IT TAKES A GRAVEYARD: THE ROLE OF SUPERNATURAL GUARDIANS AND PARENTAL FIGURES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

JOSEPH DANIEL ANDERSON. It Takes a Graveyard: The Role Of Supernatural Guardians And Parental Figures In Children's Literature. (Under the direction of DR. BALAKA BASU)

Children's literature often has the child protagonist face a problem at home, such as large disagreements with parents or even the loss of a loved one. While realistic novels regularly tackle these concerns, supernatural novels are forced to use metaphor and magic to guide their young heroes. As parental figures or guardians of child protagonists in children's literature, supernatural guardians and mentors allow the child to experience more agency, and through that agency, act on their own to solve problems for themselves. Unlike real world mentors and guardians, supernatural beings do not directly help the child fix their problems, but instead they give the child the tools and empower them to deal with and solve their problems on their own. Through a journey that is frequently fantastical, the child learns how to face and solve the problem they have at home. Since the supernatural is unrealistic, the amount of agency the child has can also be fantastical. The inclusion of the supernatural permits for the child to come of age, or at least act as an adult, at an accelerated rate.

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INTRODUCTION

Children's literature often has the child protagonist face a problem at home, such as large disagreements with parents or even the loss of a loved one. While realistic novels regularly tackle these concerns, supernatural novels are forced to use metaphor and magic to guide their young heroes. Unlike real-world mentors and guardians, supernatural beings do not directly help the child fix their problems, but instead they give the child the tools and empower them to deal with and solve their problems on their own. Through a journey that is frequently fantastical, the child learns how to face and solve the problem they have at home.

As parental figures or guardians of child protagonists in children's literature, supernatural guardians and mentors allow the child to experience more agency, and through that agency, act on their own to solve problems for themselves. Since the supernatural is unrealistic, the amount of agency the child has can also be fantastical. The inclusion of the supernatural permits for the child to come of age, or at least act as an adult, at an accelerated rate.

Realistic novels focus on the depiction of real-world issues that a child might face, but they are often unable to create a truly meaningful resolution due to the inevitability of adult interference. One example is *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier where the climax of the novel is interrupted by a teacher, leaving the children to have their cathartic release stymied. In *Cut* by Patricia McCormick, the focus of the novel is on self-harm. The main protagonist's entire life is consumed by her urge to harm herself. It isn't until the main character accepts help from adults that she is able to confront her

feelings and find a way forward. These novels that root their story in realism tend to exaggerate the impact of the problem on the character's personality as well as the level of adult supervision necessary. Meanwhile, novels that implement supernatural elements are able to use their fantastical nature to have more meaningful endings for child protagonists and readers.

These supernatural guardians range from friendly companions to adoptive parents. There is a surprising amount of fantasy literature that follows this trope; the most famous example today is arguably the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. This series is full of supernatural creatures, including wizards, elves, and giants, who play a large role in the upbringing of the young protagonist, who has lost his biological parents. There are many reasons an author might purposefully include supernatural creatures and entities as parental figures: the protagonist could be an orphan (like Harry Potter), or the supernatural could represent something that the character needs to learn, or possibly these entities could be the protagonist's only link to their past. However, orphan narratives provide the most fertile ground for supernatural parental figures. Feeling alienated from their peers, being alone in their grief, and wanting revenge are all staples of orphan narratives; supernatural guardians help the child navigate these common tropes. Regardless of the reason, the inclusion of supernatural caregivers permeates many children's novels.

Supernatural guardians and parental figures cannot be talked about without first discussing and defining the role that they are filling. A parent's role in children's literature is an ever evolving one. The most common way to identify a parent is strictly based on if they have a biological child. While that narrow definition might apply to

many parental figures in literature, it is by no means the only way that a character can be a parent. Those that raise a child, regardless of biology, can also be considered to be the child's parent. Complicating the issue further, there can be parent-like figures for the child even if their biological parents are still a part of the child's life. While finding a strict definition for the complexities of parenthood might be difficult, there is a general feeling that the word connotates; it implies a loving, caring relationship that educates and comforts. Regardless of whether one is a traditional parent or a non-conventional guardian, the main drive is typically to teach the child how to function in a world without them.

Early children's literature depicted parents as paragons of virtue and knowledge bearers who the child must obey above all else; obedience rather than agency was the educational goal. As time passed, depictions of parents changed, becoming more authentic. Nineteenth century children's literature also featured numerous orphans, like Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, who is raised by his aunt. While Aunt Polly is related to Tom biologically, later twentieth century novels like L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. often feature guardians who have no relationship to the children they adopt. In what is considered by many to by the first young adult novel, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, the child protagonist is raised by his older brother and in *Harriet the Spy*, by Louise Fitzhugh, the parenting of the child is passed on to the nanny. Today, the picturesque parents who lay down absolute laws that can never be questioned have disappeared; instead the reader is given a more realistic view of how a child might be raised. Parental characters become more accurate reflections of the true nature of parenthood. The flaws of the parent are emphasized and

the agency of the child, their ability to function without a parental figure around, becomes paramount in children's literature.

As this earlier parental role decreased in literature, the agency of the child increased. Children eventually started to be looked at as real people, rather than less than human. Disobeying parents was no longer punished by the threat of hellfire and brimstone, but instead became a way for the child to stake their claim as a person, with their own interests being critical to their quest for autonomy. In modern children's literature, the agency of young people is approached in many different ways. Using fantasy or supernatural elements in children's literature offers a pathway for the child protagonist to gain more agency than they could in a normal mundane life. For example, in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, are thrust into a fantasy land where they are no longer governed by their parents' rules and thus can become the saviors of the magical world they have discovered. Since the fantasy land acts as an extension of the child's imagination, it allows for the expansion of the child's agency. Supernatural figures who interact with the "real world" of the child provide similar opportunities.

The supernatural in children's literature is a broad and highly inclusive theme and is often just a blanket term to describe elements of a story that break the rules of the natural world. It falls under the umbrella of fantasy, yet just the word, supernatural, adds a connotation of scariness and possibly even horror. However, it must be said that the supernatural is only truly noticeable when it is compared to the real world. If the reader is given a fantasy world filled with supernatural elements, they do not stand out as supernatural unless the fantasy world has a link to the normal, mundane world that the

reader lives in. The supernatural element can be as small as a single talking animal or as vast as an entire new world. It can be good, evil, or even somewhere in the middle, akin to a force of nature. How the supernatural is used varies just as much as supernatural elements themselves. The friendly animal that is the child's guardian or guide is a major trope in fairytales and Disney movies, but ghosts haunting a house are no less supernatural, they are just used in a different way. Using supernatural characters in a story is a creative decision that the author has made for a reason. Making the supernatural creature a parental figure, guide, or guardian of a human child is a plot device that is employed to give a story more depth.

Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* is a great example of how supernatural parental figures act in this genre. In *Coraline* the antagonist is the paranormal parental figure. Through the use of the supernatural mimicking the character's mother, the novel is able to tell a story that reflects on the role of parenthood as well as what it means to be a child in a modern family. While *Coraline* has a few other supernatural elements outside of the evil mother figure, a talking cat, some ghost children, and a horrific version of Coraline's father, the main focus is on the struggle between Coraline and her evil facsimile of a mother.

Conversely, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children,* by Ransom Riggs, approaches supernatural beings in a different way. Here, the supernatural figures are improved stand-ins for the protagonist's parents, who do not understand their child. Teenagers having problems with their parents is nothing new to young adult literature. Where *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* differs is in how the past and present are shown through the use of the supernatural. In this novel the reader gets to see

a plethora of supernatural creatures, called peculiars, and how they interact with the mundane world. Through the supernatural creatures' influence, the teenage protagonist is able to discover the truth about his deceased grandfather and give more meaning to their relationship.

A Monster Calls, by Patrick Ness, offers an interesting view on grief and loss by using a destructive monster to help the main character overcome their fears and deal with their emotions in a therapeutic way. In this novel, nature becomes vitally important and is shown through Ness's use of the titular monster, a supernatural tree come to life. Using an orphan narrative framework, Ness's main character is forced to confront his feelings about the natural order of things—life and death—with the aid of the monster who helps in a way that a regular person could not. The monster arguably tortures the child protagonist yet empowers him to face his reality.

The Book of Lost Things by John Connolly is a fantasy novel that uses many aspects of an orphan narrative to tell a story about a child that travels to another world, filled with fantastical creatures and people who help him come to terms with the death of his mother. Where the other novels I look at have a few supernatural aspects, *The Book of Lost Things* has an immersive world that wraps the main character in supernatural life or death situations. Through the use of one particular guardian, The Woodsman, the child protagonist learns how to process his grief in a significant way as well as how to move forward with his life beyond the tragedy of his loss.

Neil Gaiman's novel *The Graveyard Book* is, in certain ways, much more of a traditional orphan narrative than the previous two novels. This novel has many of the normal tropes a reader expects to see in a story about an orphaned child, yet these tropes

are subverted in the author's use of supernatural parental figures. Where the novel differs from the status quo is its implementation of supernatural creatures, ghosts, a vampire, and a werewolf, all of whom help the child understand how to face a world without their parents in it. This novel places great emphasis on the agency of the child and how he faces situations without any adults around to help him.

In all of these novels, the supernatural is used to help the child realize how to face their problems alone. While that might be the ultimate goal of all parents, the supernatural parental figures and guardians do so in a way that reveals the true nature of parenthood. Because of the fantastical quality inherent in supernatural creatures, they must have a less typical way to raise and care for a child. These novels show the reader that facing problems alone does not have to be a scary situation. Where the real world might seem like a bleak place for the child protagonist in these novels, the supernatural is able to give them hope to conquer their problems. This is done by empowering the child to tackle their difficulties without the need of an adult to supervise or step in.

CHAPTER 1: EXTANT PARENTS AND THEIR OTHERWORLDLY REPLACEMENTS

Parents are a continual source of conflict and tension in children's literature. Writers often use parental absence, neglect, and abuse as antagonists within such novels. More rarely, it is the inability to connect with their child that is the novel's "problem," which is interesting considering that this is an issue likely to affect a majority of young readers. Even without violence or cruelty, when parents and their children do not have a pleasant relationship, home often becomes the child's biggest concern. In the two novels examined in this chapter, *Coraline* and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, the child protagonists are not in abusive relationships with their parents, but instead are unable to connect with them in a meaningful manner. With the help of supernatural parental figures, Coraline and Jacob find ways to understand their situation, cope with it, and ultimately improve their home life.

Coraline

In many children's books, parental figures exemplify certain morals and virtues or are voices of logic and reason; *Coraline* does the opposite. In this novel, Neil Gaiman takes the idea of loving parents and subverts it, creating a terrifying world where those that love you might not have your best intentions at heart. The resulting relationship between parents and child is neither good nor healthy, but appears to be one of indifference. Gaiman uses the supernatural to reveal what most people take for granted, that a parent's love is a wonderful thing.

The main character, a young girl named Coraline Jones, is forced to deal with parents who seem like they barely notice that she is there. Early in the novel Coraline

asks Mrs. Jones what she should do with her afternoon. Her mother's response is, "'I don't really mind what you do […] as long as you don't make a mess'" (*Coraline* 4). Gaiman is showing that Coraline's mother is indifferent to her daughter, as long as she stays out of trouble. Mr. Jones has dialogue early in the novel as well that expresses this same sentiment for his daughter. He tells Coraline in a distracted manner to "'Leave me alone to work'" (*Coraline* 5). One interaction between Coraline and her father makes it blatantly obvious that her father is not interested in her when Coraline asks her father to play: "'Busy' he said. 'Working' he added. He still hadn't turned around to look at her" (*Coraline* 16). While these are just the first instances of Coraline's parents not being there for her when she asks them to be, their detachedness to her is the catalyst for her to seek out caring and love from other places.

Because of her parents' lack of input in her life, she has had to become self-sufficient in many different ways. To occupy her time, since neither of her parents will play with her, she explores the nearby area, discovering a tennis court, a rose garden, and an abandoned well. She hates her father's cooking, so when she sees he has tried making something new for dinner, she immediately goes to the refrigerator to find her own provisions. While her father tells her to just try his food—probably the sensible thing to do—Coraline refuses. Her refusal to try the new food is one way that Gaiman shows Coraline is still a child. Yet this also shows that her father is not willing to cook something that he knows his daughter would enjoy eating, and he has apparently done this enough for his daughter to become proficient in making her own dinner.

Moving outside the home, her neighbors, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, repeatedly call her "Caroline" instead of her real name. Again, Gaiman is showing that

the people in Coraline's life do not really take an interest in her and do not see her as a fully formed person. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible only wish to tell Coraline about when they were famous actresses, and much like Coraline's parents, care little for what Coraline has to say. Similarly, the man that lives above the Jones', Mr. Bobo, pays no attention to what Coraline says in their interactions. Instead he presupposes her questions and goes on talking as if she has asked them, all while she is trying to get him to just acknowledge that she didn't ask any questions. The closest thing to a friend that Coraline has is a stray cat. While somewhat friendly, the cat always maintains its distance and never truly warms up to her.

Communicating with a child is difficult. Adults have to walk a fine line between not talking down to the child and not using concepts or ideas that too complex for them. Being understandable but challenging is a difficult spot to find. When the child feels like they are being talked down to, or even belittled, they can ignore what the adult is saying completely, or start to harbor resentment. However, communication is a two-way street. The adult must be interested in what the child is saying, and by doing so, show the child respect, or the adult risks the child not talking to them anymore.

While the adults in this novel might treat Coraline as only a child, rather than a person with feelings and independent thoughts, Coraline herself does not see the adults as real people. Her interactions with the adults might be one sided, but she does not really give any more thought to the adults than they do to her, assuming that Miss Spink, Miss Forcible, and Mr. Bobo are nothing more than crazy, eccentric old people. She does not bother learning anything about them and only asks precursory questions with little interest. After one interaction with Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, Coraline wonders to

herself "why so few of the adults she had made any sense. She sometimes wondered who they thought they were talking to" (*Coraline* 18). Coraline even dismisses the warnings of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible; the danger that they warn her about just sounds fun and exciting.

While Coraline might feel ignored or abandoned because her parents do not pay her much attention and the adults outside of her home are strange, this is not necessarily the case. She refuses to see that the adults do care for her but might not express it in a way that she understands. Mr. Bobo passes on a warning from his rats about her not going through the secret door in her flat, and Miss Spink and Miss Forcible give her the stone with a hole in it that turns out to be a key item in her quest to defeat The Other Mother. Regardless of what is actually going on in her life, Coraline feels abandoned and misunderstood, and those feelings causes her to travel through a door in her flat that leads to a parallel world where she meets analogs of the people she knows from her world.

Two of the figures Coraline meets are The Other Mother and Other Father. They at first appear to give her the love and attention that she was missing from her own parents. However, Gaiman gives the reader clues that things are not as they seem. Most notably is that The Other Mother and Other Father have buttons for eyes. The button eyes, which The Other Mother will later try to sew into Coraline's eyes, show that there is something not right in this world and might be insidious at heart. Coraline begins to notice that The Other Mother has a few differences from her true mother, noting "Only her skin was white as paper. Only she was taller and thinner. Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp" (*Coraline* 25-26). These slight differences do just enough to unnerve Coraline into

not accepting The Other Mother's love and affection. It is quickly revealed that The Other Mother is the creator of this new parallel world and controls everything inside of it.

Where this novel differs from the other novels being examined is that the supernatural parental figure is sinister and does not want to help Coraline. As the novel progresses Coraline realizes that The Other Mother is not the answer to her feelings of abandonment. In one passage Gaiman writes: "[The Other Mother] said 'You know I love you.' And despite herself Coraline nodded. It was true: The Other Mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. […] Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more" (*Coraline* 104). Coraline understands that people can love a possession but that is not the same a parental or familial love. She tells The Other Mother that she doesn't want her love. However, when The Other Mother tosses Coraline a key to help in her quest, Coraline "caught it, one handed, before she could think whether she wanted it or not" (*Coraline* 195). The key The Other Mother tosses to Coraline could be seen as a tangible expression of her love for Coraline. The fact that it is an object just reinforces how The Other Mother loves Coraline, as a possession. Love is an emotion that is incredibly difficult to define. In abusive relationships, physical or emotional, it is not uncommon for one of the parties involved to truly believe they love the other. Love can be a great thing; however, it can also be unhealthy if it is taken to an extreme. The Other Mother is controlling and sees that as an expression of her love. Coraline, while she understands this, takes what The Other Mother gives her almost out of instinct and only after the fact stops to think if she even wants The Other Mother's token of love.

The other doppelgangers in this novel are controlled by The Other Mother. The Other Father is subservient to The Other Mother, so much so that he almost completely refuses to talk to Coraline while The Other Mother is not around. While angered that The Other Father talked to Coraline, The Other Mother locks him in the basement and changes him into a grub-like creature that only vaguely resembles Coraline's real father. Yet, even in this horrific form, the copy of Coraline's father tries to resist The Other Mother's mental commands and even attempts to warn Coraline. In his efforts to maintain even a bit of himself, he tells Coraline "'Run, child. Leave this place. [The Other Mother] wants me to hurt you, to keep you here forever, so that you can never finish the game and she will win. She is pushing me so hard to hurt you. I cannot fight her" (*Coraline* 110). Coraline feels sorry for The Other Father and his fate; she even tries to help him fight The Other Mother's urging. Even though the sight of The Other Father revolted and horrified her, and it was working for The Other Mother, Coraline attempted to aid The Other Father until it could no longer control itself. The Other Father's resistance to The Other Mother the first sign that The Other People of this supernatural world, all under the control of The Other Mother, care for Coraline's wellbeing.

Though in this moment, the Other Father presents a terrifying situation that Coraline must escape, the true horror is the revelation that the Other Mother has the power to control the Other Father to such an extent. The Other Mother is able to bend the Other Father's will and punishes him for going against her. This is a representation of how Coraline views her home dynamic, just highly exaggerated. One of the most truly terrifying aspects of The Other Mother is seeing how she has complete domination of these creatures. She seems to have created they creatures with the intention to have

complete control over them. While this is a fantastical and supernatural world, this feeling of having a person completely control all aspects of your life is very common among the child reader.

Miss Spink and Miss Forcible are also in this new world. They are caricatures of their real selves that put-on stage performances that are reminiscent of vaudeville acts. Once Coraline enters The Other Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's flat, she is immediately treated to their show. Coraline is eventually pulled on stage to take part in their knife throwing act. After finishing that part of the show, Coraline takes her seat in the audience, which consists of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's dogs. The dogs let Coraline know that the show goes on forever, so she excuses herself, and leaves. This is reminiscent of how they treat Coraline in the real world. They only talk to Coraline about their act when they were younger and pay no attention to if Coraline wants to hear about it or not. The Other Miss Spink and Miss Forcible now have the perfect (captive) audience, that of their adoring dogs.

All of these uncanny and other worldly creatures appear to exaggerate and caricature the way that Coraline sees their real-world counterparts. Coraline's feelings about her father manifest in how he is controlled by The Other Mother. Miss Spink and Miss Forcible now get to re-live their glory days, rather than just talking to Coraline about them constantly. The Other Mother puts on a good appearance but underneath her words of love and caring demeanor lies what Coraline thinks her mother truly feels for her, indifference. The cat, however, is the only creature that crosses over freely from her world to the Other Mother's, without appearing as a dark reflection of Coraline's real-world relationships. The cat gives Coraline advice on how to get her parents back and

deal with The Other Mother as well as warnings about the Other world. While the cat remains aloof and gives off a feeling of indifference towards Coraline, it attacks The Other Mother so Coraline is able to escape this dreadful world and get back to her true home. Having just one ally in this new horrific world helps give Coraline the strength to continue to outsmart The Other Mother. While the cat does little throughout the novel to be truly helpful to Coraline, it is the catalyst for Coraline to remember when her real father saved her from a swarm of wasps. This memory is important because her father told her that being brave while not being scared is not true bravery. She realizes that going back into the Other world to find her parents is going to require her to be incredibly brave.

The cat is Coraline's first helper in the novel, but not the last. After angering The Other Mother, Coraline is locked in a closet where she meets the ghosts of three other children that The Other Mother has collected. They explain to Coraline what happens when The Other Mother sews the buttons on someone's eyes and how she will get bored of her newly collected child and eventually leave them for eternity locked away in this closet. These ghost children are interesting insofar as they do not have real world counterparts. Where everyone in the other world besides the cat is a twisted copy of someone from the real world, the children not having real world twins begs the question as to why Gaiman would include them in the first place. Dominik Becher writes about the symbolism of these ghost children in his paper "Neil Gaiman's Ghost Children". Becher argues "The child ghosts represent here the possibility to set right past wrongs and to connect positively with the dead" (Becher 101). Not only is Coraline able to help these ghost children find peace and experience a final moment of love, through the help of the

ghost children she is able to reconnect with her parents in a meaningful way. Setting right past wrongs is the ultimate lesson that Coraline learns from her time in the other world and her interactions with the supernatural creatures that inhabit it.

The ghost children are also a dark mirror for Coraline. She could easily become one of them. Knowing the possibility of a bleak outcome makes her decisions that much more dire. These ghost children also show Coraline that change can be a good thing. They are forever stuck in this hellish world and still look like they did when The Other Mother took them. One of Coraline's major issues is adapting to her new home. Moving into a new home, away from everything familiar, is difficult for many children. While children can be highly adaptable to various situations, having a stable touchstone, be it homelife or a routine, helps tremendously in their adaptability. Having her father make novel, odd, and disgusting dishes for dinner does nothing for Coraline's stability as even the food in her home has no continuity or comfort. Coraline's parents and eccentric neighbors do nothing to lessen this burden. Ghosts tend to represent aspects of the past, as they are unable to move past them. Juxtaposing Coraline with these ghosts allows the reader to see how being inflexible and unwilling to adapt to change can cause a person to not allow themselves to like any aspect of their new situation.

Mr. Bobo is the character that Coraline has the least contact with in either world, however, in the Other world he has some of the most telling dialogue in the entire novel. To persuade Coraline to stop searching for the way out of this world he says to her "'You'll go home. You'll be bored. You'll be ignored. No one will listen to you, not really listen to you. You're too clever and too quiet for them to understand. They don't even get your name right'" (*Coraline* 116). The Other Mr. Bobo promises her all the

things she had problems with in her world will be better in the Other world. This causes Coraline to realize that she had been just as big of contributor to her problems as those around her. Her response to his promises is "'You really don't understand do you? 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?'" (*Coraline* 118). This revelation is the true catalyst for Coraline's character to change. She understands that her expectations of her parents might be too lofty and her interactions with her neighbors should not always be about her.

The Other Mother does not directly help Coraline understand and deal with her parents' lack of attention. Instead, The Other Mother's actions show Coraline that her real parents are not perfect yet their love for her comes from a place of good intentions. Towards the end of the novel, Coraline realizes that the other mother "could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed" (*Coraline* 116). How all the Other people act toward Coraline is just a gross exaggeration of the people, feelings, and thoughts that Coraline knows from her world. The supernatural allows for the exaggeration of beliefs, feeling, and situations while still maintaining the ability to be believable. While the Joneses might not always be there for Coraline in the moment, they have always loved her for no reason other than she is their daughter. Coraline also understands that some of the divide between her and her parents is her fault. Once returning to the real world with her parents, her attitude changes toward them. She immediately becomes more affectionate which leads to her parents being more loving with her. Her father even compromises with her about his recipes for dinner. He makes a home-made pizza (which is Coraline's go to meal anytime her father cooks) for the

family and Coraline eats it without complaint. After her time in the other world, Coraline has a new appreciation for her parents and what they mean to her.

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children

Having imperfect parents is a fact of life that most people learn in their teenage years. Ransom Riggs's novel *Miss Peregrines Home for Peculiar Children* takes the idea of deeply flawed parents and adds the supernatural to this theme. In this novel, the main character, Jacob, and his parents are unable to form any type of meaningful bond. There are many reasons for this strained relationship: neither party understands the wants and needs of the other, teenage angst, feeling trapped in a seemingly inescapable situation among others. Riggs shows the teenage reader a realistic family dynamic with a relatable protagonist who has a home life that the reader themselves might understand. While Jacob has parents that are present, they control of every aspect of his life. Having parents that are completely overbearing is almost as bad as not having parents at all. Not only do the controlling parents rob their child of agency, it can also lead to the child not understanding conflict resolution or how to face challenges on their own. Even if the child stages acts of rebellion against their parents, the acts are often minimized and dismissed. Because of the way his parents treat him, Jacob is forced to look outside his home for surrogate parents. He finds two supernatural beings to fill this role, one of which is his own grandfather.

The majority of the supernatural setting takes place in on one island in Wales, and specifically at a boarding house on this island that is stuck in a time loop. Because of this setting, Riggs's novel has a fairy tale-like feel to it. The novel also blurs the line between portal fantasy and intrusion fantasy with its use of a portal to enter a time loop that is still

set in the real world.[1] The supernatural beings in this novel are known as peculiars and their powers vary vastly. For the majority of the novel, Jacob believes he is just a mundane human, but it is revealed that he and his grandfather both have the same peculiarity; they are both able to see the hollowgasts, creatures that hunt and eat the peculiars. The boarding school in the time loop is ran by Miss Peregrine, a special type of peculiar; not only is she able to shapeshift into a peregrine falcon, but she is also able to create the time loop that her wards live in. The children under her protection include a teenage girl that can create fire, a boy that is invisible, a young girl that is incredibly strong, and a teenage boy that can create homunculi and raise the dead.

The time loop that the peculiar children and Miss Peregrine live in is set to one day, September 3rd, 1940. This is the last day that the boarding house stood before getting destroyed by Nazi bomber planes. Every night the day is reset so as to protect the children and the school and because of this the peculiar children and Miss Peregrine have not aged a day in the eighty years that has passed. However, if the inhabitants of the time loop leave the loop and return to present day, they will drastically age and die.

Much like the ghost children in *Coraline*, the peculiar children are stuck in the past with no way to move forward on their own. Both sets of children are unable to make any meaningful changes in their existences. This is echoed in Jacob, or at least how he sees his life if left up to his parents. Just the idea of a child brings to mind change. Children are often touted as the future, the underlying connotation being that children will make the future better than today. Seeing a child being stripped of this possible potential is unsettling at best.

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[1] Farah Mendlesohn, *The Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008)

A major motif of this novel is dealing with past traumas. The peculiars symbolize this in their inability to grow up. They live every day the same and though they make light of their advanced age, they are still in the bodies of children. While they have been alive for close to a century, they are still treated like children and act accordingly. Being unable to grow up strips the peculiars of their agency. Jacob's life mirrors the peculiars situation in that he, like the peculiars, does not make his own decisions and because of that has no agency over his own life

Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, once lived at Miss Peregrine's boarding school. He fled Poland during the Nazi invasion as he was Jewish and his parents, in order to save him, sent him to live in Wales. This is where his trauma starts. He left the boarding school the day after the bombs destroyed it and the time loop was created. He soon joined the military to fight the Nazis and soon began hunting the hollowgasts. Not only had Abraham become a refugee, fleeing for his life, he grew up under the constant fear of being killed by evil monsters that only he could see. Adding to that trauma was the inevitable horrors of World War II that every soldier faced combined with the toll that hunting and killing the hollowgasts had on Abraham. It might not be a coincidence that Abraham's enemies, holocaust and hollowgast, sound very similar.

Abraham eventually starts a family in America because the hollowgasts were less numerous there. However, Abraham's traumas did not allow him to be a warm and loving father. He and his son, Franklin, had a very strained relationship. Being unable to tell the truth about being a peculiar to his family, all the while leaving on extended trips to hunt and kill hollowgasts, drove a wedge between Abraham and his children. When he did tell his children about the fantastical boarding house where he grew up, he was met with

disbelief that eventually turned into dismissal of all the things he said. Throughout his life, Abraham has been exiled from his biological family in Poland, exiled from his adopted family in Wales, and became the black sheep of the family he started in America. Even when Abraham opens up to Jacob he is eventually met with disbelief and written off as a senile old man. Rachel Dekel and Hadass Goldblatt, in their study of intergenerational trauma, suggest that "emotional numbing, detachment, and avoidance may directly impact on the veteran's parenting ability by diminishing the capability to interact with the child and develop a meaningful relationship" (Dekel 284). With this in mind, Abraham's inability to form bonds with his children becomes less of a failure on his part, and becomes more of an understandable, even if unfortunate, mental state of mind.

Abraham's traumatic past stunts his ability to have meaningful connections with those he loves. When he leaves the boarding school, he is involved in a relationship with Emma, one of the peculiars. As time goes on, many years for him while Emma relives the same day, Abraham's letters to Emma become less and less frequent and when one does arrive it only contains short and to the point messages. Eventually Abraham has to tell Emma that he has married and had a child with his new wife. While his relationship with his wife is not apparent in the novel at all, his relationships with children are.

Franklin eventually starts a family and has Jacob. Because of Franklin's poor relationship with his father, he is unable to connect in a meaningful way with his son. Jacob and Franklin do not have much in common and Franklin does not seem to take much of an interest in Jacob's life or feelings. However, Abraham and Jacob become close because of their shared interest in exploration. Franklin only sees his father as an

eccentric old man that is an embarrassment to the family. Hearing this about his grandfather from his father drives a wedge between Jacob and Franklin, continuing the cycle of poor relationships between father and son. Once Abraham is killed by a hollowgast, Jacob is put in therapy. His therapist becomes the Portman's answer to all of Jacobs problems. While it is admirable that Jacob's parents saw that he needed help and quickly got him to a professional, it also highlights that they do not know how to help their son in the least. Every aspect of Jacob's life after Abraham's murder is now dictated by his therapist, Dr. Golan. When Jacob wants to go the island that his grandfather was raised on, his mother and father only agree once Dr. Golan has given his consent. Jacob's parents are not evil and getting him the help he needs goes far to show this. Yet while Jacob's parents have given control of his life over to a therapist, Jacob still has no control over what happens to him.

Jacob's parents are incredibly controlling of his life. They have decided where he will work, what he will do with his summers, and his progression to take over the family business. Jacob gets no say in the events of his life, and thus, has no agency. The one outlet he has at the beginning of the novel is his best friend, who is a nonconformist and lives quite the opposite of Jacob's affluent life. However, even this relationship is torn apart when Jacob is unable to cope with his grandfather's death. When Jacob was a child, he was very close with his grandfather, so much so that he wanted to grow up to be an explorer just like him. However, Jacob's parents were dismissive of his childhood dream and even discouraging. Jacob recounts telling his mother his aspirations: "one day my mother sat me down and explained that I couldn't become an explorer because everything in the world had already been discovered. I'd been born in the wrong century, and I felt

cheated" (Riggs 13). During the climax of the novel Jacob has a revelation about the way that he has been controlled by his parents, the hollowgasts, and even his grandfather and Miss Peregrine his entire life. The most telling line in the book is "A force that had arranged the murder of my grandfather and exploded all that I'd humbly called a life […] and carried me here to this place and this moment, in much the way less corrupt and violent forces had done my living and deciding for me since I was old enough to decide anything" (Riggs 327). This is the moment that Jacob realizes that he has had very little agency up to this point and though his parents, grandfather and Miss Peregrine had his best interests at heart, he was still controlled by them. Up to this point, Jacob had only seen his grandfather in a positive light. While he loved his grandfather deeply, Jacob's father's strained relationship with Abraham didn't allow Jacob to mourn properly. When going through Abraham's possessions, Jacob's father goes into a angry tangent about how crazy Abraham was. He references Abraham's collection of receipts from the year JFK was assassinated as proof that Abraham had some kind of mental imbalance. Jacob is forced to see Abraham through his father's eyes for the first time. Conversely, when interacting with the peculiars, Jacob was constantly told about the amazing man that his grandfather was. Faced with these two contrasting views, Jacob felt he could never live up to the legacy that Abraham had left behind.

Jacob's agency grows throughout the novel. He starts with little or none, and by the end of the novel he is fully in control of his life. This mirrors a child's progression through childhood into adulthood. The child/adult dynamic is an ever-fluctuating relationship. At times a child must defer to the knowledge, wisdom, and maturity that the adults in their life possess. However, as the child matures, they ought to be able to make

more of the decisions that affect their lives. It isn't until Jacob is fully away from his parents, Abraham and Miss Peregrine, as well as the hollowgasts, that he chooses to make his own decisions. All the adults in Jacob's life are controlling, even if passively.

Miss Peregrine knows about Jacob's peculiarity but opts to keep that a secret from him in order to protect him. While this could be seen as admirable, it is in fact detrimental to Jacob's understanding of the fantastical and dangerous situation that he finds himself in. She forbids Jacob from talking about things from his time: cell phones, television, and commercial air travel just to name a few. Yet, while she sets these limitations on him, she hampers him by not involving him in the things that directly affect his life. Just like his mother, Miss Peregrine does not permit Jacob to make his own decisions. His mother has Jacob's whole life after graduating high school planned out for him. While Miss Peregrine might be more approachable than Jacob's mother, she is still stumbling into the same pitfalls that his mother did: they believe they know what is best for him without considering his own desires.

Jacob's mother is not equipped to help Jacob deal with the trauma of his grandfather's gruesome death because she does not understand her son in the least. When Jacob gets a book and letter from his deceased grandfather, his mother's only concern is Jacob making a scene in front of other people. It isn't until Jacob sees the tenacity in the younger peculiars that he decides to rebel against the wishes of Miss Peregrine and take charge of his future, and in doing so he defies not just Miss Peregrine but his mother as well. Jacob's connection to the past is what helps him find his agency.

Photo albums—the records of this past—are a reoccurring item in this novel. Not only does Abraham keep photo albums filled with pictures from his time at the boarding

school, Miss Peregrine has multiple photo albums containing pictures of all her wards as well as photos of her fellow peculiar head mistresses of other boarding schools, or ymbrynes. Placing so much emphasis on the past does not allow the characters to grow and change with the future. The novel itself contains many pictures that are referenced in the text. Many of these pictures have a supernatural element to them, where others seem to be mundane pictures of some of the characters. Among these are pictures of Miss Peregrine, Emma, and a few of Abraham. The emphasis on pictures, moments locked in time, has a negative effect on Jacob as he is constantly comparing himself with his grandfather and finding himself lacking. The photographs are just an extension of the peculiars, and Jacobs, inability to change. When pictures are placed in such a high regard it lessens the importance of the present and future. Considering that the peculiars do not see themselves having a future, as every day for them is exactly the same, the past is all they have. For Jacob, the pictures are a link to his grandfather's past, but they also create a future that is completely dependent on the past.

Miss Peregrine creates a sanctuary for the peculiars in the form of the time loop. People that have been dealt with a trauma, such as a war or violent experience, have an easier time dealing with other people that have been through a similar experience. Sandra L. Bloom writes about these communities in her paper "Trauma Theory Abbreviated". Bloom states "in order to create a safe, living-learning environments, any group of people must come to share the same basic assumptions, goals, and practice utilizing a shared language" (Bloom 12). This adds definition to the boarding school that Miss Peregrine runs. Abraham is able to fit into this community because of his time hiding from the hollowgasts, just like the rest of the peculiars. While not part of the trauma that brought

the peculiars together, the bombing of their home, Jacob is able to join their community because of the trauma he experienced with the loss of his grandfather. Abraham's death was devastating to the peculiars and Jacob, just in different ways. The peculiars create a new sanctuary for Jacob where he can finally process the loss of his grandfather through the commiseration with his new found friends.

It is not until the end of the book when Jacob kills a hollowgast on his own that he realizes that he is not useless and has merit even if he did not join a military or train to fight these creatures. No one tells Jacob that he is less of a fighter than his grandfather, they don't have to. All he has heard from the peculiars and Miss Peregrine is how amazing Abraham was as a war fighter, both against the Nazis and against the hollowgasts. Throughout the novel Jacob has a very low opinion of himself when compared to his grandfather. In an inner monologue, Jacob thinks "*Couldn't I be like Grandpa Portman?* […] *He was military-trained, dummy. A stone-cold badass. This man was Rambo compared to you* […] *You're weak. You're a loser. That's why he never told you who you really were. He knew you couldn't handle it*" (Riggs 271). Not only does he not live up to his mental image of his grandfather, he feels inferior in the fight against the hollowgasts. Even when it is revealed that he has a power that is crucial in the survival of the peculiars, he does not feel up to the challenge. Having so much importance placed on his grandfather, both by himself and the peculiars, keeps Jacob from becoming his own person. This could stem from his grandfather's and Miss Peregrine's efforts to keep him safe and withholding information from him. The control his parents have over his life has led him to believe that he cannot do anything alone. It is not until he is put in a life or

death situation that he realizes that he has been selling himself short and that he has what it takes to not only defend himself but protect those that he loves.

Killing the hollowgast, defending the peculiars and rescuing Miss Peregrine, as well as realizing that he has been controlled his entire life leads Jacob to start making his own decisions. Though he goes back to the inn where his father is staying, he does so with the intention of telling him he is leaving. By the end of the novel, Jacob has complete agency over his life, and with the help of his fellow peculiars, he finally gets to become an explorer like his grandfather. As Jacob and the remaining peculiars row away from the boarding school, one of them takes a picture of Jacob that causes him to reflect "We'd brought none of the old photo albums with us; maybe this would be the first picture in a brand new one. It was strange to think that one day I might have my own stack of yellowed photos to show skeptical grandchildren – and my own fantastical stories to share" (Riggs 352). On the last page of the novel Jacob finally begins to see his life as his own and imagines a future that is of his own creation.

Conclusion

Both *Coraline* and *Miss Peregrine's School for Peculiar Children* revolve around a child's anxieties regarding lack of recognition and agency, common feelings that most ordinary children have. The supernatural elements, the setting and creatures, create a fictional space in which to interrogate these emotions indirectly, so that the character, as well as the reader, come to the solutions on their own, rather than being directly told how children should think and act.

In both these novels, the supernatural parental figures are shown to be just as flawed, if not more so, than the parents they are replacing. While there is a massive

difference between The Other Mother and Miss Peregrine, both Coraline and Jacob grow to see their surrogate parents' flaws and throughout their journeys realize that they do not need them to solve their problems. The authors, Gaiman and Riggs, do not sugarcoat the realties that their protagonist face. They prime their stories with relatable tensions in the home and have their characters travel to a supernatural world in search of the answers. Yet, in both cases, the supernatural beings are not the solution. These paranormal beings do not teach the child how to fix their own problems, but through action or even inaction, allow for the child to solve their conflicts, both interior and exterior, on their own. Through The Other Mother, Coraline realizes that her parents do love her and that she has to take steps to mend their relationship. Meanwhile, Jacob sees that everyone he knows, human and supernatural, has been controlling him through one form of manipulation or another. Once he realizes this, he is able to break free from their control and take charge of his life. These protagonists were not given the keys to solve their issues at home, they had to discover them on their own.

CHAPTER 2: GRIEF, GHOULS, AND GOBLINS

The loss of a loved one is emotionally devastating. The grief can seem insurmountable and the hole left by the person's death can never be filled. These are emotions that are hard to understand and deal with even as an adult. Children who lose a parent feel all of this without the cushion of emotional maturity that comes with age. Fiction that a child, or even an adult for that matter, can read that deals directly with the loss of a parent becomes meaningful only when the novels show the real-life emotions that accompany tragic loss. *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness is a slow and in-depth look at the emotions a child might feel while watching a parent die. *The Book of Lost Things* by John Connolly deals with the child's inability to move past the death of his mother. These two novels show the realistic struggles that a child might face when a parent passes. Through the use of supernatural creatures and fantasy lands, the grief and anger that the children harbor are explored through supernatural metaphors, allowing for the child to fix the metaphorical problems which in turn helps them deal with their real-world issues. More importantly, these novels do not focus on the loss itself but rather how a child protagonist can cope with and ultimately understand the loss of their parent.

A Monster Calls

Losing a parent at thirteen is a terrible tragedy; watching that parent slowly become weaker and weaker until they pass can be torture. *A Monster Calls* takes this traumatic and emotional time in a young teenage boy's life and painstakingly explores his emotions, thought processes, and how he copes with his loss. The supernatural character, the titular Monster, makes the protagonist face the impending death of his terminally ill mother and forces him to accept his true feelings about the matter, that he wants her to

die so they can both stop hurting and he can begin to heal. The Monster is not necessarily a caregiver for Conor, but instead has a specific lesson to teach him. Calling the Monster a parental figure might be a bit of a stretch but it is undoubtedly a guardian and guide. Other novels tend to have the child's parents killed quickly, often off page. The *Harry Potter* series is an example of the trauma of losing a parent being almost glossed over because Harry loses his parents at a very young age and the traumatic event occurs before the novel even starts. Even more removed from the loss of their parents is *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In this novel, Tom's parents are dead well before the novel starts and are hardly mentioned in the narrative. Tom expresses no lasting trauma from losing his parents and being an orphan. Conor, comparatively, is fully aware of what is going on, watching his mother die and dealing with the emotional trauma that watching a loved one suffer brings. Many orphan narratives deal with the loss of a parent or parents only after they have died. *A Monster Calls* gives the reader an in-depth and unflinching look into what is left out of other novels. Conor does not fall into the same orphan narrative mold as Tom Sawyer and Harry Potter considering that his father and grandmother are still alive. However, a recurring theme in orphan narratives is that of abandonment, and though Conor still has relatives around, he feels abandoned and alienated, and that is what truly matters.

This novel echoes sentiments found in certain fairytales, yet does so in way that is far more meaningful for a contemporary audience. *Cinderella*, for example, has many of the same ideas, a dead mother and ineffectual guardian as well as a supernatural savior. Yet *Cinderella* does not have the realism that *A Monster Calls* does. Taking place in the real world, compared to a fantasy realm, is just one of the ways the novel is more

realistic. Having the protagonist not just experience real world problems, but also show true to life emotions makes the story more relatable. Fairy tales have long been used to inculcate children with values and goals that will help them deal with adult life. But fairy tales are not psychologically realistic, so their ability to help contemporary children is somewhat limited. Meanwhile, *A Monster C*alls has the best of both worlds: it's relevant and enchanting, even as it frightens. Conor's grandmother becomes the caretaker for his mother while she is dealing with her illness. While his grandmother is shown to be kind and caring when dealing with his mother, she is cold and quite serious when she speaks to Conor, which causes much strife between the two. Where Conor might need a caring adult to be there for him in this time of emotional crisis, instead the only other family member that is a constant in his life is a woman to whom he cannot relate. His grandmother is shown to be very curt with him, and often disparages his father. Shortly after Conor is forced to move in with his grandmother, she tells him "'Your father may not notice how tired your mum's been getting, okay? So we're going to have to work together to make sure he doesn't overstay his welcome. Not that *that's* been a problem'" (Ness 82). While she expresses love for her daughter here, she immediately undercuts her inclusion of Conor by belittling his father. While Conor might not have much respect for his father, hearing another family member express their negative opinions of him does nothing more than divide them farther. It's best when caregivers are able to work together as in *The Graveyard Book*, which I will explore in detail in chapter three.

Conor's father, Liam, had previously left him and his wife to move to America and start a new family. This alone might be enough to leave a child feeling alienated from their father. Since Liam does not understand his son or make room for him in his new life

in the United States, Conor feels like his father is nothing more than a stranger. In their afternoon together, after seeing Conor's mother in the hospital, every time Liam tries to connect with his son, Conor refuses to let his father get close. The disconnect between the two is not one sided. Neither father nor son understand the wants and needs of the other. When Liam attempts to tell Conor about his new baby sister, Conor reminds his father that she is only his "'*Half-sister*'" (Ness 87) placing emphasis on them not being true siblings. Similarly, Liam does not understand that his son is hinting at coming to live with him in America: "'What do you mean?' his father said, sounding surprised. 'A visit as opposed to…' He trailed off, and Conor knew he'd worked out what Conor meant" (Ness 87-88). Considering that most of the adults in Conor's life are not able to make a meaningful connection with him, other than his dying mother, it is understandable that he would feel completely isolated.

Stephanie Elizabeth Dabrowski, in her paper "Monstrous Losses and Broken Fairy Tales: Fantasy, Loss and Trauma in Young Adult Literature", points out why Conor is so affected by his father's dismissal. Dabrowski argues "While the loss of a mother is a traumatic and highly destabilizing form of loss for any adolescent, its impact is further intensified in Conor's case by his experience of prior losses in his family, most notably his farther leaving, which have made him sensitive to loss and have left him in a particularly precarious position" (Dabrowski 47). Conor's mother is his last link to a normal family life. While dealing with the abandonment of a parent is, in itself, a difficult task for a child, coupled with the loss of the other parents just amplifies the feeling of abandonment.

Feeling alienated and alone in the world are emotions that can affect a child tremendously. Where an adult is self-sufficient, a child must rely on people to survive. When a child is unable to make a meaningful connection with their caretakers, the feeling of isolation could become unbearable. With Conor's mother unable to care for him because of her illness and his father and grandmother unable to form much of a bond with him, Conor has no one to turn to in his own family. This leaves him feeling just as alone and isolated as someone that has lost their entire family. When a gap like this formed in children's literature, it is often filled by an outside force, often supernatural. Having an imaginary friend is common for children. Therefore, when the supernatural entity somehow fills the gap left by the parents in fiction, the resulting stories replicate ideas that are particularly important to their child reader. The moments when the Monster reveals itself to Conor will resonate with anyone that had an imaginary friend or experienced creating a game from their own imagination.

The single supernatural element of this story is the Monster. Its first appearance comes on the second page of the novel when Conor wakes from a reoccurring nightmare. The Monster is a yew tree come to life from the local graveyard. Conor is at first disappointed in the appearance of the Monster, thinking "This wasn't the monster he was expecting" (Ness 8). While the Monster is physically imposing, the size of a two-story house, Conor does not seem afraid in the least. The Monster even asks him "*You really aren't afraid, are you?* 'No' Conor said 'Not of you, anyway'" (Ness 9). Conor's response is the first hint that he has something weighing on him that is far more pressing than a giant tree monster outside of his bedroom window. The reader can see that what really frightens Conor is his recurring nightmare and what it truly means. The Monster

tells him that it will tell three stories but after the stories are told Conor must tell the Monster a fourth story and "*It will be the truth. […] Not just any truth.* ***Your*** *truth*" (Ness36). Conor's biggest fear, and the "truth" the Monster is referring to, is not losing his mother, but rather admitting that he wants her to die so that she can stop hurting and he can begin grieving.

The Monster is not an evil entity, though it does threaten Conor often and even inflicts pain upon him. Nor is the Monster completely benevolent. Instead the Monster is a force of nature. Being a sentient yew tree reinforces the idea that the Monster is an aspect of the natural world. The Monster even tells Conor "*I am everything untamed and untamable I am this wild earth, come for you, Conor O'Malley*" (Ness 34). Much like a hurricane, earthquake, or cancer the Monster is indifferent to those it affects. Nature is not something that people can conquer, rather it is something that people must learn to contend with and adapt to. With that in mind, Conor's mother's cancer is not something that is malevolent, but rather an unfortunate fact of nature. The fallout from her illness, Conor's anger, shame, and loss of agency are akin to being angry at a tornado. Yet, emotions do not care much, if at all, for logic or reason.

Agency is an important theme for many children's novels. While there are myriad examples of characters with or without agency in children's literature, *A Monster Calls* approaches the agency of the protagonist in an interesting and refreshing way. Many novels have a character lose agency or even have no agency in the first place. An example of this is *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The main character, Laura, has to follow her parent's orders and directions almost absolutely. While Laura does show moments of agency, the time in which the novel takes place does

not lend itself to empowered children. Also, the fact that she is a female reduces her agency not just within her family but with society as a whole. This ultimately reduces or completely eliminates the character's ability to make choices or decisions based on their wants and needs.

A Monster Calls does not remove Conor's ability to make choices or take actions; what it does instead is remove the consequences of his actions. Nothing he does matters: he cannot cure his mother's cancer, he is unable to make meaningful connections with his grandmother and father, and he cannot change the way people at his school view him. While he is able to make decisions and take actions, all the outcomes are more or less the same. His inability to change how people at school see and think of him is one of the most demoralizing aspects of his situation. Everyone in his life, family, other students, and even his teachers treat him with kid gloves.

The Monster helps Conor regain his agency through two pivotal scenes. The first is the destruction of Conor's grandmother's sitting room. The Monster tricks Conor into smashing the furniture by telling him a story that is so vivid Conor believes he actually is seeing the Monster do the mayhem. Though the Monster is in a way tricking Conor into destroying the room, his actions showed the grandmother the rage that Conor was feeling. This is the first time Conor has expressed his true inner feelings. The fact that is the destruction of his grandmother's sitting room, a room that is off limits to him and used for appearances only, shows that Conor has pent up his anger for so long that the only way he can get any relief is from destroying something that his grandmother holds dear. Unexpectedly the grandmother even joins in on the mayhem, destroying the last remaining piece of furniture, a glass cabinet. Seeing her do this allows for Conor, and the

reader, to see that the grandmother is feeling just as much rage and uselessness as he is, making a common bond between them. This is the first time that there is a real connection between Conor and his grandmother and at this point in the novel, this is exactly what Conor needs as it gives him some agency over his life and surroundings. By forcing his grandmother to finally see him as a person, rather than just a child, he now has a way to communicate with her. Their shared grief, though not ideal, is the starting point for their relationship. As the Monster points out "*Destruction is very satisfying*" (Ness 116). Conor has been spending his time feeling like just a passenger in his own life, helpless to do anything to help his mother. Their violent acts are cathartic. Wanting to break, smash, and destroy something is a natural reaction when faced with a situation in which a person has no control over, even more so if that person is a thirteen-year-old boy. The Monster helps Conor take control, though in a destructive manner, of a little piece of his surroundings.

The second time the Monster "helps" Conor regain some tiny bit of agency is when Conor is confronted by his bully, Harry. The Monster starts this scene by telling Conor the third story "*There once was an invisible man, who had grown tired of being unseen*" (Ness 146). Harry starts the confrontation by saying that he no longer sees Conor, implying that Conor is nothing to Harry. As Conor chases after Harry to confront him, the Monster continues the story: "*And then one day the invisible man decided I will* ***make*** *them see me*" (Ness 147). Here the Monster is coaxing Conor into a physical confrontation with Harry. Once Conor has had enough bullying from Harry, he imagines the Monster is the one that knocks Harry to the ground.

The novel skips past the actual fight, but it is revealed by the headmaster of the school that Conor put Harry in the hospital. When Conor thinks about the fight he remembers "[He] had *felt* what the monster was doing to Harry, felt it in his own hands. When the monster gripped Harry's shirt, Conor felt the material against his own palms. When the monster struck a blow, Conor felt the sting of it in his own fist" (Ness 154). Instances like this show how the Monster guides Conor yet ultimately leaves the act itself to him. The chapter ends with Conor going back to class and thinking that he was no longer invisible: "They all saw him now" (Ness 158).

After the fight Conor is threatened with expulsion from school. He realizes that he is actually relieved because he will finally be punished for something. He wasn't punished for the destruction of his grandmother's sitting room, but here he will get the punishment he believes he rightly deserves. Conor wants to be punished for his secret and shameful thoughts of wanting his mother to die. However, the school's administration ultimately decides to not punish him, and this just adds to Conor feeling ostracized and distant from those around him. While Conor is taking steps to regain some semblance of control, normalcy, and agency in his life, he is unfortunately alienating himself from his classmates.

Conor's loss of control over his own life is the main reason he has so much anger pent up. Since his mother has become ill, Conor has been treated differently and he is old enough to recognize why. Everyone in his life, except for the Monster and possibly his grandmother, has treated him as if he is fragile. Even his father refuses to tell him the harsh truth that his mother will probably not live too much longer. The children at his school are much the same. Conor's friend Lily is the one child at school that tries to

continue to be Conor's friend through his mother's illness. While Lily attempts to be kind to Conor she undoes any good will by saying to him "'My Mum said we need to make allowances for you. Because of what you're going through'" (Ness 67). All Conor wants from school is to be treated like a normal student, and here is his one friend expressing what everyone else is thinking, that he is different and must be treated accordingly.

The most important line in this novel comes on the second to last page. Conor is with his mother in her dying moments. Ness writes "[Conor] could feel the monster, holding him up and letting him stand there" (Ness 204). Like all the important moments in the novel before this, the Monster is there to support Conor, yet does nothing to actually help him. Guardians help; they don't do. They barely even teach. Rather, they provide an opportunity for learning to occur. From the destruction of his grandmother's sitting room, to fighting the bully, to finally facing his true fear, the Monster shows Conor what he needed to see but it has always been up to Conor to do what needed to be done. Being with his mother at the end is no different. Conor must face the truth, that his mother will die but he will survive her passing.

Maria Donata Panforti, in her paper "From Enrico to Charlie: The Parent-Child Relationship in Children's Literature", writes about the role of guides in a child's life. She states that "a 'child-person' (a child who is above all a person) cannot be guided and directed by anybody, but on the contrary, he or she needs to be backed up and supported in realizing his or her ambitions." (Panforti 4). While I would argue the Monster helps show Conor a path that will lead to him accepting his loss and not feeling ashamed by his innermost thoughts, the Monster allows Conor the space needed from him to act for himself and "realize his ambitions". Panforti's idea that a child is a person first and

foremost allows for the child to not just take ownership of their life but also take responsibility for it, for both good and bad. This forces the child to face obstacles as if they were an adult, and in Conor's case there is not an adult around to help him. Panforti's idea is paramount in children's fantasy literature. What is more fantastical than a child that is fully realized and can act in such a way? In realistic children's literature it would be unrealistic to have a child act in the way that Panforti describes.

The single supernatural element in this novel could arguably just be in Conor's head, a fiction he created to cope with the terrible situation that he is now in. The Monster is nonetheless vitally important to him facing his struggles by himself. Had the Monster not been a monster and instead was a school guidance counselor, a close friend, or even a family member instead, the impact of the novel would not be the same. There are some emotional traumas that require more than just talking or thinking about logically. The Monster is able to give Conor the tools needed to tackle his trauma, but the Monster cannot help him use the tools because he is a supernatural being. A normal person helping Conor might not let him to stand on his own, to ultimately regain agency over his own life. Since The Monster is neither good nor evil, it permits Conor to deal with his external and internal strife alone. Only a monster would be able to stand back and give Conor the ability to fail.

The Book of Lost Things

While *A Monster Calls* is a close examination of how a child deals with the slow demise of his mother, *The Book of Lost Things* mainly looks at what happens after this loss has taken place. Instead of a singular supernatural creature who helps the protagonist deal with their loss, *The Book of Lost Things* contains an entire land filled

with supernatural creatures and people that help the protagonist along his way. This novel incorporates well known fairy tales in a fantasy land but gives these familiar stories twists that range from comical to emotionally impactful. By having the child protagonist leave his world and family to deal with his problems, this novel focuses on a child's recovery from and acceptance of his mother's passing with the guidance of a cast of supernatural guides and villains. These guides allow the child to process his grief and anger on his own terms with nothing more than a guiding hand and insightful advice.

The main character of this novel is David. His mother dies early in the story, suffering from an unnamed illness. While she is getting sicker and sicker, David creates routines that, some might argue, verge on Obsessive Compulsion Disorder. He believes that if he does things in a particular way or a certain amount of times "[his mother] will not be punished for his mistakes" (Connolly 1). David's compulsions, putting his left foot on the ground when he gets out of bed and doing things in even numbers just to name a few, seem harmless and a way for a child to feel like he is contributing to making his mother better and has some degree of control over the outside world. However, this creates a tremendous amount of responsibility in him for keeping his mother alive. When David's mother ultimately succumbs to her illness, he believes that he has failed in his "routines" and feels shame in letting her die. David is practicing magical thinking as he believes that his actions, or inactions, will have a specific outcome that has nothing to do with what he is doing. Alan Nadel and Diane Negra, in their paper "Neoliberalism, Magical Thinking, and Silver Linings Playbook", define magical thinking as "a fantasy logic that invests people or things with an agency they cannot possess" (Nadel 313). David's use of magical thinking allows him to feel and act as if he is doing something

that will have a positive outcome for his mother while at the same time it causes him to ignore the reality of the situation. While David's feelings might seem misplaced or a logical fallacy to an adult, to a twelve-year-old child, his feelings are true to him and more rational than his mother dying for no reason. Since children do not have much experience with the world, looking for actions they can take, realistic or not, is a way for them to feel like they are having an impact on the world around them. Considering David cannot physically save his mother, he turns to the only tool he has, his imagination. Much like having an invisible friend or making up a game, David's magical thinking is not unusual, it just is coming from an emotionally distraught place.

The first supernatural character that David meets, after going through a portal in a tree to the fantasy land, is the Woodsman. After a quick meeting, the Woodsman saves David from a pack of wolves and a werewolf-like creature who might be the offspring of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. In the confrontation between the wolves and the Woodsman, the Woodsman claims that David is under his protection, saying, "'[David] is mine, and I am his guardian'" (Connolly 80). The Woodsman's words are not just said to save David from the jaws of a pack of wolves; he truly means them as he explains at the end of the novel: "'They were all my children. Every one that was lost, every one that was found, every one that lived, and everyone that died: all, all were mine, in their way'" (Connolly 328). The Woodsman is revealed to be a shepherd of sorts for children that need guidance and protection, not just in this fantasy realm but that need his sage advice in the real world as well.

Once safe back at the Woodsman's cottage, David tells the Woodsman of his "routines," explaining that "'I started doing them to keep my mother from harm.'" The

Woodsman response is "'And did they?'" (Connolly 93). This is the first time that David sees that his "routines" are essentially useless; the sense of purpose they provide is illusory. The Woodsman explains "'We all have our routines. But they must have a purpose and provide an outcome that we can see and take some comfort from, or else they have no use at all. Without that, they are like the endless pacing's of a caged animal'" (Connolly 94). The Woodsman goes on to give David routines that have a purpose. He highlights that he cleans his ax and house every day to make sure his equipment is ready for when he needs it. This is exactly what David needs to hear in order to alleviate himself from his self-imposed guilt for the death of his mother.

The Woodsman tells David that his new routines should include his father, stepmother, and baby brother. However, David is unable to see himself making new routines, let alone ones that include the parts of his family that he does not particularly care for. While having useful routines in the fantasy land is imperative for survival, they do not translate well into the real world. What the Woodsman is truly teaching David is how to create routines that are realistic and will supplement any situation that he finds himself in, be it a fantasy world or dealing with a new family dynamic. As the novel goes on, David discontinues his magical thinking compulsions, and instead starts to emulate the Woodsman's routines, as they serve a purpose in this fantasy land. Doing things that have a purpose, in turn gives the person a sense of purpose. David needs this so that he is not trapped in his grief and is able to move past his mother's death. Anything that can take his mind off of his home situation, even for a minute or two, helps him understand that there is more to his life than his mother dying or the difficult situation that his has in his new home.

The most revealing aspect of the nature of the Woodsman is not explained until the end of the novel. At this point in the story, David has returned from the fantasy land and lived his life into old age. While it is left ambiguous, David could potentially be dying and, in doing so, returns to the fantasy land where he sees the Woodsman again. Connolly shares with the reader David's thoughts upon seeing the Woodsman once more: "David wondered at how like his father the Woodsman was, and how he had failed to notice it before" (Connolly 338). While this in itself does not necessarily add to the Woodsman's purpose in David's life, the fact that the Woodsman looks like David's father is incredibly telling when compared to other media meant for children.

In *Peter Pan* stage productions, it is common practice to have the same actor that plays Mr. Darling also play Captain Hook. Also, in the 1995 movie *Jumanji*, the actor Jonathan Hyde plays the dual roles of the child protagonist's father, Sam Parish, as well as the movie's villain, Van Pelt. Both of these works take the father figure and turn them into the story's main villain. In the *Peter Pan* plays, Mr. Darling is a good father but is transformed into the antagonist of Neverland, while in *Jumanji* the father is not a very attentive or loving father and is turned into a murderous hunter intent on killing his son. Having the fathers turn into the villains of their respective works adds many layers to these particular stories. I believe that this creative choice symbolizes a child growing up and losing the awe that they have for their parents. In the case of *Jumanji* (1995), the villain could be the twisted fantasy version of the child's mean and uncaring father come to life. In this movie it isn't until the evil version of the father is beaten that the main character can stop being afraid of his father and start living his life for himself, finally

stepping out of his father's shadow. With that in mind, the resemblance between David's own father and the Woodsman has much more of a literary impact.

David's father is not around much as he is a code breaker for England during World War II. The fact that David's father remarries and has a child with his new wife so soon after David's mother's death, does little to help David deal with his shame and drives a wedge not just between David and his father, but also between his new stepmother and brother. David's father does not see the compulsions or the shame that David carries with him, as he is too busy with either work or taking care of a new baby. When David and his stepmother, Rose, get into arguments, David's father does not offer solace, comfort, or even a solution to the strife in this dysfunctional family. In one instance David's father is explaining to David why he is with Rose: "'I love you, and that will never change, no matter who else we share our life with. […] being with Rose has helped me a lot these last few months" (Connolly 27). While this starts with a nice sentiment, and no one is arguing that David's father does not love David, it ends with a very telling statement, that David's father has had help dealing with his own pain and grief, yet David is alone. David's father is so wrapped up in his own world that he does not see the state of his own son. The Woodsman, on the other hand, places David at the center of his attention. Almost immediately after the Woodsman meets David, the Woodsman realizes that David needs protecting and sets out to do just that, even to the point that he seemingly sacrifices himself so that David may live.

Where the Woodsman differs from the portrayal of Captain Hook and Van Pelt is that he is actually a good guy that takes care of his new ward rather than trying to kill him. The Woodsman is able to do the things that David's father cannot. The Woodsman

helps him deal with his problems, such as David's compulsions, as well as gives him advice on how to survive in this fantasy world. In short, the Woodsman is simply there for David, filling a role left empty by David's actual father. Had there not been a war on and if David's father had not just had a new son, David's father very well might have been able to give David the attention he so badly needs. The Woodsman is David's idealized version of his father. Even the names of David's father and the Woodman are left very ambiguous, with their titles serving as their only names in the novel.

After completing his quest but just before leaving the fantasy land and returning to his world, David is reunited with the Woodsman. David questions why the Woodsman helped him in the first place. The Woodsman's response tells David how he was able to navigate this land as well as overcome his feelings of anger and shame: "'While others aided you along the way, it was your own strength and courage that brought you at last to an understanding of your place in this world and your own. You were a child when I first found you, but now you are becoming a man'" (Connolly 328). Here the Woodsman is illustrating to David that while people were there for him, it ultimately is David's responsibility to overcome all the obstacles that were in his way. Taken farther, the Woodsman is, in a way, telling David that it is up to him to deal with the grief, pain, and shame of losing his mother because no one will be able to do it for him. The Woodsman does not offer advice without David first initiating the conversation. It is up to David to ask for help, and with that he must realize and admit he needs and wants help first.

David encounters many supernatural beings in this fantasy world including dwarves, werewolves, trolls and harpies. Yet the one entity that had the most lasting impact on David is a seemingly mundane man whose job is to take care of the forest. In a

land filled with knights and monsters, wizards and kings, the one person that shows David ways to cope with his homelife is the Woodsman. He does this by showing David how he lives, not by directing him to the answer to all of his problems or by solving David's issues for him. He gives David an example that can be emulated and adapted to any situation. David takes the lesson the Woodsman taught him and once he returns to his world, he is able to cultivate meaningful relationships with his father, new stepmother, and his baby brother.

Conclusion

Both *A Monster Calls* and *The Book of Lost Things* deal directly with the loss of a parental figure, specifically the child protagonist's mother. Where *A Monster Calls* is a slow burn and deep dive into the emotions a child feels while losing their mother, and *A Book of Lost Things* focuses more on the aftermath, both novels have many things in common. Nature is an aspect that runs through both novels. Each uses the supernatural to highlight nature and its role in life. *A Monster Calls* has one facet of the natural world, a yew tree, become the singular supernatural element in the novel, where *The Book of Lost Things* has a supernatural forest that is tended by a seemingly non-supernatural man. Death is a natural part of life, even if that life is cut short by cancer or any other disease. With that in mind, the role of nature, or the natural world, has to go hand in hand with literature that deals with death, especially if that literature involves the supernatural. There are two reasons that death, nature, and the supernatural are tied together. The first is that with the death of a loved one often comes grief. Emotions are different for everyone and for a child there are even more complications. The supernatural is a tool that an author can use to help the child reader better understand that emotions that they

feel. The second reason is the unknowability of life after death. It is hard to understand something that we know nothing about. The supernatural is able to fill in that gap.

Having the supernatural act as a guide for the grieving child protagonist allows for the child to find their own meaning, agency, and ultimately acceptance of the death of a loved one. This is accomplished by having the supernatural act as a mirror for the real world. The Monster acts as an outlet for Conor to work through his complicated emotions, while the Woodsman creates an example that David can follow, but only if he chooses to do so. The Woodsman and the Monster, when compared to each other, act as foils. Where the Woodsman seeks to give David productive advice that will help him not just overcome his grief and shame, this advice will be just as important in every aspect of his life. The Monster, on the other hand, creates an avenue for Conor to release his pent-up anger and in doing so reclaim a part of his life.

CHAPTER 3: BOY MEETS GRAVEYARD

As I have previously discussed, orphan narratives comprise a great deal of children's literature. Frequently, orphaned children have issues with their surrogate or adoptive parents; even without these conflicts, orphans often feel lost while trying to understand their place in the world. A child losing one parent is terrible; losing both parents is almost unimaginable. Such loss puts the child at a severe disadvantage compared to their peers who still have one or both parents. The orphan must find and create different, yet meaningful, parental relationships; while all relationships between parents and children have points of contention, orphans must forge new bonds that can exacerbate these tensions. Sometimes the orphan's new parental figure is not quite ready to be thrust into that position or the personalities between the new parent and child are too different for cohabitation to be peaceful. To add to the disadvantages the child faces, orphans typically have problems with attachment and feel even more disconnected from the new familial ties. Orphan narratives often end with the new family unit having found a way to move forward together with the child "adopting" the parent. Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* simultaneously subverts this genre and pays homage to it.

While written for children, *The Graveyard Book* is much more than just a standard children's book. *The Jungle Book*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and the *Harry Potter* series all have influences on this novel. At the same time, Gaiman is telling a story about the difference between biological families and chosen families. *The Graveyard Book* has many of the same elements that traditional orphan narratives do, such as tense relationships with biologically unrelated guardians and feeling alone in the world just to name a few. However, Gaiman also adds new depths to what these things

mean through subverting horror tropes and showing a child character who is empowered to have agency. Turning normally horrific creatures into loving and caring parents and guardians allows for the definition of family to grow. These supernatural creatures raise their ward to be almost completely in charge of himself, showing that a child does not have to be watched and policed constantly.

When an orphan narrative is paired with the supernatural, an interesting thing occurs, especially if the child is raised by supernatural creatures. Since supernatural creatures have a difficult time living in the real world, considering that vampires cannot go out during the day and ghosts are intangible and unable to be seen by humans, they are unable to raise a child in a traditional way. Instead they often are more of a guide than a stereotypical parent. These guardians are unable to be parents in the traditional sense because of the limitations their supernatural abilities necessitate; with that in mind, they must teach the child to act decisively since they will usually not be able to be there to help the child and hold their hand. Because of the barriers that they might face, supernatural parental figures and guardians do not solve their children's problems. Instead they give the child the tools to solve the problem for themselves and empower the child to do so.

The Graveyard Book

Naturally, a book that takes place in a graveyard contains myriad supernatural elements. Gaiman's novel fills the traditional orphan narrative with ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and goblins. With the exception of the goblins, each of these supernatural beings' archetype is subverted. Instead of the bloodthirsty murderers that children have

nightmares about, the supernatural creatures that are normally found in horror novels and movies are here the caring and loving guardians of a newly orphaned child.

The main character of this novel is Nobody Owens or Bod for short. The story begins on the night when an assassin, known as The Man Jack murders Bod's family. Although he is only a toddler, he escapes by pure accident, walking out of his house, down the street and into the community graveyard. The spirit of Bod's recently deceased mother appears to the ghosts that have found Bod and pleads with one of the ghosts, Mrs. Owens, to care for her child. Meanwhile, The Man Jack realizes that the child has escaped and follows Bod to the graveyard where he is met by a stranger, who is later revealed to be Silas, an ancient vampire. Silas uses his vampiric abilities to persuade The Man Jack that there is no baby in the graveyard and that he should probably be on his way. It is worth noting that The Man Jack questions why Silas is in the graveyard by asking "'Are you the caretaker, then?' 'Am I? Certainly, in a manner of speaking' said [Silas]" (Graveyard 19). Already Gaiman is showing that Silas, though a vampire, is not what the reader might expect and at the very least considers himself the steward of this graveyard which, for the moment, also includes Bod.

After The Man Jack leaves, the ghosts of the graveyard as well as Silas, gather to hold a meeting to discuss what they will do with the newfound child. After some debate, Mrs. Owens along with her husband Mr. Owens, decide they will raise Bod as their own. When questions are raised about how to procure food and other essentials for the child, Silas steps forward and states "'If Mr. and Mrs. Owens will be his parents, I shall be his guardian'" (Graveyard 23). What follows is how Bod comes by his name. While Gaiman, up to this point, has been ambiguous about Bod's name, he resolves this issue by having

the ghosts of the graveyard name him. Since Bod is too young to talk and speak his own name, the ghosts decide that he is a nobody, deciding that his name should be Nobody Owens. In fact, naming a child raised mainly by ghosts “Nobody,” or “No Body” is beautifully ironic.

Many orphan narratives have a similar theme that runs through the entire work: the orphaned child is surrounded by people that care for them, yet they have to discover the world and learn their place in it on their own. For example, Harry Potter is another orphan that must learn how the world works with minimal help from adults. He has magical teachers, a giant for a male role model, and his god father is also a werewolf-like creature. Yet, with all these caring parties in Harry’s life, he faces dire situations and obstacles without the safety net that an adult can provide. Harry is often left to his own devices to make sense of his surroundings and the perils he faces. With minimal instructions left by Dumbledore, it falls on Harry to figure out how to find and destroy the Deathly Hollows as well as defeat his nemesis, Voldermort. Bod is raised in much the same way and on more than one occasion he finds himself in danger with no one to rescue him. Bod is given “Freedom of the Graveyard”, which is to say he is imbued with certain powers that allows him to navigate the graveyard, see the ghosts, and help him fit in, or find his place in their macabre little world. As he grows, Bod begins to master the powers he is given and is even able to utilize them outside the graveyard. Much like Harry Potter’s magical powers help him in his adventures, Bod also utilizes his powers to help get him out of trouble. More significantly, his powers also make the graveyard much more of a home. These two protagonists do not have a traditional home yet being part of a supernatural world makes them part of a very exclusive club. Harry is able to find other

people that are able to use magic like him, whereas Bod is surrounded by an entire graveyard full of ghosts that care for him.

The Graveyard Book also mirrors *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in many ways. Both novels deal with a child whose parents have died and are being raised by someone else. Where Tom Sawyer is rambunctious, rebellious, and a troublemaker, Bod is curious and kind. Tom rebels where Bod pays attention, for the most part. Both characters are orphans, but that is not the only similarity between the two. It might not be coincidence that the turning point in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* also happens in a graveyard. While there are no supernatural elements or creatures in *Tom Sawyer*, it cannot be overlooked that Bod's journey is eerily similar to that of Tom's. Both characters face off against and overcome adult villains without the help of a parent or guardian.

While *The Graveyard Book* follows some well-worn orphan narrative tropes, it does deviate from the mold in some key ways. Most notable is Bod's relationship to his dead parents. Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, a large driving force for Harry is to get revenge on the people that murdered his parents. When faced with the person that betrayed his parents, leading to their death, Harry seeks to do more than just bring Peter Pettigrew to justice; in fact, Harry wants to harm him. Of course, defeating Voldemort is for the good of the wizarding world, yet it is very personal to Harry. He also seeks out adults that would have known his parents to find out more about them. Harry's parents, though dead, take up much of his time. Jill Barbara Menes Miller, in her paper "Children's Reactions to the Death of a Parent: A Review of the Psychoanalytic Literature 1971," argues that "individuals whose parents die in childhood construct elaborate fantasies in which the lost parent is glorified and idealized" (Miller 7). Harry

Potter is a perfect example of a child's idealization of their dead parents. However, Bod expresses none of these tendencies. Harry's journey is to be more than just an orphan; Bod, on the other hand, never even considers himself an orphan. This could be because he, unlike Harry Potter and even Tom Sawyer, accepts his surrogate parents completely. He was also orphaned at such a young age, preventing him from remembering his biological parents. Since he cannot leave the graveyard, as a young child at least, he has no way of finding out information about his biological family. For Bod, the graveyard is the entire world. Since the graveyard is all he has known, and unlike Harry, he does not have constant reminders of his deceased parents, Bod is able to assimilate into the graveyard as a community.

Bod and the Owens represent an idyllic relationship between an orphan and their adoptive parents. That is not to say it is unrealistic, just that relationships like theirs are not portrayed in contemporary children's literature often. When a relationship that is similar to Bod's and the Owens does occur, it is normally the "happy ending" of the novel. *Matilda* by Roald Dahl is an example of this idyllic adoptive parent relationship. It is not until the end of the novel that Matilda and Miss Honey are able to find happiness with each other. Gaiman's choice to portray the relationship between his main character and the adoptive parents as loving and seemingly stress-free works because the tension of this novel, unlike most other children's literature, comes not from within the home but from outside of it. Bod does not have to overcome a terrible home life; neither does he have to prove to his parents that he can be his own man. Instead, the tension in this novel is an effect of Bod's coming of age while dealing with the world outside his home.

Bod's adoptive parents act as normal human parents, and if they were not explicitly stated to be ghosts, the reader might not initially pick on the fact that there is something different about them. However, it becomes blatantly clear that the Owens, just like the rest of the ghosts in the graveyard, are static. Because of the nature of their current existence, they cannot grow, adapt, or change. The Owens did not have a child while alive, so Bod is their way to correct that. The other ghosts in the graveyard stay exactly the same as when they are first introduced. While the Owens do not age or have major change throughout the novel, they do grow into their role as parents. By the time Bod leaves the graveyard for good, Mrs. Owens, at least, has become a very loving mother and despairs at seeing her child go.

Many times, throughout the novel, Gaiman refers to the Owens as Bod's parents and Bod even calls Mrs. Owens "mother". Curiously, Bod never addresses Mr. Owens directly. At no time in the novel does Bod call Mr. Owens Dad or even Father. Nevertheless, Bod's closeness with Mrs. Owens is clearly understood throughout the novel. When discussing what to do with the baby that crawled into their graveyard, Mrs. Owens has all but made up her mind about adopting Bod. When she asks for her husband's support, Mr. Owens is initially skeptical of their ability to raise the child. It is only after Mrs. Owens pleads with her husband that he relents, stating "'If you'll be his mother, I'll be his father'" (Graveyard 17). At first glance this response might seem accepting, however it is conditional and has a feeling of resigned acceptance at best. Mr. Owens will only be Bod's father if Mrs. Owens is the mother, placing more importance on Mrs. Owens's desires rather than the security of the child. While Mr. Owens does go on to remain Bod's father figure throughout the novel, there is clearly a lack of intimacy

between Bod and Mr. Owens. This helps to explain Bod's feelings towards Silas, as the vampire can fill the father figure role that Mr. Owens is not that excited about holding.

The other ghosts in the graveyard are much the same as the Owens. The ghosts range from ancient Roman soldiers all the way up to the Victorians. Because of this, Bod is inundated with history and hears all the stories that these ghosts have to tell. What he does not learn about is the world as it is now. Though Bod is alive, he is trapped in the past, just likes his parents and ghostly neighbors. One chapter that sticks out as unusual in this novel is about the Danse Macabre, or as the ghosts call it the Dance Macabray, where the ghosts of the graveyard all come out of their crypts and tombs to walk, dance, and sing among the living. The following day the living and dead forget what has happened. Even Bod eventually forgets, though he seems to hang on to his fleeting memories longer than most. None of the ghosts are willing to talk to Bod about the Danse Macabre; even Silas is not quite willing to divulge any information about it. The Danse Macabre is said to be a tradition that the ghosts have with no explanation given on why it happens, or how the ghosts are able to reveal themselves to the living world. This chapter reminds the reader that while the graveyard is a nice place for Bod to grow up in, it is not truly his world and because of that Bod will never fully understand it, at least not yet. Silas tells Bod "'I do not know what it is like to dance the Macabray. You must be alive or dead to dance it - and I am neither'" (Graveyard 149). Since Silas is a vampire, he cannot be fully part of either world; he can only observe. The only other insight into the Danse Macabre that Bod gets is when he talks to the Grey Lady. Bod asks her if he can ride her horse, her response is "'One day. Everybody does'" (Graveyard 161). She is telling Bod that only upon death can he ride her horse, making her either a version of Death (who rides on a

pale horse) or even Charon from Greek mythology, ferrying the dead to the afterlife on the back of her horse rather than a boat. Bod seeing the Danse Macabre and his interaction with the Grey Lady highlights that Bod exists in a liminal space between the world of the living and the world of the dead. He is not of either world yet part of both.

Growing up in this graveyard community serves Bod well. In fact, his community is much like that of a normal child growing up: he has neighbors who talk to him and tell him stories about years past. However, living in a community that is apart from the real world is going to have repercussions on any child. Where a normal child will have grown up with technology, an understanding of interpersonal relationships, and how they fit in the larger world, Bod has to learn all of these things at a much older age. Since his parents do not age there is no change with them. From the first day the Owens adopted him to their last day together years later, they are the same. Bod, on the other hand, has grown into a young man and wants more than the graveyard has to offer. Compared to parents that are alive, that will grow with their child and have a better understanding of how the larger world works, the Owens are more like a picture of parenthood and not the real thing, since they are unable to change and are stuck in the same place and time forever.

The supernatural elements and figures in *The Graveyard Book* create a sense of home, familiarity, and family. Gaiman is able to accomplish this early in the novel by having one of the elder ghosts in the graveyard, the Lady on the Grey, address the inhabitants of the graveyard in order to put to rest any arguments about Bod's future. She simply states "'The dead should have charity'" (Graveyard 30). If the Grey Lady is truly the courier to the afterlife, her line here helps to humanize not just her, but the afterlife

itself. Having one's fate be determined by ghosts that have no idea what is going on in the world sounds terrifying. Considering the novel is meant for children, there needs to be a way to alleviate some of the horror in this particular scene. When the Grey Lady, whose words are revered for their deep and meaningful impact on this graveyard society, suggests that the dead should have charity, the novel argues that the ghosts are not only capable of charity but that they should do charitable acts. Ghosts in literature tend to connotate rattling chains and haunting unsuspecting people. Having them be charitable is a way to show that not only are these ghosts not the malignant specters that they are assumed to be, but that death is not as terrible as people might think. The Grey Lady's proclamation shows that the dead can be just as good Samaritans as the living. Subverting the normal conception of ghosts, vampires, and werewolves, Gaiman writes a novel that focuses on the love and caring that these otherworldly creatures can have for a regular human baby.

The creatures that appear as true monsters in other works of literature and film are in this novel, kind and loving guardians who adopt Bod as their ward and do their best to raise him to be a normal child to the extent possible. Gaiman replaces the clichéd caretakers that, at best, do not understand their new ward and at worst are abusive, with a large number of supernatural creatures that care for this helpless child and are willing to do whatever it takes to raise him properly. Echoing the saying "It takes a village to raise a child" Silas states "'It is going to take more than a couple of good-hearted souls to raise this child. It will take a graveyard'" (Graveyard 23).

Bod's support structure consists of his surrogate ghost "parents" the Owens, his guardian Silas, and his teacher Miss Lupescu. Silas is, at first, Bod's main guardian.

While Bod is cared for by the Owens, they are unable to leave the graveyard and cannot get things Bod needs, such as food and toys. All the ghosts in the graveyard are from eras relegated to history books and might have a lack of understanding when it comes to today's world as well as outdated modes of thought and speech. Silas is there to balance that out. While Silas does teach Bod the proper way to speak in the modern world, his main role in Bod's life is to act as if he is Bod's moral center, not Bod's moral compass. Where Silas does not give Bod the correct answers, he teaches and trains Bod to find the answers for himself. When Bod does not know the alphabet, Silas does not teach it to him. Instead Silas makes Bod find the letters on tombstones in the graveyard. While the difference might be subtle, Silas is making Bod find the knowledge for himself rather than just giving it to him. Silas is teaching Bod two different things at once, the alphabet and how to find answers for yourself. In this same vein, Bod does not emulate Silas as he grows up, but rather follows the way Silas taught him.

Though Silas is Bod's guardian, he is not there for Bod in the climax of the novel, when The Man Jack returns to finish the job he started many years before. In Bod's hero journey, Silas fills the mentor figure. Often the mentor figure is not there for the hero in the final battle either because they have died or there is another battle that requires their presence. This can be seen in popular literature and movies in the characters of Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* and Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*. Falling in line with this trope, Bod is left to figure out how to beat this master assassin on his own. From years of tutelage from his guardian, Bod is able to construct and enact a plan that saves himself. In a way, Bod takes over the role of the graveyard's caretaker, at least momentarily. Unfortunately, because of his actions while defending himself and the ones he loves,

Bod's single human friend, Scarlett, decides she can no longer be a part of his life. To add to this loss, as Bod is growing older, he is losing his Freedom of the Graveyard powers, and can no longer see the ghosts of the graveyard, including his parents. Having Bod lose his powers is a metaphor for growing up and losing his innocence. He, like normal people, now has to face the world by themselves without the wonder and awe that children often have. His loss of powers can be equated to a child losing their imagination and the freedom of childhood that is only felt after it is lost. Adult readers can relate to the loss of childhood innocence.

As the novel closes, Bod and Silas have a conversation about Bod leaving the graveyard for good. Bod has become, in some ways, just like Silas. While fighting The Man Jack, Bod becomes the guardian of the graveyard using many of the things Silas had taught him. However, Bod differs from Silas in important ways. Bod is able to leave the liminal space of the graveyard and have a full life in the real world. Bod's ability to grow, age, and live differentiate him from Silas. Bod has taken the good that Silas was able to teach him, and leaves behind anything that would hinder him in his new life. Realizing that once his powers are gone, his life will be completely changed is simply stated through one line of dialogue from Bod "'If I come back, it will be a place, but it won't be home any longer'" (*Graveyard* 304). Silas is forever stuck at the age he was turned into a vampire; he is bound to drink blood to survive and cannot have much of a life outside of the graveyard. Bod, on the other hand, is looking forward to living his life to the fullest and is excited by all the experiences that he will have. Since there is very little information given about Silas's life before he is introduced in the graveyard, the reader does not know if Silas has ever had a family with children of his own. However,

considering how he quickly decided to be Bod's guardian and how he has cared for Bod over the course of this novel, he does have a very paternal presence. Because of Silas, and to a lesser extent the other inhabitants of the graveyard, Bod has been left alone to make his own path, filled with mistakes and successes. All of Bod's guardians and parental figures have given him the ability to fail. Often, the success of the child is what is most talked about. Yet giving the child the chance to go out on their own and fail is just as important. Armed with just the lessons and advice of the people that raised him, Bod must forge his own path.

Silas often has to leave the graveyard for long periods of time. In his place, he sends Miss Lupescu to tend to Bod's educational needs. At first, she seems to be a normal human, though she does have a large amount of knowledge about the supernatural. It is soon revealed that she is a "Hound of God," a large werewolf-like creature. While she acts as Bod's protector when Silas is away and saves Bod from a hungry group of goblins, her main focus is teaching Bod the ins and outs of the supernatural world. She accomplishes this through being very tough on Bod, and he is not used to such strictness from his parents and Silas. Other than correcting the way Bod speaks, Silas often teaches Bod through Socratic dialogue by asking him questions until Bod comes to the answer on his own. Miss Lupescu, on the other hand, is much more direct and unflinching in her teaching and expectations of Bod. Silas's approach to teaching Bod is more in line with Montessori education, where Miss Lupescu's teaching tactics almost seem dated to the turn of the century, focusing on rote memorization and obscure facts that seem irrelevant. Both of these approaches to teaching help Bod become very well rounded, not just in his education, but in the application of his knowledge.

One curious thing that Miss Lupescu does for Bod is cook food for him. The first thing she makes for him is beetroot-barley-stew-soup. Bod is disgusted by Miss Lupescu's dish and at first refuses to eat. She is more stubborn than him, however, and she forces Bod to eat the soup. As their lessons continue, and trust is built between the two, Bod relents and his objections to her food become more playful than serious. Bod's introduction to the larger world, outside his graveyard, comes through Miss Lupescu's recipes. Until this point, he has only been in the graveyard and has very little conception about the outside world. Silas brings him food from gas stations and some fruit. Food is a great introduction into any culture and by forcing Bod to partake in strange foods he has never seen before, Miss Lupescu is laying the groundwork for him to be interested in things other than his small little world. This foundation is surely one reason that Bod is able to look past the loss of his ghost family and friends when it comes time for him to leave the graveyard for good.

Considering that Bod's parents and guardian cannot come out during the day, Bod is left to his own devices. While this might not be surprising for a teenager, early in the novel Bod is still a young child. Gaiman does not tell us Bod's precise age, but it is safe to say he is between five and eight years old. Leaving a child alone to wander a graveyard might seem irresponsible on the parents' part, but it creates a sense of agency in Bod. This agency from such an early age helps Bod become a more self-actualized character. Not only does he know that grownups will not always be around to save him, he also knows he does not need help and that he can take care of himself. Because of the limitations that Bod's supernatural parental figures and guardians have, Bod is forced to mainly rely on himself. Though, early in the novel, he is rescued from goblins by Miss

Lupescu, as Bod gets older, he needs his guardians less and less; instead he is able to handle the situations he finds himself in.

From an early age, Bod has to fend for himself, yet at the end of his time in the graveyard he still takes the time to say goodbye to his mother, allowing for her to sing one final lullaby to Bod. This last act of love from Mrs. Owens shows not just how she has grown as a parent but that even with all the agency and freedom in the world, Bod still needed to see his mother before facing the world alone. While Bod is looking forward to the challenges that lay ahead of him, needing his mother's love is a feeling that goes beyond biological relatives and transcends life and death. Bod could easily have been saying goodbye to his mother before heading off to college or saying his final farewell before leaving for military deployment. Regardless of the family dynamic, having a heartfelt and meaningful goodbye is something that many people can relate too.

Empowering agency in children can be a difficult task. A common goal for parents is to prepare their child for the world without them. While this is a good goal for parents to have, there is something oddly strange, and sometimes sinister, about a child that is empowered to act as their own advocate. The horrific ramifications of an empowered child can be seen in the short story *The Children of the Corn* by Stephen King. Bod could easily have been one of those creepy kids that lures adults into a trap. Yet, he uses his agency for the protection of the graveyard and for his own defense. The assassins underestimate Bod because they, as adults, cannot fathom a child with such awareness and self-actualization standing up to them. Bod has no choice but to accept this as fact, because as he grows older, he becomes unable to interact with the people of the graveyard, including his parents.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Bod exists in a liminal space, able to navigate the graveyard almost as a ghost yet still interacting with the corporeal world and human people. In his essay, "Neil Gaiman's Ghost Children" Dominik Becher writes, "This eccentric state in both the worlds of death and the living, allows [Bod] to examine and negotiate the border between the two, like no other" (Becher 13). Bod accomplishes this negotiation almost completely on his own. While his supernatural parents and guardians give him advice, expose him to and teach him about the outside world, and provide him with the love and care that a child deserves, it is ultimately Bod's responsibility to use all that he has been taught and experienced to venture out into the world. Because Bod is of two vastly different worlds, that of the living and the dead, he does not truly fit in either. Yet, he never stops trying to find his place in the world as a whole. In the climax of the novel, he uses both his knowledge of the graveyard and the living world to defeat the assassins that are trying to kill him. Bod has to sacrifice his friendship with his only human friend, Scarlet, in order to save her and himself. As the novel ends, he makes his final decision as a child, to leave the graveyard for good, symbolizing his final step in leaving his childhood behind. Tsung Chi Chang, in "I am Nobody: Fantasy and Identity in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book"* highlights Bod's decision to leave by writing "[Bod's] decision to leave the graveyard underscores a new sense of self. Through what he learns in the graveyard and his interactions with people in the real world, Bod has realigned himself with his own identity and is ready to explore the ways of the world further". (Chang 17) For all his life, the graveyard was his home, playground, and schoolhouse. Defending it was Bod's final lesson. Bod's loss of powers represents that

the graveyard, his parents and guardians, have nothing more to teach him. Only Bod can make the decision to head out into the world completely on his own. Bod has lost his family and his friends. While this sounds like a terrible way to start an adult life, Bod is well equipped to handle anything that he might encounter because of how the supernatural people in his life have prepared him.

CONCLUSION: SUPERNATURAL GUARDIANS AND CHILD AGENCY

Throughout all the novels I have examined, supernatural guardians and parental figures tend not to directly help the child in their conflicts. Using nontraditional methods, like the Monster's abuse of Conor or Silas's teaching style, they give advice and educate. Most importantly, however, they empower the child to rise above the need to have their hand held so that they may act with their own agency rather than that of their elders.

When looking at the child protagonist's life, there is a marked change in the level of agency the child has before and after the introduction of the supernatural to their experience, Coraline not only finds her ability to stand up for herself, she realizes that she is just as much of the reason she and her parents have a turbulent relationship. *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar* Children's protagonist Jacob, on the other hand, realizes that his life exists outside of the influence of his parents. He takes up the mantle his grandfather had left behind, not because he is told to but because he chooses to. In *A Monster Calls*, Conor is defined by the fact that his mother is dying. The Monster helps him come to terms with that as well as allows Conor to assert himself in his own life rather than be a victim of his circumstance. David, from *The Book of Lost Things*, heeds the advice from the Woodsman and starts making meaningful changes in his daily routines. Not only that, but David realizes through the Woodsman that he has been incredibly hard on not just himself but his father as well, leading to him making drastic changes to how he approaches his new stepmother and baby brother. *The Graveyard Book* is the exception here. Bod never has to struggle for agency since he had the Freedom of the Graveyard from the beginning of his story. While he does grow and

mature with the help of his supernatural parents and guardians, Bod's agency had never been in question.

The way that the supernatural parents and guardians empower their wards is just as important as the empowerment itself. Coraline is empowered by the Other Mother because of Coraline's spite towards her. This novel presents the supernatural parent as the antagonist, yet the Other Mother's villainy still leads to Coraline finding the courage and agency to fight back against her situation. Jacob, on the other hand, is shown a world where he can make a difference. His empowerment comes for the juxtaposition between the peculiars' time bubble and the time he comes from. Realizing that he can be his own person in the peculiar world, he chooses to leave a world where his entire life has been planned out for him by people that do not truly understand him. Miss Peregrine allows for Jacob to be himself, within her rules. Yet when she is injured, it's only because of Jacob's newly found freedom, that he is able to take charge and save the other peculiar children.

Conor, through the pressure of the Monster, finds the courage to stand up to his bully and his grandmother and assert himself. While he believes the Monster is the one doing the actions, it is revealed that they were in fact actually performed by Conor. *A Monster Calls* illustrates the small and incremental steps that the Monster takes to coax Conor into taking action. When the time comes for Conor to face his mother's impending death, Conor no longer needs the Monster to help him as he is confident in himself and has accepted what happens next with his mother. In contrast, David's interactions with the Woodsman are kind and caring, though at times stern. The Woodsman is acting in the opposite way the David's father acted and, in doing so, is able to influence David in a

meaningful way. What David needed was a person that listened to him and took him seriously while at the same time was able to give him useful advice and direction.

Bod's education can't be so subtle. The graveyard is different enough from the world he was born into, that he must be empowered from the moment of his adoption as an infant. He therefore experiences multiple educational methods. His guardian, Silas, teaches him in such a way that allows for Bod to come to the conclusions on his own. Meanwhile, Miss Lupescu is much more of a traditional teacher. Her lessons include memorization and exposure to things in the outside world. Both forms of educating Bod are imperative for him to become a fully independent character. He needs to be able to think for himself and adapt to any situation but at the same time possess a pool of knowledge to draw from. Both Bod's Freedom of the Graveyard, and by extension his agency away from his parents, allow him to function on his own from a very early age.

The relationship between the natural and supernatural world is a common thread that ties the supernatural elements and creatures of these novels together. Nature is a prevalent theme in *A Monster Calls*, *The Book of Lost Things*, and, to a lesser extent¸ *The Graveyard Book*. As a child, nature, or the natural world, can seem as if it is supernatural. Making nature supernatural has an interesting affect; it makes the natural seem more friendly, or at least more understandable. *A Monster Calls* shows how nature can be violent and uncaring, yet it can also provide the things that a person needs to survive. By the end of the novel, the Monster is no longer a scary beast but instead is an uplifting companion. *The Book of Lost Things* has a more subtle approach to nature. Instead of a singular monster from nature, the reader is given an entire world filled with natural creatures. The Woodsman's job of caring for the woods is just the tip of the nature motif.

Having David being chased by wolves led by a werewolf- like creature goes further in showing how nature is intertwined with the supernatural in the book. Leroi is the culmination of the combination of human and nature, creating a supernatural being that wants to be the ruler of the land. Yet paired with the Woodsman, David can see how to live with in the natural world in a way that understands that death is just a part of the natural world. Likewise, *The Graveyard Book* uses death as a part of nature, and because of that, the afterlife becomes part of nature. While there is not a lot of emphasis given to this idea, there are some instances that show that death is just the next step in life. The Grey Lady hints at this when she says that everyone rides her horse one day. Silas is unable to know the secrets of the dead because he cannot die, while he says that Bod will understand one day. Using death as the bridge between the natural world and the supernatural world makes death seem less daunting.

Supernatural parents and guardians allow children to navigate their own lives. These supernatural creatures are able to accomplish this through the use of education, advice, and empowerment. While not being there to help their ward in the final battle, these supernatural parents are nevertheless enormously influential. Perhaps the most interesting of the gifts the parental figures and guardians in these novels give their child ward is the ability to fail. Having a child protagonist succeed is not uncommon in children's literature. However, allowing for the child protagonist to venture out on their own with the knowledge that there will be no adult, supernatural or otherwise, to save them, thus allowing them to fail in their mission, cannot be overlooked. The authors employ the supernatural in a way to, ironically, make the issues these novels face less scary. When the character is faced with an evil homunculus of their mother, the conflicts

of home seem less stressful. Having a child protagonist survive assaults from wolves makes the arguments they might have with their stepmother seem miniscule by contrast. Where these novels shine is their ability to take everyday problems that a child might have with their parents and shows the child reader a solution, though draped in metaphor, to their real-world issues. The authors' use of the supernatural allow for the character, and the reader, to find the agency to solve the problems they face for themselves rather than expect an adult to always be there to save them.

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