protagonist, and the successful conclusion of the battle restores balance to the magical world, as seen in the vegetation that again "glows" and "pulsates" (Brooks 51). Furthermore, the hero of romance is often rewarded. Whilst in secular narratives the reward for a successful quest is usually material and palpable, "in mythopoeic romance [the reward] often means wealth in its ideal forms, power and wisdom" (Frye 193), or, in this particular instance, determination and resilience acquired as a result of virtuous conduct, as demonstrated by Jack's words: "I'm not going to give up without a fight. And I can win" (Brooks 52).

The image of a battlefield is often evoked in fictions dealing with subjects afflicted by cancer. Due to the resistance that is attributed to it, the malignant illness is often accompanied by the usage of military terminology and the jargon of warfare, and, as Sontag contends, "With the patient's body considered to be under attack ('invasion'), the only treatment is counterattack" (54). In the same vein, Brooks's play centers on the fight between the ailing hero, referred to as "the young warrior" (Brooks 33), and the demonic figure embodying the malady. The Demon is hidden in the tree, sometimes hiding and sometimes showing, indicating the volatility of the illness, its remission and reoccurrence. Consequently, after the battle with the monstrous villain, in Waddy's eyes, Jack conjures up the image of a hero returning from battle: "JACK. My head. I feel like I've been hit by a truck. / WADDY. You look like you just fought a war" (Brooks 51).

The fifth or the penultimate phase of romance is envisioned as a "reflective, idyllic view of experience from above" during which the

romantic passenger returns to his original habitat and receives recognition for his triumph over the barbarous world, whilst the sixth or the *penseroso* phase signifies the completion of the cyclical movement followed by the hero brooding over the previously experienced events and, eventually, detaching himself from the experience (Frye 202). Since the protagonist of *The Secret of Courage* "falls, unconscious" (Brooks 51) immediately after killing the demonic figure, which implies the end of his journey and a return to the world of natural order, the fifth and the sixth phase in the play are somewhat intertwined. The fifth phase in Frye's mythos of summer, called "*anagnorisis* or discovery," includes the exaltation of the hero, which often implies social recognition (Frye 187). However, in Brooks's play, it is Jack himself who recognizes his newly acquired courage that will help him fight the illness: "JACK. Pick. I've got to tell him. I did it, Waddy. Pick said I had the magic inside me, but I didn't believe him until I fought The Demon, well, I had to" (Brooks 51). A successfully completed adventure evokes an atmosphere significantly different from that described in the previous two phases. The mood that emerges is similar to that described in the pastoral phase, except that it is "a contemplative withdrawal from or sequel to action rather than a youthful preparation for it" (Frye 202). Although the fifth phase marks the end of adventure, it does not mark the end of the overall movement within the romance. This phase is characterized by a return to the world of natural order; namely, the transition occurs "from a lower world of confusion to an upper world of order" (Frye 184), as indicated by Jack and Waddy's decision to refocus on their earlier priorities, which are "girls, food, and *Shadow of Darkness*" (Brooks 53).

The sixth or the final phase of romance signifies the end of the romantic hero's journey, and it is marked by a significantly changed view on the experienced adventure, which is no longer an active endeavor but merely a theme that inspires stories; therefore, "a characteristic feature of this phase is the tale in quotation marks" (Frye 202). As the play progresses towards the end, the young hero finds himself back in the

family home and tells his friend, Waddy, the story of his journey to the Sinnissippi Park: "JACK. Remember? Wartag captured you, and Pick drove him away, and then The Demon said, 'I'll destroy you both!'" (Brooks 52). The heroic exploit, that is, the adventure, in this phase becomes a hazy memory that slowly fades as the hero and his friend, Waddy, return to their usual activities.

5. Conclusion

On a final note, the analysis of Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* demonstrates that the twenty-first century represents a turning point in challenging the cancer-related stigma. In order to de-mythicize the existing cultural notions of illness and convey her fourteen-year-old protagonist's unconventional fight against leukemia, Laurie Brooks opts for fantasy, a genre of fiction with a salient tendency to the romantic mode. *The Secret of Courage* thus focuses on the quest of a teenager who is determined to find the titular secret that will help him overcome a formidable episode of illness. The play's affiliation to the fantastic mode is most evident in the adventure it depicts, which lies on the border between dream and reality.

Brooks's dramatization consistently follows six phases of the mythos of summer outlined by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*—the birth of the hero, the innocent youth, the quest, the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience, an idyllic view of the experience from above, and the end of a movement from an active to a contemplative adventure. According to Frye's theory of romance, the hero's origin remains unknown and mysterious until the end. Likewise, even though Brooks's play depicts the McCalls as a close-knit family, the identity of Jack's father remains obscured. In line with Frye's concept, the plot of *The Secret of Courage* is initially set in a pastoral, Arcadian landscape that abounds in various plant and animal species whose viability is threatened by the evil Demon hidden in the magical realm. The pastoral phase is interrupted by news of the boy's illness. Thus, the play moves

into the third phase, the quest, which includes a series of smaller adventures that lead the hero towards his ultimate goal—the antagonistic Demon who personifies the relentless malady. The end of the quest involves a fight with the antagonist, which represents the defense of the integrity of the children's world against the onslaught of the antagonist. The fifth phase follows the successful completion of the quest and is characterized by a transition from the fantastic to the real world. It implies a retrospective contemplation on the previously experienced adventure, a celebration of the victory over the antagonist, and the restoration of the pastoral atmosphere described in the second phase. The sixth phase marks the end of the movement and depicts Jack McCall at home, preoccupied with mundane worries, which indicates the completion of the cyclical movement and romance coming full circle.

Moving beyond the stereotypical imagery associated with cancer, which for centuries labeled cancer patients as fragile, passive, and powerless, *The Secret of Courage* demonstrates that literature dealing with illness can significantly increase the visibility of ill-affected individuals and help destigmatize medical conditions that are still considered taboo. Applying Northrop Frye's idea of the romantic hero to Jack McCall, a boy battling leukemia, this analysis intended to prove that the potential to redefine the identity of ailing subjects is invested in both fiction and scholarly literature. Considering that literary representations of illness remain understudied, this work also hopes to pave the way for further research on this topic within the framework of literary studies that would contribute to changing the existing perceptions of ill bodies.

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