ABSTRACT

PIVER, COURTNEY LORRAINE. More Than One Shape: Unity Among Fred Chappell’s Varied Literary Works. (Under the direction of Michael Grimwood.)

The purpose of the research has been to develop a theory of unity between Fred Chappell’s prose and poetry. His works thematically range from Southern gothic, regional Appalachian, magical realist, and science fiction. One application of this theory of unity has been explored through the idea of a common heroic character. Another application of this theory of unity has been explored through the reliance on fantasy during the hero’s journey in the search for truth. But there is a danger in fictive realities – they can both hinder and help the hero reach his goal. Ultimately Chappell’s more regional works predominately use fantasy to allow a protagonist to gain truth in self-knowledge while his more gothic and science fiction works tend to use fantasy in order to lead the hero away from truth.
MORE THAN ONE SHAPE: UNITY AMONG FRED CHAPPELL’S VARIED LITERARY WORKS

by

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Biography

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Introduction

Usually an author’s reputation is based on his or her accomplishments as a writer in a certain literary genre. Yet when a writer’s efforts equally span multiple genres, his or her reputation is harder to establish, given the structural diversity of literature. This difficulty presents itself in the case of Fred Chappell, who has written novels, short stories, and poetry. The purpose of this thesis is to find the unifying elements that connect Chappell’s genres. Since Chappell is recognized in numerous ways – as a Southern Appalachian fiction writer, as a science-fiction and fantasy writer, as an Appalachian folk poet, and as an arabesque artist – labeling him as one type of author is too limiting. Occasionally critics identify Chappell as an author in some combination of those categories, perhaps even noting that his writing is “marvelously diverse” (Lang 140).

Many readers recognize Chappell as a regional novelist and poet who writes primarily about Southern mountain folklore and good ol’ boys. For example, the entry for Chappell in the 1994 issue of Contemporary Literary Criticism describes him as using “the Appalachian region where he was born and raised as the setting for both his poetry and fiction” (90). The same entry also mentions that Chappell is praised for his “vital sense of community and Southern values” (90). Chappell’s series of novels about the Kirkman family living in the North Carolina mountains, I Am One of You Forever (1985), Brighten the Corner Where You Are (1989), Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You (1996), and Look Back All the Green Valley (1999), are some of his best known works. But attaching one label to Chappell’s work can be misleading because, while his novels and poems may present details of Appalachian mountain life, some of his short stories never touch that world.
In addition to the Appalachian-themed literature for which he is best known, Chappell has written a body of science-fiction and fantasy stories involving the gothic, the grotesque, and the arabesque. Many of these works are collected in a book titled *More Shapes Than One*, which was published in 1991. On the surface, this collection is an unusual book for Chappell because the short stories have supernatural or quirky plots, and they do not all occur in the traditional Southern settings of most of his fiction. Likewise, Chappell’s 1968 novel *Dagon* is one of his most gothic works, and while it is set in the rural South, the story ends in an otherworldly realm.

One critic, Michael Dirda, observes that the stories in *More Shapes Than One* loosely fit into three categories: “humorous supernatural fantasies,” “historical jeux d’esprit,” and “tales of Southern type” (Dirda 5). But Dirda’s categories are too restrictive, and they are somewhat misleading. Every story in *More Shapes Than One* displays a touch of magical realism and fantasy, so to label only a few of them as “supernatural” is misleading. Further, not all of the supernatural stories are humorous; most display a darker tone. For example, “Alma” and “After Revolution” explore an alternate reality in which the characters experience various states of happiness and despair. Dirda’s label of “historical jeux d’esprit” for some of the stories in *More Shapes Than One* is also inaccurate because, while the collection includes historical stories, they do not all possess the light-heartedness that the term “jeux d’esprit” denotes; rather, “The Snow That Is Nothing in the Triangle,” “Weird Tales,” and “Barcarole” look closely at the lives of historical figures who are tortured by their own failures. And though the few stories in *More Shapes Than One* that are set in the mountains of North Carolina can fit the traditional Southern tales of Dirda’s classification,
the darkness of the plots in stories such as “Duet” and “ Ember” separates *More Shapes Than One* from Chappell’s more conventionally upbeat regional works.

Even within the genre of poetry, critics are conflicted as to how to label Chappell, since he does manifest a duality in his works. Rita Sims Quillen includes Chappell in her treatment of Appalachian poets, maintaining that Appalachian writers, such as Chappell, are “folk artists” who act as seers for civilization. In addition, Quillen accepts P.J. Laska’s definition of the folk poet as someone who writes about “a particular people, place, and time” (Quillen 66). Quillen uses Chappell’s own words to define the differences between the folk artist and the “arabesque” artist who writes intricate, intertwined stories involving elements of wonder such as the supernatural or surreal, but her analysis of his words is too narrow. Writers of the arabesque, such as Edgar Allan Poe, are concerned with elaborately weaving seemingly unrelated elements, and thereby producing strange and sometimes unsettling reactions in their audience. For example, Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death” appears to be about a masquerade, but it ends in the terror of impending death.

Chappell believes that “folk artist” is a dismissive term, but he uses this label to differentiate “writers of the arabesque” from “folk writers” because arabesque writers’ “work is less concerned with delivering basic narrative materials than with manipulating these materials in an idiosyncratic manner” (“Two Modes . . .” 335). He further separates folk artists and arabesque artists by stating,

All art is, of course, treatment, but the arabesque artist will insist upon what we might call a ‘post-treatment’; after a satisfying narrative outline is determined [the artist] then manipulates the elements so that this train of narrative becomes of secondary importance and may, in fact, disappear almost entirely . . . . He speaks to an audience for whom style is a mild intoxication. (“Two Modes . . .” 335)
Quillen believes that Chappell is not an arabesque poet (using Chappell’s own definition to back her claim). Instead, she proposes that Chappell “stand[s] looking over civilization” to see how he fits into it (Quillen 63). Thus, Quillen maintains that Chappell, as a folk poet, is not as concerned with the style of his works as he is with the basic narration of a story/world with which he can identify himself.

Contrary to Quillen’s beliefs, Chappell is both a folk poet and an arabesque writer, especially in his fiction, which shows influences of Poe and his use of the arabesque. Chappell has admitted to being influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, and he notes that when he wants to write in a certain tone, he searches out an influence to inspire him (Bizarro 13). Poe used the terms arabesque and grotesque to describe his own works, most conspicuously in his collection of stories published in 1840 entitled *Tales of the Arabesque and Grotesque*. Poe’s concept of the grotesque/arabesque contains an element of tension, however, because for Poe the terms indicate “closely proximate areas of feeling or impact, as that point between laughter and tears, calmness and frenzy, seriousness and mockery” (Thompson 105). Thus Poe’s grotesque and arabesque include elements of the surreal, supernatural, and horror in order to induce a variety of emotions in the reader, as do Chappell’s works.

Orson Scott Card describes Chappell as “an odd hybrid,” both a “literary” writer and a lover of science fiction and fantasy (Card 18). Card’s observation is a valid one, for even though some readers might want to ghettoize *More Shapes Than One* as Chappell’s only group of science-fiction and fantasy stories, stereotyping them is problematic for two reasons. First, the stories in *More Shapes Than One* were originally written and published at different times, over sixteen years. Interviews with Chappell reveal that his first love in modern literature was science fiction and that he hopes to eliminate “the division between
what is wished for, what is imagined, and what is generally thought to be realistic or recognized as factual” (“Chappell, Fred,” 78: 109-110). While the stories in *More Shapes Than One* seem to reflect Chappell’s vision, these stories are not anomalies in Chappell’s writing; rather they are actually an integral part of it. Frederick Busch argues that Chappell’s voice is similar across his works:

There is a wholeness about the work of Chappell. Everything he does seems a piece of the same cloth, whether story, poem, novel or essay, and whatever he does fits with all the rest. It is the voice that dominates and is recognizable, no matter where you start any of his works . . . . Whether the subject be his parents or Linnaeus, he demonstrates the same gift for luminous phrase and detail. (“Chappell, Fred,” 8: 114)

This thesis seeks to reveal that Chappell’s works are unified by the following elements: his type of hero, his use of fantasy, and his search for truth. These themes connect the less traditional *More Shapes Than One* to Chappell’s *Dagon*, to the Kirkman series of novels, and to his poetry collections, *Midquest* and *Family Gathering*. Though the plots and characters are diverse, the stories in *More Shapes than One* are thematically very similar to his mountain novels and poems.

All of Chappell’s works include distinctive heroes. His protagonists are not traditional heroes, such as those researched by Joseph Campbell. Even though they seem to be very different characters in widely differing settings, the Chappellesque heroes have similar traits and goals. The Chappellesque character is an “everyman” who deviates from society’s conventions in an attempt to find himself while on a journey. This heroic journey involves experiencing an alternate reality in order to come to enlightenment.

Chappell’s heroic journeys allow his characters to attempt to change. *Dagon*, for example, involves a main character who attempts to break away from his family and their
violent past, only to yield to it at the end of the novel. In “Alma,” “After Revelation,” and “Linnaeus Forgets” from *More Shapes Than One*, protagonists experience change when they rebel against the conventions of society. In the mountain-family series and *Midquest*, men explore their positions in their families and their places in society through a series of recollections.

Chappell’s heroes rely on fantasy to pursue truth during their heroic journeys; his works reveal distinctive narrative voices that often use the thematic conventions of “magical realism.” The term “magical realism” was introduced in the 1920s by Franz Roh, a German art critic, to describe visual artwork in which “real forms are combined in a way that does not conform to daily reality” (Carpentier 103). In relation to literature, the term “magical realism” has been formally applied to authors -- Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, and others -- who seamlessly combine the worlds of reality and fantasy. Many magical realist works are associated with the culture of South America. According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, magical realism is “the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surreal description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable” (Cuddon 522). Chappell’s use of magical realism focuses mainly on bizarre, surreal, and dream-like events that coincide with mundane life; he focuses on the realistic description of the unreal (McDonald 136). The majority of Chappell’s tales fit into the genre of magical realism more than into the genre of the Southern gothic, though the two categories overlap.
The Southern gothic genre is a derivative of traditional gothic literature. A gothic tale is a romance with "an emphasis on the supernatural" (Weston 3). Usually such a tale focuses on the pursuit of innocence by lustful evil, manifesting itself in the story through sadism, sex, violence, the grotesque, and the simply bizarre or fantastic. Ambiguity is also an element in Southern gothic literature. Southern gothic is a unique blending of traditional gothic and the unique American Southern experience, which includes the repercussions of slavery and the Civil War on Southerners.

While Chappell’s early novel *Dagon* shows elements of the Southern gothic genre because of its setting, violence, and lustful evil, most of Chappell’s other, later works are less gothic; they incorporate more aspects of magical realism. For example, the search for truth in Chappell’s works involves blending fantasy and reality as well as using different narrative voices, giving the reader several views of a story’s events. Magical realism allows unexplained fantasy to live in the mundane worlds of Chappell’s characters.

In the gothic novel *Dagon*, a man struggles with his family’s history of evil when he begins to remember the death of his father. The novel is thematically very dark and disturbing, and the events in *Dagon* also illustrate elements of magical realism in the main character’s memories. *I Am One of You Forever* is very different from *Dagon* in form and theme. The form of *I Am One of You Forever* is not as conventional as *Dagon*: it is a collection of short stories that can also be construed as a novel, but the tone of *Dagon* is much more sinister than *I Am One of You Forever*. Yet both novels contain inexplicable events and childhood recollections that are shocking and surreal. The mountain-family series of novels beginning with *I Am One of You Forever* illustrate Chappell’s reliance on fantasy through tall tales about Jess’s father, mother, and younger sister.
Patrick Bizarro states that Chappell’s poetry “has paralleled his fictional efforts in theme and structure” (3). Also, a couple of notable critics, Hilbert Campbell and Sally Sullivan, have pointed out that *Midquest* and *I Am One of You Forever* bear similarities in narrative structure, and Sullivan expands on that theory by stating that “*I Am One of You Forever* resembles a long narrative poem, often employing allegory, or mixing allegory, fantasy, and realism . . .” (Sullivan 120). Like his prose, Chappell’s poetry includes magical realism, though mainly through recurring dream-like states. Dreaming characters appear in *Midquest*, a collection of first-person poems reflecting on life and family, and in *Family Gathering*, a collection of poems from the viewpoints of various members of a family. The hazy reality that exists between waking and sleeping is an opportunity for Chappell’s characters to further their journeys.

Many stories from *More Shapes Than One* – “Miss Prue,” “Ember,” “Linnaeus Forgets,” and “The Snow That Is Nothing in the Triangle” – reflect the bizarre and mythical sides of fantasy. “Miss Prue” is an eerie tale about a woman’s encounter with the ghost of her suitor. “Ember” tells the darker story of a murderer coming to grips with his act and the consequences of that act when he finds himself mysteriously imprisoned with other killers on a haunted mountain. Carl Linnaeus, in “Linnaeus Forgets,” observes a microscopic world living in a plant he receives in the mail. In “The Snow That Is Nothing in the Triangle,” a famous mathematician descends into madness in front of his students as he remembers a rebellion during his school years.

Ultimately, Chappell’s works explore the role and risk of fictive reality in the hero’s pursuit of truth. The addition of fantasy elements in narration can either help or hinder Chappell’s characters in achieving their goal of reaching truth. Amy Tipton Gray suggests
that Chappell believes that man is “torn between will and appetite” and “can only resolve that struggle through self-knowledge; this is also the only means by which he can come to a resolution about the nature of the world and his place in it” (78). For example, Peter in *Dagon* tries to avoid the curse of his family, by attempting to become a holy man. But he is never really satisfied as a clergyman, and he therefore begins a journey, which leads him back to his family’s pagan worship of the fertility god Dagon. The characters in the Kirkman series and *Midquest* reflect on past events with touches of fantasy, hoping to identify truth in the process.

All of the stories in *More Shapes Than One* portray fiction as a vessel for finding truth. In “The Somewhere Doors” the main character’s experiences with a magical door make him realize that he must focus on the real world instead of a fantasy world. In “Linnaeus Forgets,” the famous botanist witnesses the surreal and becomes a happier person as a result. “The Adder” describes an evil book that acts as a vampire, draining and infecting other works of literature while attracting the interest of the reader, spreading evil within its own tale. Chappell’s characters are seeking truth within these magical settings.
Chapter I

The Chappellesque Hero

Even though Chappell’s works range from Southern regionalism to science fiction and gothic, his main characters all share certain heroic attributes. However, Chappell’s main characters deviate somewhat from the traditional hero archetype as defined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Chappell’s heroes must experience an altered reality, meaning either that the story is set in a distorted world or that the heroes experience an alternate reality through visions, dreams, or delusions during their heroic journeys. Campbell states that heroes may be summoned to adventure in a “profound dream state” (Campbell 58). But Chappell extends the function of this dream state for his hero and makes the fantasy or surreal experience a precondition for the heroic journey. While Chappell’s characters embark on journeys that in many ways adhere to Campbell’s archetypal myth (they are called to adventure and they are tested by obstacles along the way), his characters also depart from that path.

Campbell’s heroes are extraordinary men who pursue a couple of goals, to fulfill their destinies and to find their spiritual centers. Chappell’s heroes are average men, and unlikely heroes, who struggle to find their destinies. Chappell’s characters are more likely to attempt to rebel against, and challenge, destiny than Campbell’s traditional heroes. They do not accept their lives in their current states and they experience unrest. Campbell’s heroes are larger than life and rise to greatness only after an “infrahuman” descent: they must become less than human in order to re-connect with nature (Campbell 319). But Chappell’s heroes do not necessarily rise to greatness, but simply focus on self-awareness and free will. At times, Chappell’s heroes do not seem “heroic” in their actions, because they challenge the very idea
of a typical heroic character. Although Chappell’s characters may not fit Campbell’s definition of a hero, they do fulfill a primary requirement: they are all engaged in similar pursuits of truth and self-fulfillment.

The call to action for Chappell’s heroes results in an interior journey. The heroes embark on their adventures to achieve personal satisfaction and self-recognition, but the adventures do not usually take them far from their physical homes. They do not need to leave and return to their communities physically in order to share their findings, as Odysseus does in Homer’s *Odyssey*; rather, Chappell’s heroes embark on metaphysical journeys in their own minds, through emotion and imagination. The real journey takes them deep inside their own minds to explore their beliefs and identities through the blending of fantasy and reality, in an attempt to discover truth and order in the world. This retreat into the mind allows Chappell’s characters to assess their physical surroundings and their relationships with their families and communities that have defined them before their call to journey. In their internal retreat Chappell’s heroes experience a setting or a mindset different from their normal ones, and as a result, they learn about their true selves.

Many of Chappell’s works develop characters that are unlikely heroes. But in his more gothic works, such as *Dagon*, the protagonists may be anti-heroes. For Chappell, an anti-hero is a character that may simply be fulfilling his destiny – not rising to, but rather descending into, his true self. For example, Peter Leland is an anti-hero in Chappell’s *Dagon*. Unlike the Campbell hero, Peter does not grow to greatness in the physical world after an infrahuman descent. Rather, he becomes a giant fish, “a glowing shape some scores of light-years in length” (181).
Peter’s character appears to be inspired by an H.P. Lovecraft short story also entitled “Dagon.” In both Chappell’s novel and Lovecraft’s story, a man embarks on a physical journey that triggers a mental descent into madness. The physical journey is in many ways merely the catalyst for the real adventure – the mental excursion. Chappell reworks Lovecraft’s maritime story of horror and despair into a novel. In Lovecraft’s story, a victim of a shipwreck washes ashore on a black marsh that stinks of dead fish. When he ventures out of his small boat, he witnesses a grotesque fishlike creature killing a whale. The man escapes the fish island, but he becomes mad because of what he has seen. The story is a near-death confession, as the author is about to commit suicide by jumping out of a window: “So now I am to end it all . . . . The end is near. I hear a noise at the door, as of some immense slippery body lumbering against it. It shall not find me. God, that hand! The window! The window!” (Lovecraft 19).

Lovecraft’s main character is an unnamed first-person sailor, but Chappell names Peter Leland and gives him a different occupation from that of Lovecraft’s character. Peter has pursued a religious vocation as a minister, but his true love is scholarly research. He believes that his future is tainted because of a mysterious family illness, but that by becoming a minister, he will be able to work against his bleak fate. Thus, he has not chosen a vocation true to himself. His call to heroic action occurs when he takes time off from preaching to research and write a book.

Peter’s journey begins when he moves to a new location, his family farm, where he comes to face his past and a potential threat to his future. Because Peter is oppressed by his family history, he hopes to suppress it, but instead his past only draws him in further. For example, Peter is simultaneously repelled by and attracted to a “fish-like” girl, Mina, whose
family is connected to Peter’s through the worship of Dagon. Also, when Peter discovers how his father died, chained in the attic because he had “lost the way” and was becoming delusional, he becomes so obsessed with this discovery that he “accidentally” chains himself up in the attic in the same place where his father died (62). He remembers that his father was “not mad, but furiously raging in inhuman anger, with the sweat all over him like yellow paint” (52).

Once Peter starts facing his past, he also begins spiraling downward into madness. Peter gives in to deeply hidden evil desires, kills his wife, becomes the sex slave of Mina, and the mental slave of alcohol. At the end of the novel, Mina sacrifices Peter to Dagon. As Peter is dying, he realizes the purpose of universal suffering: “Suffering is the most expensive of human feelings, but it is the most intense and precious of them, because suffering most efficiently humanizes the unfeeling universe” (180). Peter is no longer regretful when he dies, because he has come to see being human as a limiting condition. Eventually, he takes the form of a giant fish, in a reference to the fish-god Dagon and to Lovecraft’s story. A question remains whether these events happen to Peter because he wants them to happen or because he lacks the free will to change the course of his life. Usually Chappell’s heroes are able to break free of their societies and venture out to self-discovery, but Peter is rather complacent with his acceptance of the cult of Dagon. He seems to bring these terrible events on himself because he believes they are supposed to happen; his fate is foreshadowed by his family history. Peter journeys back into a community that he tried to avoid, and by doing so, he succumbs to a destiny that he wished to evade earlier in the novel.

While Peter is an example of an “anti-hero,” most of Chappell’s main characters are more accurately “unlikely” heroes. Several tales in More Shapes Than One explore the
journeys of unlikely heroes, men who experience change by rebelling against their current paths in life and against the values of their communities. For example, “Alma” is a tale set in an alternate reality where women are chattel, the terrain is harsh, and outlaws roam the land. The main character, Fretlaw, the first-person narrator of the tale, tells the rather sad story of how he has come to feel differently from other men about women. Fretlaw defies social rules, as his name indicates, because he believes that selling women as slaves is somehow wrong: “The truth is I never did really hold with woman trading . . . something ugly about the whole thing” (171-72). His journey begins when he encounters Dingo, a man who trades women, whom Dingo calls his “shoats.” The narrator is traveling alone because he is tired of dealing with others, but one of Dingo’s women, Alma, intrigues him, and she encourages him to help her escape. Alma exemplifies everything bad that men believe about women in this fantasy world. She infects Fretlaw like a “pizen” (poison), and she uses sex and deception to ensnare him (173). She later persuades him to conceive a child with her. Then, when the time comes for her to give birth, she retreats to an island of women, leaving Fretlaw behind. The story ends with Fretlaw yearning for Alma’s return, but she gives him something besides just sorrow. She leaves a legacy with him, the new goal to free women. Certainly this tale makes light of how men and women relate to each other, with several stereotypes about how women treat men, but the mood is finally not light. “Alma” has a sorrowful ending because Fretlaw misses his love and continues to long for her return. Fretlaw’s rebellious heroic journey is an emotional journey during which he finds and loses love, changing himself and his values.

The hero in “After Revelation” is similar to the one in “Alma” because he too is a rebel in an alternate reality. The story is appropriately the last one in More Shapes Than One because it describes the end of a society. In this world, science is suppressed in favor of
“white magic” because science has caused the destruction of civilization twice before. One
man, George, the first-person narrator of the tale, rebels against society and questions the
rules of this world, especially when human “Owners” come to the village to lead the people
to a “revelation” that causes death. The Owners are, in the words of the narrator, “those who
can pay full attention to someone else,” thereby deserving to be Owners of the human race
(191). George and the others in his village feel an intense longing to be near an Owner, to
receive that kind of attention. Yet even with this longing, George questions what will happen
to them when they experience the close attention of an Owner. The coming of the Owners
and the revelation they bring allow George to reflect on himself. He thinks that he has always
been a rebel in his society. He begins to question his past actions, until he loses the woman
he loves, Larilla. She dies from the revelation of extreme happiness, from being close to her
Owner. This event causes George to question the Owners’ revelation even more. He does not
know how to feel, and the end of the tale marks the beginning of another goal for him--to
find out what happens to his world after the revelation. George’s world is still changing and
he desires to know what happens next. Thus the revelation in this story does not result only in
death. For the hero, George, the revelation is also an eye-opening experience, his second call
to adventure, which reveals him as a hero full of curiosity and longing to know and learn.

The Chappellesque hero in “Linnaeus Forgets” is a scientific rebel, a man with a
desire to learn. He is Carl Linnaeus, the esteemed botanist and taxonomist. Linnaeus is not
an “everyman,” since he is a famous scientist, but like many of Chappell’s other characters,
he needs personal fulfillment and has some emotional wounds to heal. In this story based
loosely on the life of Carl Linnaeus, Chappell’s Linnaeus explores a fantasy world present in
a rare plant that appears on his doorstep. This experience changes him in many ways. In the
beginning, the plant is seemingly dead because it is parched and “collapsed in upon itself” (3). Linnaeus waters the plant, and when he returns to check on it, he finds that it is miraculously revived and growing quite large. The plant exudes a familiar odor that confuses Linnaeus’s sensations and causes his head to feel “dreamy” (5). Once Linnaeus inhales the scent of the plant, his sense of time is disoriented, and he suffers from painful recollections and strange dreams.

Linnaeus is a Chappellesque hero because he leaves his community through non-traditional means and encounters an alternate reality that allows him to reflect on his life and his self-identity, and he is positively changed by his adventure. The title of the story indicates forgetfulness, but paradoxically the purpose of the tale is to express the “importance of remembering” (Lang 141). In this story, Linnaeus must allow his memories to change shape. When he experiences the visions that accompany smelling the plant, he begins his journey and undergoes change, crossing the threshold between reality and fantasy. After Linnaeus witnesses the strange and miraculous tiny world in the leaves of the plant, he forgets what he sees, and he cannot read the notes he has taken about the vision. After he sees the alternate world, however, Linnaeus is able to forget the guilt he has carried about past failures and quarrels, and he begins to use metaphors in his scholarly studies. He is able to be at peace with himself and with his work because he sees the beauty in plants’ population of the world.

Chappell’s regional works often include heroes who become positive individuals by reflecting on past community and family experiences. One example is Jess in the mountain-family series of novels beginning with I Am One of You Forever. Jess is a typical Chappell hero, an ordinary man who has encountered fantasy during his journey toward self-discovery. In I Am One of You Forever, Jess recalls events from his childhood that have shaped him to
become the man he is today. The short stories that make up this collection show the progress of his journey to maturation, his discovery of his place in society. Jess’s psychological journey is to discover where he fits in the world, for many of his recollections involve situations in which he at first does not feel that he belongs.

Jess’s stories document his coming of age by illustrating his place in society. Chappell’s heroes often struggle to find a place for themselves within their current communities. For example, Jess makes decisions about the kind of man he wants to be by observing the dynamics between men and women in the family. Women represent “good sense and authority,” and the men rebel against them (9). Jess likes to think that he is one of the men, but his actions in the stories reveal that he is in between the two groups until the end, when his place in society is somewhat more definite. In the next-to-last chapter of the book, Jess’s father makes him sing the lines of a song:

I have often wondered why women love men,  
But more times I’ve wondered how men can love them;  
They’re men’s ruination and sudden downfall,  
And they cause men to labor behind the stone wall. (178-79)

After singing these lines, Jess turns red with shame and quits singing because he is embarrassed by his voice, and perhaps by what he is singing. Jess knows that his grandmother is a very strong and smart figure in his household, and that his father enjoys teasing the women in the family. At this point, Jess makes significant progress in his discovery – Jess embraces his father’s placement of the roles of women and men. While Jess admires both the women and the men in his family, he idolizes his father. In the last novel of the series, Look Back All the Green Valley, this adoration is extended into Jess’s adult years when his dying mother chides him for being too much like his father, relying on his sister and
wife to look after him: “You’re too much like your father, always trying to do a hundred
things at once and never getting a one of them done” (10).

As much as the collection is about Jess as a hero, it is also about his male relations
who are his heroes: his father, his uncles, and Johnson Gibbs. Each chapter of *I Am One of
You Forever* centers on a lesson Jess learns from one of the many men in his life. These
lessons shape him as a person and as the protagonist of the group of stories. Johnson has an
especially large impact on Jess and his family. He is an orphan with a very active
imagination who comes to live with Jess’s family and to work on their farm. As soon as
Johnson arrives, the family is transformed. His mere presence makes the household a happier
place. Johnson and Joe Robert, Jess’s father, become very close, and Johnson becomes like
another son to Joe Robert. Jess idolizes Johnson and wishes he could relate to his father as
Johnson can.

Jess grows as a hero when he recognizes that he is part of society and no longer just
an observer. At the beginning of the novel, Jess wants to be included in the bond between the
two men, but he is still too much of a child. He is often told he “will have to wait until [he is]
older” to be part of their group, and he feels that important information will always be kept
from him (33). Johnson’s presence does not cause Jess to be overtly jealous; it has an
opposite effect. He is a role model to the young Jess. But a change in tone occurs in the
middle of the novel when Johnson is killed at war. The life and luster go out of the family,
and the last half of the novel is more sober, as Jess witnesses his parents’ grief. Before
Johnson’s death, Jess looks up to the figures in his life as infallible adults, but afterward, Jess
sees the world around him differently.
Jess’s journey as a hero is also marked by his admiration for his father. Toward the end of the novel, in “Bright Star of a Summer Evening,” Jess identifies with his father when he witnesses him being treated as a child. Jess realizes that he is not the only one treated as a child, and that recognition makes him happy. The last segment of the novel, entitled “Helen,” records Jess’s dream in which he is on an adult outing with Joe Robert, Johnson, and Uncle Luden. This dream is a catalyst for Jess because it brings together several men who have influenced him, and it hints at the end of Jess’s childhood journey and the beginning of a new one. His experiences mold him into a composite hero for the later novels. He retains the values of the men in his family, and they help him to be a hero. In “Helen,” Jess remembers that he was not treated as a child but was included with the men. This feeling is reinforced when he sees an image of Helen of Troy, an allusion to the Homeric beauty who drove men to war. Seeing Helen and recognizing her as the most beautiful woman in the world allows Jess to cross a threshold into manhood. Jess does not do everything that the older men do, but to answer Johnson’s question at the end, he has become one of them. In the last book of the series, Look Back All the Green Valley, Jess readdresses the title of the first novel and the answer to Johnson’s question. Jess indicates that Johnson is the one who becomes included in the novel: “Johnson Gibbs had been rescued from abusive parents to come and live with us on the farm, to become one of us forever” (67). Jess has kept part of Johnson’s spirit in his hero character throughout the series of novels.

In the sequel to I Am One of You Forever, Brighten the Corner Where You Are, Jess recalls another one of his heroes, his father, in a series of stories. Joe Robert is the quintessential Chappellesque hero, because he believes in searching for the truth. The novel seems like an epic journey, but it is really only one day in the life of Joe Robert Kirkman. He
has become a teacher in order to support the family while his wife recovers from a car
accident, but Joe Robert dreams about being an entrepreneur, and teaching does not entirely
suit him. He idolizes two people from British history: Izambard Kingdom Brunel, a pioneer
of the British railway system, and Charles Darwin, who espoused the theory of evolution. Joe
Robert admires these two men because they acted on their ideas and visions.

Joe Robert grows as a hero throughout *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*. In the
second chapter, Jess first establishes Joe Robert as a teller of tall tales, a person who enjoys
telling elaborate falsehoods: “The truth was, in fact, so sacred to my father that he generally
refused to profane its sanctity with his worldly presence” (28). And Joe Robert admits that he
can “tell a dozen lies before breakfast and not even break a sweat” (191). But he loses his
touch throughout the chapters in *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, and the reader can see
a transformation in Joe Robert’s character as the novel progresses. He evolves from a man
who lies and plays pranks to a man with a defined dream.

Joe Robert wants to be “an ace scientist or an entrepreneur of major ideas” (191). He
associates these roles with success and cannot see that his own achievements already make
him a hero for many reasons--for saving a little girl, for supporting his family, and for
teaching and inspiring the local children. In the chapter “Foxfire,” Joe Robert has the vision
that Jubal predicted: he sees two foxes that look like flames, playing in the sunset. This
vision is an affirmation that Joe Robert has made the right choices during his very eventful
day. He has decided to pursue his dreams instead of merely doing what falls his way. He
wants to “lay his own personal hands on the world,” and that realization and the decision to
follow his true desire while rebelling against his daily life make him a Chappellesque hero
(204). While Joe Robert does experience a call to adventure and encounters obstacles along
his way, much like Campbell’s heroes, he also comes into contact with several alternate realities. These altered states allow him insight to struggle with his own destiny, and he ultimately decides to follow his dreams.

The protagonist in *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You* is less defined than in Chappell’s other works. The novel shows Jess’s relationship with his grandmother, Annie Barbara Sorrells. Annie Barbara is one of the few women in Chappell’s works who can be considered a protagonist. She is a strong-willed woman, and her storytelling influences Jess to become a writer. But the novel is not as much about Annie Barbara as a hero as it is about how she influences Jess to find his calling. The novel is a collection of stories, mostly about Appalachian women, told to Jess by his grandmother. The italicized stories in this novel describe the pain of Jess’s family as they wait for his grandmother to pass away, and Jess memorializes his grandmother through the stories that she told to him. Thus, the novel is a tribute by the hero, Jess, to one of his heroes, Annie Barbara.

Similarly, *Look Back All the Green Valley* includes a tribute by Jess to his father, Joe Robert. This novel shows Jess as an adult and brings him together with his mother and sister on a quest to understand his deceased father’s workshop endeavors and to find burial plots for his parents. In this process, Jess comes to realize that he has become just like his father, Joe Robert. The Kirkman series of novels is one long inward journey for Jess, who reveals that his pen name is “Fred Chappell” at the beginning of *Look Back All the Green Valley*. Thus, Jess/Fred explores his relationship to his family though stories to discover a true identity.

In Chappell’s *Midquest*, the Chappellesque hero’s quest for self-discovery resurfaces in the form of an epic poem. *Midquest* and the *I Am One of You Forever* series share some of
the same characters, such as Virgil Campbell, a drunken storyteller that both Jess and Old Fred, the first-person narrator of *Midquest*, remember from their childhoods. In *Midquest*, Old Fred is much like Jess, defining his place in the world in relation to his family. Old Fred is remembering past events in his life. He remembers his schooling, growing up, moving away from his family, and talking to his grandmother about her marriage. Thus, he reflects on many events that have shaped his life.

In the poem “Birthday 35: Diary Entry,” Fred is lamenting that his life up to age thirty-five has not been exciting. Fred’s birthday is his call to adventure because he is unhappy with his current life, and turning thirty-five has made him realize his unhappiness. He brainstorms about what he could do to make his life more interesting, but he fears change: “. . . Each time I reach outside my skin, / I just get lonesome for what’s within” (105-106). Nevertheless, he prays to find more time to enjoy his life, and thus his journey begins.

At the end of the epic, in “Earthsleep,” Old Fred is transformed by these memories. He becomes “a new creature” (9). Fred recognizes that he is part of a community of humankind when he sleeps:

No one sleeps apart
Or rises separate
In the burning river of this morning
That earth and wind overtake. (31-34)

Realizing that he is both an individual and a part of a society allows Old Fred to appreciate how he has become the man he is. And he sees that his future will be a new adventure, like a dawn “in the earliest morning of the world” (41).

Characters in Chappell’s collection of poetry *Family Gathering* also exemplify his type of hero. Unlike *Midquest*, a series of poems that center on one main character, the
poems in *Family Gathering* offer descriptions of many different characters. The setting is a family reunion, and the style is similar to that of T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* because the poems are humorous, individual, and quirky. Also, some of the poems are paired. While the collection is not styled like the epic of *Midquest*, the short poems do provide insight into the struggles of the characters. The character of Elizabeth in the first and last poems of the collection is a young girl not too far from the beginning of adolescence. Much like Jess in *I Am One of You Forever*, Elizabeth tries to gain the attention of adults, but they are too busy talking to each other to pay her any notice. She is impatient to grow older and experience more in life because she believes that her life now is in a state of limbo, “When all that’s good is past or yet to come” (30). Much like Old Fred, Elizabeth is seeking change and excitement in her life.

In the last poem in *Family Gathering*, Elizabeth is sleeping and dreaming of her future. She believes that her dreams bring her truth, but she cannot yet fully comprehend the meaning of her journey: “She’s there inside her dream; its rainbow flow / Means much, though she can’t say exactly what” (19-20). The poem then speculates that perhaps she is becoming an adult, “one of them” who has no imagination or spirit (21). But this tone of doom changes to one of hope when Elizabeth dreams of a comforting mockingbird that tells her that she should not be afraid because it is her friend. The poem ends with Elizabeth still dreaming and journeying toward self-discovery through the aid of dreaming.

The Chappellesque hero is a rebel, often moving against the grain of his or her community. The hero attempts to find a new path, sometimes succumbing to a fate that may have been predestined. The Chappellesque hero could be a subset of the larger Campbell hero archetype because both can experience a call to adventure through an alternate reality
such as a dream. Yet Chappell’s heroes must be in either a surreal setting or in an altered state in order to embark on their heroic journeys. When the hero emerges, he or she is changed emotionally, sometimes at peace with himself or herself, or possibly with a new goal and a new journey on the horizon.
Chapter II

The Reliance on Fantasy During the Heroic Journey

During an interview with Fred Chappell, Irv Broughton asked if Chappell was influenced by Gabriel García Márquez, suggesting that *I Am One of You Forever* has a feeling of magical realism (*CLC* 114). Chappell admitted that he had read a lot of magical realist works, but denied that his works fall into that category. Rather, he saw his stories as folk tales, and claimed that his works contain nothing “that you can’t find in Mark Twain, whom [he had] never heard referred to as a ‘magical realist’” (*CLC* 114). Even though Chappell has denied that he knowingly uses magical realism in his works, many aspects of magical realism are present across all of his works, providing an essential setting for his heroes to complete their heroic journeys. Chappell does not ask his readers to suspend their disbelief in the face of fantastic events, and Chappell’s heroes – in both his Appalachian works and in his more grotesque works – rely on fantasy as a means of pursuing truth and self-recognition. These fantasies paradoxically put Chappell’s heroes in touch with reality in his Southern regional works, but they distance his heroes from reality in his more gothic pieces.

Some of the best examples of Chappell’s fabrications and magical realism are in *I Am One of You Forever* (as well as in the other novels in that series), in which Jess recalls the events of his childhood in a series of stories. Particularly significant stories in italics are placed at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. These stories are special because they give shape to Jess’s remembrances by highlighting his feelings at certain points in the novel. Also, all of these italicized stories contain elements of fantasy. Other stories in the novel also contain small examples of whimsy, but the italicized stories are almost completely based on
fantasy. These stories are turning points for Jess, and perhaps because they are extremely emotional events in his past, he is unable to reflect on them in a completely realistic setting. Rather, he infuses them with the imagination of childhood.

One example of magical realism in *I Am One of You Forever* is located in “The Change of Heart,” a story in which Johnson, Joe Robert (Jess’s father), and Jess are caught in a bad hail storm. As the three males watch hail destroy the crops on their farm, they notice that Johnson’s voice begins to sound odd. He has become possessed by the storm:

> His red face seemed to glow like an overfired wood heater and his blue eyes lightened almost to white and were as alert as a bobcat’s. We shivered to look at him and shivered again with each scattershot of hail that hit the barn wall.

> What had happened to Johnson? He was some part of the storm now, or a further element the storm was trying to become, an extension of itself both human and inhuman. Johnson was another kind of presence than a man . . . .

(71)

Johnson takes on the properties of the storm and appears to channel a higher being in this story centered on a religious vision of “storm angels” (72). The three men are in awe of the power they have seen, but they do not talk about the visions. When Jess asks Johnson and his father what they experienced that night, the older men avoid discussing any supernatural elements in the event. The reader is left to decide whether Jess imagined Johnson’s transformation.

“The Storytellers” is another example of fantasy in *I Am One of You Forever*. In this story, Jess’s Uncle Zeno comes to stay with the family. Uncle Zeno is a philosopher, and his name “may allude to Zeno of Citium, the stoic philosopher” who told stories from his porch (Sullivan 123). Zeno’s role is that of the storyteller, which would explain why Jess mostly describes his memory of Uncle Zeno as a voice; the rest of Jess’s recollection of his uncle’s
visit is complex: “He was a presence, all right; he told stories, endless stories, and these stories worked upon the fabric of our daily lives in such manner that we began to doubt our own outlines . . . . The natural and the artificial orders intermingle, and ready definition is lost” (97). Uncle Zeno “uses up or absorbs life, in that he observes life but fashions it according to the necessities of the story” (Sullivan 123). He is a storyteller, and with that job comes responsibility for his community of listeners. He has the power to affect his readers by making them question their lifestyles and identities. The way in which he chooses to do that is to juxtapose the elements of the real and the bizarre, making his role very similar to that of the author who created him – Chappell.

Jess wonders if Uncle Zeno causes events to happen by telling stories about them, because “he seemed to absorb reality, events that took place among people, without having to be involved” (103). Uncle Zeno does not directly engage in conversation with the family members. Instead, he starts telling a story whenever the mood seems to possess him; he is only concerned with telling stories. Uncle Zeno’s lack of normal conversation irritates Joe Robert, and he attempts to poke holes in Uncle Zeno’s stories, but he is unsuccessful. Uncle Zeno is unaffected and the conclusion of this chapter reveals him sharing a story about how Joe Robert, Johnson, and Jess ate their grandmother’s candy. This story, “The Good Time,” is the same as the first chapter of I Am One of You Forever. While Uncle Zeno tells the story about them, Jess observes his father feeling weak, and he invites him inside for apple pie. When Joe Robert finally moves to go inside, he seems to disappear, stepping into a dark shadow just as Uncle Zeno concludes his story. The magical-realist qualities of the bizarre, the surreal, and the unexplained are clear in this story. How Uncle Zeno knew the details of the trick that the men played on Jess’s grandmother and her candy is inexplicable. And the
way Jess’s father begins to fade when he is the subject of Uncle Zeno’s tales implies that Uncle Zeno has storytelling powers enabling him to alter reality. This tale is one of many examples of metafiction in Chappell’s writing. Chappell is showing the reader how the author of a story, Uncle Zeno in this example, is in control of the reality of the setting. For the reader, Chappell is the omniscient and omnipresent voice in his works, creating and erasing the setting and characters as he writes. When Jess Kirkman reveals that his pen name is Fred Chappell in *Look Back All the Green Valley*, the revelation spoils the illusion that the author is a separate figure from the main character in the novel series. They are one and the same.

*Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, the first sequel to *I Am One of You Forever*, is structured very similarly to the earlier book. Jess is the narrator of the events that happen to his father, Joe Robert, even though Jess is not present for all of them. Also, just as in *I Am One of You Forever*, the sequel contains three italicized stories placed at the beginning, middle, and end that are filled with mysterious and magical events. For example, in the first story, Joe Robert steals the moon from the sky simply because he wants to see if he can do so. Jess watches him, horrified: “my father stopped and turned and ripped the moon from the window and thrust it down into one of the buckets of milk and clapped a lid over it . . . . when he stood licking the milk foam from his fingers and looking smug and pleased with himself, I knew what had happened and I grew afraid” (4). Jess never questions how his father steals the moon; he is simply surprised that Joe Robert actually does so. Jess witnesses this event while performing the very mundane task of milking cows, yet it never strikes him as unreal because Chappell does not present the scene as out of the ordinary. Jess and the reader accept the events in the story as part of reality.
In another chapter of *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, Joe Robert encounters the school janitor, who foretells his future. Joe Robert enters a secret door in the school basement and encounters the hidden room of Jubal, the janitor. As the two men drink whisky and discuss their differences, Jubal tells Joe Robert that he can predict the future. Joe Robert does not believe him when Jubal says that “the big things, the things important in [his] life, will come cloaked in fire” (127-28). But Joe Robert’s vision of the foxes later in the novel is the sign of affirmation that Jubal foretold. When Joe Robert rises to leave the janitor’s secret room, the janitor disappears and Joe Robert finds himself in frozen darkness: even the “light of his match would not illuminate it” (130). In order to leave the room, Joe Robert passes through a space with no air for him to breathe, and the cold is “so numbing that his body thought he had died and so told his mind that he was dead” (131). This mysterious experience is replete with elements of magical realism, as is the entire novel. The events in *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* are predicted by Joe Robert in the first chapter. He tells a lie to his friends, and that lie ends up becoming the truth after a long day of interconnected events. Joe Robert exhibits some of the storytelling qualities of Uncle Zeno, but Joe Robert “cares more about the effect of his narration than he cares about the story itself” (Sullivan 123). This is why Joe Robert is upset that his day turns out exactly like the lie that he tells his friends in the beginning of the novel. He says, “All day long I have been trying to tell a lie and I haven’t had even a whiff of success” (191).

In *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You*, the italicized stories about Jess and Joe Robert illustrate the purgatory where the two men wait for Cora, who is sitting at the bedside of her dying mother. The conventions of time and space are questioned in these stories because the wind picks up and the clocks in the room begin rapidly to show random times, and the men
know that when the clocks stop, the grandmother will have passed away and the family will have to come together in order to fill the void she leaves. The emotional death of the family matriarch has a physical manifestation in the way that time spins out of control. The hands of the clocks “pointed where they pleased” and the wind begins to “whisper and weep” (4-5). Jess and Joe Robert witness this chaos and literally hang on to survive the change. Jess observes, “When I looked at his hand on the arm of his rocking chair, his knucklebones shone as white as if his skin had been peeled off them” (5). When time stops and then starts again, the men know that their world is different: “. . . it would not be steady in the least and the winds would be cold in our faces against us all the way” (228).

Also in *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You*, there are more surreal elements in the chapter entitled “The Shining Woman,” a ghost story about a quiet woman who is empowered after death. When Little Mary, a plain hardworking soul, wears out of her hard life and dies, she comes back to haunt her husband and new wife in the form of a shining beautiful silver woman. Her presence causes her former husband, Talbot, and his new wife, Sarah, much distress until they learn to pay tribute to her by decorating her grave with apple blossoms and Talbot agrees to buy his new wife birthday presents to ward off the spirit of Little Mary. These supernatural occurrences in “The Shining Woman” are very much a part of the real world for Chappell’s characters, and as Hal McDonald points out, the ghost in this story is very real, and it is “posing a very real problem that demands a concrete solution” (133). Thus, the real and the supernatural coexist in Chappell’s tale.

The italicized stories in *Look Back All the Green Valley* are also bizarre juxtapositions of the world of the living with the spirit world. In the first story, Jess is exhuming his father’s body from its grave, and he sees “an old man with white hair” sitting
on a tombstone in the graveyard (5). Then, in the middle italicized story, Jess observes his grandmother, Annie Barbara, standing at the gates of Heaven and conversing with Saint Peter. And then he hears the voice of Uncle Zeno, telling stories in Heaven. In the final italicized story, Jess is convinced that Uncle Zeno was the man sitting on the tomb in the graveyard, but they cannot seem to catch of glimpse of him again: “. . . when he struck the beam that way, there was no one. Yet we all thought that someone had been seated there and only a moment ago had stood up and walked away into the rain” (278). Once again, Uncle Zeno is hard to contain physically. His storyteller’s voice is what Jess recognizes.

“Into the Unknown!” is a particularly strange chapter in Look Back All the Green Valley. The chapter is a dream sequence about Jess flying through time and space with his family in a rocket that his father has built. Joe Robert has built a device called a “floriloge” that allows them to travel to the moon, and in this case, twenty years into the future. The dream was perhaps influenced by the elements that Jess has found in his father’s old workshop. While they travel in the dream, Jess’s grandmother disappears when they pass the date of her death. Then, as they near the date of destination on the moon, the day of Joe Robert’s death, he too collapses on the ship. The chapter describes a fantastic journey into the future for the young Jess and into the past for the current Jess, but it also shows the relationship of the author/inventor to his story. In this dream, Jess is remembering an event that did not happen in the waking world, but there are elements of the dream that are from his waking existence.

Similarly surreal elements are also present in the grotesque short stories of More Shapes Than One. “Miss Prue” is comparable to “The Shining Woman” chapter in Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You in that it combines the real and the supernatural in a ghost story.
Miss Prue’s suitor, Mr. M, has killed himself, but he appears as usual for their Thursday afternoon tea. Mr. M appears transformed: “he was thinner than ever, and pale, pale as a cloud, pale as a glass curtain. His eyes were like cinders in the deep sockets. He seemed to belong more to the cool gray autumn wind than to the world of animal flesh” (151). Yet Miss Prue does not seem to realize the implications of his death and she is not surprised at his appearance. Rather, she expects him to appear at her door out of habit. Miss Prue continues her daily routine, and his ghost shows up for tea to ask her what else he could have done to make her love him. But she misses the opportunity to express any love for him. Blinded by preoccupation with her fears, the fear of being loved and the fear of change, Miss Prue fails to notice the significance of her suitor’s last visit, and he fades away. The juxtaposition of the real world with the spiritual world in this tale is seamless.

Apparitions mixed with reality reveal “Ember” as a morality tale. The story is a mountain legend about a man who commits a murder and then finds himself trapped in a haunted place with other killers. The first-person narrator, Bill Puckett, describes his run from the law after shooting his girlfriend, Phoebe Redd, out of jealousy. He attempts to climb Ember Mountain in order to make a getaway, and while climbing the mountain, he sees a mysterious cabin where a grandmotherly woman lives. She invites him to come in out of the cold. Bill notices that the woman has facial wounds that have healed over with time, except for a fresher wound in her throat, which is as “red and rare as a scarlet flower” (130). Bill drinks some tea that the old woman makes for him and as he is doing so, he realizes the wound in her neck is in the same place where he shot his girlfriend. He passes out. When he awakens, he is in a grassy area, surrounded by all the other men who have killed Phoebe Redd and were punished for it as well. This tale is a ghost story, and the plot twist is that Bill
realizes that he is going to be punished for his crime when he sees that the ghosts of other murderers dwell in what he thought was a place of refuge.

Fantasy is also present in “The Snow That Is Nothing in the Triangle,” in the narration’s mimicry of the derangement of a real man, Herr Feuerbach. The story begins with a question: “If we construct, gentlemen, an equilateral triangle on a sheet of paper, an ordinary sheet of paper such as we customarily use, what is in the triangle?” This question is the catalyst for the telling of the tragic tale of a young mathematician who is descending further into madness. In the process of explaining his theory, the professor confesses to his own failed suicide attempts and the agony he felt at losing one of his close friends and peers. The story ends with the professor becoming completely delusional as he sees his students turn into strangers and as an ashy snow begins to fall in the classroom: “It fell thickly and blindly and covered the floor and the desks and the chairs and Feuerbach’s hands, those hands so aged, they no longer looked entirely human” (42). Feuerbach’s madness is projected onto the narration of the story as well as his physical being. As his mind deteriorates, so does the body of the story and the body of the man.

Magical realism is also present in Chappell’s poetry. In Midquest, the character of Old Fred is thirty-five, and the collection is a mid-life love poem for his family. Fred’s age is significant because it refers to Dante’s age in The Divine Comedy, which begins, “In the middle of the journey of our life . . . .” Dante is thirty-five, since seventy is the Biblically prescribed lifespan of man. The title of Chappell’s collection is also a reference to the opening of Dante’s The Divine Comedy. The collection even includes Virgil Campbell, Old Fred’s version of the muse and guide Virgil in The Divine Comedy.
The blurry world between waking and sleeping is a significant theme in *Midquest*, the lack of strict boundaries allowing Old Fred to reflect on his real life in a fantasy world. In the first poem in *Midquest*, “The River Awakening in the Sea,” Old Fred equates waking with rebirth: “Sleeping sleeping I cannot halt the faithless instinct to be reborn” (58). This rebirth consists of Old Fred emerging from the dream world. Later, in “Fire Now Wakening on the River,” Old Fred is again waking and the poem describes waking as fiery death: “I have no wish to awake / Ever to awake, to be exiled a cinder / From my globe of half-dream …” (63-65). The last poem, “Earthsleep,” describes Old Fred sleeping, about to wake, as “a new creature born thirty-five years to this earth” (9). *Midquest* seems to focus on the fine line between sleeping and waking because that time is often filled with fancy and dreams. Old Fred is able to use the visions in his dreams to gain a positive attitude toward his future.

Another collection of Chappell’s poetry also refers to imagination and dreams as special worlds for reflection. The first and last poems in *Family Gathering*, “Elizabeth Retreats” and “Elizabeth in the Porch Swing,” describe a child learning about adulthood. In the first poem, the little girl Elizabeth is bored and frustrated with the adults and their lack of attention to her: “They let you wander and listen all you please / But pay you no more mind than cigar ash” (19-20). She entertains herself with dancing, escaping the adult world. Then, in the last poem, Elizabeth is asleep, but fretful: “There is one dream / That leaps and dances like a candleflame / And tells her clearly that she must beware” (8-10). This dream is vital to Elizabeth’s recognition of her journey from innocence into adulthood. The dream flits and dances as Elizabeth does earlier in the collection, but it is also a warning of her upcoming journey.
Chappell’s *Dagon* contains more overt uses of fantasy than some of his other works. One commentator describes Chappell’s *Dagon* as borrowing “settings and themes from the Southern gothic, but [including] elements from surrealism, mysticism, and the horror of H.P. Lovecraft” (*Contemporary Authors* 111). *Dagon* is an example of the overlap between the Southern gothic and magical realism. Both genres can include bizarre, horrific, and supernatural events, often inexplicable to the reader. *Dagon* combines magical realism and the Southern gothic genre in the mental deterioration of the main character. The magical-realist aspects of the main character’s descent into madness are illustrated in the surreal visions he suffers as his illness progresses. The reader has difficulty distinguishing what is real and what is imagined. In addition, the Southern gothic elements of the main character’s weakening mental capacity are exemplified through his increasing lust and violence.

Chappell’s narratives all contain elements of fantasy, dreams, bizarre stories, and surreal events. Hal McDonald observes that magical realism “transforms our perception of the world in which we live to accommodate or include the magic that has been there all along, unnoticed perhaps, but very real” (139). The occurrences of magical realist elements are fundamental to all of Chappell’s writings because they provide the protagonist a catalyst for change. The next chapter will show that Chappell’s works contain surreal elements that provide his characters with an escape from the mundane, allowing them to reflect on the meaning and purposes of their lives. In his regional works, fantasy allows his characters to recognize better the world that is around them, leading to truth. By experiencing fantasy, they can come to conclusions about their reality and their position within their societies. In Chappell’s gothic and science fiction works, by contrast, fantasy allows his characters to realize the dangers of fiction since it can lead them away from the truth.
Chapter III

Fiction and the Pursuit of Truth

The commingling of fantasy and reality in Chappell’s world occurs in many different ways: through the thoughts of a main character, in settings, and in narrative structures. Often Chappell’s characters experience dream-like states that can foreshadow what could happen to them, or perhaps what will happen. What occurs in these fantasies and dreams can be good or bad, reflecting inner thoughts, hopes, and fears. Often realizations in dreams express the characters’ subconscious minds. The hero’s reliance on fictionalizing reality, such as through invention or imagination, assists the pursuit of truth in some cases and defeats the pursuit in other cases. Chappell explores the virtues and the defects of fiction, including his own, as a means of pursuing truth.

Fictive reality frequently helps Chappell’s characters in their quest for truth. Chappell alludes to this search for truth in the epigraph to More Shapes Than One, when he quotes Milton’s Areopagitica: “For who knows not that Truth is strong, next to the Almighty. She needs no policies, nor stratagems nor licensings to make her victorious – those are the shifts and defenses that error uses against her power . . . . Yet is it not impossible that she may have more shapes than one.” Milton states that truth does not need a plan, trickery, or consent in order to win in the battle against error; she has only one underlying form, under many shapes, and fundamental truth will always prevail.

Chappell’s quotation from Milton’s Areopagitica in More Shapes Than One reflects his fascination with the philosophy of truth, and it sets the stage for an exploration of truth within these stories. Yet Chappell also places this quotation in his collection as a foil to his tales. The title of the collection indicates that Chappell is acknowledging Milton’s statement,
implying that the truth can have more shapes than one, leaving the interpretation of the truth up to the reader.

Chappell explores truth by blending reality and fictive reality. Through this blending, Chappell finds opportunities to explore the functions of story-telling in relation to the value of truth. Often in his more Appalachian works, his characters achieve truth by telling stories and using fantasy. Yet in his more grotesque works, the truth-value of fiction is usually questioned. While Chappell’s placement of Milton’s quotation as an epigraph signifies its relevance to his stories in More Shapes Than One, Milton’s observation is also relevant to Chappell’s other literary works. In Areopagitica, Milton acknowledges that truth falls into two categories: the truths one already possesses and the truths one has yet to gain. Although the perception of truth may change from story to story, Chappell searches for truth through main characters yearning to find their place in the world.

I Am One of You Forever contains many moments of fantasy mixed with the otherwise seemingly ordinary recollections of childhood. In this regional novel, fabrication is a positive catalyst for Jess’s journey to adulthood. The italicized stories act as the skeleton of the novel, summarizing Jess’s emotional growth and, at various points, his feelings of belonging. The events in these italicized stories are twisted into dreamlike states in which Jess remembers his childhood. In the first story Jess recounts a time when his family consisted of his father, his mother, and himself. Jess and his father build a bridge across the stream in their backyard as a present for Jess’s mother while she is away, but the present is destroyed when the paper mill upstream from them illegally opens its floodgates. At the end of this first italicized story, Jess, his mother, and his father are swept up in his mother’s large tear that engulfs them all. The story presents themes that recur throughout the novel, all
relevant to Jess and his memories: the meaning of family, the roles of men and women, and feelings of loss and sorrow.

The second italicized story, in the exact middle of the novel, is a surreal recollection centering on the telegram that announces Johnson’s death. This story fictionalizes reality in order to show Jess’s family coming to terms with their true feelings about Johnson’s passing. The telegram triggers a roller coaster of feelings in the family. Jess’s father removes the telegram from the kitchen table where it has remained for two weeks after he read it, but it comes back. Each time it comes back, a family member tries to remove it. The return of the telegram mimics the family’s effort to cope with their sorrow by pushing away the pain that keeps returning. They try to forget that Johnson has died, but sadness keeps returning in the form of that telegram. The telegram itself is a fantasy element because no one can remember it being delivered, yet it plagues them by sitting on the kitchen table, like “an ugly pus” (93).

Jess, his mother, and his father each attempt to destroy the telegram in fits of anger, by burying it or burning it, but it will not disappear. The members of the family never talk about the telegram, as if they are afraid of its power over them. Finally, each person takes a turn at staring at the telegram--facing down their feelings--until it disappears. This story shows much about the way that Jess’s family interact with each other. They are all experiencing immense sorrow and pain, yet they never talk to each other about these feelings. Jess notices this lack of communication and thinks it is strange. He is the first to confront his emotions by facing the telegram. He remarks at the end of the tale that the telegram is most agonizing for his mother (presumably because she “took to [Johnson] immediately” when he came to help them on the farm [8]), but the telegram also changes the relationship between Jess and his
father, as the novel later reveals. The memory of the telegram allows an older Jess to reflect on the actuality of the emotions surrounding Johnson’s death.

The third story that is italicized, the last chapter of the book, is completely a dream, as suggested by its first sentence: “It seemed that there were four of us …” (180). Jess is unsure of his surroundings, and he uses the word “seemed” instead of a definitive verb. This dream reveals how Jess sees his place in his family. He is on a hunting trip with the men of his family, and in this dream he is now included in the rituals of hunting as well as the rituals of manhood, such as fantasizing about Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world according to Greek mythology. This chapter employs several kinds of narrative structures – the traditional story of Helen, Jess’s dream, and Jess’s written memory of the dream within the novel – to bring Jess to a conclusion about himself and his budding adulthood. In earlier stories in the novel Jess was treated as a child by his father and Johnson, but in this last chapter he is included as a man.

The italicized stories are not the only places in *I Am One of You Forever* where fiction helps the protagonist find truth. For example, “The Beard” recalls Jess’s Uncle Gurton, who has a mysteriously long and fabled beard. Jess and his father drug Uncle Gurton and then sneak into his room while he is asleep in order to see the beard that he keeps hidden away. They watch in awe and horror as the beard begins “spilling out over the sheet and spreading over the bed like an overturned bucket of milk. It flowed over the foot of the bed and then down the sides, noiseless, hypnotic” (58). The beard comes alive with creatures from books and stories, as it continues to spill throughout the house. These stories stored in Uncle Gurton’s beard represent the novel’s fundamental theme of leading a character to truth through storytelling and fiction. The magical quality of Uncle Gurton’s beard is never
questioned by Jess and his father. They accept it as an amazing answer to their curiosity. The reader might question the credibility of this story, given that it is recalled by a child and that it takes place in a dimly lit room. Yet Jess validates it by offering adult witnesses to this event, and he and Joe Robert even search for a practical solution out of the room without being engulfed by the beard. The story of the beard helps Jess to grow because it teaches him to respect other people. The vision of the beard is a shocking lesson about prying into other people’s business; the tale “illuminates the consequences of humankind’s obsessions” (Sullivan 123). Though Uncle Gurton chooses not to reveal his stories through spoken or written word, his beard provides a magical voice for a curious old man who has lived a long and interesting life. Hal McDonald sees “The Beard” as a perfect example of ontological magic realism, similar to Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” where the main character wakes up to find himself transformed into an insect and does not question how the transformation happened as much as he ponders how to proceed with his daily life (133). In ontological magical realism, the supernatural events in the story are “presented in a matter of fact way as if it did not contradict reason, and no explanations are offered for the unreal events in the text” (Spindler 82). “The Beard” illustrates that the existence of people, place, and events is rarely questioned in Chappell’s works.

The veracity of the storytelling in I Am One of You Forever can be questionable because the stories are recollections that could be embellished by an active childhood imagination. Even so, Jess’s surreal experiences help him discover that the members of his family have shaped him to be the man he is. Jess recalls events in his childhood because he is trying to find out who he is as an adult. Jess’s tales reflect his progression into adulthood and his desire to be included as a man with his father and his surrogate brother, Johnson. In a
The first story in the collection, which describes Joe Robert pulling the moon out of the sky, putting it into a bucket of milk, and later returning the moon to its proper place, is important because it reveals Joe Robert’s personality and his relationship to his family to the reader. When Joe Robert’s mother-in-law asks him why he removed the moon from the sky, he responds that he pulled the moon down to find out if it could be done, because he believed in reason and science. Jess points out at the end of the story that Joe Robert means well, but that sometimes his notions are a bit turned around: “… he was the local champion of reason and science, but somehow he had gotten mounted backward on his noble charger …” (7). Thus this story artfully introduces the reader to Joe Robert, his family, and his personality by juxtaposing fiction and scientific truth. This contrast sets the story up to lead to a resolution of Joe Robert’s dreams.

The juxtaposition of creative remembering and truth continues in the middle italicized story in *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, where Jess’s father teaches him not to fight the tenant farmer’s son. The story has two main foci: Jess’s feelings about his father, and Joe Robert’s beliefs about society. Jess is egged on by the farmers who use his father’s land, but Joe Robert will not allow Jess to fight the boy, who teases him because he sees the conflict as friction between the “haves and the have-nots” (111). Joe Robert cannot see that Jess is very hurt by the teasing; he sees that his family has a moral obligation not to bring more hardship on an already poor family. At the end of the story, Jess goes into a crazed state and thinks to
himself after beating up Burrell, the tenant farmer’s son, “I wish I was grown up now already and owned me a farm with some poor folks on it . . . . I’d whip their ass three times a day” (114). Jess is obviously pushed to a breaking point in this story by both his father and the tenants, and he becomes a different person in the end. He is violent and his thoughts reveal that his grammar is nonstandard – a very different picture from the bookworm the reader sees earlier in the novel. This change in Jess is a truer representation of the narrator as a young man by himself as an older, more educated narrator. The experience illustrates the relationship of Jess, the hero, to society, because his sociolinguistic guard is temporarily lowered when he recounts the tenant farmer fight, and thus, fictionalizing allows the reader to see how Jess spoke as a child, revealing a more accurate picture of the novel’s narrator.

The last story in Brighten the Corner Where You Are is a dream sequence, much like the one at the end of I Am One of You Forever. This time Joe Robert is dreaming about Charles Darwin being executed at the Tipton High School. Joe Robert attempts to defend the scientist and begins a brilliant speech in support of the theory of evolution. Yet his speech goes awry as he becomes the “vessel of a Truth that had long been waiting to make him its spokesman” (211). Joe Robert voices what he has discovered in his day-long “epic” journey in the novel: “It is the nature of the human animal to subject its earnest seekers and most passionate thinkers to humiliation, degradation, imprisonment, and execution” (212). Humiliation and ridicule are what usually happen to Joe Robert because he is a seeker of the truth. In the dream, Darwin is hanged and Joe Robert giggles in his sleep, seeing the execution as a joke.

“Bacchus” is a particularly odd chapter of Brighten the Corner Where You Are, in which Chappell uses fantasy to help the protagonist reach a turning point. In this story, Joe
Robert climbs up to the roof of the house in order to persuade a goat named “Bacchus” to come down, but instead he engages the goat in a conversation about philosophy. This bizarre story then blends seamlessly into the next chapter, “Socrates,” where Joe Robert is telling his students about the philosopher goat and how the goat treated him badly. Whether Joe Robert really believes that the goat spoke to him is unclear. He may merely be trying to interest his students in philosophy with this story. In this tale, however, Joe Robert’s fictional experience tells the truth, and describes his inner struggle with the teachings of scientists and philosophers – those who set conventions for locating, measuring, and describing truth. He wants to be one of these men, but at the same time, he cannot wholly subscribe to their theories.

Truth in fictionalization is also a main theme in both *Farewell I’m Bound to Leave You* and *Look Back All the Green Valley*. The chapter entitled “Fisherwoman” in *Farewell I’m Bound to Leave You* illustrates how to become a good storyteller and foreshadows Jess’s profession as a writer. According to Jess’s grandmother, Annie Barbara, one must put oneself in the protagonist’s place in order to tell a story properly. When she asks Jess if he would like to be a storyteller, he replies that he would, but does not know any stories. Annie Barbara advises him to be a good listener in order to learn stories. That advice is exemplified throughout the mountain-family novels because they are all collections of stories told to the protagonist, Jess, who then retells them to the reader. In *Look Back All the Green Valley*, the reader discovers that Jess Kirkman uses the pen name Fred Chappell. Jess/Fred uses Annie Barbara’s advice and places himself in the protagonist’s place in order to tell his story; the author and the protagonist are one and the same. The connection between the author and the hero reflects their unity in the journey for truth.
While fictive reality in Chappell’s more regional works tend to lead the protagonist toward truth, it can cause the opposite effect in Chappell’s grotesque works. For example, the main character in *Dagon*, Peter Leland, also struggles internally with his identity, and delusions allow him to experience a psychological journey that ultimately leads him away from truth. His mind is so warped and foggy with alcohol and memories that events in the story are distorted at times. In the early stages of Peter’s mental decline, he foreshadows his wife’s death by dreaming about killing her: “He was talking, kept murmuring monotonously, his voice thick and deep and full of words he could not distinguish, could not hear . . . . He kept speaking to her and she would not answer, but in the bed lay a tangle of blood, dark, bluish, in the cheap moonlight” (70). When Peter commits the murder, in a manner very similar to the way in his dream, his rage is fueled by the same voices and memories of the past. Peter’s deed exemplifies the dangers of alternate realities and the responsibility of any person to recognize when reality deviates from truth. Peter does not realize that his delusions are leading him astray. The remainder of the novel is a similar blur of events during which Peter does not seem to be in his right mind. Peter ceases to be active; his movement is restricted by his addiction to alcohol and by his attachment to Mina. The blending of dreams and hazy memories illustrates Peter’s mental deterioration until he reaches a state in which he is nothing but a bodiless spirit who has given himself over totally to his thoughts.

For Peter, dreaming and being immersed in an alternate reality are not a positive experience. Peter is similar to Jess because he too discovers his place in his family. Also like Jess, Peter recalls events involving his father and his grandmother when he was much younger, but, unlike Jess’s recollections, Peter’s discoveries are extremely dark and disturbing. Both novels consider the uses and abuses of memory; however, Jess’s experience
shows fantasy and imagination as positive while Peter’s experience shows them as a source of horror. While Peter does attempt to face his history and perhaps his true self, his life takes a turn for the worse. Collapse may have been his destiny; thus the altered state he endures allows him to discover the truth about himself. Chappell says that writing the character of Peter Leland in *Dagon* was extremely difficult because “the events of the novel were so crushing that [Peter] could never get out from under it [sic]” (“Chappell, Fred,” 78: 114). Peter gives up his will and succumbs to evil. Compared to Chappell’s other leading male characters, such as Jess and Joe Robert, Peter is very passive. He allows bad things to happen to him, and his search for truth and personal growth appears stunted by his complaisance.

Every story in *More Shapes Than One* explores the protagonist’s reliance on fiction to assist in his pursuit of truth. And many of the tales require readers to suspend disbelief, without “actively” calling upon them to do so (McDonald 127). For example, Linnaeus’s unusual plant appears to be magical, because it contains “a miniature society in which the mundane and the fanciful co-mingled in a matter-of-fact fashion” (13). That description of the plant is also appropriate for Chappell’s fiction, which searches for truth through fantasy, sometimes with positive results and sometimes with negative results. For Linnaeus, the enchanting experience of the strange plant that blends fantasy and reality allows him to confront frustrations he has encountered in his studies, because he sees the world in a new, more beautiful light, and he begins to use metaphors in his documentation. For Linnaeus, metaphors are a type of fictionalizing that tells the truth, allowing his work to be more genuine to his identity. Chappell also uses metaphors and other non-literal figures of speech as vessels of truth. In many ways, his stories are extended metaphors, allegories for truth, which illustrate the human desire to find self-knowledge and purpose. For example, in *Look*
*Back All the Green Valley*, the italicized stories show Jess attempting to exhume his father’s remains. These stories are the symbolic “digging up” of his father, while the rest of the stories in the novel describe Jess trying to discover his father’s secret life in his workshop, a metaphorical grave of ideas. Jess is making an effort to understand the kind of man his father was in order to better understand himself.

“The Somewhere Doors” is another story from *More Shapes Than One*, in which the main character, a science fiction writer named Arthur Strakl, is affected by fictionality that leads him to recognize the value of his life. Arthur realizes that he has been living in the dream world of his stories after he encounters a pair of doors on his armoire that offer him two worlds: one is a world with no people and the other is a world “of great cities” (80). Arthur puts off making the decision for many years until one day he realizes that he has made the decision to choose a third door, to stay on the planet. He decides that he can no longer live in the fantasy world of his stories because it is keeping him from enjoying the real world around him. When Arthur chooses actuality over fantasy, he begins to appreciate and experience the real world for the first time. Chappell’s point in this story may be to consider the defects in fictionalizing, because too much reliance on fiction can lead the hero away from the path of truth. Both Chappell and his character in “The Somewhere Doors” explore the risk of fictionalizing. The conclusion appears to indicate that Chappell prescribes moderation in fiction because too much fantasy can obscure the true meanings in life.

“The Adder” also exemplifies the literal responsibilities and liabilities of fictionalizing. The book in this story is a vampire to other books, poisoning and devouring any that come near it; “first it poisons, then it devours” (102). It fades when it does not have nourishment, and it is called the Adder because its poisons other books. The first-person
narrator, Robert, accidentally sets the evil book on top of a volume of Milton, infecting all the copies of Milton in the world by changing the words in them:

It took me a long time to understand that this manuscript had found something to feed upon. It had discovered a form of nourishment that caused it to thrive and grow stout. And I am embarrassed to admit that more hours elapsed before I guessed the source of the food – which had to be the copy of Milton’s poems I had placed on top of it. (107)

Robert attempts to contain the contamination and restore Milton, but fails. The story ends with a fly carrying off the poison of the ink of the *Necronomicon* to spread the evil throughout the world. The end of this tale is both shocking and horrifying because fiction is actually a contaminant. Chappell is expressing the idea that “words can destroy as well as create” and that there is a moral obligation to those who fictionalize (Lang 143). The story is one of Chappell’s many metafictions, reflecting on the responsibility of literature and those who create or nurture it.

In Chappell’s poetry, fictionalizing is generally an aid in the protagonist’s quest for truth. Recollection and self-identification in Chappell’s poetry are often revealed through an alternate reality, such as dreams. As in his prose works, Chappell’s use of dreams in *Family Gathering* and *Midquest* suggests that experiencing an alternate reality is important to the growth of the characters. The world of dreams and the experience of waking from a dream and drifting to sleep are strong situations in his poetry. Both of these states are types of fictive realities, in which events may not always be what they seem. Dreams tell stories, and the metaphors and dreams in *Midquest* are also vessels of the truth. They do not serve to deceive Old Fred on his journey. *Midquest* involves the cycles of life, sleeping and waking included. For example the first poem of the collection, “The River Awakening in the Sea,” metaphorically describes Old Fred as coming out of the dream world. He is a river mixing
with the ocean and washing up to a shore that represents the wakened world: “While I am wishing never to wake / the oily bull-muscle / Of sea shoves us landward, straining and warping like kites” (50-51). Then, in the poem “Birthday 35: Diary Entry,” Old Fred wishes that he can dream and find truth: “Or that simply by dreaming I’d find out / What subnuclear physics is all about” (97-98). Fred sees dreaming as a solution to his lack of an interesting life. That reliance on a fictive reality could be misleading for Fred, as it is for Peter in *Dagon*, but dreaming acts as a therapy for Fred instead.

Later in the collection, “Susan’s Morning Dream of Her Garden” is a poem devoted to the explanation of a dream. It reflects in words the nonsense that can seem so real in a dream, and the resistance to waking: “You don’t catch me yet, New Day, I’m snuggling / deeper in the larder of dream …” (60-61). Susan struggles to stay in the realm of dreams because it is easier than reality. But she cannot stay in the dream world because the sunlight of the day wakes her: “Yet there’s no help for it, and up I go / to breast the unendearing morning, / eject, usurpt, and half awake” (78-80). When she wakes, she is like a blank slate, “a dimestore plate which has no picture on it,” ready for her future (82).

In the last poem of *Midquest*, “Earthsleep,” Old Fred is sleeping, once again about to waken, accepting the changes in his life: “What shapes may we take now / Where destiny uncurls its roots of fire?” (26-27). He awakens to embrace the uncertainty of the future because dreams have led him to the truth about the happiness of his life. Fictive reality leads him to the answers that he prayed for in the earlier poems, supporting the idea that fantasy, dreams, and other fictions are all sources of truth. In addition to the fiction within the actual collection of poems, *Look Back All the Green Valley* tells the story of Fred Chappell/Jess Kirkman writing *Midquest*. Thus, a novel tells the story of a man who writes a collection of
poems similar to *The Divine Comedy* that describes a middle-aged man’s search for truth. The layers of reality are multiple, and these different realities allow the author to find answers to his questions about life.

In *Family Gathering*, Elizabeth is dreaming about her life in the last poem, “Elizabeth in the Porch Swing.” But Elizabeth is not sleeping well, because her dream is a story trying to warn her about growing up; in doing so, it is providing her with truth and knowledge. The poem states, “There’s more to dream than we can wish to know. / Elizabeth is dreaming gibberish – and yet / She feels that what she dreams is truly so . . .” (16-18). On one hand the dream is a nonsensical collection of images, but the dream world is a setting that Elizabeth can accept as truth. Dreams are a vessel of truth for Elizabeth because in the nebulous reality of the dream world, Elizabeth is presented with her fears about growing up.

Fictive reality allows some of Chappell’s characters to explore the truth about themselves in an unconstrained manner; however, escaping to a “made-up” world also allows other characters to evade self-truths. Fiction-making in Chappell’s works is a valuable medium for the characters as well as for the reader. Realizations in dreams represent the characters’ subconscious impulses or perhaps unrecognized alternatives, leading ultimately to truth. Thus, fiction-making can foreshadow truth, indicating what will happen to the characters, or perhaps simply what could happen to them. But fiction-making can also prove risky, as in the case of Peter Leland and some of the more gothic tales from *More Shapes Than One*, when the protagonists are led into danger through their reliance on fictive reality. Peter is turned into a delusional monster when he focuses too much on the legends of his family, and Arthur Strakl wastes his life reading and writing stories instead of living. Chappell’s stories are unified by their attention to the resources of fiction-making, through
which he shows that characters who rely too heavily on fiction can be led astray from the truth.
Conclusion

In an interview, Chappell states that Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is one of his favorite plays because he likes “the transition or almost lack of transition between the supernatural and the realistic elements of the play” (“Chappell, Fred,” 78: 109). Chappell also says he is “interested in getting rid of the division between what is wished for, what is imagined, and what is generally thought to be realistic or recognized as factual” (“Chappell, Fred,” 78: 110). These beliefs are illustrated throughout Chappell’s works, and they support his use of ontological magical realism. But Chappell denies the conscious use of magical realism; instead, the magic that appears in his world results from his belief that the world is magical enough as it is, and that no author needs to transform it to be more so (McDonald 139).

Rather, Chappell sees the role of the author to be a voice of truth, as he exemplifies in the storytelling character of Uncle Zeno. Chappell’s “quest for the truth and order that he sees as an integral function of the human imagination” is illustrated in his works through his hero and his hero’s journey (Lang 140). Chappell’s literary imagination is like truth – it has more shapes than one – and so has produced poetry and prose; but all of Chappell’s works are unified through his heroes, through the necessity of fantasy during their heroic journeys, and through the role of fiction in their pursuit of truth.
Works Cited


