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English 403 - Children's Literature

May 1, 2013

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 Disneyfied 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 Wonderful Wizard Of Oz*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through The Looking-Glass*, 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 villains 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. This view is backed up by well known fairy tale expert Jack Zipes in his essay "Are fairly tales still useful to Children?" when he states: "...the very act of reading a fairy tale is an uncanny experience in that it separates the reader from the restrictions of reality from the onset...".

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 T*he Wonderful 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 *Firestarter* 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 tween or "middle-reader" 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. Disney even appears to intentionally reinforce this view in their own films - as evidenced by the apparent reversal of this in Beauty And The Beast. The Beast (who is physically repulsive) becomes the hero, despite his appearance, and as stated in *The Gospel According to Disney:* "At the film's conclusion, the Beast does turn into Prince Charming - an auburn haired hunk resembling the model Fabio - the castle and it's servants are restored, the music plays, and the grand ball commences" (Pinsky, 146). 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 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. A perfect example of this is again found in *Beauty and the Beast*, as Belle our heroine is represented very differently than other females - "A very different kind of sexuality also makes an appearance in this movie, although in passing. Gaston's empty-headed, young female admirers are portrayed with large breasts and low-cut dresses (in contrast to Belle's more modest neckline)" (Pinsky, 146). 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. Despite his strange circumstances and home, 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 its 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.

The major themes in all of the previously mentioned books are alike. They represent the same themes that we see in almost all children's literature - coming of age, self-reliance, good versus evil, and the development of relationships between kids and adults. While at a high level the themes are comparable (no-one would question that good defeats evil when Coraline defeats the beldam in *Coraline* or in Lloyd Alexander's *The Black Cauldron* when Gwydion and the army finally defeat King Morgant) we must consider if the major themes have been simplified (in the same fashion as a Disney film) in order to cater to the expected audience. First let's consider the theme of Good versus Evil. In most Disney films, we see that the villain is portrayed as wholly evil, unrepentant and unredeemable. If we look at one of the primary villains of the 1966 Newbery Honor book *The Black Cauldron*, we find a good candidate for such an antagonist: King Morgant - he is a traitor, and intends to lure the heroes to their depths. Although he attempts to bring about the destruction of the others, he is a complex character, with both faults and good traits. The refusal to see him as entirely evil is evidenced by the conversation between Taran and Gwydion - " 'It is easy to judge evil unmixed,

replied Gwydion. ‘But, alas, in most of us good and bad are closely woven as the threads on a loom; greater wisdom than mine is needed for the judging’ “ (Alexander, 170). Here we can see that the concepts of good vs evil go much deeper than a Disney stereotype, and the intent of the author is to have the audience consider that depth. In Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* we are also presented with an atypical antagonist. Jack Frost, the assassin is certainly evil due to his actions, but it might be difficult to classify him as malicious. He appears to be a more typical villain, as he is clearly unrepentant, and goes to his death attempting to finish his evil deeds. The good vs evil theme here is thus fulfilled, and although it is very scary, it is (thematically) less deep.

A second theme that we should consider is the characterization of children and the child-adult relationship. In Neil Gaiman’s *The Wolves In The* Walls*,* we are shown what might be termed a “typical” relationship between Lucy, a 6 year old, and her mother, father, and older brother. Although exaggerated to show the point, the relationship is characterized by Lucy being largely ignored or dismissed by her older family members, even when she is right. The relationship develops slightly when she is proven to be right, and slightly more when Lucy solves the crisis facing the family. Once the crisis is resolved however, the adult/child dynamic goes back to an even worse state - she doesn’t even bother to tell her parents and brother when she suspects something even worse. In a perverted way, this fulfills part of Henry Giroux’s vision of a Disneyfied theme, as he states: “Disney films combine an ideology of enchantment and aura of innocence in narrating stories that help children to understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment.” (Giroux, 65). Although Lucy sheds part of her innocence, it is reflected by a true

understanding of who children are and their place in an adult environment - that they will largely be ignored by adults, especially when inconvenient. If we compare this to the child/adult relationships we see in the 1953 Newbery Honor book *Charlotte's Web*, we see a different outcome. In *Web*, we see a little girl, Fern Avery, who at the beginning of the book pleads with her father not to kill a runt pig. The father acquiesces only after an emotional outburst from Fern, and although he does not kill the pig, he stays the act primarily for the goal of teaching his daughter a lesson: "You go back to the house and I will bring the runt when I come in. I'll let you start it on a bottle, like a baby. Then you'll see what trouble a pig can be." (White, 2) . In most contexts, the adult/child relationship in *Charlotte's Web* is much more traditional in the sense that the adult knows more and attempts to guide the child into a more mature understanding of the realities of caring for an animal, farming, and the difficulties therein.

Lastly, we should consider the theme of self reliance. In *Coraline*, we find that the primary protagonist, 11 year old Coraline Jones is used to being self-reliant, and in fact derives a great deal of her self-image from her own reliance. When Coraline refuses to agree to the Other Mother's request to sew buttons on her eyes, and returns to her real home, her parents are kidnapped. Coraline lives for several days on her own, fixing her own food and surviving without her parents. She takes it upon herself to rescue her parents, primarily alone. In a similar way, we see the heroine of *Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* being thrust into a state of self-reliance due to her husband's death. In this case, we find that Mrs Frisby is forced into self-reliance, as she has no other choice, in the same way that Coraline is when her parents are taken. From this we can draw that the authors' choices to deeply communicate the message of self-reliance is intentional, so as to imply that we can grow to make our own choices. Again, we can

see a similar idea voiced by Jack Zipes: “The second occurs within the tale itself and indicates a socialization process and acquisition of values for participation in a society where the protagonist has more power of determination.” (Zipes, “Are Fairy Tales Still Useful to Children?”*).* From these observations, we can see that these themes are relatively different than the Disney idea wherein an individual is rarely seen to accomplish major things without help, both supernatural and other.

To draw these into a final contrast, we can see that material from the past can exhibit both Disneyfied (such as child/adult relationships *Charlotte’s Web*) and non-Disneyfied (displayed as the good vs evil in *The Black Cauldron)* themes. Neil Gaiman’s books, however appear to show non-Disneyfied themes almost exclusively, except when it’s done as an intentional perversion or parody. By exploring characters in a more realistic and deep fashion, Gaiman utilizes the need for children to relate to and evaluate the behavior of peers. Similarly, by developing specific plot lines that explore non-Disneyfied versions of major themes, we find that he is able to draw in children on many levels. By engaging them with more relatable and interesting plots and characters, he gives them a deeper and richer literary experience. By providing children with higher quality literature that they enjoy, ponder, and can learn from, we do them the courtesy of treating them as they should be - as capable individuals who can think, consider and evaluate. By treating children as lesser beings, needing their literary and entertainment experiences watered down for understanding, we do them a vast disservice, regardless of how Disney portrays them.

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