Eli’s Goodness: The Lessons of Nature

Today’s youth are facing a host of unprecedented problems for which new answers must be found. Gun violence and mass murder dominate the headlines as chaos erupts around us. Community leaders are distanced from today’s youth as technology widens the ever-growing cultural gap. Whether a youth of today or not, such things as texting, Twitter, Facebook, and video games have desensitized our need for human contact. They have removed the human factor from our daily interactions. One could argue that this technology, which was not available to previous generations, is only compounding the problems facing today’s youth. It is breeding isolation while exposing today’s kids to a new level of graphic violence. Fortunately, these are not the sort of problems facing the young people in Silas House’s novel *Eli the Good*. However, as we read about a simpler time of life, perhaps, we can look to the past for answers to our present situation. When the young Eli is faced with much conflict and inner turmoil, he is able to immerse himself in the goodness of nature, where he finds peace. Instead of lashing out at society or engaging in self-destructive behavior, he develops a kind of spiritual reverence toward nature that allows him to find comfort in his time of need. This also allows him to gain vital insight and a better understanding of human nature in general and of himself, specifically.

Eli is a conflicted, ten-year-old boy growing up near the mountains in a town called Refuge in the year 1976. The exact location of Refuge is not stated in the novel. The clear and vivid pictures of serene forests that House so painstakingly paints for us makes it easy to imagine that it lies deep in the heart of Appalachia, a place that the author has a special affinity for. The characters in the novel deeply reflect the attitude of the author toward the people of Appalachia: “In some ways I believe that we are all Appalachians, no matter where we come from, because this has always been a place made up of people who don’t quite fit, who have been
downtrodden but refuse to be defeated” (House 62). This attitude embodies the spirit of Eli as he fights his many battles but refuses to surrender. The great social issues of the ’70’s are also evident in the heart of this young boy as he struggles to make sense of everyday life. His father, Stanton, is a shell-shocked Vietnam vet who is perpetually at odds with his war-protesting sister. Many of Eli’s mornings begin with the silence being shattered by the sounds of Eli’s mother fighting off a crazed assault coming at her in her sleep. These assaults are the result of night terrors escaping from the ravaged battlefield of her husband’s mind. There is also a constant battle between Eli’s rebellious older sister, Josie, and their mother. This battle stems from the fact that Josie recently learned that Eli’s father is not her father, but it manifests itself through Josie’s growing lack of respect for America. Her disrespect enrages her mother because her husband so proudly fought and killed for this country. As the ever-present battles rage on and encroach on his world, the young and sensitive Eli learns to find refuge in nature.

Through nature, Eli finds peace and gains understanding of human nature. Once, when sitting in the woods contemplating all the living things in them Eli remarks, “How many of them [have] I killed with my innocent footsteps to this place? I [have] most likely disrupted thousands of lives, obliterated things I wasn’t even aware of” (House 95). This new awareness gives Eli deeper insight into the relationship between his Aunt Nell and his father. He realizes an important life lesson in that many times we are unaware of the effects that our actions will have on others. Many times we may disregard the feelings of others because we deem our actions as noble. Certainly Eli’s Aunt Nell is guilty of doing this when she protests the war in Vietnam that her brother, Stanton, is fighting in and “…joined a march in New York City” (House 37). She and a group of “…fifty thousand people…marched right up to the steps of the public library and lai[d] down there…” (House 37). Her face is plastered all over the news as she is dragged away
and handcuffed. She manages to free one of her hands at the last minute and flash the peace sign. All of this is caught on camera and video for the world to see (House 37-38). Imagine the deep, stabbing pain and sense of betrayal that must have cut Stanton to the core. Imagine how he must have felt, being thousands of miles away from home, a strange man in a strange land, fighting for the very freedom that Americans so deeply treasure, and then seeing his own flesh-and-blood sister being arrested at an anti-war protest while flashing the peace sign. That is the kind of pain that he is subject to carry forever. However, Stanton never takes into consideration how important the protest of the war is to Nell, how deep in her heart, her sole motivation is that “[she] didn’t want [her] brother to come home in a body bag …” (House 38). Stanton fails to realize that the pain and resentment that he so bitterly harbors toward Nell are of his own creation. If he could glimpse into her heart and see her true motivation, perhaps he could find the true freedom that lies in forgiveness.

In the novel, the narrator uses the beech tree to teach young Eli a lesson about carrying pain and secrets: “All through the winter the brown, shriveled autumn leaves hang there, staying with the tree. The beech is never alone” (House 92). Many of the characters in this novel are much like this noble tree; they carry their pain and secrets so stoically, refusing to drop them. Carrying the weight of those things in their hearts is like carrying a millstone around their necks. Surely they must realize that their hearts are withering under the burden of those dead things. Releasing their secrets will give them room for vital, new growth. This revelation becomes known to Eli as he overhears Josie sharing her secret of her real father with her boyfriend, Charles Asher. This painful secret has isolated her from the people she loves by hardening her heart and fueling a fire of rebellion. As the narrator explains, “… by finally making this known to someone else she had freed herself in a small way … that was the beginning,” he says, “of my
sister healing” (House 134). By sharing this secret, she is able to unburden herself of the “brown, shriveled autumn leaves” (House 92) that weigh so heavy on her spirit. The shedding of this secret allows her to start the healing process so that her spirit may flourish as she blossoms into adulthood.

Eli is also made aware of the necessity of his own growth, both spiritually and physically. By watching nature with such a deep reverence and appreciation, he is able to see that our growth as humans is mirrored in the life cycles of nature. Old life gives way to new life; life must be taken to sustain life. As a subtle hint that Eli is becoming aware of his own vitality, which will mark the passing of his childhood as it yields to new growth, House writes: “The sun was melting fast…like honeysuckle that hadn’t bloomed yet, like honeysuckle that didn’t even know that it was about to bloom yet. The sun sank lower and lower…” (17). As the sun sets on his childhood, another cycle of nature is beginning. These life-affirming cycles of nature that are vital to our growth as human beings are a theme that is also present in the transcendentalist writings of Henry David Thoreau: “There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star” (440).

As the characters in this coming-of-age novel make their own progression through the cycles of life, we share their heart-wrenching pain as they quest for answers. Their ascension from innocence is paved with disillusionment, yet they press on. This natural progression along the road of life is eloquently described by poet John Milton: “long is the way, and hard, that out of hell leads up to light” (2.432-433). The characters in House’s novel each find their own way to transcend the darkness. Some seek solace in the strength that can be found in others. Young Eli finds his comfort in nature. By being so completely in tune with the natural world around him, he is able to focus his attention and truly listen to the lessons of life that are so softly
whispered to him. By so intimately communing with nature, it is easy to imagine that Eli is drawing nearer to the divine serenity that is the true presence of God. Perhaps, it is He who is actually whispering, “I am here” (House 222).

