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A Cobbled Liminality: Motifs of Adolescent Identity Formation in *The Graveyard Book*, by Neil Gaiman

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Abstract:

This paper examines the depiction of mental health in fantasy fiction, focusing on *The Graveyard Book.* Mental health remains a critical and relevant subject in academic discourse, as many individuals, consciously or unconsciously, experience mental health challenges. Fantasy fiction, one of the most widely consumed literary genres, has increasingly been employed as a medium to explore mental health. This paper focuses on the depiction of mental health in *The Graveyard Book* through a psychoanalytic analysis of the themes of loneliness and marginalisation.

While *The Graveyard Book* is a work of fantasy, it engages with real psychological themes, particularly adolescent mental development—a common feature of the genre. This paper analyses the motifs of adolescent loneliness in the novel through theoretical frameworks such as Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Derrida's theory of language. The macabre and Gothic elements in the novel do more than create a physical ambiance; they establish a psychological landscape, with each unsettling aspect metaphorically reflecting the mental state of adolescence.

Neil Gaiman's use of the Gothic transcends aesthetics, functioning as a transliteration of mental states into the physical world. His magical elements are grounded in psychological experiences, particularly identity formation and the lived realities of marginalised individuals. Through his nuanced depiction of the macabre, Gaiman sheds light on the complexities of adolescent mental states, such as loneliness and depression. This paper will explore how

these motifs—whether Gothic, horror, or nature-related—serve as narrative devices to investigate adolescent mental health and identity formation within the novel.

Keywords: Fantasy Fiction, Mental Health, Trauma, Psychoanalysis.

For strictly academic purposes, Fantasy literature is often dismissed as mere tales of the impossible—stories featuring unworldly feats of nobility and kindness, alongside improbably convenient happy endings. However, fantasy literature draws on real-world human tendencies, amplifying them within the canvas of a world that both resembles and diverges from our own. This physical distancing does not weaken the underlying authenticity of human action; on the contrary, it enhances its clarity, making it the most relatable element of fantasy. As Lucie Armitt observes, fantasy literature has two latent aspects: it engages with an otherworld and narrates stories beyond our everyday experience (Armitt 09). In Neil Gaiman's work, the supernatural aura is prevalent, with many main characters being ghosts, a vampire, or a werewolf—elements of the "otherworld" on which Bod, a character of this world, depends for his existence.

A significant aspect of the fantasy novels which has been underplayed is the connection in it between the fantastic and the real. Fantasy literature is not just about a narratorial creation of the fantastical, but rather being able to create a fantastical against a backdrop of all that is real and relatable. The incorporation of the relatable and the everyday makes the suspension of disbelief that much easier, as a launch pad necessary for the lifting of the imagination to an altitude necessary for the grasping of the fantastical. The real in a fantasy work makes it more relatable and makes the otherworld more homely and comprehensible. In the introduction to his seminal work *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality*, T.E. Apter contends that fantasy literature functions as a manifestation of the unconscious, drawing on unresolved and obscured emotions (Apter 4-5). It operates as a linguistic map or symbolic code that offers access to the most profound psychological depths. Distinct from other literary forms, fantasy does not necessitate an explicit justification for the bizarre nor does it adhere to the realist demands of conventional narratives. Instead, fantasy thrives on the symbolic and metaphorical, privileging the implicit over the explicit. The true architecture of a fantasy narrative is constructed in the psychological perturbations that arise from a disquieting antecedent, which provides thematic cohesion and structural grounding to the fantastical elements of the narrative. Thus, fantasy fiction becomes a symbolic translation of the inner workings of the psyche. Achieving a complete understanding of fantasy requires transporting the reader to

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the other side through the portal of metaphor, unveiling new extended meanings of familiar things or emotions. And there exists between the two of them, the fantastic and the real, a no man's land used by Gaiman to situate the character of Bod and the process of the formation of adolescent identity.

A significant but often under emphasised aspect of fantasy novels is the connection between the fantastical and the real. Fantasy literature is not merely about narrating the creation of the fantastical; it involves the ability to craft a fantastical world against a backdrop of what is real and relatable, for a better explication of the latter. As Apter states— "The fantastic circumstances can be viewed as an economical and effective means of revealing characters' interests and emotions…" (Apter 1).

Nor would the fantastical elements strain the suspension of disbelief beyond its limits, as "The fantastic occurrences, setting, or characters will not tax the reader's credulity, for they are treated as systematic representations, with the particular quality of their strangeness commenting in various ways upon the ideas represented." (Apter 1-2). Thus, there exists a striking parallel between the unconscious and fantasy fiction, as both subvert the boundaries of conscious, systematic realism. Consequently, this analysis of the text inherently carries psychoanalytic underpinnings. As Rosemary Jackson states in her seminal *Fantasy, The Literature of Subversion*— "Fantasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material that it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts" (Jackson 3).

Fantasy fiction employs a crucial device by portraying the dynamics of the mind in its entirety, encompassing both the conscious and the influence of the unconscious on the conscious. In doing so, it adeptly illustrates the societal moulding process and its impact on the psyche through deeply symbolic means. By translating subtle mental abstractions into symbolic representations, fantasy fiction makes these complex psychological processes widely accessible and universally resonant. Consequently, a psychoanalytic reading of fantasy literature is both crucial and illuminating, as psychoanalysis seeks to "comprehend how social structures are represented and sustained within and through us in our unconscious" (Jackson 4).

The incorporation of the familiar and the everyday makes the suspension of disbelief more seamless, providing a launchpad necessary for elevating the imagination to a level where the fantastical can be fully grasped. The presence of the real in a fantasy work enhances its relatability and renders the otherworld more "homely and comprehensible. Between these realms lies a "no man's land," a space Gaiman skillfully utilises to situate the character

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of Bod and explore the process of his identity formation. This liminality, while fantastical in the literal sense within this particular work, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the myriad liminalities experienced by marginalised and confused identities in the real world. Additionally, the depiction of the fantastical world within the graveyard, while not entirely dissimilar to the "orthodox" societal order, is distinct enough to underscore the underlying machinations of societal injustices. The fantastical, in this sense, serves as a tool for illuminating these realities. As Jackson notes in discussing Freud's concept of the 'uncanny,' such literature "is opposed to institutional order. Freud is well aware of the countercultural effects of a literature of the uncanny, and its transgressive function in bringing to light things which should remain obscure. The uncanny *expresses* drives which have to be *repressed* for the sake of cultural continuity" (Jackson 40).

The "fantastic" in Gaiman's work is not otherworldly in effect but serves as a necessary defamiliarization of the familiar, allowing the often-overlooked tragedies of confused identities and marginalisation to be seen. The identity that Bod develops is not rooted in one place or another; instead, it must navigate multiple existences. Fantasy literature, therefore, is not solely about the fantastic but also about the relatable human element within the fantasy—whether in human actions or underlying emotions—which serves as the channel of "believability" that guides readers through an otherwise alien fantasy world. Some theorists argue that fantasy can more effectively depict and connect with the unconscious mind, as it suspends the usual cerebral task of relating to and deciphering the "normal" world. As Brian Attebery states in his *Strategies of Fantasy*, "Thus, even the freest fantasy is in a sense mimetic, for it depicts the associational processes of the unconscious, processes which seem to be most accessible when the rational censor is lulled to sleep..." (Attebery 08). In fantasy, there is an underlying consistency: all that is familiar yet mundane is stripped away, while all that is human and personal—yet common to all—is transferred into themes or motifs. Fantasy, therefore, captures the essence of life without appearing recognisable in a superficial sense. *The Graveyard Book* is one of the most notable adult fantasy novels of this century.

Though a work of fantasy, *The Graveyard Book* addresses real themes related to mental states, particularly adolescent mental development, as fantasy literature often does. This paper aims to explore and analyse motifs of adolescent loneliness throughout the novel. The themes of the macabre and the gothic are not merely present for creating physical ambiance; they serve to establish a mental ambiance, with each "uneasy" element of the novel acting as a physical metaphor for the state of an adolescent mind. Therefore, these gothic qualities must be understood through a lens of specific mental states. Neil Gaiman's consistent fasci-

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nation with and familiarity with the gothic is evident in much of his work, including the *Sandman* series (1989—). However, his approach to the gothic is more of a transliteration from the mental to the physical, where every magical aspect of the novel is grounded in a psychological state. In *The Graveyard Book*, Neil Gaiman constructs the graveyard as a "mindscape" where the boundary between internal thought and external reality blurs, reflecting the protagonist Bod's inner development. This concept aligns with the idea of "mindscape" in the book *Mindscapes: The Geographies of Imagined Worlds*—"landscapes, new or extrapolated, that are meant to be realizations of our mental forms 'out there'" (Slusser and Rabkin 17). In the graveyard, Bod interacts with supernatural beings and faces existential challenges, which allow him to grow both mentally and emotionally, embodying the transformative power of speculative landscapes Through his literary depiction and incisive description of the macabre and the gothic, Gaiman conveys the latent possibility of understanding certain adolescent mental states, no matter how elusive they may seem. Gaiman's use of the gothic extends beyond the genre's usual preoccupations with madness, shame, or trauma. Instead, he employs the gothic as a tool not just to create a palpably moody atmosphere but as a setting—a stage—where the revelation of identities occurs. As Alison Halsall notes, "Gaiman employs iconic Gothic visuals to create a moody, even haunted, atmosphere and setting in which to allow his protagonists to explore the intricate passages of their own identities" (Halsall 124). This paper will closely examine such motifs—whether gothic, horror, or nature-related—to uncover the core of mental states and adolescent identity formation, for which these motifs act as narrative vehicles in the novel.

The Graveyard Book is a novel about the maturation of an orphan, though he is not an orphan in the fantastical realm of the story. The boundary between the graveyard and the outside world serves as more than a physical barrier; it delineates the real from the fantastical. Outside the graveyard, Nobody Owens is an orphan, as his sense of belonging only makes sense within the graveyard's fantastical and gothic elements, which exist solely within its confines. Parented by ghosts from the past after his biological parents are murdered by the aptly named Jack Frost, his existence becomes an anomaly outside the graveyard. It is only within the graveyard that he can make sense of the world and himself, and through Nobody Owens, readers can relate to the fantasy in the novel. As a coming-of-age novel, *The Graveyard Book* adheres to typical conventions.

As M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham explain, a coming-of-age story typically deals with "the development of the protagonist's mind and character…into maturity: this process usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (Abrams and Har-

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pham 255). Such narratives often employ resistive forces that shape the character and particular methods of character description. The novel takes a two-faced approach to fantasy: it uses fantasy to uncover latent aspects of human development, yet by the end, it suggests the irrelevance of fantasy. Bod must leave the graveyard, and despite all the otherworldly experiences he has had, he now faces the challenge of navigating the normality of the real world. In this way, the ordinary world becomes the novel's ultimate challenge, taking the place of the horrible and the otherworldly that would typically be present in gothic literature.

According to Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic theory, the developing mind undergoes eight stages of psychosocial development. Erikson notes that "in puberty and adolescence, all samenesses and continuities relied on earlier are questioned again, because of a rapidity of body growth which equals that of early childhood and because of the entirely new addition of physical genital maturity" (Erikson 246). Loneliness is not an inherent feeling; it must be contextualised with other emotions. When Jack Frost murders Bod's family, Bod experiences profound loneliness in that moment. His crawl from his home to the graveyard represents the most isolated he is throughout the novel. Like all other human emotions, loneliness must be understood before it can be fully felt. This understanding often takes place during what Jacques Lacan refers to as the Symbolic stage in psychoanalytic theory. In this stage, language (beyond mere linguistics) becomes integral not just to comprehension but to the very process of comprehension. In other words, language begins to think for us. Language not only becomes a part of our mind but also shapes the mind itself; the mechanics of social, cultural, and linguistic structures are reflected in the ways our minds function in this Symbolic stage. As Lacan states in his seminal work, *Écrits*, "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" (Lacan 64).

Language plays a significant role not only in shaping a character's consciousness but also in forming our perception of that character. Slavoj Žižek suggests that language, by its very nature of being a representation of things, can be violent in this process. According to Žižek, every entity, whether animate or inanimate, possesses infinite aspects or personalities, and language, in its attempt to convey the essence of that entity, inevitably simplifies it. Language "reduces [things] to a single feature" and "dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous" (Žižek 61). The first significant element in the formation of identity, particularly for Bod, is his name. The Owenses name him "Nobody Owens," and while this name may not directly convey an identity, it still contributes to his sense of self as he comes to understand it. In Western literature, the relationship between naming and identity, and the evolving correlation between them, has been thorough-

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ly explored. For instance, Odysseus tells Polyphemus that his name is "Nobody" to conceal his identity from the cyclops, while for Emily Dickinson, the term "Nobody" reflects her desire for tranquility in obscurity. Both instances assert power and control over identity, acts of steering identity in a particular direction. However, in Bod's case, the identity he is to develop has its foundation in his name, which exemplifies the Derridean concept of "absence of presence." As Derrida explains, this is "the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Derrida xvii). The name "Nobody" underscores the inescapable condition of Bod's life—his identity as an anomaly.

An identity is not solely constructed by the individual but is shaped by numerous factors, including social contexts, societal mentality, religion, education, social interactions, and one's place in the social hierarchy. Moreover, identity is a temporal construct, influenced by the conventions of its time and place, even as the past exerts its influence. The unique case of Nobody Owens illustrates this complexity; the society and era that shape his identity are not of his own time, making his identity an inevitable anomaly when he eventually ventures into the world. Social Identity Theory, proposed by Tajfel and Turner suggests that individuals experience collective identity based on their membership in a group, such as racial, ethnic, or gender identities. However, in Bod's case, the factors typically moulding identity are absent or out of sync with his time.

Ironically, loneliness is not experienced in isolation but often in the presence of others. The early events in Bod's life give him little reason to be joyful, which is reflected in his disposition. This disposition is sharply contrasted when he first makes contact with the outside world through Scarlett. This interaction with someone from beyond the graveyard makes Bod acutely aware of the peculiarities of his identity—a realisation that often acts as a catalyst for feelings of loneliness. One of the most telling moments is Bod's lack of participation in the celebration of a birthday, which hints at how his upbringing within the graveyard has rendered him alien to the normalcy of the outside world. The fact that Scarlett's parents believe Bod to be imaginary, and a mere figment of childish imagination highlights the thematic and narrative insistence that an identity not conforming to conventional development is excluded from the real "normal" world. Another moment of realisation occurs when Bod fails to introduce his deceased friends to Scarlett, who cannot see or hear them, or when he walks through walls unchallenged due to his "Freedom of the Graveyard" (Gaiman 31).

This first meeting between a being from the graveyard and one from the outside world symbolically underscores the mutual exclusivity of these two realms. Through this encounter,

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and by being in the company of someone truly alive for the first time, Bod becomes acutely aware of his loneliness. His initial protectiveness over the headstones—lifeless objects—rather than engaging in lively play with someone as alive as himself, makes him realise the peculiarity of his way of thinking and being. "For a moment, Bod felt protective—the gravestones were his, weren't they?—and then he realised how foolish he was being, and he thought that there were things that might be more fun done in the sunlight with a friend. He said, 'Yes'" (Gaiman 58).

Loneliness also contributes to an exaggerated sense of anthropomorphism. As one study notes, "When we're lonely, these inanimate objects actually seem more human" (Johnson). This intense interaction between loneliness and inanimate objects serves as a narrative engine in the story, as it does in much of fantasy literature. However, while most fantasy literature treats such interactions as a gateway to the fantastical, Gaiman uses fantasy to circle back to the core issue of loneliness. All of Bod's interactions with inanimate objects metaphorically reflect his yet-unrealised loneliness. His interaction with Liza, although infused with care and compassion, hints at a deeper, suppressed loneliness. Liza's subtle need for compassion and Bod's corresponding need to be compassionate speak to a long-suppressed loneliness, with the headstone symbolising an exchange of compassion. Extended periods of loneliness also undermine the certainty of one's identity. As Liza poignantly remarks, "Got no headstone," she said, turning down the corners of her mouth. "Might be anybody. Mightn't I?" (Gaiman 163).

An identity cannot exist in isolation, not only physically but also in the absence of understanding and emotional connection with peers, particularly those of the same age group. Identity requires external validation for its sustenance. Liza's lack of a headstone, while tragic, also symbolises her fragile and unvalidated identity. For Bod, his act of compassion toward Liza is not just for any ghost but for someone with whom he shares much in common. The gift of a headstone, a peculiar one at that, symbolises the uniqueness of both characters and the establishment of mutual understanding.

Identity formation relies significantly on social interaction, not only for understanding but also for validation. It is a socially constructed phenomenon. Identity can be understood as "the interface between a private sense of self and those factors that constitute the social context in which we experience those feelings and motivations" (Giles and Middleton 34). In *The Graveyard Book*, the true mystery is Bod's identity, which remains elusive both to the readers and to himself throughout the novel. The fantasy of the novel unfolds around the revelation of Bod's identity. Throughout the first half of the novel, Bod exhibits certain inner quali-

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ties, yet the essential origins of these qualities remain hidden, much like a mystery waiting to be unveiled when Bod confronts the final antagonist, Mr. Frost.

The Freedom of the Graveyard provides Bod with protection but also obscures his path to self-discovery. This protective element, along with the guidance of his elders, prevents Bod from fully discovering his identity on his own terms. As Bod progresses through adolescence, the term "Freedom" in freedom of the graveyard becomes paradoxical. Although Bod is initially shielded by this freedom, he eventually must embrace the dangers of the outside world to find his true self. This journey begins with his interactions with Scarlett and culminates in his growth beyond the protective boundaries of the graveyard. In this way, the novel adheres to the conventions of the "coming of age" genre, where the influence of elders plays a crucial role in shaping identity. However, the protagonist must ultimately transcend this influence to forge their own identity through the challenges and perils they encounter. Bod's quest to find his identity and determine his destiny on his own terms is central to the fantastical elements in the novel. While Bod's upbringing under the guidance of Silas, Miss Lupescu, and the Owens certainly shapes his identity, his self-awareness develops through his interactions with Liza, Scarlett, and ultimately his confrontation with the Jack of All Trades.

Bod's concern for Liza highlights not only his empathy for the marginalised but also a growing realisation of his own sense of being "out of place" and at risk of marginalisation. He is neither fully "normal" like the living, nor entirely dead like the graveyard inhabitants, nor a vampire like Silas. These realisations become more apparent through his interactions with Scarlett. Before meeting Scarlett, Bod relies on the elders, particularly Silas, to handle dangers. However, his sense of protection for Scarlett, especially during their time in the dungeons, pushes him toward mastering his own destiny—a central theme in many coming-of-age narratives. It is through his adventures with Scarlett that Bod first perceives his ability to protect and stand up for someone else.

In a pivotal moment, Bod feels the cold of a knife at his neck, and everything slows down, coming into sharp focus. "I know my name," he declares. "I'm Nobody Owens. That's who I am" (Gaiman 418). This revelation marks a significant step in Bod's journey toward self-discovery and agency.

In addition to being a fantasy novel, *The Graveyard Book* is a coming-of-age story that explores the transition into adolescence—not just living through it but discovering and understanding it. This internal transition reflects the chaotic, otherworldly elements of its fantasy setting. An essential aspect of adolescent literature is identity development, particularly

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as it pertains to the protagonist. Adolescence is a period when individuals "find themselves" and uncover their true selves. The novel's relevance to adolescence lies in its depiction of this liminal stage—a space between childhood and adulthood, much like the novel's setting in a graveyard, which exists between the fantastical and the real worlds. As Laurie Langbauer notes, "An identity that is sometimes child, sometimes adult, but also both or neither is … 'young adult 'or 'adolescent'" (Langbauer 510). This peculiar nature of adolescent fantasy aligns with Farah Mendlesohn's concept of Liminal Fantasy. The graveyard thus serves as a metaphor for Bod's own liminal existence, bridging the gap between different states of being and stages of life.

In *The Graveyard Book*, the supernatural and "horrifying" elements, which incorporate typical horror tropes, diminish in significance when viewed through their impact on Bod's identity. Their importance emerges not from their inherent horror but from their relationship with Bod's identity and their effects on his development. Through this lens, the seemingly superficial horror elements gain deeper significance, serving as metaphors for the process of adolescent identity formation.

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