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Examining the works of Neil Gaiman:

Children don't need their literature Dumbo'd down.

"I don't want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted just like that, and it didn't mean anything? What then?" (Gaiman, "Coraline", 112)

From this quote, we see a young child who some might say has a very firm grip on reality. Others may go so far as to say that Coraline Jones, the protagonist of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, has a sober, lugubrious view of life, the kind of view that would normally be shared by cheerless adults. She shows little of the cheer and exuberance expected of someone her age, and likewise, less of the fear and panic that may be expected of an eleven year old girl. In many ways, Coraline, while not fulfilling our expectations of a literary little girl, is perhaps instead a paradigm representing modern children, and their literary tastes.

In *Coraline* and other works, we see that Neil Gaiman's literature for children reaches for darker and more fully developed plots and characters. This trend helps move popular books for children away from Disneyified reflections of life toward a more critical and thought-provoking literary experience at a young age.

If we were to take a brief look at a collection of popular children's books from the past that feature supernatural creatures, magic, witches, or other unexplainable phenomenon, we might be drawn to such classics as L. Frank Baum's The Wizard Of Oz, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, Lloyd Alexander's The Black Cauldron, or C.S. Lewis' The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe. All of these books are widely considered to be classic tales from previous generations, and all have elements of the supernatural, from explicit witches and wizardry to the unseen resurrection of characters. All of these books have dark or evil characters, and in fact the Wicked Witch of the West is one of the most prototypical of the entire genre. Despite the proliferation of 'bad guys' in these books, they don't seem to have the depth and realism of fright that more modern works have. These books have clear designations that make it known that what is happening is make believe, and that diminishes the realism and impact on their readers. Children who read these books can more easily convince themselves that what is happening is not real, as the parallels to the main characters as they are going through such adventures are difficult to draw. In essence, most of these books are examples of mild escapist fiction, where the author provides a magical world for children to live in, but can easily escape from.

Modern works by Neil Gaiman have some similar concepts (one can easily see the parallel of Coraline traveling through the passage into the Other-world and Alice's trip through the Looking-Glass, into a mirror world with significant differences), however they tend to use more realistic, frightening language, characters and scenes. In The Wizard of Oz, for example, even the climactic scene where Dorothy throws water on the witch and she melts away is hardly written in a frightening way:

> “This made Dorothy so very angry that she picked up the bucket of water that stood near and dashed it over the Witch, wetting her from head to foot.
>
> Instantly the wicked woman gave a loud cry of fear, and then, as Dorothy looked at her in wonder, the Witch began to shrink and fall away.
>
> "See what you have done!" she screamed. "In a minute I shall melt away."
>
> "I'm very sorry, indeed," said Dorothy, who was truly frightened to see the Witch actually melting away like brown sugar before her very eyes. (Baum, 99)

And contrast this with the first few sentences of Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book*:

> There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife.
>
> The knife had a handle of polished black bone, and a blade finer and sharper than any razor. If it sliced you, you might not even know you had been cut, not immediately.
>
> The knife had done almost everything it was brought to that house to do, and both the blade and the handle were wet. (Gaiman, “The Graveyard Book”, 9)

This explicit, descriptive style immediately brings a feeling of seriousness and impact that does not exist in the earlier example works. This style and grittiness is certainly known and intentional, as is evidenced by Gaiman’s response when discussing this exact passage: “And if you’re dealing with the kind of parents and teachers who only read the first line or the first half page, that’s probably not the best beginning for a children’s book one could hope for.” (Gaiman, “Interview”)

Despite these modern books being more frightening and scary than works from previous generations, it can be seen that as time has gone on, supernatural and horror fiction that has been targeted to children and young adults has gotten darker. If we look at books from the turn of the

century through the 50's or 60's, we can see books that are similar to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in their mild handling of frightening characters and scenarios. As we move into the 70's we can find that horror novels have been targeted towards young adults for a great deal of time. A perfect example of this are works by the classic horror and suspense author Stephen King - two of his works: *Salem's Lot* and *Fire Starter* won the Best Books for Young Adults award given out by the American Library Association in 1978 and 1981, respectively. This shows that children and young adults have been reading scary literature for a long time. The previously mentioned Neil Gaiman books are also targeted for the "young adult" audience, (generally considered the 8-12 year old range), and could easily be considered scarier than even these so-called horror books from authors such as King and Dean Koontz. As time goes on, it appears clear that more and scarier books are being targeted to the child and young adult audience, and as a result, children are reading scarier books than in the past.

Since 1937 when the Walt Disney company released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney has been the company that set the bar when it comes to children's entertainment. They have achieved consistent success and acclaim, and they continue doing so to this day. The success that they achieve in this arena comes via a very specific formula, one that has even been termed "Disneyfication", and is represented thematically by grand and great heroes, dark and evil villains, and a clear line between the two. Additionally, each discrete film has good triumphing over evil and people living happily ever after. If one takes any of the hero or prince characters from a Disney film and takes away their physical appearance, they are almost interchangeable paradigms of heroism. The same can be said for any of the well-known Disney princesses. Although each has a different physical appearance, they all are the same general

character: a young woman in difficulty, who through her own ingenuity and help from her friends is able to triumph, and live happily ever after with the aforementioned prince. Although they are (age-wise) representative of the post-pubescent age group, they are carefully represented as wholesome and pure, so as to keep the characters appealing to all, and to give no cause for any objection. This is observed by Finn Mortensen in his essay about *The Little Mermaid:* "Disney films usually gift-wrap their product in sexuality as watered-down Freudian cliches. Even this is not done consistently, however, since the sexual instinct is toned down in the film version of the story." (Mortensen, 450). This characteristic is seen repeatedly. Villains in Disney works also fall into repetitive characterizations: they are selfish, wicked, unfettered by morals, often drawn with darker skin, hair or clothing, and ultimately tragic (thus overtly reinforcing the moral that evil cannot win).

When we examine characters in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, we find some similarities, and some significant differences. The protagonist, Nobody Owens (who is called Bod), starts as a baby, and we are introduced to him as an assassin murders the rest of his family. He is taken in and raised by the ghosts and spirits in a graveyard. In some ways he is similar to a Disney protagonist, in that he develops a decent moral compass. In other ways he presents differences: he is very human, and spends most of the book pursuing very human desires and making human mistakes. He doesn't aspire to being great, or wealthy, or living happily ever after. The book ends with him in his 15th year, and having actually accomplished very little other than dispatching the assassin that killed his family and was seeking him. He does not get the girl, he does not live happily ever after, and other than the death of the assassin - few plot lines are actually tied up. The antagonist, Jack bears a few more parallels to Disney villains - he is a

killer, certainly, but kills because it is his job, not out of a satisfaction (at first.). He is immoral and wicked, and in the end is defeated. Despite being the primary antagonist, little is said about his origin or motivation, and he is more of a stereotype than a fleshed out character. In fact, when the protagonist assumes another identity while searching - the other identity comes across as much more real than his real identity. The real focus of the book however, is Bod and his being raised by various denizens of the graveyard. As a character, Bod is much more real and less stereotypical than a Disney character. He acts and feels as we ourselves do, and makes the same mistakes, asks the same questions, and suffers similar setbacks. Through the depth and reality of Bod's character, the reader is able to delve into the difficulties that Bod faces, and be more thoughtful about his situations and choices, precisely because he is so relatable.

Other books by Gaiman have similar diversions from the "Disney Princess" archetype. If we examine Coraline Jones, the titular character of Gaiman's *Coraline*, we see a young girl who is bored, and acts as we expect an average 11 year old bored girl to act - she complains, is picky, she annoys her parents, she gets into trouble, and is smarter, wiser and braver than most people give her credit for. She finds that she is bored, and mostly ignored by her parents, thus desiring deeper relationships (a very real and relatable trait which the antagonist Other Mother uses to draw her in.) She has a very firm grip on reality, and is able to (with little difficulty) see through the glamour presented, similar to that which is often on the surface of Disney stories. In the opening quote, she demonstrates this ability: "I don't want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted just like that, and it didn't mean anything? What then?" (Gaiman, "*Coraline"*, 112). She is able to see that despite wanting things, to be given everything takes away the value of those achievements and

valuables. This alone shows that Coraline is vastly different than the Disney princesses that we are presented with, most of whom are more than willing to take a shortcut to get what they want, whether it is brought by a sea-witch or a fairy godmother, and only as a last resort will they fall back to the merits of their own actions. Coraline instead relies on her own wits, with only occasional help from others, and is the primary person responsible for both the difficulties in the book, and the final redemption. As a character, Coraline's depth allows us to relate to her difficulties and victories due to her own wits and strengths. We also see that she is unwilling to sacrifice some of herself (as is represented by sewing buttons on her eyes) to achieve happiness with her Other Parents. This is in stark contrast to the Little Mermaid, where Ariel hesitates only briefly before agreeing to give up her voice in the hopes of snaring the prince. By being so real, the children readers may find Coraline's decisions to be more thought-provoking, and consider what to learn from her actions. Jack Zipes states: "Fairy tales have developed as means of communication that enable us to get a hold on problems that we have and ways to resolve them." ("Interview with Jack Zipes: Jack Zipes on Fairy Tales")

The heroine of *Wolves In The Walls*, 6 year old Lucy shares many of these traits with Coraline. She is also precocious, thoughtful, and seeks more of her parent's attention. When the wolves come out of the walls and the grown-ups are all considering far-fetched schemes, it is down-to-earth Lucy that thinks through the problem logically and comes up with a likely plan. Additionally, she provides the impetus and bravery needed to drive the family through the solution. As an interesting side theme, Lucy's plan and desires are primarily motivated by selfishness in the beginning - she attempts to go back into her house not to reclaim it for her family, but instead to get her favorite stuffed pig-puppet that was left behind in the commotion.

Lucy is represented as a logical, clear-thinking example of a child. The adults in the story have their judgement clouded by many preconceived notions and thoughts, as is evidenced by the repetition of the line: “You know what they say: If the wolves come out of the walls, then it's all over.” (Gaiman, *“Wolves In The Walls”*, 9). Lucy spends time attempting to deconstruct this notion by drilling down into it, asking who the mysterious “they” are, and what is meant by “it’s all over” but all the adults have been programmed to take it at face value, without question. Children are filled with curiosity, and will easily relate to Lucy and her quest to know “why”, as well as Lucy’s inability to make the adults aware of the goings-on inside the house and it’s walls until it’s too late.

These works by Neil Gaiman present deeper and different characterizations of the protagonists, and moreover, these fleshed-out characters are ones that children can see themselves in. A character who struggles with similar moral dilemmas, similar family dysfunction, similar struggles and similar emotions is much more relatable than a shallow prototype as Disney uses. The ability to look critically at a character and situation is expanded when that character and situation has a depth of reality that a reader can relate to.

PARAGRAPH HERE - . How do the selected works compare to similar award winning books of a previous generation with regards to disneyfication of their major themes? - END PARAGRAPH

CONCLUSION HERE -

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