I plan to divulge into the history and accolades around *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. This book hits me on a personal level, which is why I felt it best to discuss. As a child, I was read this book regularly because I was a huge fan of all things Shel Silverstein. What I remember being so appealing about *The Giving Tree* was that it still had that "Silverstein" feel, but it felt more grown-up, since it was in book form. I enjoyed that the text amount varied from page to page as well as how the text was written. Some pages were traditionally spaced, and others went a bit rogue. Some would have more and some less. It felt like each page was a surprise. It was a simple book with a simple message that was easy to understand: he got everything he wanted from the tree. Fast forward 25 plus years and I redeveloped a relationship with *The Giving Tree,* but now as a mom. My daughter and I read stories every night, just like my mother and I did. *The Giving Tree* has become one of her favorites. I can vividly remember the first time I read the book to her: the story was completely different than I remember. The story was no longer a simple story about a boy who got everything he wanted; it was now a metaphor for the undying love you have for your own children. Parents love their children with their whole being and ask for nothing in return. Shel Silverstein's books so prolific because they introduce children to the world of poetry in a non-threatening way. They are popular today because they were popular with those who are now raising their own kids. They are loved because they offer simple opportunities for parents and children to read together. Deborah Stevenson states in her article *Classics and Canons*, "ultimately, the literature's most powerful children are ex-children." I believe the double meaning of the book and the multigenerational investment is what makes *The Giving Tree* a classic.

In discussing *The Giving Tree* as a classic, I feel it is important to outline some of the definitions created around the word 'classic'. In *What is a Classic,* by Mukherjee, she pulls from

the speech given by Coetzee, stating, “the classics is that which survives ideology determination as well as skeptical questioning - in fact, it defines itself by surviving.” Deborah Stevenson, again, argues that books last because ultimately, the ones judging are “ex-children”. She believes that “as long as adults can remember themselves as children reading that title, a classic has the children’s imprimatur it needs for current status.” On that scholarship alone, I believe the “classicdom” of Shel Silverstein is fitting.

In an article written by Keith Moser, he explores the book from a “different lens”. He attempts to highlight that the book is not as simple as it appears. He states that “the progressive disenchantment of the character “Boy” throughout the narrative compels the reader to ponder whether the modern world is conducive to any type of genuine or lasting happiness at all. “ He finds deeper meaning in the text, by asserting, “the utter disillusionment of the protagonist later in life after a seemingly pleasant childhood also causes the reader to question the hollow virtues of consumerism that are allegedly supposed to maximize one’s happiness.” Moser reveals that a fellow author uncovered that *The Giving Tree* was originally rejected by publishers for its lack of a “Disney-esque” plot.

Shel Silverstein, as a person, was incredibly private. This part of his persona became very frustrating to the literary world, who wanted a deeper look into his personal life. Shel Silverstein was born in Chicago in 1932. Silverstein refused to allow his publishers to release any of his biographical information. Because of all his secrecy, information like his birth date, family, and upbringing are not readily available. He went as far as to never allow an interview until 1975. In the interview in 1975, he stated he "would've much rather have been a good baseball player...But I couldn't play ball...So I started to draw and write. I was lucky that I didn't have anyone to copy, be impressed by. I had developed my own style." Silverstein began his career as a cartoonist

while stationed in Japan. After getting out of the Army, Silverstein submitted some of his cartoons to *Playboy.* After he became a regular in *Playboy*, he began to dabble in songwriting, writing “A Boy Named Sue,” for Johnny Cash, which won a Grammy in 1969. Silverstein recalled that it was his friend Tomi Ungerer who "practically dragged me, kicking and screaming, into Ursula Nordstrom's office." While Silverstein had written a few books, it was *The Giving Tree* that established his reputation. While many academics have written extensively about the hidden meaning behind the story, Silverstein holds tight to his aversion to interviews by simply stating, "It's just a relationship between two people: one gives, the other takes." With the folklore behind his personal life and romantic relationships, one could be swayed that the book is a parallel to his broken heart. Despite his reclusiveness, Silverstein has penned three books that are among the best-selling children’s books of all time, selling over 11 million copies and counting. In the 1975 interview that appeared in Publishers Weekly, Silverstein divulges his motivation for writing: "I have an ego, I have ideas, I want to be articulate, to communicate, but in my own way. People who say they create only for themselves and don't care if they're published…I hate to hear talk like that. If it's good, it's too good not to share. That's the way I feel about my work. I would hope that people, no matter what age, would find something to identify with in my books, pick one up and experience a personal sense of discovery. That's great. But for them, not for me. I think if you're a creative person, you should just go about your business, do your work and not care about how it's received.” Shel Silverstein died of a heart attack on May 10, 1999, at the age of 66. Postmortem, Silverstein has become a staple in every child’s personal library

While Silverstein is known for his simple, yet playful and entertaining pieces, *The Giving Tree* seems to put people at war. There is a divided camp of whether the story is one of

unconditional love or pure and malicious selfishness. In a two-author debate, the New York Times article, *'The Giving Tree': Tender Story of Unconditional Love or Disturbing Tale of Selfishness?*, dives into the thoughts behind each camp. Through reading and research, it seems as though there is no middle ground. Either you are of one opinion or the other. Columnist Rivka Galchen, boldly but concisely states, "the boy and the tree are both "flawed," and in the most old-fashioned way, their flaws, which are also their characters, determine their fates. The sadness one feels in reading this book so full of the word "happy" is not unlike the sadness of knowing just how it's going to end up for poor Oedipus. *The Giving Tree* is in part a disturbing tale of unconditional love, in part a tender tale of the monsters that we are."

I have always considered the tale to be one of unconditional love, never considering the other side. I believe my innocence does not want me to find any other meaning. I am content living with my rose-colored glasses and feeling as though the boy loved the tree, the tree loved the boy, and, in the end, the old man came back humbly for repentance.

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