

Dark Fantasy Elements in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*

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Abstract: *One of the most important and coveted children's writers is Neil Gaiman. His works for children are widely read, and his novels that are particularly written for children are fantasy based. Children naturally gravitate towards fantastic elements, and Neil Gaiman not only writes wonderful works of fantasy, but he also understands the type of fantasy that children love. The novel under consideration for this paper is *The Graveyard Book*. This is a book that has dark fantastical elements, and this paper proposes to examine these dark fantasy elements in the select novel. The paper identifies certain fantastical elements in the novel and supports with some incidents. Most of the fantasy novels that has young protagonists after the narrative journey, come to the real-world innocent and unaffected. But in the case of *Graveyard Book*, Bod has no other choice than to grow and explore. He must get ready to face the real world and the consequences. This dark fantasy stays true to what a dark fantasy ought to establish*

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Fantasy helps the reader to enjoy a world of infinite possibilities. Whatever a mind can conceive can be easily accepted in the realm of fantasy. Sometimes fantasy includes the breathtaking, frightening, and almost impossible to imagine scenarios. The stories from the oral tradition to the modern day's story have all used the magic of fantasy. The modern fantasy, however, combines all the mythic elements, and patterns for the contemporary reader. Fantasy, in short, is about connecting the reader with the infinity.

In the literary tradition fantasy might be difficult to define. It shows a possibility to a much greater world than we live in. Fantasy in the literary sense is connected with myth, legends and fairytales. In other words, "fantasy is distinct literary genre, however, may best be thought of as a fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or impossible. It consciously breaks from mundane reality (Mathews 2).

Fantasy has been part of the ancient cultures. The tales are not separable and they are all filled with the greatest supernatural, and fantasy stories. Many critics have observed that, "fantasy forms the mainstream of Western literature until the Renaissance" (1). Then it moved into scientific studies and more realistic literature started to be written. The vast wealth of human rationality slowly decreased the amount of appropriate theories, leaving less space for unbridled conviction and creativity.

These modalities of realistic fiction first gained popularity in the eighteenth century through books of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, and Frances Burney, then flowered into the great age of literary realism in the nineteenth century through the writings of Jane Austen, Charles.

Increasing literacy and the burgeoning middle class. The emergence of realism as the mass media focus of literary imagination created a clear dialectical pole against which the fantasy genre could counteract as a specialized mode of fiction. In reality, fantasy has specifically used the novel, the most ambitious and popular medium for realism, as its primary literary tool.

Fantasy is closely associated with other versions of a fictional novel, including gothic horror, science fiction, dystopian fiction, and irony, and one way to explain the common nature of fantasy is to take it into account. Significantly, each of these kindred genres relies more specifically on, and incorporates, the structures and meanings of realism, whereas fantasy is different.

It incorporates a revolutionary departure from the real. The Gothic Story Shock, the first great synthetic uprising against a rational book, established a simple identity of its own, playing fear and dark horror against the light of rationality. A series of surprising novels in exotic settings, from Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1765) to plays by authors such as William Beckford, Ann Radcliffe, M. G. Lewis, and Charles Maturin, saw mysterious monsters, weeping figures, and wandering portraits. Language: Language

And the German writers have also used the supernatural elements to establish a larger variety of words than is possible in a practical book. Broadly speaking, these plays have become part of the romantic movement. These include landmarks such as Jacques Cazotte's *Le diable Amoureux* (*The Devil in Paradise*, 1772), three-volume Ludwig Tieck. *Phantasmus Series* (1812-1817), early nineteenth century. The German story of E. T. A. Hoffmann, and the work of Friedrich de La Motte Fouque (most notably *Undine*, 1811) and Wilhelm Meinhold (whose *Sidonia the Sorceress*, 1847-1848, was a fantastic one. Leader of the Pre-Raphaelites and one of William's novels Morris decided to print it at his Kelmscott Press). Yet given that, these writers, terrifying intrusions from the supernatural hold their grip on normal, material reality, evoking fear. It's mainly because of this practical grounding.

Children's literature has always leaned towards fantasy. A child is far more susceptible to believing in a talking horse than an adult. The 'willing suspension of disbelief' is quite easily attainable for young readers than adults. Fantasy makes the reader enter a new world where the rules are different, and the logic for certain things happening are never looked into detail. Fantasy too started to have many genres as the years passed by. There are fantasies called high fantasy, magical realism, superhero fiction, and also dark fantasy.

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Dark Fantasy emerged as a close form of horror. The traditional ghost stories which have always enjoyed great popularity emerged with a new name called Dark Fantasy. Stories of Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Nathaniel Hawthorne *Scarlett Letter* all have some kind of supernatural elements. Similarly, in the *Graveyard Book*, the story borders between reality and fantasy. Nobody Owens(often called “Bod”) is the protagonist of the novel, and his family is killed by a man called Jack. Bod who was a baby then escapes to the nearby graveyard. A ghost couple called Mr. and Mrs. Owens protects the boy, and the rest of the stories is about how he grows up in the graveyard. The uniqueness of the fiction is the way Bod seems to exist in both the world of the living and also in the land of the dead.

The *Graveyard* is certainly a new setting in young adult fiction. This has sparked discussions ranging from philosophical theories that are proposed by Aristotle to Kierkegaard. Wayne Yuen says that the small line between living and the dead gives meaning to Bod. The coming of age aspects and the ghost world adds to the structure of the novel. The elements of fantasy are easily recognizable in the novel. The graveyard is in itself a supernatural place. The place is filled with ghosts and specters.

The place is, by all means, Gothic, or in other words, it is dark. There are graveyards, coffins, and old bones. All the inhabitants of the ghost are very old, and they walk around with decaying clothes. They have been in the coffins that they have been for centuries. The gothic setting gives an eerie setting to the novel. In addition to this, the structure of the old graves is also explained vividly.

The story not only consists of supernatural elements such as ghosts but also ghouls, the Jack of all trades, and also the unique members of the Honor Guard. Ghosts are commonplace fantasy elements in any novel of this genre, but Ghouls evil spirits who are keen on causing havoc or trouble to the people. Jack of all trades seems to be a consortium of murderers, and Honor Guards are like Angels who protect the world from all sorts of evil. These are all the fantasy elements in the novel. What is interesting to note in this novel is that there is a witch, and she seems to be burned in an unholy place. The truth is that she was never a witch when she was alive, she pretended to be one. Prejudice can be seen within the ghosts about holy land an unholy land. They do not have much of a contact with the witch. But Bod due to his innocence strikes a friendship with the witch girl. In turn, she helps him escape when he is stuck in some tight spots.

This witch is most apt person to make this novel confine to Dark Fantasy literature. She is an uncanny character. The character of Elizabeth 'Liza' Hempstock in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* is unmistakably strange because of the many roles she adopts in the narrative: that of a witch, a ghost-child, a supernatural entity, a murderer, an curiosity in love and a malevolent harbinger, among many others. Its fluidity, its philosophical complexity and its various, undecidable positions instill a feeling of doubt in the narrator, Bod Owens. Nevertheless, its liminality and instability are also a source of complex and productive energies (Wenzel 46). It defies the boundaries inculcated by social orders, especially hegemony and

religion. Liza's alterity and marginalization was compounded not only by her race, age and religious system (or heresy), but also by her position as an alien, a 'foreigner' and potentially a Jew. Her oppression, dislocation, and exile align with Bhabha's re-imagining of ignorance. I therefore claim that Liza can be viewed as a "unholy" figure or a "displaced [site] for the most personal invasions in history" (Bhabha 141). Reading Liza through a post-colonial lens implicitly and obliquely exposes the young reader to topics of alterity, marginalization and exile. By examining Liza's character alongside contemporary notions of the uncanny (Royle 2003), it is possible to see how it disturbs the stability of Western hegemonic structures by merging past and present, by representing marginalization within the physical space of the graveyard and the transhistoric space of violent persecution (witch-hunting and child oppression). In turn, I would also explain how experiences with Liza's insensitivity facilitate the protagonist's liminal perspective, helping him to enter facets of his Jungian shadow that result in a deeper self-awareness and contribute themselves to creating a positive identity-formation.

Liza is presented in the fourth chapter of the book, *The Witch's Headstone*, first as an unidentified foreboding threat from the occupants of the graveyard, and then as an ethereal force that manages to cure the narrator after he falls from a tree (Gaiman [2008] 2009: 99). Liza lives on the unconsecrated grounds of the cemetery, where her skeleton is abandoned rather than burned on charges of witchcraft. She is a ghost-child and a witch (as we know from her confessions) who died on the verge of a womanhood (as Bod describes her as neither his age – eight years old – nor an adult). From the information gleaned throughout the book, Liza seems to have been born about the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1603), which coincides with the trial of the Elizabethan witch at that time in England (Website 2). The charges brought against her are typical of many witch trials in which "milk has gone sour and horses have gone lame," and the bespelling of young men has often been used as evidence of a woman's witchcraft (100). Liza appears to have a lower-class standing within the community, as she admits to Bod, "I do washing," an profession that is stereotypically reserved for the poorest or uneducated class (108). Liza's syntax and way of speaking also reflect a lack of knowledge, and she acknowledges that "I never learned my communications" (107).

On a physical basis, Bod describes Liza as "grey-eyed" and "pretty," and her physical beauty is further supported by Liza's tale of young Solomon Porritt, who is enamored of her and "hangs about the washhouse like a wasp around a honeypot" (103, 101). This comment conveys Liza's emerging femininity, suggesting that she is at an age that attracts the sexual interest of people. Her free-spiritedness is shown as she describes dancing before dawn, underlining her desire for fun and enjoyment of independence as she "twirled and kicked, and her bare feet danced in the moonlight" (101). On an emotional basis, Liza is frequently moody and quarrelsome, reflecting her contradictory and permanent teenage state (due to her early death). It is also described as "unimposed," "pro" or speaking "with a sniff;" these are often indicators of freedom, ferociousness and non-sensical actions (119, 131, 121). Liza's stubborn defiance, even in death, confirms the plausible presumption that her 'heresy' may have been due to the above-

mentioned traits, which frequently correlated powerful, brazen, aggressive women with witches, without needing evidence of any real practice of witchcraft (Bovenschen 90).

Liza and Bod become friends after treating her ankle, and she slowly displays signs of love for him after he threatens the protection of the graveyard to buy her a headstone (something forbidden to her as a convicted witch). She performs a spell that effectively makes Bod "Fade" (a ability of invisibility used by graveyard ghosts) and protects him from danger on a variety of occasions (alerting his guardian when he is kidnapped by threatening policemen and aiding him in capturing the gang of malicious Jacks who intend to kill him) (Gaiman 250). Her affection turns to young love (something that Liza might never have experienced when she was alive) and she shows jealousy when Bod becomes a friend to a young, living girl, which leads to long periods of silence and frustration that adds to her ambiguity as her adolescent emotions oscillate (224). Although Liza influences Bod and warns him to repressed impulses (his sexuality) and values (influenced by stereotypes of identity and othering), Bod also makes a profound imprint on Liza, helping her to feel the goodness (the gift of a headstone) and the excitement (falling in love) of life. Towards the end of the book, Liza gives Bod his first kiss, thereby forever affecting the protagonist 's character.

Nicholas Royle argues that the paranormal not only deals with what is "cruel or awful" or, as Freud intimates, "arouses fear and terror" (Freud 193) but with "something oddly exquisite, touching on bliss [...] eerily reminding us of something like *déjà vu*" (Royle 2). This confusion is mirrored in Liza's first experience (as seen by the protagonist 's eyes), "She was older than him, but not a grown-up, and she looked neither friendly nor unfriendly. Wary, for the most part. She had a face that was articulate and not just a little beautiful"¹⁵ (Gaiman 99). The appearance of the frightful and lovely is indicative of the ambivalent character of the uncanny (evidently in the etymological intersection of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, discussed in my Methodology section) where both the German words and the English counterparts, *canny* and *uncanny*, with their different connotations end up having the same context unclear (Freud 195-199). Until meeting Liza, Bod asks "whether the witch is old and iron-toothed and flies in a house on chicken paws, or if she is young and sharp-nosed and bears a broomstick" (Gaiman 98). Liza disturbs and overturns the stereotypic portrayal of the heroine, as it truly becomes more beguiling than terrifying. Furthermore, the juxtaposed depictions of a Western witch (sharp-nosed, broom wielding) with the Slavic Baba Yaga folktale portrayal (a witch who flies on a house made of chicken legs) reflect the role of a witch as someone foreign to all cultures (Ness 2018: n.p.). However, instead of facing the wicked or unscrupulous witch, Bod meets an odd, young girl who is both friendly and unfamiliar to him, both approachable and hostile.

Liza's ambivalence, which makes for such transgression and defiance, is also apparent in how effortlessly she can turn from a girl-next-door citizen to a woman fatale. At first, her conspiratorial and chatty style of speaking creates a welcoming environment that pulls the reader into her trusting inner circle by the revealing of secrets and confidential information: she lovingly calls Bod "poor lummo" while she talks to him, and her stories include talkative

additions like "even if you ask me" (Gaiman 107,100). He confides in Bod about her harrowing story of being "drowned and burnt," the manner in which her peasants are ill-treated by physical threats and abuse, and then eventually put to death (100). Her true story, accentuating the unjust prosecution of victims by paradoxical and prejudiced crowds, has a universal appeal and resonance. She describes her accusers as "Pigwiggins scrubbed clean on a market day" and there is a strong hint, from her dismissive language, of class inequality and of the town's mustache (100). Thus, she draws attention to the nature of evil in human beings by portraying the inhabitants of the city as putting up the pretense of innocence and godliness for the day, amid their own faults, by highlighting their hypocrisy for condemning her supposed wrongdoing. Of example, in explaining her traumatic and intimate encounters, remorse is evoked for Liza, who is clearly wronged by the locals. Nevertheless, her reputation as an innocent, helpless survivor is soon undercut by her case-of-fact revelation as a witch, allowing her to reinsert her power.

The "cucking stool" (or ducking stool) is important as a potent emblem of male superiority over females, in that it was used to mock and taunt housewives, gossips and any woman who wanted reprimand during the Medieval period (Yard n.d.). Females were put in chairs (consisting of chamber pots) and submerged into filthy water for a long time as a form of punishment and correction of female deviance. In fact, it has been used to extract testimony from witches (many have also been executed in this way) and to warn the public of the serious implications of violating socially established laws. Liza intimates the embarrassment and indecency associated with the encounter by highlighting the filth of the "duckweed" and the "stinking pondmuck" (a combination of faeces and city trash, usually concealed by a woman when dunked). The curse of Liza, though, is a welcome sort of her vengeance. Not only does Liza turn her victimization into her victory, but she also avenges innocent women and children who may have been equally convicted, abused and murdered in her town. The time of her swearing is also the time that Liza reclaims her sense of control by turning the masculine mark of witch into a tangible harbinger of vengeance that brings about the death of her accusers.

Until she drowned, she seemed unaware of her gifts, and therefore surprised how easy it was to perform magic. When she issues her curse, she's on the brink of death, and she's eerily portrayed as a corpse being brought back to life. This is reminiscent of Ernst Jentsch's argument that the uncanny is related to "doubt as to whether an apparently living being is actually animated and, conversely, doubts as to whether a lifeless object may not actually be animated" (Jentsch 8). There is certainly an uncanny quality to Liza's seemingly dead body returning to deliver a final blow. In the abrupt possession that Liza undergoes in her "nine-part" inanimate state, an eerie impact is created by the disturbing intimation of something alive and dead that occurs together: the presence of something ancient and diabolical. In the demon-possessed images of her 'eyes rolled back' in her head, she is also a shocking reminder of the past types of sexual abuse that coerced children to believe in their binary connection with innocence and sin.

Liza is also not a typical image of a girl, since she is a teenager, a witch and a ghost. She is a combination of opposites, animate and inanimate, early death and everlasting life, worshiped

by people for her innocence and punished for her supposed guilt. As a ghost-child, Liza is able to offer a poignant encounter with a "in-betweenness" that "focuses on the co-existence and connectivity of the living and the (un)dead," according to Dominik Becher, who explains the use of ghost-child motifs in novels such as *The Graveyard Book* (103). However, as a witch-child, Liza presents the possibility of destabilizing the marginalized construction of the "child" (Buckley 2014). The witch-child's ambivalence takes on unusual complexities and avoids historical conceptions of what it means to be a "child" while fully rejecting labeling and allowing for the restoration or "recovery" of the concept that contributes to "greater diversity and complexity" which encompasses a variety of girl classes and experiences (Buckley 106). Liza's reanimation resembles the ancient macabre mystery of a ghost-child or teraph in Victorian art and literature: "the beheaded head of a child, raised on a pillar and compelled by sorcery to answer the questions of a sorcerer" (Shuttleworth 106). The obsession with teraphs is focused on preconceived notions of the "child" as a portal to heaven and hell, as associated with an eternal source of life and self-knowledge by innocence or sin, or an innocent "person" as an oracle. Liza re-enacts a teraph's association with prophesying in her final moment when she provocatively curses her convicts, but by doing so she uses both the witch and the child personae to reclaim her power and challenge the violence she has committed as both a witch and a child.

The transition from the supernatural world to the natural world can be seen exclusively in this novel. As mentioned previously children are easily susceptible to believe in magical things than adults, but for Bod, the graveyard is his reality. He grows up there running through graves and having classes taken by ghosts. For his reality is the outside world. The natural world for him lurks with danger. As he grows up just like children do, he slowly loses his ability to be in the graveyard. His powers to fade, and vanish slowly diminish as he grows up. The ghost that once took care of him as a child finds it difficult to have him around the graveyard. Like any child he uses his supernatural powers to teach the bullies at school, by doing so he understands real life outside the grave and how he ought to be careful if he loses his powers.

Bod's caretaker also feels the same. He thinks Bod would do better if he has contact with the real world than always staying in the graveyard. Silas understands that Bod will have to learn about reality if he is to survive the real world. He comes to know that this is the only way for development and maturation.

From the beginning to the end of the novel fantastical elements are wonderfully used to make Bod grow. From a small baby to an adolescent he is in this fantastical world. He comes to terms with his own identity. Even in the supernatural world, the sense of belonging lacks, and he feels isolated when he becomes an adolescent and cannot fade into structures as he used to do when he was a small boy. Most of the fantasy novels with young protagonists after the narrative journey will come to the real-world innocent and unaffected. But in the case of *Graveyard Book*, Bod has no other choice than grow and explore. He must get ready to face the real world and the consequences.

This dark fantasy stays true to what a dark fantasy ought to establish. And in the words of Northrop Fry even though he talks about Fantasy in general, this can be used for dark fantasy as well. He says Fantasy is fiction that employs "myth extending over time and space, over invisible and visible orders of reality" (325). This is true as far as Neil Gaiman's *Graveyard Book* is concerned.

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