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Friendship, Humility, and the Complicated Morality of E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*

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Abstract

Charlotte's Web (1952) by E. B. White is a classic children's book praised for the memorable friendship between its two protagonists. This article explores the problematic bond that results from Wilbur's greater demand on Charlotte and Charlotte's act of devotion. It also examines the moral value of humility, from the word "humble" which Charlotte weaves to praise Wilbur, which can be questionable as it is intertwined with innocence or ignorance, and better suits Charlotte who is reticent of her accomplishment. That she must pass on without recognition casts doubt on the author's presentation of friendship and the said moral value. Looking beyond White's fictional work, it is not surprising to discover his lack of respect for traditional morality. Even so, the article finds that White does offer certain moral guidance to his young readers, but it is far from straightforward due to his frequent employment of evasion, humor, and irony.

Keywords

friendship – humility – *Charlotte's Web* – E. B. White – morality in children's literature

1 Introduction

Children's books are often believed to be an instructive tool concerning morality, acceptable social behaviors, and important facts about the human condition. A term like didacticism, historically used to denote strict religious and

biblical narratives, continues to be found in recent literary criticism of children's fiction. For example, Maria Nikolajeva (1998) cites Perry Nodelman's *The Pleasures of Children's Literature,* which outlines criteria traditionally used to characterize the genre. These include simplicity, action-orientedness, an innocent viewpoint, optimistic ending, didacticism, and repetitive diction and structure. All these principles are challenged in contemporary children's texts since more complex and multiple narrative modes, more controversial themes, and features of postmodernist fiction are increasingly visible. Even so, she maintains that "children's books will continue to be discussed as instruments of socialization" (221, 233). Undeniably, the merit of a children's book has always been inseparable from its instructional potential,[1] whether it be traditional morality like compassion and honesty, or more recent and liberal ones like the importance of children's defiance against repressive authorities and critical judgment against religious fanaticism. In other words, contemporary children's fiction might not directly involve conventional or religious teachings; but, as opposed to general fiction for adults, children's books are still expected to advocate and pass on certain values or qualities considered "good" or commendable, and that would have bearing on the young readers or their guardians as a "good message" or a lesson from the story. One book that can be seen as highly controversial and complicated in this regard is *Charlotte's Web* (1952), a popular and much-loved children's book by the American author E. B. White (1899–1985), and winner of the John Newbery Medal in 1952 and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal in 1970. This is because while it has been heralded as a book offering good lessons and is included in many schools' reading lists, the author himself declared that it is not at all "a moral tale" (*Letters* 2007, 562).

For those who have not read the book, *Charlotte's Web* is essentially about animals and their pleasant lives in the barn, but focusing on Wilbur, a runty pig. At the beginning, Wilbur is saved at birth by Fern, a young girl who argues with her father that it is "the most terrible case of injustice" (3)[2] to kill a baby pig just because it is born small. Fern wins and is allowed to nurse the piglet for five weeks. After that, Wilbur is sold to Mr. Zuckerman, Fern's uncle and joins the animal community. At the Zuckerman farm he befriends several animals

1 It is necessary to acknowledge here the ongoing discussion of the primary purpose of children's literature being to educate or entertain its readers. For instance, Peter Hunt writes in "Instruction and Delight" that "most histories of children's literature suggest that children's books were initially entirely designed for educational purposes, with 'delight', if any, an incidental suger-ing [sic] of the pill. In the course of the nineteenth century, instruction gave way to entertainment, religion to fantasy – with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* seen as a kind of anarchic, liberating turning-point" (2009, 22).

2 All future references to the primary text are from *Charlotte's Web* (White 1952/2012).

including the barn spider Charlotte. Soon Wilbur hears of the farmer's plot to slaughter him at Christmas, naturally to his great distress, but Charlotte promises to save his life. As summer and autumn slip by, Wilbur and Charlotte grow fonder of each other, and the spider comes up with an idea to write some compliments about Wilbur on her web. Once Mr. Zuckerman sees these words, Wilbur is deemed extraordinary and instantly becomes a sensation, or a miracle, in the town. With the help of Charlotte and partly of Templeton the rat, Wilbur finally gets an award at the county fair and is indeed spared. Yet his friend Charlotte, having a much shorter lifespan, dies at the fair, leaving a sac of eggs that Wilbur carries back to the barn. Finally he has Charlotte's offspring as his friends forever.

Reviewers and critics of *Charlotte's Web* have found diverse instructional materials in the story. The points praised most prominently are the value of friendship and the inexorable passage from childhood to adulthood, as well as the story's wit, gentility and simplicity. On the inside cover page of the edition published by Harper (2012) are some such commendations. *Library Journal* calls the novel "an amusing story and a gentle essay on friendship." "The fine thing about this rare story of a beautiful friendship is that it has something for every age," wrote *The Chicago Sunday Tribune* (inside front cover). *Charlotte's Web* has also been considered useful in teaching some basic life lessons to young readers. For example, according to Cathy Lowne, "Fern's caring for Wilbur teaches her responsibility, and she realizes that if she stands up for what she believes in she can make a difference in the world. Charlotte and Wilbur's friendship, despite their differences in nature, teaches tolerance" (2018, n.p.).

Besides reviewers and book critics, literary scholars have shed light on different issues relevant to the discussion of the didactic impulse in this story. For a start, Norton D. Kinghorn in "The Real Miracle of *Charlotte's Web*" (1986) picks up White's claim in his letter that the novel functions as a "hymn to the barn" (4) or a celebration of life on the farm, but that is only one part of the novel's engagement with the theme of change and maturity. In the end Fern not only grows up; her growth is in fact "the fall from innocence, the loss of paradise – a paradise in which every living creature has a *raison d'être*, in which all life exists on an equality absolute" (6). On the other hand, Lucy Rollin in "The Reproduction of Mothering in *Charlotte's Web*" (1990) suggests that the novel might teach the young about gender roles and mothering: Wilbur has been nurtured by several female characters, and in the end he is also given a chance to symbolically "mother" Charlotte's babies. Yet the novel presents a problem because it involves social conditioning that posits a limited role for women, who must nurture their child (50). In a more recent essay, Amy Ratelle in "Ethics

and Edibility in *Charlotte's Web*" (2014) focuses on the book's representation of animal characters, not as stand-ins for human beings but actual non-humans. Ratelle traces the history of domesticated hogs and notes how White bestows animal subjectivity on Wilbur. The words Charlotte weaves, then, tamper with the "discourse surrounding edibility" (334). They make Wilbur stand out as an individual or a companion instead of a meat animal, which results in the safety of this "deserving hero" (338).

While the three scholars above have placed emphasis on different characters, from Fern to Charlotte to Wilbur, respectively, the simpler lesson on friendship between these two species has been discussed in detail in Fred Erisman's essay: "Emersonian Echoes in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*" (1998). Erisman claims that the concept of friendship in White's novel is not friendship in general but that outlined by the great American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson: at the start, friendship is spontaneous and exhilarating. It "leads to a whole-hearted acceptance of the friend and to a distinctive selflessness in the befriended… *Charlotte's Web* is emphatically a chronicle of love and friendship. White himself concedes as much, remarking in a 1973 letter that it is 'a story of friendship, life, death, salvation'" (281). Pursuing these critics' and scholars' views on what *Charlotte's Web* might teach, this article examines the novel's message on friendship and humility. The two topics are found in a number of children's books and seem to be openly advocated in this one, but the extent of their meanings and applications here are anything but ordinary or flatly positive.

2 Friendship and the Question of Imbalance of Actions

Strictly speaking, friendship is not a virtue in itself, but being a good friend requires a few moral qualities like compassion, loyalty and sincerity, and it can yield positive results like harmony, interdependence and unity. Friendship is thus a value often cultivated in the young through children's books. From what critics, scholars, and the author have said, it is hard to deny that friendship is one of the core subjects of *Charlotte's Web*. It is obvious from the moment Wilbur discovers himself alone in the barn, fretting and refusing to eat: "he didn't want food, he wanted love. He wanted a friend – someone who would play with him" (27). Apart from Wilbur, a young pig, the narrator of the story fully approves of friendship and states plainly that "friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world" (115). This reassurance seems to echo

what a number of stories for kids teach: friendship is indeed important, but in *Charlotte's Web* it seems to deviate from the more straightforward friendship presented in other books.[2] Far from showing the typical, mutual caring and devotion of the befriended, this friendship is fraught with an imbalance of power and seems lopsided with Wilbur's self-centeredness and Charlotte's dedication to Wilbur.

It is clear that Wilbur is a jolly, gentle-hearted and truthful friend. At first, he makes a direct statement against Charlotte's fly trapping: "it's cruel" (40); but he is ready to open his mind and accept her explanation of spiders' role in the ecosystem. As a friend, Charlotte is wise, compassionate and devoted to Wilbur. She is the one who initiates this relationship, volunteering to be his friend after observing him for a day. At the beginning they start off naturally and evenly as strangers; but as their relationship develops, it is clearly far from equally beneficial. When Charlotte makes a vow to save Wilbur's life, she seems to have turned into a guardian or a mother to Wilbur. Lucy Rollin opines that, after Fern who nurses Wilbur as her own baby in the earlier phase of his life, Charlotte "takes over the mothering of Wilbur – a different form of mothering. Charlotte and Wilbur never touch each other, and Charlotte never feeds Wilbur. She accomplishes her mothering solely through language. She advises, scolds, compliments, sings lullabies, tells stories, and finally weaves words into her web" (1990, 44).

Rollin's observation reflects the awkward nature of the friendship between the two characters. When Wilbur is downhearted, Charlotte comforts him and advises him to stop fretting and to eat more and sleep well. In return for all these motherly gestures, Wilbur unreservedly claims Charlotte's full attention and asks her to accompany him to the county fair. Charlotte is at first reluctant, saying that she does not "feel like leaving [her] web," that she'd "better stay home," and that she is afraid that laying eggs in a strange place is not going to be the "wonderful fun" (116) Wilbur suggests it will be. Yet Wilbur still insists – twice – that she go, purely for his sake: "I need you... You've just got to come" (116). Wilbur is largely unobservant of Charlotte's condition and fully exploits her affection for him. Perhaps it is only fair to say that it *is* Charlotte who keeps her personal trouble from Wilbur, that Charlotte would pass on anyway, with or without her toil for Wilbur, and that Charlotte never complains about Wilbur's

2 For example, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), a classic children's book by A. A. Milne, features quite a few animals of different species who always do activities together and help each other regardless of their size or brain. *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970), also by E. B. White, seems to offer a more clear-cut and common depiction of what friendship should be. A boy, being fond of animals, befriends a mute trumpet swan and helps him pursue his career as a musician and his dream love. They part at the end of the story but remain good friends and see each other occasionally.

requests. When compared with Fern, another character of a different order who stands up for Wilbur, but who abandons Wilbur as she grows up, Charlotte is all the more remarkable in her steadfast loyalty. Obviously, friends should be honest, loyal, and supportive of one another without expecting anything in return, but in this case, all the deeds come from the spider alone. Wilbur gets all the benefits, and Charlotte is wholly a giver; he demands, and she bestows, right from the start of their friendship to the end where her offspring still serve as future friends for him. That is a depiction of friendship of an unusual sort. Perhaps it is idealistic, but also troubling because it is unfair. It entails a sense of debt and an imbalance of power that goes oddly with the mutual caring and support we expect between friends.

So, even as readers may hesitate to accept that Wilbur behaves more like a son and Charlotte like a mother, they cannot but feel that he has *not* been a good friend to Charlotte, for in this relationship he has done so little. Like any other kind of relationship, one is expected to *show* their feeling and deeds are always essential, even if a person is just standing by the friend's side and listening quietly. However, Wilbur has done even little of those, compared with all that Charlotte has done for him. Careful readers can notice Wilbur's shortcomings because the author drops a few strong hints that while Charlotte is getting weaker daily, Wilbur is only concerned about his own big day. When Charlotte tells Wilbur about something she is doing for herself, "for a change," and that it is going to be a masterpiece, Wilbur falls asleep before she can finish the sentence (143). This raises a question regarding the nature of friendship where one can just "be" a friend without having to make any effort or deserve it. To avoid a hasty judgment that puts too much emphasis on equality and actions, of which Wilbur is less capable, we can examine further a personality that makes him likeable and friendly. All Wilbur does is just *be* himself, a 'person' that Charlotte observes and "likes" (31) enough to befriend. But what exactly does Charlotte see in Wilbur? For me the answer might be revealed through the words on the web.

3 The Words on the Web and the Complications of Humility as a Moral Value

While the book's lesson on friendship remains ambivalent for its imbalance, one might find the key to Wilbur's quality as a "good friend" and the novel's concrete moral in Charlotte's wise words. Charlotte is considered by many to be the heroine of the story, both from the title and from her heroic feat, and her writing has been regarded as a declaration of the value of language and literacy

(Kinghorn 1986, 8; Paul 2012, 127). From the start, Charlotte is portrayed as an eloquent English user. After greeting Wilbur with "salutations" (35), she puzzles him with several long words: "sedentary" (60), "gullible" (67) and "versatile" (116), prompting his begging for their meanings, and providing the author a chance to teach new vocabulary to his reader. By the time she starts writing, she has already become familiar with Wilbur, but her original contribution to his quality is only that he is "some pig" (77). Here is Lissa Paul's insight into that phrase:

> In the context of the life-and-death seriousness of the situation, it may be odd that the first words Charlotte chooses to write in her web, "Some Pig," are colloquial, rural, grammatically dubious and puzzling. Yet the phrase invites speculation. After reading Charlotte's carefully woven sign, the likely wielders of the knife, the farmer Zuckerman and his henchman Lurvy, discuss their pig seriously. They try to figure out why Wilbur is not just any old pig. They wonder what makes him "Some Pig." That's what saves him. If, instead of "Some Pig," Charlotte had written the clichéd commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill" into her web, would it have had the same effect? Not likely.
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> 2012, 127

So the enigmatic quality of these two words sparks thoughts, serious contemplation and imagination that completely change the course of events – Lissa Paul, however, stops there. We are therefore left with the other three words which come from other farm animals: "terrific" (88) – the word that Charlotte surprisingly is unable to spell – comes from the goose, while "radiant" (99) and "humble" (140) are from Templeton's random pick from the dump site. In the process of word selection, which can represent the laborious process of writing and editing, Charlotte can point out weaknesses of many words that other animals propose, like "pig supreme" (87), "crunchy" and "pre-shrunk" (98), and in so doing proves her ability to grasp the nuances of meanings and range of connotations. Yet she does not really come up with the last three words on the web; she merely writes them. This reliance on other characters, especially Templeton, makes the Saving-Wilbur project more inclusive. All animals in the barn community are invited to participate and their debate creates some of the funniest episodes in the story.

Regarding the four chosen words, there seems to be no significant pattern between them. Basically Charlotte begins with a more general word: "some" to describe the pig, highlighting certain ambiguous – possibly sacred – qualities of Wilbur, before moving on to a more decidedly positive quality with "terrific."

The last two words are even more specific and concrete. "Radiant" comes from a package of soap flake that says: "With New Radiant Action" (99). Charlotte seems baffled by such a combination of verb and adjective, giving readers a prompt to experience the same sense of wonder about the effects of words that can give "radiant action" to a cleansing product. Finally she agrees to use this word as it can signify the seemingly shining outward features of Wilbur, with a positive hint of his joy and good health. But "humble," which is picked out of context from a newspaper clipping (139), takes a strange turn. It is the only word Charlotte writes that has direct moral implications; and it emphasizes Wilbur's personality or behavior, as well as his lowness, rather than his pleasing appearance. In contrast to "terrific" and "radiant," the last word seems positive in a subtler way and is more complicated as praise.

Every character in the novel agrees with all the words used to describe Wilbur, but this last one is written right before the day he receives the prize. "Humble" does not highlight Wilbur's quality in contrast to that of his competitor at the county fair: the enormous, ugly, dirty, and seemingly older pig that everybody calls Uncle. So it is puzzling why this final word is used where many others might fare better and impress the audience more. For example, in contrast to Uncle, Wilbur is well-shaped, clean, adorable, jubilant, brilliant, gentle, and healthy. A more literal reader might say that "humble" is chosen because Templeton is already fed up with the job of finding words from junk at the fair. In fact, far from being arbitrary, the author intends to use "humble" to express a moral that many children's books seek to promote.[3] As an adjective the word means "having a low estimate of one's importance, worthiness, or merits; marked by the absence of self-assertion or self-exaltation; lowly: the opposite of proud," or "of lowly condition, rank, or estate; of modest dimensions; modest, unpretentious" ("Humble" 2020). Having these definitions in mind, Charlotte says: "That's Wilbur all over. He's not proud and he's near the ground" (140). Compared with the first three words, this last adjective is perhaps the closest to Wilbur's nature. He does show in many scenes that he is conscious of his limited abilities. Despite the false confidence in the chapter "Wilbur's Boast," from which he learns a good lesson that pigs can never spin

3 For instance, in *The Jungle Books* (1894) by Rudyard Kipling, the maxim of Baloo, the teacher of Mowgli, goes: "'There is none like to me!' says the Cub in the pride of his earliest kill; // But the Jungle is large and the Cub he is small. Let him think and be still" (22). Or in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), the narrator suggests that the gifted girl Matilda "displayed almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never showed off. 'This is a very sensible and quiet little girl,' you would have said to yourself" (101).

a web, Wilbur declares twice that "I'm *not* terrific," and that "I'm just about average for a pig" (89, 91).

However, humility as a moral is more complicated than its dictionary definitions. In "The Social Dimensions of Modesty" (2008), Scott Woodcock notes that modesty is:

> "...a valuable disposition for moral agents to possess because it alleviates some of the jealousy, bitterness and other caustic emotions that arise in social contexts where the comparative merits of agents are publicly acknowledged. It serves a delicate social function by discouraging unhealthy forms of competitive ranking, and it promotes harmony among agents who perceive themselves to be unequal with respect to their natural talents and accomplishments".
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> 2–3

From Woodcock's argument, it is understandable why modesty, even as it is closely linked to self-effacement and low self-esteem, is often regarded as a virtue, as it ensures public harmony and serves as an effective check against *hubris* or pride. Probably for this reason, modesty is generally considered a safe, proper and unobjectionable quality to cultivate in young readers, among other stock morality or behavioral traits like compassion, bravery or generosity.

Having said that, it appears that many other aspects of humility are revealed in *Charlotte's Web*. Firstly, in Wilbur's situation, this word bestows on him a *human* attribute, making him appear grateful for everything and thus good-natured and deserving of rescue. Secondly, when applied to the protagonist of this novel, "humble" is one of the truest and most obvious claims. In contrast to the wisdom of Charlotte or resourcefulness of Templeton, humility is rather an attitude or an absence of action – like boasting – than a skill or qualification. Practically it is something that can be done, or even faked, quite easily, although Wilbur does not fake it. When Wilbur gets much praise and more than a hundred visitors come to the Zuckerman farm to admire him, "some of Wilbur's friends in the barn worried for fear all this attention would go to his head and make him stuck up. But it never did. Wilbur was modest; fame did not spoil him. He still worried some about the future, as he could hardly believe that a mere spider would be able to save his life" (115). This passage shows that Wilbur is humble only by remaining himself, that is, ordinary and apprehensive of impending danger. He is deeply aware of his powerlessness; and constant dread does to him what it does to most of us, it checks his pride and confidence.

Apart from Wilbur's ordinariness, his limited abilities and power, and his fear of death, Wilbur's humility seems to be largely a result of his innocence, or absence of guile, or a lack of knowledge about himself and everything else. Julia Driver, the author of *Uneasy Virtue* (2009), claims that modesty is "associated with self-deprecation or an underestimation of one's self-worth" (16), and therefore must always involve a degree of ignorance with regard to one's self worth (18). From this argument the characterization of Wilbur as humble gets complicated. For one thing, Wilbur does not brag because he has done practically nothing of significance to boast about. For another, Wilbur can simply be labeled "humble" and even attract a crowd large enough to win a prize without much awareness of or knowledge about himself. Wilbur's cluelessness, once linked to the more positive quality of innocence and humility, only seems natural and perfectly satisfactory. In fact, E. B. White is not the only children's writer who celebrates this quality of blissful ignorance. Several authors of classic children's books also endow it on their main characters, for example, Little Gerda in Han Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* (1843), Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Dorothy Gale in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1990) and Lyra Belacqua in Philip Pullman's epic trilogy His Dark Materials (1995–2000). All these young heroines venture forth in their adventures, largely clueless about what dangers await, what they must achieve, or sometimes even who they are. This is because ignorance is frequently associated with childishness, innocence and purity, all significant characteristics that many writers would like to see fondly preserved in their young characters, despite much suspicion on the part of children's books scholars and critics.[4] Even though most of these young characters, perhaps except Alice, are exposed to more knowledge about life, death, or evil towards the end of the novel as a sort of a lesson for the young reader, Wilbur stands out as a character that remains innocent and childish even *after* experiencing Charlotte's death. Therefore, Wilbur is praised as humble and seems to suit the word in the sense that he is practically clueless about everything, from the beginning to the end. He just loves life and is happy to live on, preferably with a friend to talk to or look after him.

Ironically, while Wilbur "looked very humble and very grateful" (149) after the last miracle and "blushes" (160) appropriately in front of the crowd when he is given the medal, a better model for this virtue of modesty, completed with all awareness of her own self-worth, is his friend Charlotte. Similar to the lesson

4 Peter Hunt (2009) and Catherine Butler (2012), for instance, call attention to the crux in the assumption that childhood is innocent (13–14) and to "fetishization of innocence and the horror of 'growing up' that is one legacy of the Romantic idealization of childhood" (232), respectively.

on friendship, again it seems to me that between the two main characters, the one who communicates the more admirable virtue of modesty is the spider. In Wilbur, significant ingredients of modesty are his ordinariness, innocence and ignorance, which is a neutral if not poor foundation for a moral value. In contrast, Charlotte intentionally and persistently hides her own genius. So in a way she *is* the humbler one, and for her humility, she gets no credit at all from anybody in the story: "Everybody who visited the pigpen had a good word about Wilbur. Everybody admired the web. And of course nobody noticed Charlotte" (151). This presents an ironic circumstance, because Wilbur does not deserve the good words heaped on him as much as his friend does, and she gets none.

This is a subtle illustration of modesty, all the subtler because her action is not branded as such. Referring to *Uneasy Virtue* again, Driver suggests that "a person can be modest without talking about himself at all; that is, the person in question isn't merely exhibiting certain behavior that constitutes modesty. Rather, the behavior springs from an inclination to avoid discussing himself, even though he has an accurate assessment of his accomplishments and character" (2009, 20). Therefore, what Charlotte does can constitute a different illustration of modesty, one that is free from ignorance and full of discretion. It is true that a person who has a full knowledge of her worth but is careful to hide it can be charged with *false* modesty. This is different from sincere modesty which, according to Driver, "necessarily involves ignorance, [and so is] necessarily involuntary in nature" (10).

Besides, one might argue that Charlotte does not really think or speak lowly of herself or her worth. She *is* confident of her beauty, her weaving skills, and her brain; but about her most meaningful achievement she never speaks. Charlotte is behind Wilbur's success from the beginning to the end. She plays a significant part in making him stress-free, plump and healthy, and she is the creator of all the miracles in the story; but she is careful not to flaunt her achievements or even to claim anybody's attention. She is the opposite of Avery, the boy who "liked being a clown in a ring, with everybody watching, in front of a grandstand" (162). Templeton, whose hedonistic and self-gratifying lifestyle is in contrast to the spider's selflessness and hard work, also represents the antithesis of Charlotte. Both have a crucial part in Wilbur's victory and are equally unseen; both get stowed to the fair unnoticed. Indeed Templeton does two immense services when he saves Charlotte's life with his rotten egg bomb – albeit accidentally, and when he bites Wilbur's tail to bring him back to consciousness upon receiving the medal. In the second incident, Templeton is very close to Charlotte in doing a good thing without announcing it to the world: "Nobody had seen Templeton. The rat had done the work well" (160). Nevertheless, Templeton loses it all when he brags at the end: "Who made

trip after trip to the dump? Why, it was old Templeton! Who saved Charlotte's life by scaring that Arable boy away with a rotten goose egg? Bless my soul, I believe it was old Templeton. Who bit your tail and got you back on your feet this morning after you had fainted in front of the crowd? Old Templeton" (168). Obviously, Charlotte alone remains perfectly silent about her excellent job.

Therefore, it is possible to claim that while Wilbur is praised for being humble, in fact it is *Charlotte,* who genuinely displays the act of humility, with full knowledge and intention. She is a better model as the key behavioral aspect of modesty involves an inclination to speak lowly about one's greatness, if not to remain perfectly silent, or to refrain from exaggeration or from drawing attention to oneself. It might be argued that Charlotte's reticence is only a part of her plot to deceive humans, but even to herself she never ruminates on the glorious deeds she did, nor does she boast about it with Wilbur or any other farm animals. Being only a small insect, it is easier for her to escape notice, or be dismissed as just a common grey spider who can never be extraordinary (80–81). On the whole Charlotte lives and dies out of sight of humans. Only one person, Fern, knows that Charlotte is behind Wilbur's success, but neither she nor the animals, not even Wilbur, ever praise Charlotte for her ingenuity. Charlotte is nonchalant about that lack of recognition and remains self-content. She just *knows* that she has performed a legendary act. In any case, White makes sure that she would gain enough admiration from the reader who knows better and appreciates her all the more for the absence of honor *within* the story.

The complex message about humility, combined with the previously discussed issue of friendship, reaches its most problematic point with Charlotte's death. It is the moment when Wilbur must forsake Charlotte, and with good reason. Even though her death adheres to the natural fact, White seems oddly brutal when it comes to the description of Charlotte's death.

> Next day, as the Ferris wheel was being taken apart and the race horses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in their trailers, Charlotte died. The Fair Grounds were soon deserted... Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a grey spider had played the most important part of all. No one was with her when she died.
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In contrast to the vivid description of vitality of the farm and the fair, or the spring and summer seasons, the narrator describes this scene with coldness and dispassion. Charlotte's passing moment is strangely dominated by emptiness, abandonment and silence. Even as one can anticipate her end, knowing

that it is a natural scene at the end of the fair, the fact that the heroine must depart all alone in this strange place, without anyone at all to comfort her or realize her role, is actually the most ironic and cruelest turn of the story. The only explanation for this heart-rending depiction is that it helps highlight Charlotte's nobility and the extent of her sacrifice which, as I argued earlier, is part of White's campaign for Charlotte's self-effacing nature and her devotion to Wilbur as a friend. Yet, ultimately it is her closing speech to Wilbur that reflects most movingly the extent of Charlotte's friendship and humility.

> "Why did you do all this for me?" he asked. "I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you."
> "You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that."
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While Scott Elledge, White's biographer, notices a glimpse of White's skepticism in this passage,[5] I find it a statement of redemption that, though uncertain, proves Charlotte's modesty. Returning to my previous claim about the imbalance of friendship in this story, this passage again demonstrates the idealistic aspect of the relationship between two unequal individuals of different natures and abilities. Wilbur is ignorant and largely helpless, while Charlotte is more mature and self-reliant. She needs no help and is capable of offering it to Wilbur. Just as he finally recognizes that he has done nothing for her to deserve her help, a point that attests to the problematic aspect of friendship in this story, in the end she still does not claim his indebtedness or glorify herself as a good friend and a wise spider. Instead she dwells on the less favorable points of her life: the brief time she, or everyone, has in this world, and the poor mode of living that she seems to suffer. The pun on "a mess" here does not concern a spider's messy webs as much as problems or wrongs in her life "with all this trapping and eating flies" (164). This might strike readers as strange, because earlier she maintains that trapping is only a natural and "clever" way of spiders

5 According to Elledge, "as the skeptical White comes close to the problem of moral imperatives, he is cautious. *Perhaps*, he says, she was trying to lift up her life a little – to transcend her genetic inheritance, or be a little better than she had to be; and when she adds, 'Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that,' she carefully, as well as humorously, warns that a little concern for moral improvement goes a long way" (qtd. in Neumeyer 1994, 255).

(40). It seems that at this point Charlotte is shifting from her own good deeds to the benefit she *gets* from helping Wilbur, and even hints that Wilbur has a role in bringing about her redemption. Therefore, Wilbur has really done nothing for Charlotte as a friend; still Charlotte gets an uncalculated reward from this friendship with him, for that act of compassion eventually elevates her. All this is said without any slight hint of a boast. In this way, the two are presented as receiving mutual benefit even as the position and the effort put into this friendship are far from mutual, and the objection Wilber makes of his unworthiness as a friend is gently brushed off.

4 E. B. White and His Stance on Morality

From the previous sections, it is clear that despite sounding simple, friendship and humility in his novel are by no means simplistic. White's tendency to avoid direct teaching is found earlier in *Stuart Little* (1945), his first children's book. The moral of "nix on swiping anything" and "absolutely no being mean" (96) are demonstrated in a comic way and undermined by Stuart as a substitute teacher wanting to snatch a student's tiny balsam pillow for himself. The canoe project in which Stuart puts his labor and determination is ruined for no reason, and his long search for Margalo the bird does not present a clear reward in the end. In *Charlotte's Web*, Templeton, the unethical, self-serving and lazy rat, turns out perfectly fine, if not better-off. He gets to choose the food of Wilbur, sneers at the sheep's caution against gluttony, and remains gladly friendless and fat. Such a dismissal of traditional morality is not surprising. In fact, the author makes it clear in his letters to several people that he never sets out to preach. For instance, in White's letter to film director Gene Deitch regarding his manuscript for the film, he says: "I do hope… that you are not planning to turn 'Charlotte's Web' into a moral tale. It is not that at all. It is, I think, an *appreciative* story, and there is quite a difference. It celebrates life, the seasons, the goodness of the barn, the beauty of the world, the glory of everything. But it is essentially amoral, because animals are essentially amoral, and I respect them" (*Letters*, 562). In response to a criticism by Childhood Revisited Class who objects to some unrealistic elements in *The Trumpet of the Swan*, White answers that "as for whether realism and honesty are 'good for a young child,' I don't pretend to know what is good, what is bad. I go by my instinct. I write largely for myself and am content to believe that what is good enough for me is good enough for a youngster" (*Letters*, 594).

White's letters and interviews also confirm that he was less concerned about realism or morality, and more about truthfulness, as seen in his unwavering

resolve to include Charlotte's death.[6] He cares very much about what his intended audience think, or how the book "sits with the young" (*Letters*, 333), wondering what they will say, while largely neglecting criticism from adult critics. In the Harper Publicity flier for *Charlotte's Web*, in which White writes to respond to many letters from his young fans, the emphasis on truth is raised: "Are my stories true, you ask? No, they are imaginary tales, containing fantastic characters and events. In *real* life,… a spider doesn't spin words on her web… But real life is only one kind of life – there is also the life of the imagination. And although my stories are imaginary, I like to think that there is some truth in them, too – truth about the way people and animals feel and think and act" (Neumeyer 1994, 240). It is more important to be honest with young readers and respect them by telling them the truth without simplifying the issue, and that, I believe, might explain the choice of ambiguous morality which is more realistic than that found in more overtly didactic texts. To preach is to assert a superior position to the reader, and White refuses to insult children in this way, just as he would never serve them unchallenging materials. For instance, in this interview he positions himself on the same plane with his reader and drops a humorous hint of modesty regarding his small bank of vocabulary.[7]

> Some writers for children deliberately avoid using words they think a child doesn't know. This emasculates the prose and, I suspect, bores the reader. Children are game for anything. I throw them hard words, and they backhand them over the net. They love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention. I'm lucky again – my own vocabulary is small, compared to most writers, and I tend to use the short words. So it's no problem for me to write for children. We have a lot in common.
>
> WHITE 2011, 147

6 Newmeyer mentions how White received so many objections from parents, teachers, and librarians about Charlotte's death. White might have those in mind when he wrote to Ursula Nordstrom, editor at Harper's children's books, that he was writing a new book "about a boa constrictor and a litter of hyenas. The boa constrictor swallows the babies one by one, and the mother hyena dies laughing" (1994, 167). The naturalistic cruelty, morbidity, and the wild delight of an unexpected nature intertwined, though definitely harsher here, echoes the self-professed amorality and a keen sense of humor of the author in *Charlotte's Web*.

7 In a similar vein of wit and humility, White objects to the jacket blurb after reading the manuscript of his own biography by Elledge. "The blurb calls me 'America's most beloved writer.' That is not only open to question, it isn't a good pulling idea anyway. I'm an old advertising man, and I know that people would rather buy a book about a writer everybody hates the guts of" (*Letters*, 675).

Perhaps it is unwise to assert ethical values of the book while the author says there is none. However, *Charlotte's Web* is still highly instructive in many ways. It can be seen in Mr. Arable's sermon to Avery: "Fern was up at daylight, trying to rid the world of injustice. As a result, she now has a pig…It just shows what can happen if a person gets out of bed promptly" (5). It is equally plain in Charlotte's kind-hearted decision to befriend Wilbur and save him, and in Wilbur's sorrow at recognition of himself as an undeserving friend. Yet what enhances the complication of the book's moral lessons is the author's reliance on evasion, humor and irony. For example, the statement "what is good enough for me is good enough for a youngster" is evasive, just as his claim that the book is "a sneeze" (Neumeyer 1994, 238) – that is, something involuntary and natural that he is not obliged to provide any explanation about. Therefore, saving some rotten goose eggs, a behavior first presented as dirty and disgusting, could turn out to be a brilliant idea because it saves Charlotte's life in an ironic turn of events. Wilbur's excessive demands and his lack of attention to Charlotte are ever so discernible to readers but he is never openly admonished by any character or by the narrator-author. Another glaring case of irony is in Mrs. Arable's assertion to Dr. Dorian that Avery is perfectly normal because "he gets into poison ivy and gets stung by wasps and bees and brings frogs and snakes home and breaks everything he lays his hands on. He's fine" (111–112). White never directly says that Avery's behavior is terrible and dangerous, or that Mrs. Arable and Dr. Dorian are two lousy judges of proper behavior. But every child must know instinctively that the adults are being senseless here and Avery is a troublesome abuser of animals. White knows that children know this and secretly laugh at the folly of the adults and their professed superiority. Indeed, subverting the adults' authority is a motif that constantly emerges, from the beginning with Fern arguing with her father, but more obviously in Charlotte's claim that "people are very gullible" (67) and in her whole scheme. It is fair to say that the author's attitude toward children as respectable and capable thinkers, his disregard for traditional morality and authority, and his witty and ironic sense of humor, combine and greatly expand the moral dimensions of this novel.

5 Conclusion

While the author claims that his book should never be considered a moral tale, certain messages related to moral principles, or rights and wrongs, are obviously established in *Charlotte's Web*. This article reassesses the two values that the novel evidently upholds: friendship and humility. It is found that the former is presented in its most idealistic form; that is, it is so one-sided in the

effort put into this friendship that while it is deemed "the most satisfying thing in the world" (115) for the two, it might not be as satisfying to a reader who is more critical of Wilbur's egotistical demands. Nevertheless, Wilbur is less capable of doing much for his friend apart from just being a friend, and that friendship can still be rewarding for Charlotte in the end. The latter, regarding humility, is either a result of innocence or ignorance, or an attempt to play down one's accomplishments, with full knowledge and self-effacement to the point of invisibility. The irony is that only Wilbur is labeled "modest," while Charlotte, despite her greatness, remains obscure and passes in the shadows. In truth, it seems that Wilbur is secondary to Charlotte in both qualities. Yet it would be a mistake to regard Charlotte as a saint, just as much as Templeton is a sinner. White's moral points are more complicated as they resist traditional definitions of the words; they appeal to the common sense of the young and are truer to reality. So ultimately *Charlotte's Web* does not preach, but the two values of friendship and modesty remain a significant message that White means to deliver just as he is questioning them, together with other messages that have nothing to do with vice or virtue, like the idyllic country life, simplicity of childhood, love of animals, and facts about the passage of life and natural change. Considering the wit and ironic humor of the author, it is definitely not a coincidence that a spider, a creature seen by many as ugly or repulsive,[8] and at first by her closest friend as "brutal and bloodthirsty" (164) is chosen to be the heroine and the prime agent of teaching and loving in this novel.

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8 An account of White's perception of spiders as "skillful, amusing" and largely harmless, his wanting to change children's ideas about this insect, and his keeping spiders for some weeks to observe them can be found in Neumeyer (1994, 237–238). More about his identification with spiders as a writer and an artist is subtly revealed in the closing sentence of the novel and his poem "The Spider's Web" (1929).

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