

Method and Structure

1. Why do you think White chose mainly subjective description to explore the themes of this essay? Would objective description have the same effect? Why, or why not?
2. Locate the many flashbacks in which White remembers being a boy at the lake. (See p. 63 for an explanation of *flashback*.) What events in the present trigger these flashbacks? Note that in some passages (paragraph 8, for instance) the time is neither clearly present nor clearly past. Why?
3. OTHER METHODS Though primarily a descriptive essay, "Once More to the Lake" is also developed by narration and by comparison and contrast. Locate examples of both methods just in paragraph 12, and analyze what they contribute to the essay as a whole.

Language

1. How would you characterize White's tone? What, for example, is the effect of "holy," "sweet," and "cathedral" (paragraph 2), "sleepy" (10), and similar words throughout the essay? (If necessary, see *tone* in the Glossary.)
2. White's sense that time has stood still is repeated or restated many times throughout the essay—not only explicitly, as in "There had been no years" (paragraph 5), but also in single words, such as "indelible" (8). Locate both the restatements and the single words in paragraphs 4–11. How does White intensify this theme in his description of the oncoming storm (12)? How do the figures of speech in the description of the storm and the lingering over the "deathless joke" forecast the essay's last sentence? (If necessary, consult the Glossary for *figures of speech*.)

Writing Topics

1. Think of a situation in which you observed a child undergoing an experience or making a decision that recalls your own childhood. (The child may be a brother, sister, son, daughter, cousin, neighbor, or even a stranger.) Write a narrative essay linking your observations with your memories, making sure that you lead the reader to see the insights you gained.
2. Recall a time when you accompanied a parent or other adult (aunt, uncle, grandparent, and so on) to a place he or she knew well but you were seeing for the first time. It could be a place where the person grew up, went to school, lived for a time, or vacationed. Write an essay in which you compare your reactions to the place with what you remember of the adult's reactions or what, with hindsight, you think the adult's reactions might have been.

WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON

In his extensive sojourns across the United States travel writer William Least Heat-Moon has attended closely to the distinctive people and places he has encountered in small towns and little-known byways. Born William Lewis Trogon in 1939 in Kansas City, Missouri, to parents of Irish-English and Osage extraction, he changed his name to Least Heat-Moon to honor his Native American background. After graduating from the University of Missouri at Columbia in 1961, he stayed on to earn a PhD in literature and a BA in photojournalism. He has contributed narratives of his journeys to many periodicals, including the Atlantic, Esquire, the New Yorker, the New York Times, and Whole Earth Review. Heat-Moon is best known, however, for his meticulously researched travelogues: Blue Highways (1982), Prairie-Earth (1991), This Land Is Your Land (1997), River-Horse (1999), and most recently Roads to Quoz (2008). When he's not meandering about the country, Heat-Moon makes his home in Columbia, Missouri.

Dance of the Hobs

In Roads to Quoz Heat-Moon chronicles the sixteen-thousand-mile quest he and his wife, "O," made in search of American "quoz," an archaic term for "anything strange, incongruous, or peculiar." They found one such instance in the Quapaw Ghost Light—a legendary apparition that reportedly floats above a valley at the border of Missouri and Oklahoma. In this essay, adapted from a chapter of the same name, he describes the exhilaration of doubting one's own eyes.

Perhaps somewhere in Missouri or Oklahoma exists a local newspaper or magazine never to have carried an item about the Quapaw Light, more commonly known in the old mining area as the Hornet Spook Light. Reports, both in print and from people I spoke to, claimed the phantasm sometimes appeared briefly or not at all, and on other occasions would shine till dawn. Generally,

it had a constancy rather alien in the realm of ghosts. "It's reliable enough, especially on cloudy nights," a librarian told me, "and I never heard of it harming anybody, unless scaring the dickens out of you is harmful—you know, out there in the dark, getting a whack put on your ticker."

In both Jasper and Ottawa counties, I came upon nobody unaware of the thing, about half saying they'd seen it, and most of them believing it not yet properly explained by science. But one fellow, ignoring the many photographs of it, called it "the Horret Spool Light." I asked had he seen it, and he replied, "How does a sane person see what isn't there?"

Based upon no physical evidence except declarations written and spoken, and in spite of the sanity question, I still believed in the possibility of something spectral: not a specter perhaps but maybe a manifestation of a spectrum out on the wooded slope above the Spring River on the western edge of the Ozark Plateau. I further believed Q and I would encounter nothing, yet we nevertheless went forth, interested not so much in debunking as merely observing. We headed south as the sky was clearing just enough to reveal a trail, crescent moon setting beyond the prairie of eastern Oklahoma. The Devil's Promenade was a wooded vale dropping down to the Spring River to the west. The lane was less forested than formerly but yet woody and remote enough, despite a couple of tumbledown dwellings and a farm near the river, to create good darkness for a light show. Still, steady electrification had recently caused a few visitors—those managing to find the proper lane—to watch some electrical radiant and entirely miss the Ghost Light. Or so we were told.

The customary accounts concurred on the phenomenon earlier appearing in another location not far distant, but for the past half century it had taken its shine to E-50. "She jiggles around a little, but she don't go straggling across the county," said an old fellow tottering through the library. "She's a homebody. You just got to sit real quiet like you was in Granny's parlor."

At Halloween, he'd often known the road to be lined with cars, but on the March evening Q and I drove to the hollow, no one else was around, and our expectation was tempered only by a sense we'd not be lucky enough to glimpse the whatever. I rolled us along slowly over the new asphalt running as straight west as a

surveyor's transit can lay a lane down, the engineered perfection having relief only in its rise and fall over low hills of blackjack oaks. Melodious calls of toads roused the darkness, and the damp air smelled of spring.

Right after we crossed the Missouri line and entered the Promenade, a small light appeared in the distance on the left of the road. My anticipation apparently got the better of me, and I blurted out something to which Q said, "You're seeing some kind of vehicle way ahead of us," and a pickup did pass by soon after. I pulled to the side, shut off the engine, got out of the car. In a darkness so deep I could see down only to my knees, I began walking as if I were wading the night. When I returned, my sudden emergence from the thick obscurity caused Q to jump.

In a whisper, as if the Powers of Spectral Illumination have ears, she asked for explanations I'd read that afternoon: ball lightning, will-o'-the-wisp, marsh gas, mine gas, fox fire, Saint Elmo's fire, sunspots, glowing minerals, static electricity, ionized plasma, headlights from automobiles, billboards, a water tower, a landing field, a farm; and, of course, those ectoplasmic souls in search of craniums—theirs or yours.¹

Thirty minutes passed, and no emanation of any sort appeared, so I drove back eastward to a higher spot with a longer view. A van had arrived, with four intent faces staring into the west. I stopped far enough away not to block their view, then walked to them. A woman of middle years and three teenage girls glanced at me only to ascertain I was possessed of a more or less standard head lacking any luminescence and in the accustomed location.

Had they seen it? Without looking my way, the woman murmured slowly, uneasily, "It's there right now."

I turned to the west. Blackness. Soot, pitch, ebony, the inside of a crow. Otherwise, zilch. She whispered, eyes still fixed forward, "In thirty years, this is the best I've ever seen it." I looked again. Nothing. Spool Light.

¹In an earlier part of *Roads to Ozoz* Heat-Moon explains that local legends about the light include "yarns of a vicious, captured Civil War sergeant—vengefully decapitated by being stood in front of a cannon—who spends eternity hunting his head; of a lady walking moonless nights with a ball of fire where her noddle should be; of a miner following his shaking carbide lamp in quest of a lost you-name-it." [Editors' note.]

Then, as if I'd suddenly regained lost vision, the dark got 11
punctured—a white-hot poker thrust through a black tent. The
whiteness rose above the distant road, waxed brighter, dimmed,
then again brighter; its edge tinged blood-red. A not-of-this-Earth
gleaming seemed to float a mile or two away, slightly shifting lat-
erally, like an animal moving its head side to side as it fixes on its
quarry: Great Caesar's Ghost!

I was at last seeing the Quapaw Light! I started off down the 12
black road to tell Q, but I couldn't keep from turning around to
assure that nothing was coming up from behind. Holy Willie! A
Nodgor? had found a crack in my rationality, and the pesky hob
was dancing, mocking. I forced myself to stand still for a moment
to prove reason yet prevailed, even if a bit equivocally. *There*,
I thought, *that's a moment, that's enough*. But I had to restrain
an impulse to quickstep back to the safety of the car. (Oh, reader,
do you shake your head? Well, consider this: A jakester jumping
out of the scrub at that moment could have put a whack on my
ticker.)

"What's wrong?" Q asked, and I nodded westward, and she 13
looked that way. "What am I supposed to be seeing?" The road
was black again. "I don't see any—oh! Is that it?" It was it: wax-
ing, pendulating, waning, throwing out a bubble of redness, suck-
ing it back in, vanishing only to show itself again, making a tiny
zig to set up a zag.

The thing glimmered and shimmered, twinkled and blinked, 14
flickered and fluttered, glistened and winked. We stared so long I
began to believe our eyes were playing tricks, so we corroborated
what the little dazzler was doing: Tell me what you're seeing, I
said, and Q answered, "It just moved left." Yes. "Coming back the
other way." Yes. "Getting reddish again." Yep. "Oops, just disap-
peared—no, it's back—and brighter." Exactly.

It was doing the pixy peekaboo. "The thing's playful," Q said. 15
"No wonder people are fond of it—it's a Thinker Bell." In my
satanic voice I rasped, No, my pretty—mistake not a tool of the
Devil. Then, changing to a falsetto, I repeated the librarian's wise-
crack: "Around here, we take it lightly."

Spooky, as it's sometimes called, resembled an evening star 16
low in the sky on a clear night, but it upended astrophysics in

²²"Trogon," the author's former last name, spelled backward. [Editors' note.]

its shifting from a red dwarf to a white giant, although it was
never bigger than a bright planet seen with moderate-power
binoculars.

A farm truck came from behind and passed, and we watched 17
to see whether it would spook the Light, but the globe bravely
continued its performance. I started the engine and went slowly
forward to get closer; I was an infant reaching out to touch the
first star he ever sees. At our approach, the gleaming kept its
distance as does a rainbow or mirage, then it winked out. We
turned around to go back to where we'd been, and again there
it was, hanging above the lane. If we couldn't close the distance
on it, then that eliminated explanations like will-o'-the-wisp or
lights from a tower—anything with a fixed location. Q: "It's not
a fragment of the imagination. It's actually there—~~or~~ somewhere.
Something's somewhere. It's real as a rainbow. Maybe not as
beautiful, but a lot more lively."

We gaped at it for nearly two hours because it was what we 18
had wanted to find: an authentic optical phenomenon reportedly
unexplained by science. A merry spectral puzzle. Observing it
was like stepping back into the Dark Ages when nature was full
of phantasmagoria, when mysteries overwhelmed explanations
and ignorance transcended illumination, a time when supersti-
tion could extinguish enlightenment, when priestly obfuscations
manipulated folk into blind faiths where charms and potions,
spells and incantations, holy relics and amulets, were defenses
against hobgoblins going thumpity-bump in the night or rising in
the woods to flicker their mischief.

The Light was less spectacular than suggested by the most 19
fanciful claims, so much so that had someone not initially
observed it prior to the electrification of the county, the phenom-
enon might not be noticed today. In fact, when we arrived, I *had*
seen it, only to be convinced by Q that it was a moving vehicle.
As we were leaving, she said, "It's my first UFO," adding before I
could cavil, "Unexplained Flickering Orb."

The Quapaw Ghost Light is remarkable but not incredible, 20
modest but worth its myth, possessed of the power of the pecu-
liar, and among the many phantasms of the Ozarks, Spooky is
one of the few to come forth predictably and allow examination.
You can't hear, touch, smell, or taste it, but you can't doubt seeing
it if your patience allows.

Meaning

1. Why is Heat-Moon fascinated by the idea of the Quapaw Light? What does it represent to him?
2. What does Heat-Moon mean when he says he hoped to see "not a specter perhaps but maybe a manifestation of a spectrum" (paragraph 3)?
3. Does "Dance of the Hobs" have a thesis? What is Heat-Moon's point?

Purpose and Audience

1. How would you describe Heat-Moon's purpose in this essay?
2. What do you think the light looks like, based on Heat-Moon's description? What dominant impression of the phenomenon does he create?
3. Does Heat-Moon assume that his readers believe in ghosts and apparitions, or does he expect that they will be skeptical? How does he ensure that readers won't write him off as crazy?

Method and Structure

1. In paragraph 3 Heat-Moon says that he was "interested not so much in debunking as merely observing," suggesting that he will describe his experience with the objectivity of a scientist. Is this, in fact, what he does? Would you say that his description is mainly objective or subjective? Why?
2. Point to a few sentences in the essay that make particularly effective use of concrete details and figures of speech to describe Heat-Moon's experience of searching for and seeing the light. (If necessary, see the Glossary for a definition of *figures of speech*.)
3. In his first paragraph, Heat-Moon quotes a librarian, who warns of "getting a whack put on your ticker." What does that mean? Where in his essay does Heat-Moon return to this notion, and what is the effect of the repetition?
4. OTHER METHODS "Dance of the Hobs" is as much narration as it is description. How does Heat-Moon use dialogue to structure his story and add interest?

Language

1. How would you describe Heat-Moon's diction? What does his language contribute to the overall effectiveness of his essay? (For a definition of *diction*, see the Glossary.)
2. Why do you suppose Heat-Moon chose to capitalize "Powers of Spectral Illumination" (paragraph 7) and "Light" (19)?
3. What is the effect of the first sentence of paragraph 14?

Writing Topics

1. Every region of the United States has its share of mysteries and urban legends like the flickering orb Heat-Moon seeks out: gravity hills, hitchhiking ghosts, buried treasures, and so forth. Explore the function of such folklore. Where do legends come from? What purpose do they serve in contemporary American culture? How do they compare to other forms of mythology?
2. Answer the question posed by Heat-Moon's informant in paragraph 2: "How does a sane person see what isn't there?" Have you ever seen something you couldn't explain? In an essay, consider how expectation and context might shape a person's perception of reality. Draw on Heat-Moon's experience as well as your own.
3. Although a nonfiction essay, "Dance of the Hobs" is told like a ghost story. Analyze how Heat-Moon crafts his tale. How does he move from one stage of his quest to the next? Does the story seem to build in a particular way? What strategies does the author use to build suspense?