

The Glow that Illumines, the Glare that Obscures

- Kimberly Gavalchik

Whenever I walk outside at night, I can't help but notice the delicate balance between light and darkness. Small amounts of light can make a major impact in an otherwise dark setting. Whether the sun, the moon or the stars are the source, light is a marvel that constantly surrounds us, yet often seems to be a mere aspect of the background.

In scientific terms, light is the electromagnetic radiation of a wavelength that is visible to the human eye. It is composed of photons. It is an unusual phenomenon in the physics world, displaying characteristics of both a wave and a particle. The study of light is known as optics, which is a major area of scientific study in modern physics.

There have been many theories on light over the years. In ancient India, light was one of the five fundamental "subtle" elements. They theorized that all of the major elements emerged from these subtle elements. In ancient Greece, philosophers proposed that everything was composed of four elements: fire, air, earth and water. They believed that Aphrodite made the human eye out of the four elements and that she lit the fire in the eye, which shone out from the eye, making sight possible. However, if this were true, humans should be able to see as well in darkness as they can in light. Thus, the Greeks hypothesized that sight required interaction between the rays from the eyes and the rays from a source such as the sun. Because the rays from the moon and stars are weaker, sight at night is impaired.

The sensory perception of light plays a central role in spirituality. The presence of light as opposed to its absence is a common Western metaphor of good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, and similar concepts.

However, I don't usually think about these things when I absently study the way that the light plays across the landscape. Instead, I am mesmerized by the beauty of what I see before me, not caring where it comes from.

One aspect of light that is particularly fascinating is the way that light and snow can work together. When taking a walk in the daytime, the light from the sun reflects off the snow, causing a glare that can blind anyone looking at it. It hurts your eyes and makes you unable to really see anything. Instead of illuminating the beauty of the natural world, this light hides and obscures it. For this reason, I turn around and go back inside to protect myself from this unpleasantness, saving my walk for later.

In a while, when the sun goes down, I try again. I step outside of the house, leaving the artificial light from the dozens of burning bulbs behind me. Now, only the soft, white light of the moon touches the landscape. The world is a rare combination of light and shadow. As the light dances across the landscape, it brightens the white snow that blankets the ground. The snow seems to suck the darkness out of the night, filling it instead with the pale light of the moon. This combination creates a kind of midnight sun. This effect gives clarity to the blackness, bringing things into view. Yet, it also seems to obscure them, showing the landscape in a way that the light of the day cannot. Although some might be comforted by the way the snow reflects the light, others often find it disquieting. It is in the night that we feel like we can hide. The night creates shadows, allowing us to fade into the darkness, avoiding the harsh glare

of the day. When the snow pilfers the darkness, this luxury is taken away. It gives us a midnight sun when only the stars and the moon should light the nighttime landscape.

In this gentle light, I walk towards the line of trees in the distance. As I walk, I watch the ground in front of my feet. The pale moonlight glitters over the surface of the snow. It gives the appearance of tiny diamonds adorning the surface of the snow, or a blanket of miniscule stars scattered over an immense, white sky. The ground seems to mirror the heavens above, each enhanced with its own infinitesimal stars. The ground and sky reflect, yet contrast each other, one the purest white, the other the inkiest black. With each step, the light seems to change, revealing new stars and sending others back into the pristine, colorless backdrop. As I walk, I feel increasingly guilty over marring this beautiful sky with the blemishes that my footprints leave behind me.

As I reach the line of trees, the snow on the ground disappears. The trees above hold it within their canopy, leaving the grass uncovered. In the darkness, the grass is cast into shadows. This darkness is empowering. The grass underneath me has taken on a shadowy color of dark purple, giving the landscape a fantastic, otherworldly ambiance. The light has hidden, the light has revealed, but here, the light changes. It makes the grass purple in a world where we know without a doubt that it has to be green. This darkness gives us power- power to question the things that we have always known. Is grass green, or is it really purple? Which is the liar: the light or the darkness?

I continue on, walking down the path. Eventually, I get to my favorite spot in the forest. From this spot, I can stand in the darkness, looking out over the snow-covered hills in the distance. Here, I contemplate the differences in how I feel in the light versus how I feel in the darkness. Standing in the dark, the blackness seems to hold itself away from me, making me feel

isolated within it. When standing within the light it seems to press against me, assaulting me, enveloping me.

From this spot, I see the bare trees juxtaposed against the immaculate white of the snow. White light peeks out from behind the rough, dark bark of the trees. Which part is crucial? Which part is merely negative space? Should I savor the soft, white light? Should I dote on the dark, rough branches? The two play against each other, making it impossible to choose.

I turn back toward the trees. Before me there is a long, downhill path. A thin beam of moonlight penetrates the canvas of trees above me, trying to reach the ground. The light aches to break through the thick darkness. It reminds me of when the sunlight attempts to break through the rainclouds. The sun usually fails. As if attempting a feeble redemption, the sun casts a transparent, yet breathtaking rainbow to remind us that it is still there. As I look at this shaft of light in the darkness, snowflakes blow through it. The tiny flakes catch the light, giving the appearance of fireflies racing across the light.

I feel reluctant to leave this spot. I want nothing more than to revel in the effects of the natural light that graces the landscape, bringing beauty to everything that it caresses. I am loath to return to the empty, artificial light inside of the house. It casts dark shadows over our eyes, hiding our souls from the world, and hiding the world from our eyes.

See bio below:

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I live in Windber, Pennsylvania. My parents are Thomas and Joan. I have a sister named Michelle and a brother named Tom. My wonderful boyfriend, Justin, inspired this essay. I am a junior at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, majoring in Secondary Education of English. After I graduate, I plan to eventually work towards a doctoral degree in literature or become a fiction writer.