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### The Effects of Trauma on Identity Formation: Pursuing and Obtaining Individual Freedom in Emerson's Nature and Creech's Chasing Redbird

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The Effects of Trauma on Identity Formation: Pursuing and Obtaining Individual  
Freedom in Emerson's *Nature* and Creech's *Chasing Redbird*

The way in which past trauma affects how individuals process information becomes the focal point for many prolific writers. Specifically, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* depicts how Emerson coped with a range of grievances, as he desired to be intimately connected with nature. Emerson describes nature often through referencing the innocence of a child, as a child does not fully understand tragedy and its effects. In the essay, he asserts that children possess an inherent ability to relate to the natural world because their innocent perspectives are not yet tainted by experience. He also claims that being in nature allows individuals to process their emotions without the interruptions of modern society. Sharon Creech's young adult novel *Chasing Redbird* poses as a model for Emerson's assertions. Zinny Taylor, the young adolescent protagonist, endured trauma not openly discussed by her family. As a result, Zinny internalizes her grief, only understanding her identity through encounters with the natural world. Therefore, examining Emerson's personal experiences in relation to Trauma Theory, while analyzing Creech's *Chasing Redbird* as the exemplar for Trauma Theory's assertions and *Nature's* themes, reveals how unresolved grief affects the maturation of a child.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson's Background

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born into a family where outward displays of love and affection toward the children were scarce, especially from his father (McClelland 34). Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, to Reverend William Emerson and Ruth Haskins in Boston Massachusetts, and the city was already growing into an increasingly urban area (Richardson 18). Due to his observant nature as a child, he often felt imprisoned in urban life and perceived this as hindering his upbringing since he lived far from an undisturbed country lifestyle (Richardson 18). Ultimately, this paints the picture for modern audiences and critics to understand how, from a young age, he felt a dissonance between his longing to be in the natural world rather than the growing metropolitan area in which he lived. The lack of affection he received from his father and the recognition of his desire to live elsewhere contributed to why he felt deeply disconnected from his own identity. Emerson claimed that he would shun his “father and mother and wife and brother, when [his] genius calls [him]” (Emerson, *Self-Reliance* 4) which depicts his deeply rooted need for independence after his father’s emotional abandonment. Emerson illustrates here that he is completely disconnected from his ability to relate to other people as a result of the emotional challenges he faced during his upbringing. Emerson attempted to “sterilize childhood” (McClelland 14) as a means for purification, creating an idealized vision of childhood since he believed he lacked a true childhood. This sterilization of childhood likely signifies his desire to purify and present a perfect childhood experience. The childlike mindset and adolescent need for finding the true meaning of his personhood indisputably appears in many aspects of his early life, although more prominently arises in his writing.

Although Emerson became detached from his parents, Emerson’s intellectual abilities were developed during his childhood because he was forced to make observations and conclusions on his own. The independence Emerson received at just eight years old was due to

his father's premature death; he remembers his father as a harsh figure, and this lack of a father figure enabled him to focus on his studies (*A Historical Guide* 11). His focus on schoolwork also helped to distract him from his impoverished state, as his mother was left to provide for the family, a difficult task for a single mother in the early nineteenth century. However, his intellectual abilities as a writer were not evidenced in college; he graduated from Harvard in the middle of his class (*A Historical Guide* 11). Emerson eventually attended Harvard Divinity school from 1825 to 1827 and preached until 1832. After he ended his career as a preacher, which followed directly in his father's footsteps, he traveled to Europe for ten months, detailing his trip in multiple journals; his journals explicitly evidenced the freedom he received from going on walks to delightful places in the natural environment (*A Historical Guide* 14). This trip resulted in his desire to focus on the natural world, one which gave him true serenity and distance from the sorrowful life he had as a child. As one studies Emerson's own experiences with the natural world, it becomes clear that he acknowledged his love of nature even in its absence. The foundation for his future need to cope with tragedy was established through his early years and into college, proving his inherent need to become intimately acquainted with nature.

To gain a complete understanding of Emerson's necessity to write *Nature*, one must understand the tragedies Emerson faced during his lifetime, before and after writing this specific text in 1836. Emerson endured several deaths in his immediate family that affected him deeply: his father's death, his siblings' deaths, his first wife's death, and his son's death (Packer 169). It is interesting to note Emerson's fixation on his late family members; in 1833, he once visited Ellen Louisa Tucker, his first wife who died in 1831, at her grave and opened the coffin as "some part of him was not able to believe she was dead" (Richardson 3). He believed she was present

with him even after her death (*A Historical Guide* 12). After his first wife died at the young age of nineteen, Emerson left his vocation as a minister because he could not “administer the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper” (*Ralph Waldo Emerson*) as death was a horribly tough subject to address. Whether these actions denote an obsession with the dead or a coping mechanism, it is possible Emerson needed to open the coffin to gain personal peace. One may consider the marriage of Emerson’s dislike of industrialization and the tragedies he faced to conclude that *Nature* is the product of the two.

Later, Emerson married Lidian Jackson in 1835, and their five-year-old son, Waldo, died of scarlet fever in 1842; consequently, Emerson spiraled into grief and bouts of depression (McClelland 34). Although *Nature* was written six years before Waldo’s birth, Emerson already saw life through the eyes of a child. Therefore, he was so deeply affected by the death of his son because he created the idealized picture of the childhood he desired, one that he wished his son could experience. Emerson’s grief after Waldo’s death may not be only due to the death itself, but the death of his son’s childhood experience. Because Emerson had already written *Nature*, the lens through which he viewed life would continue to be tainted, as if the childhood experience could not be remedied. Even though the writing of *Nature* occurred before this tragedy, there is a clear connection between the trauma of Emerson’s own childhood and the themes presented in this work. Specifically, his own experience as a child and young adolescent “inform[s] most of [his] representative stories, including the one he tells about *Nature*” (McClelland 17). As a result, Emerson likely believed he lost two childhoods: the one he experienced, and his son’s that would never be.

Emerson’s reaction to Waldo’s death directly contradicts many of his claims about his need for freedom and independence. Emerson believed that his independence could never be

compromised by someone else, yet the relationship he had with his son was a bond that he did not share with other members of his family as a child himself. Compromising his independence for the sake of nurturing his son was a worthy cause for Emerson as he longed for this kind of relationship since he was a young boy. Once Emerson finally obtained a trusting father-son relationship, he was deprived of it. One could assume that he made such a claim about shunning his family members because of how “severe” his father was with him and his siblings (Richardson 20). With this in mind, how could Emerson have learned to create such a special bond with his son when his own father neglected him? It is logical to assume his mother brought more of the loving nature to the parent-child relationship. Emerson wrote that he “went to bed in bliss at the interest she showed” (Richardson 21). One clearly observes the natural relationship and bond between the parent and child, as well as the lack of this type of relationship, through Emerson’s childhood experiences. He discreetly incorporates his background experiences in several his writings, but his work in *Nature* offers a glimpse into the way he deals with grief, most vividly through the eyes of the child’s perspective.

Emerson’s detachment from intimate relationships as a young child contributed to his distance from and longing for childlike innocence. Specifically, he frames much of his writing around the difference between the adult’s experience and the child’s innocence. As clearly depicted in *Nature*, he attempts to purify his childhood, placing a representative child as a focus in this essay as a means to showcase an idealized way of living (McClelland 14). McClelland states that Emerson’s essay acts as a nurturing mother figure, making it close “to a confession that his idealization of nature compensated for a sorrow-infused childhood” (18). In *Nature*, Emerson makes readers aware of a disconnection between humans and nature, in that humans are preoccupied with the increasing modernization of society. Moreover, he claims that nature is a

force that grants freedom from societal expectations, but humans fail to see the importance of allowing oneself to enjoy the spirituality of the natural environment after enduring a traumatic season of life. Emerson's work contains the following sections: "Nature," "Commodity," "Beauty," "Language," "Discipline," "Idealism," "Spirit," and "Prospects." These sections each depict the relationship between nature and humankind. Emerson urges the audience to consider how an individual can experience wholeness and freedom from the ways the modernization of society affects one's daily life. He suggests that the only way to find one's identity in the most authentic and pure form is to spend time within the natural world to deal with personal struggles.

Due to his own loss of childhood, Emerson removed the self-inflicted emotional barriers in order to process his past experiences, allowing for a written work to aid in his attempt to process his own grief. This solitude outside of the pressures of modern life allows an individual to cross the barrier from just being an earthly individual into viewing the world as a spiritual space. He argues that modern society does not allow the individual to truly appreciate what nature has to offer, so understanding life as spiritual provides a greater insight into how nature itself reflects human nature: all parts are working together to create the whole. Emerson asserts that if one truly desires to find inner peace, one must locate one's inner child. He suggests that children often can accept nature for what it is instead of manipulating it into something else, as adults with experience often attempt to make meaning out of nothing (Emerson 3). Further, he urges his audience to liberate their past innocence, to break through the surface and reveal eternal youth. Because of his personal understanding of why youth and childlike tendencies need to be protected, it appears as though he believes only the child can experience true rest and freedom when in nature.

## 2. Sharon Creech's Background

Like Emerson's upbringing that influenced the writing of his essay, Creech's experiences dramatically shaped her novel, as many of her own experiences become part of the novel's plot. Creech's inspiration to write young adult novels results from her personal experiences growing up with a large family. Creech was born in Euclid, Ohio, on July 29, 1945, and she was the second oldest of five children (Carroll 2). Growing up with an extremely close bond with both her immediate and extended families, Creech spent much of her time with her family. In an interview, Creech revealed that her characters are a combination of people she personally knows, specifically her own family members (Peck 381). Creech admits that writing about "young protagonists' relationships with siblings and with older people... reflect[s] [her] own relationships with [her] gentle, humorous relatives" (Carroll 3). *Chasing Redbird* mimics her experience; she implements true adolescent behaviors and thought processes into the story that resembles family relations she experienced.

Not only was Creech inspired by her own experience, but she also implemented an abundance of natural imagery as a reminder of her childhood; although Creech is not necessarily aware of the exact reason, she has always loved "climbing hills and trees" while also being "drawn to rural locations and [being] calmed by them, very much like Zinny" (Carroll 2-3). It is clear that stages of Creech's own development affect her writing; as a result, readers of all ages are able to access the beautiful imagery and childlike narration even though an adult is writing from the perspective of the child. This directly relates to why Emerson wrote *Nature*, referencing the innocence and adaptive nature of the child's experience to demonstrate how to cope with trauma as one engages with the natural world.

Creech began her writing career after her father's death, similar to Emerson's start. In an interview, she reveals personal details to the interviewers surrounding her relationship with her father while describing his influence in her writing. However, Creech's father suffered from a stroke, and she realized after his death how terrible it was not to communicate with someone she loved (Peck 382). Creech stated that she felt as though writing was "an obligation... to use all the words [her] father couldn't use" (Peck 382). Her grief allowed her to craft natural imagery in a way to help others cope. Writing *Chasing Redbird* helped her to grieve her father's death, as it "also seemed to mirror the trails we all follow in our lives" ("From the Author"). Creech admits that she did not know where the writing would take her, claiming that this mirrors both the writing process and Zinny's journey ("From the Author").

Creech's ability to write with such precision and poignancy reflects in the various awards she has received for her novels. Creech was the first author to receive both the Newberry Medal and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, Carnegie Medal (CILIP); the latter was also given to C.S. Lewis (Caroll 7). The fact that Creech shares this honor with C.S. Lewis places "Creech in the brightest, sunniest pool of literary achievement for authors whose readers are young people" (Caroll 7). Creech writes in a way that reaches young audiences not only because of her personal childhood experience, but also because she is a licensed English teacher. She employs rhythmic syntax, repetition, exaggeration, and humor to demonstrate her experience as an English teacher as students study these ideas often from early elementary school until the end of high school (Caroll 21). Creech understands how to access young readers' minds and does so showcasing her mastery of the craft of storytelling. Her accolades are worth mentioning to prove that this young adult author belongs in the same

category as traditionally classic authors, especially considering how one may glean similar lessons from classic literature to modern texts.

To showcase Emerson's ideas, a modern young adult novel can aid in illustrating many of his assertions about the restorative power of the natural world in *Nature*. As previously mentioned, Sharon Creech's *Chasing Redbird* is an example for the themes and ideas presented in Emerson's work. To illustrate how Creech's work is exemplary, she admits in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Gazette* that she "cannot just write a frivolous book" because "something [is] going to pull you up short"; consequently, she uses her love of the natural world to emphasize environmental solace to her young characters, as spending time in nature "nourishes a child" (Azzam). Creech continues to discuss that her personal, yet unnamed, trauma in her life influenced her desire to write for young people with the hope to prove there will be an end to their trauma. As she writes, she intentionally and purposefully weaves elements of trauma into her novels to display its significance and prove that it bleeds into one's life when he or she least expects it. While Creech refrains from naming the event as traumatic in her novels, she employs a hardship in each of her novels to "reassure young readers" that there is no need to "fear the unexpected" (Azzam). Creech does not simply write to entertain; she writes to teach, provide hope, and emphasize growth so that her young audience may learn they are not alone in their struggles. Understanding the implications of Creech's personal expectations for her novels demonstrates her desire to bridge the gap between trauma and the pursuit of peace, especially considering the child-like lens through which she writes.

*Chasing Redbird* details the maturation of thirteen-year-old Zinny Taylor. When readers are first introduced to Zinny, she appears shy and withdrawn, preferring the care of her Uncle Nate and Aunt Jessie over her own parents. Her parents are busy taking care of her other

siblings, leaving Zinny feeling as though she is unimportant. Because of this, Zinny spends much of her time outside where she can exercise her individuality without the prodding of her siblings or the apparent indifference of her own parents. Her love of nature was largely influenced by her aunt and uncle, as they spent an abundance of their time outside. Yet this relationship began to disintegrate after Uncle Nate and Aunt Jessie's daughter Rose died of whooping cough, which she caught from Zinny, causing the Taylor family to stop talking of Rose altogether around Zinny. As a result, Zinny could not help but believe she was the sole cause of Rose's death and blamed herself for this happening. Unfortunately, Aunt Jessie also passes away, and Zinny blames herself for yet another death. As Zinny matures, she begins to find herself outdoors, unintentionally beginning to remedy these traumatic experiences through finding and restoring an overgrown trail.

To take control of something in her life, Zinny begins to clear the trail; she researches the trail from the library archives and discovers it is hundreds of years old. Zinny feels as though redeeming this trail would be a way to receive forgiveness from God, making the clearing of the trail a way to remedy her guilt. Little by little, she clears the trail for the duration of the summer, and she begins to understand and forgive herself, forming a unique sense of identity as well as reconciling her past trauma. Additionally, Jake Boone, a boy who attempts to romantically pursue Zinny, causes her to finally allow herself to let others in her life again during a period of self-discovery; prior to the trail, she struggled to create close relationships with others. As the novel progresses, Creech demonstrates Zinny's newfound ability to trust others, including herself, because the trail offers an escape from others' expectations. Most importantly, the trail allows Zinny to finally take ownership over something in her life, mirroring her newfound ability to understand herself on a deeper level.

### 3. Analysis of Works Within the Context of Trauma Theory

When considering how grief and guilt affect an individual, one must acknowledge trauma theory and its explanation of feeling remorse toward one's harmful experiences. Sandra L. Bloom, M.D. outlines what trauma is and what trauma does in her article "Trauma Theory Abbreviated." Using the definition of child psychiatrist Lenore Terr, she states, "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from the outside" (Bloom 2). In Emerson's text, he makes his audience aware of a perceived disconnect between the human experience and experiences outside of one's control. This is likely due to losing his own childhood as well as losing his father at a young age (Richardson 20). Since Emerson desired a remedied father-son relationship, demonstrated by his grief after his son's passing, he suggests that "all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence" (Emerson *Nature* 2). Emerson needed to find something that would help him feel less alone as he processed his grief, relying on the natural world to provide this companionship. Not only did Emerson lose influential aspects of his early life, but he also defined modernization as a hindrance to his character, even as a young boy (Richardson 18). Therefore, it is logical to assume that Emerson fled to nature as a guide to life, helping him realize the "series of blows" he endured in his past.

Like Emerson's *Nature*, *Chasing Redbird* presents ideas about coping with grief and trauma. Zinny Taylor's perception of life is largely influenced by Aunt Jessie and Rose's deaths. Her family members' inability to support her in her understanding of how to manage grief indicated this was the beginning of a "series of blows" in Zinny's young life. Creech's novel reveals how Zinny's relationships with her family contribute to her emotional instability. Zinny's

childhood was filled with trauma that her parents and siblings neglected to discuss. From the very beginning of the novel, Zinny views her life in similes and metaphors, most likely due to the series of unfortunate experiences that will soon be revealed. For example, Zinny uses the metaphor, “[l]ife is a bowl of spaghetti... it took a heap of undoing to untangle it” (1-2). Readers can deduce that Zinny will continue to explain what she had to untangle, using a childlike vernacular to display how she has recovered from a traumatic experience. Since readers do not initially understand what she has endured for there to be a need to “untangle” her life, this compels her audience to continue reading to understand what this young adolescent girl has already suffered. Fortunately, Creech does not leave this unanswered for long. In the next few pages, it is revealed that Zinny experiences a series of two deaths in her family, and her family neglected to discuss these hardships. Because of a failure to verbalize this information, Zinny genuinely believed in her “four-year-old mind that [she] was responsible for Rose being in that drawer” (5). Due to their cognitive and emotional developmental state combined with their inability to regulate such emotions, children are not naturally equipped to recover traumatic experiences (Bloom 3). Therefore, the two texts depict ways in which the experiences of a child, Emerson’s past and Zinny’s limited lived experience, can alter the thought processes and perspectives after enduring a traumatic event that goes unattended.

Just as Zinny ruminated on a past event, Emerson’s past is the focal point for many of his writings, especially after enduring many tragic events that infected his perspective. Identifying the reason for the continuation of a singular traumatic event is an important element to consider when observing how one wrestles with one’s past. Bloom also acknowledges that children experience psychological trauma when an event outside of their control causes an incessant fear that harm will come to them or a loved one (2). Children’s experiences are shaped by the way

they think, learn, remember situations, feel about themselves and others, and the way they make sense of the world (Bloom 2). Considering Emerson's background, it is clear to see how his past may have affected his pursuit toward isolation and the need to find companionship in nature. When considering how to approach this reconciliation, he begins his essay stating that children are "retrospective" indicating Emerson's own need to reflect upon his childhood which began the pursuit of satisfying his desires (Emerson *Nature* 1). Emerson paints nature as a "comforting figure" that acts as a loving mother who "recovers him from an unnamed grief with glad acceptance" (McLelland 20) which sharply contrasts the adult that lacks the ability to see what a child can. McLelland's argument concerning Emerson's enlightened view of nature enables modern readers to empathize with his traumatic experience because he hopes to find comfort in the personification of nature as a child would.

Emerson ruminates on his past in order to better understand how those desires can be met, thus describing the effects of nature. To illustrate his point, Emerson uses the child's experience as an attempt to demonstrate an ideal form of life, as well as his belief that nature is the ultimate fulfillment of desires. Emerson claims that man, or the adult, does not experience the same illumination of thought as the child. Instead, the "sun... shines into the eye and the heart of the child" (Emerson *Nature* 2). It is necessary to understand that children are actively constructing and deconstructing how they perceive the world; their perception of happenings around them are affected by the lens through which they are taught by their parents or guardians (Muris 179). Since Emerson experienced little interaction with his parents, or even siblings for that matter, he was forced to find another realm that would meet his needs.

Considering these assertions made by Trauma Theorists, and illustrated by Emerson, Creech presents how Zinny's adolescent experiences demonstrate Emerson's argument that

children view the world through an untainted lens. Zinny's experience with trauma likely resulted in the creation of a schema to connect traumatic events to herself, since toddlers are extremely egocentric. Young children filter their new happenings through their innocence; therefore, when trauma happens, they cannot attribute it to anyone other than themselves. Because children's experiences are limited, their ability to understand intense occurrences that involve loved ones negatively affects their limited lived experience. Nevertheless, children have an inherent developmental capability to create new connections and restructure their perspective of harmful events (Bloom 2). Although Zinny recounts the traumatic narrative prior to revealing how she learned to understand her trauma, the audience is already aware that she will learn to "untangle" her personal grievances (Creech 1-2).

As a young child, though, Zinny did not have the cognitive ability to identify the source of her trauma and followed blindly in the footsteps of trusted adults; she would eventually be able to restructure how she perceived her past trauma, but readers must first understand the obstacles that, at first, inhibited her ability to overcome her self-imposed limitations. In the novel, for example, a dresser drawer was utilized as the coffin in which Rose was buried, perhaps keeping a material reminder of Rose within the home. Because Zinny spent her time with her aunt and uncle, she most likely perceived this nonverbal cue as proof that her family did not want to talk about Rose around her. Creech, then, illustrates Zinny's inability to process her young adolescent emotions when walking with her aunt and uncle in the following passage:

At the end of our health walks, we'd pass the family cemetery where Rose was buried, but they never went too close to her grave. It was a strange thing about Rose. It was as if they'd erased her. All her toys were gone, all her clothes, all her pictures. I was having

trouble remembering her. It was as if everything to do with Rose was put away in a drawer in my mind, and I couldn't open that drawer. (6-7)

Zinny reveals she often went to Rose's grave alone to talk to her, because she rarely spoke to living people, just as Emerson visited his late wife's grave (Creech 7; Richardson 3). This passage illustrates how young adolescents observe adults' actions, and how these adolescents ultimately are influenced by the values that adults possess. Even though the adults in Zinny's life did not visit the grave, the lack of visitation only made Zinny more curious as to how she fits into her family after Rose's death. It is likely that Zinny observes these behaviors and learns that the adults in her life dissociate Zinny and Rose's childhood from each other. Because Zinny does not confront her past, the cycle of trauma continues into her early adolescent years.

However, directly confronting and acknowledging past trauma allows for long-term mental and emotional security, and Emerson provides some insight into the benefits of confrontation. It should be noted that Emerson's emotional hardships forced him to find nature as solace, allowing for the creation of coping mechanisms. Yet, a traumatic experience continues as an individual begins to create defense mechanisms due to the initial threat. Because the mind cannot function clearly enough to make logical decisions when feeling threatened, the recurring cycle of vulnerability makes people become accustomed to anxiety and always feel a sense of doom (Bloom 3). The importance of the child's perspective in Emerson's text is further evidenced when he attempts to control his childhood in a way that demonstrates clear connections to Trauma Theory. Trauma Theory suggests that children fare best when talking through their trauma and hardships, or else those experiences will continue and lead to learned helplessness (Bybee 23). When an individual perceives there is an immediate threat or danger, their body produces a response that "affects all of [the] organ systems" (Bloom 3). Learned

helplessness, then, occurs when an individual identifies as never being able to conquer a fear or the traumatic experience from which they suffered (Bloom 3). In the section titled “Nature,” Emerson states that nature provides “a discipline of the understanding of intellectual truths” (*Nature* 12). One could argue that intellectual truths granted him an ability to wrestle with his childhood misconceptions to undergo personal maturation. Obtaining these intellectual gifts provided an avenue to best understand that his memories were associated with the childhood he never experienced, after fleeing from the reminders of his past.

In order to deal with Trauma Theory’s sense of doom, Emerson connects with the natural world to showcase his emotional reconciliation that began dissolving his negative attitude toward his past experience; altering his doom-filled perspective granted him a chance to realize harmony with his past and present experiences by creating a harmonious relationship with nature.

Although studies of psychological trauma had not yet been explored, Emerson makes strong psychological claims about a child’s perspective and adaptability to new stimuli in conjunction with nature’s benefits. The many tragedies and losses his family endured caused him to mature mentally faster than the average child, evidenced by his claim that “all things with which we deal, preach to us” (Emerson, *Nature* 14). Because he directly dealt with nature and was “[led] to a conclusion” about life as a result, nature enabled him to become whole again (Emerson, *Nature* 14).” Emerson’s previous vocation as a minister likely helped him understand the innate spirituality of the world around him, allowing for a more intimate connection with the natural elements. Therefore, one could argue that Emerson’s conclusion about life was directly influenced by confronting his past hardships, allowing nature’s inherent pastoral qualities to preach to him.

While Emerson's ability to confront his past with nature's assistance provided solace for his despair, Zinny appears to sit with the grief and harmful memories prior to finding the trail. Zinny experiences a learned helplessness that derives from a constant fear and remembrance of the initial trigger, forcing her to associate her late family members with negative emotions. The over-analysis of traumatic events and memories often cause the affected individual to wallow and remain trapped in the downward spiral of trauma; consequently, the memory becomes altered, and the individual takes what they believe about the memory as true (Bloom 6). Zinny assumed the role of the child for Uncle Nate and Aunt Jessie after Rose's death, creating a more intimate, tight-knit family relationship that Zinny desired; Zinny states that Uncle Nate and Aunt Jessie were her "second parents" (Creech 4). Further, because of this attachment, it is apparent that the relationship she created with her aunt would cause an even larger heartbreak for Zinny after her aunt's death. Bybee claims that feelings of guilt and heartbrokenness in children are "a form of self-punishment" due to either a rational or irrational fear that the "caregivers on whom they are dependent could punish or abandon them" (24).

Zinny's experience of constantly attributing the death of her family members to herself likely caused her to feel that guilt was a part of her identity, especially considering Aunt Jessie took on a motherly role. For Zinny, scaring her nature-loving aunt with a snake seemed like a joke; however, Aunt Jessie passed that same night, leaving Uncle Nate and Zinny to attribute her death to the scare. The previous idea is illustrated when Uncle Nate kills the snake in front of Zinny, turning the "gentlest man" into a "wild man" (43). While the doctor deemed Aunt Jessie's diabetes as the culprit, Zinny refused to believe it, naming herself "Zinnia Taylor: Killer" (43). As she matured, Zinny underestimated the gravity of assigning that role to herself, contributing to her feelings of isolation from her family as she was forcing herself to separate from her family

members. Zinny's deeply ingrained belief that her family overlooks her results from the fear she will be abandoned, sparking the pursuit of finding her own identity. Recognizing Zinny's inability to discuss Rose's death with family members also contributes to her feelings of learned helplessness as it becomes an inseparable part of her identity.

Zinny's initial response to take her traumatic experience as truth due to incessantly reminding herself of her guilt mirrors Emerson's constant reference to childhood, and these references are a direct correlation to learned helplessness. Consequently, Emerson never fully understood how to remedy his past before the confrontation occurred and was fearful that it would turn into an ongoing cycle for others. The effects of a traumatic experience on an individual continues to develop and create negative emotions that settle into the human body. Because of this lack of verbalization of grief as a child, his grief became the threat that affected the inner workings of his brain and altered the way he perceived future griefs. Yet, finding solitude in nature was the ultimate cure for his grief; in isolation, he could speak and think without interruption of thought. He claims that a "man casts off his years" when in the woods, taking away all of his "impertinent griefs" (Emerson, *Nature* 3). This illustrates his newfound grasp on his past, allowing him to write *Nature* presenting ideas through a child's lens specifically, formulating responses he wished he had known as a developing adolescent. It is logical to assume that this need to physically transcribe his thoughts about the disparity he felt in his own upbringing was a genuine attempt to finally make sense of these intense emotions he did not understand as a child.

While Emerson has the adult experience of looking back onto his past experiences, Zinny approaches her confrontation with grief unintentionally, reacting to outside influences and retreating to the woods as a coping mechanism. Bloom specifically asserts that children are

influenced by the way they perceive the world as well as how adults act after a traumatic event occurs (2). An individual who has experienced a specific trigger remains constantly fearful that someone or something is trying to hurt and attack them. Because the brain function that would typically intervene and allow humans to remain calm has been altered, traumatized individuals cannot sufficiently discern when they are truly in danger. Zinny, as a developing adolescent, takes into consideration how the adult influences in her life react to such stimuli, and perceives the act of not discussing Jessie's death as normal. This is illustrated through the dinner table conversations the Taylor family engaged in, specifically noting they all clearly felt something was missing in their lives yet refused to talk. Specifically, Creech writes the following passage detailing how Zinny is taught to ruminate about the death of her aunt:

For a while my father seemed as helpless as a turtle on its back.... At the dinner table, he'd turn to where Aunt Jessie used to sit and automatically say, "Jess--" and then he'd catch himself and turn beet-red and try to cover it up by saying, "Mess-- what a mess the airport was today!" or "Jest gonna get some more potatoes!" and we'd all look down at our plates and pretend we hadn't heard him. (45)

The fact that Zinny already recognizes these traits about her father's and her family members' refusal to discuss their emotions about both deaths allows her to overcome her learned helplessness.

Zinny's triumph over her past learned helplessness due to her family's response to the traumatic trigger resembles how Emerson believed individuals in his own family neglected to care for him, resulting in "mental struggles" that would lessen the "natural dependence of youth on paternal authority" (McLelland 34). Consequently, his work details how individuals must find a way to leave the hindrances in their life behind and locate a place of rest to help understand and

reconcile their emotions. Learned helplessness can be remedied if the individual seeks to take control of their life, but this often happens when the individual recognizes the dissonance between the life they desire and the life they currently have (Fishbane 800). Fortunately, Zinny recounts these events on the other side of trauma and demonstrates her determination to find her identity through the natural world.

As Zinny ventures to uncover parts of herself that she has never realized before, Emerson details the pursuit of fleeing to nature to discover his innermost desires. Trauma Theory provides an explanation as to why one leaves the space where that trauma first occurred. The initial inability to recognize and understand one's varying emotions ultimately leads to engaging in fight-or-flight tendencies. This idea helps explain the reason why most people cannot think clearly or articulate the best response to situations that they perceive as dangerous. This facet of Trauma Theory is conveyed through Emerson's initial response to flee to nature. Since his family did not discuss death and the hardships they faced, Emerson was forced to retreat and find a different place of safety since he could not find it in conversation with his family nor simply in his own mind. Instead, nature healed these fight-or-flight impulses he had once endured. Specifically, "the misery of man appears like childish petulance" (Emerson, *Nature* 4). demonstrates how even the bad-tempered child begins to find beauty in the exploration of the natural world. Although children approach the world and their trauma with an innocent point of view, there is something about fleeing to the natural world that allows even an inexperienced child to be healed.

Since Emerson attempts to illustrate an ideal form of childhood in this text, it demonstrates how he once was a victim of trauma and did not understand how to effectively cope with his grief. In his essay *Experience*, Emerson reflects on his previous bouts of grief and

states that “the only thing grief taught [him], is to know how shallow it is” (25). As he matured emotionally, he realized that grief causes an individual to waste their time worrying about frivolities and tragic occurrences that could not be changed. Because Emerson has the distance from these past tragedies, he can better understand how the trials he faced allowed him to provide an avenue for how other traumatized individuals can cope with their anxiety and fear. Emerson writes that there is “nothing that can befall [him] in life... which nature cannot repair” (*Nature* 3). The only reason he was able to make this claim is likely because this was his personal experience. Even though he felt physically threatened as a young child, and retreated into nature as his flight response, his maturation as an adult that appreciates nature’s lessons freely allowed him to obtain intellectual truths.

Emerson’s desire to allow nature to heal him connects to Zinny’s unconscious discovery of nature’s analeptic qualities that allows her to realize that she must forgo the negative memories associated with her late family members. Once Zinny finds the trail, her autonomy begins to reveal itself as there is something in her life she can control. Zinny immediately deems herself as the owner of the trail, moving from a lack of control to an individual that asserts her control. Zinny begins a personal maturation, understanding that the trail may be a metaphor for the journey she is about to take since she was “uneasy about what might await [her] there” (29). As she gains insight with nature as her guide, she realizes Rose had something that Zinny envied: innocence (173). Readers notice how nature is the realm to which she flees, just as Emerson urges his audience to do. The trail that Zinny finds outside her home not only provides an activity for her to uncover for the duration of the summer, but also demonstrates her need to flee from the location that makes her feel insecure; while on the trail, she “wondered if anyone would

notice that [she] was gone” (140). Zinny flees from an environment where she does not understand how she fits into her family, attempting to find her place in the solace nature brings.

Similarly, Emerson’s flight response actually revealed his capacity for healing, as he dedicated himself to perfect his perspective of his past grief. Due to his flight into nature, he took on a childlike lens as nature revealed the child within himself. Yet an individual who retreats into silence possesses a temptation to listen to a single, biased voice that comes from within the self. Examining how a traumatized mind processes personal emotions and perceived stressors explains why a trigger can seem paralyzing. Stress alters memory in a way that has harmful effects, especially with the specific memories that they often replay in their minds. With this in mind, “[p]roblems may arise later because the memory of the events that occurred under severe stress are not put into words and are not remembered in the normal way we remember things” (Bloom 6). Specifically, the lack of verbalizing trauma over long periods of time has increasingly negative effects on memory, especially when attempting to “fix the situation” (Muris 179). Understanding the implications of Emerson’s past and Trauma Theory within the context of *Nature* provides the framework for identifying how he accomplished his desire to reconcile his past and present. His escape to nature brings freedom and restoration as he could intertwine the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of his life. Emerson felt the need to engage in the flight response to see the world in its purest state, to become whole. He claims that “man and nature are indissolubly joined” (*Nature* 17). Nature provides one with the understanding and clarification they need in order to remedy grief, as its purity likely invades Emerson’s self-diagnosed impure mind. Emerson makes the point that the natural world fulfills desires because all parts work for the good of man (*Nature* 4). It is made clear that this union with nature must be done alone in order to gain the highest clarity of thought.

Just as Emerson longed for isolation and independence, Zinny also searches for emotional and spiritual fulfillment in solitude. After Zinny finds herself completely alone in the woods, she understands that nature does indeed create a kind of spirituality that remedies the way she used to view herself and the memories that agonized her undeveloped mind. As a result, she undergoes a cognitive maturation after inserting herself in nature. Emerson claims that a key point in understanding the self and remedying the past is to be fully alone and isolated as a way to not be interrupted. Because Zinny set out on the trail by herself with the goal of clearing it, she ended up finally healing from her past gradually and unconsciously. In the chapter titled “Alone,” Zinny comprehends that she can take control of this new territory and call it her own. Further, she comes to understand that nature provides her the space to not be bothered by her family. Creech writes that Zinny had “looked forward to this moment for so long—all by [herself] up in the hills with the birds and trees and sky, with no one to bother [her] for ten whole days” (137). After Zinny determines this necessary piece that affects her growth and maturation, she leaves behind her grief and replaces it with a desire to create new experiences. Throughout her adventure in the woods, she is challenged by unknown sounds and animals, directly facing her fears as a means to confront her traumatic past. Directly facing her fear enables her to challenge the misplaced guilt, recognizing that she can “hear [her]self think” (140), similar to Emerson’s suggestion to ruminate on the inherent spirituality of nature. Following the will of her own heart juxtaposes everything her past self expects from her, yet she triumphs over her self-imposed limitations to begin a journey of maturation.

As one observes Zinny’s journey to freedom, one can best understand her motivation to locate personal peace when utilizing Emerson’s references to the child’s need for individuality and liberty. Before Emerson endeavored to uncover the root of his emotional disturbances, he

drowned himself in his past griefs until it became a common practice. Consequently, Emerson's perception of his childhood remained tainted until he created examples using a childlike innocence and perspective, indicating that there must have been another entity helping his brain form new connections. When an individual is triggered, frightened, or upset, the images or feelings associated with the past occurrence can intrude that individual's mind and cause them to over-analyze the traumatic event (Bloom 6). However, it should be noted that individuals need to talk about these traumatic experiences. If the event is not processed, or if the person continues to keep such a stressor inside, the brain cannot fully heal. Particularly in children, their "bodies, brains, and minds are still developing" (Bloom 86), so it is critical that children process through their grief. Even though Emerson typically writes in solitude, he believed that he was not truly alone for the stars in the sky granted him companionship (*Nature* 2). Emerson notes that his spiritual connection with the natural world highlights nature's inherent divinity. He illustrates this as a turning point in his pursuit of reconciliation as he eloquently states, "What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE!" (*Nature* 13). Emerson personifies nature as it becomes a spiritual connection that brings healing, understanding how the child could be more willing to believe that another realm of life can be called upon during one's isolation. Notably, Emerson comments that nature is "made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us" from "[c]ertain mechanical changes" (*Nature* 13). Because all of creation points back to a Creator, as mentioned in the Spirit section of the essay, Emerson finds solace that there is an inherent spirituality all around him. At the beginning of the essay, it is explicitly stated that "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul" (Emerson, *Nature* 1-2) indicating that if there is a separation of the two, one is apt to become dissatisfied with life.

Zinny demonstrates Emerson's belief that true healing, peace, and rest come from intimately connecting with the natural world. While Zinny does not explicitly identify this, she begins to identify positive memories with Aunt Jessie and Rose while on the trail. Specifically, as she journeys through the wooded path, she starts uncovering memories of Aunt Jessie and Rose that were not associated with being sick or mentally ill. Instead, Zinny refers to these new memories as memories that become "unlocked," signifying her traumatized mind only revealed memories that continued to hurt and harm Zinny's perception of their deaths. Zinny states that her own mind "denied access" to many positive memories of Rose (145). However, the first unlocked memory finally appears directly after she realizes that it was her own mind disallowing fun memories to return. Zinny states that the first repaired memory "snuck out of its locked drawer" toward the end of the trail (202). One may therefore assume that her time on the trail caused her to forgo the anxiety she experienced in the home.

Nature itself is a constant presence, allowing Zinny to rely on its consistency which demonstrates many of Emerson's assertions. The fact that Emerson's relationships with his family and friends are remembered as harmful allowed him to observe and experience firsthand the consistency of nature. While there are seasonal cycles of growth and hope that eventually turn into a season of death and depression, Emerson relied on the consistency within nature's expected changes. As an individual who braved uncertainties, nature's rhythms may have proved that there is hope for new beginnings, emphasizing the divine workings of the Creator within creation. Emerson finds solace that there is an inherent spirituality all around him. At the beginning of *Nature*, he explicitly states that "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul" indicating that if there is a separation of the two, one is apt to become dissatisfied with life (Emerson, *Nature* 1-2). Nevertheless, since this connection is directly emphasized, Emerson

clearly portrays his own healing has already taken place. Noting this important truth for his readers allows him to speak freely on such topics since he had already endured the progression from trauma to healing. Because of this remediation, he becomes a more credible influence when providing these rationales and arguments for why individuals should seek to be in nature.

Emerson asserts that individuals come to understand spiritual healing when seeking remediation within isolation, and Zinny finishes her journey of confrontation and maturation as she finishes clearing the trail. Trauma Theory maintains that the individual dealing with trauma will not ever find true reconciliation until confronting events or removing themselves from the situation altogether (Bloom 3). It is interesting to note that all the intrusive memories that used to negatively affect Zinny's perception of herself ceased as she was on the trail. The trail provided the avenue that allowed Zinny to remove herself from a harmful family situation, making way for a newfound maturity and ability to understand her identity.

After the memories of Rose begin to flood back, she starts seeing Jessie as a real cardinal, acting as her guide through the rest of her time on the trail (191). Uncle Nate used to claim he could see his wife even after her death, and Zinny wants so desperately to see her again, too. Because nature has an inherent spirituality when one inserts one's whole mind and soul into it, Zinny finds the spirit of her aunt in a bird. Later, Zinny even sees Aunt Jessie "floating" in front of her as a guide when she is lost in nature (207). As Emerson suggests, spirituality as a guide within nature can be accessed by the child, as a child observes the natural world in a non-manipulative, non-aggressive state. After Zinny finished the trail, her family praised her. However, Zinny was already aware that her newfound identity was not defined by what the family said about her. Zinny allowed herself to transform from an individual trapped by her own fears and anxieties into an individual who finds peace.

Emerson and Creech both become intimately connected with nature, allowing them to find coping mechanisms for their grief as they understand the natural world. Current explorations in neurodiversity, specifically the response to traumatic experiences, reveal there is a possibility to rewire the brain so that individuals can remedy the past. If one's brain is not taught to respond to certain stimuli in a controlled manner, one will always respond with emotion instead of logic (Fishbane 800). While change in neuroplasticity, or the ability for the brain to make new connections, was only attributed to children, recent discoveries have proved that the adult brain can also be rewired if nurtured (Fishbane 801). Therefore, it can be assumed that Emerson lacked the ability to heal due to his past learned helplessness and the absence of a nurturing upbringing. The personified natural world provided the nurturing care for Emerson, as Fishbane suggests. Emerson concludes that "we come to look at the world with new eyes" in order to "answer the endless inquiry of the intellect" so as to be "gradually restored to perfect sight" (27). Emerson, after describing the need for nature in the earlier parts of his essay, demonstrates why contemplating grief through a representative child provided a means for obtaining restoration. Just as children's minds are making new connections, the adult brain can as well when nurtured by a trusted entity (Fishbane 801).

Zinny, as a child, finally experienced the spiritual healing nature offered her when she was alone during her rebuilding of the trail. Due to her own learned helplessness, she only associated her memories of Rose and Jessie to be negative, as though she could no longer remember the positive due to the alterations to her developing brain. Taking control and understanding that she has a choice to create a life for herself, combined with observing the natural world, she replaces the negative memories with positive ones, opening "drawers full of [memories]" (244). The most important observation for *Chasing Redbird*, though, is realizing

Zinny stops thinking about Rose and Jessie when she first begins working on the trail due to gaining personal choice and independence. After she arrives home from clearing the trail, though, her memories of those she lost become altogether more positive. Zinny finally realizes that Uncle Nate has already found his peace, chasing his “redbird” around in nature. Zinny beautifully remarks that Uncle Nate has tried “so hard to keep the dead alive, to defy that darkness sweeping in and overtaking [him]” (229). Just as Emerson found the interconnectedness between nature and the soul, Zinny also finds freedom in chasing the inherent spirituality of nature. In the end, Zinny crosses over Surrender Bridge, physically surrendering her trauma over to nature so that nature may carry her burdens for her.

When one considers the effects of traumatic experiences, Emerson provides a lens through which one may view *Chasing Redbird*. Due to the nature of his upbringing and its clear influence on his writing, Emerson makes assertions and, at the time, unverified psychological claims about the human experience to explain how to cope with grief and depression. Likewise, Creech utilizes insights which correlate with Trauma Theory’s findings to buttress her writing. The marriage of the two texts as co-existing entities explained in part by Trauma Theory presents a fascinating comparison between the real and imagined experiences of two individuals. The two authors, living in two different centuries, demonstrate the importance of finding one’s identity and relief in nature, where independence and spirituality intertwine to become a force that compels one’s soul to, yet again, become whole.

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