Oh, what a tangled web we weave!

As we ponder over our reading experiences as children, almost every American will remember reading *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White. How we read as children and how we read as adults is not at all the same. One might state children read for the pleasure of the story and adults simply read too much into the given text. However, one must realize the images being portrayed to our children. How could a story about a pig and a spider relay unwanted messages to our children? It is important to remark how social guidelines are presented in this text. The most obvious is the assignment of gender roles to the characters. Not only does this affect the human characters in the story, but it also affects the farm life. The other social guideline found in this text is the barnyard society. This society can in turn represent our human society. These two guidelines of society are taught unknowingly to our children through this story. What is perhaps the most surprising is how little attitudes have changed. This book was originally published in 1952 and these stereotypes still exist in our society forty five years later.

Fern is an eight year old girl who is full of energy. She spends most of her time taking care of a pig named Wilbur. Who would ever believe a little girl would demonstrate mothering abilities? E.B. White has even gone as far as to depict Wilbur as Fern's own child: "A minute later, Fern was seated on the floor in the corner of the kitchen with her infant between her knees, teaching it to suck from the bottle" (6-7). Not only does Fern mother a piglet as her own infant, she also plays with dolls. This once again reinforces the mother image girls should follow according to social standards. In fact, mothering becomes so natural to Fern that she is able to mother Wilbur and her doll at the same time: "Sometimes on these journeys, Wilbur would get tired, and Fern would pick him up and put him in the carriage alongside the doll ... The doll would close her eyes, too, and Fern would wheel the carriage very slowly and smoothly so as not to wake up her infants" (10). In the beginning of the story we have already noticed Fern's appropriate behavior when it come to little girls playing with dolls.

As the story progresses, Fern's behavior becomes less female oriented. Even though she is continuing her mother image by looking after Wilbur, this is no longer deem appropriate. Wilbur is
no longer portrayed as a cute little piglet, he is in fact a pig. At point, Fern is encouraged to return to her original methods of playing. Fern's mother becomes so concerned about her odd behavior she consults the family doctor. Obviously something must be wrong with the little girl if she would prefer to spend time in a barn than to play with her doffs. The recommendation made by the doctor is even more surprising than the concerns of the mother: "I think she will always love animals. But I doubt that she spends her entire life in Homer Zuckerman's barn cellar. How about boys - does she know any boys?" (111). That is right. Even at eight years old all a girl needs is the attention of a boy to make everything alright.

Fern's brother, Avery, is obviously depicted in a different light. In fact, his mother even judges his behavior differently than that of Fern: "'Oh, Avery,' chuckled Mrs. Arable 'Avery is always fine. Of course, 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'" (111-2). The reader does not notice any references where Avery will behave more normally once he meets a nice little girl. After all, boys will be boys - right? He is, in fact, male. Therefore, Avery does not play with dolls, it simply would not be accepted. Instead he plays with more masculine toys: "He was heavily armed - an air rifle in one hand, a wooden dagger in the other" (4). Not only does Avery play with masculine toys, but he also plays with animals. In fact, the images of Avery and Fern are constantly different: "Avery carried a live frog in his hand. Fern had a crown of daisies in her hair" (67-8). Why couldn't Fern be carrying the frog and Avery carrying a bouquet of daisies for his mother? Simply put, it would not fit into their assigned gender roles.

Somehow, E.B. White has managed to even assign gender roles to a spider. This spider has been given the name Charlotte; and therefore, she must perform according to her role in society. Charlotte's most obvious role is that of mother to Wilbur. She sings him to sleep and tells him stories to soothe his worries. Her stories even begin with the same four words as humans use: "Once upon a time" (102). Charlotte is so lost in her role as mother, she has lost herself. That which she considers is for herself is in fact for her children: "It's something for me, for a change" (143). This something is her egg sac, her children. This is truly a maternal instinct. One could say the friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur resembles more a mother and son relationship. One could state Wilbur was her adopted child.
For all of Charlotte's wisdom and intelligence, she was not recognized by the masculine society: "'You don't suppose that that spider...!' began Mr. Zuckerman - but he shook his head and didn't finish the sentence" (79). Somehow it was not possible that Charlotte was intelligent enough to create such an image. The only person who believed it possible was, of course, another female: "'Well,' said Mrs. Zuckerman, "it seems to me you're a little off. It seems to me we have no ordinary spider" (80). Unfortunately, this depicts certain views of society. Women are just not capable of accomplishing anything extraordinary. It is simply easier to write it off or claim it to be a miracle.

Not only does Charlotte's Web teach our children about gender roles, it also teaches about social status. E.B. White employs a barnyard society to demonstrate different roles in society. The reader can gain an impression of the animal's social status by two different methods. First of all, they can be judged by their value on the farm. The sheep provide wool to the farmer year after year. The cows provide milk and meat; however, Wilbur will only provide a few meals. He is valued less than the other animals. The other method which can be used in determining an animal's social status is by the food they eat. The sheep, cows, and horses eat grass and grain. The geese eat grain and possibly some leftover bread. Wilbur eats slop, or that which the farmer's family does not want to eat themselves. The rat, considered in the lowest rank of society, eats Wilbur's leftovers. Wilbur's low rank among the barnyard animals can be demonstrated by their unwillingness to associate with him: "'In the first place, I cannot get into your pen, as I am not old enough to jump over the fence. In the second place, I am not interested in pigs. Pigs mean less than nothing to me" (28). E.B. White uses the animal's differences as people use racial differences. One could say the fence was used to segregate Wilbur from the rest of the barnyard society.

The power of literature over our beliefs as a society is unquestionable. E.B. White could not declare this on his own, so he depicted it through his character, Charlotte: "'But Charlotte,' said Wilbur, 'I'm not terrific.' 'That doesn't make a particle of difference,' replied Charlotte. 'Not a particle. People believe almost anything they see in print...'" (89). E.B. White was aware of his influences over our culture: the gender roles and the barnyard society. We judge, as a society, what is right and wrong or what is acceptable and unacceptable. Literature and media helps guide
us to our conclusions as adults and as children. This is where *Charlotte's Web* comes into effect.
One could conclude this story has remained a children's classic over the last four and a half decades because society can still relate to it as a whole ... not very much has changed.
Bibliography