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FEAR OF THE FORBIDDEN: THE ROLE OF HORROR IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

MASTER'S THESIS

Thesis supervisor: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

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Zásady pro vypracování:

This master's thesis aims to analyse a selection of 21st century children's literature written in English by five different authors – Clive Barker's The Books of Abarat, Daniel Handler's A Series of Unfortunate Events, Holly Black's The Spiderwick Chronicles, Neil Gaiman's Coraline together with The Graveyard Book and Patrick Ness's Chaos Walking. It focuses on significant horror motifs in the examined works and their relation to three categories of foundational taboos – Death and violence, family and friends, sex and gender. Development of these categories in literary history will be put into perspective and inspected for current trends in children's horror. The thesis sets out to prove a connection between the three taboos and examined horror motifs, categorize them and analyse their manifestations in children's literature of the 21st century.

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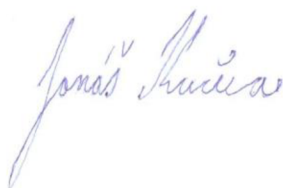
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Introduction

Children's literature has consistently incorporated elements of horror throughout its rich history. Whether aimed at reinforcing societal values, providing instructional content, or simply entertaining readers, the genre has adeptly woven chilling encounters and harrowing trials into the fabric of traditional tales and their contemporary counterparts. Despite the apparent grotesquerie of the monstrous entities that populate these narratives, delving into the significance that young readers can extract from such horrific elements reveals a depth beyond mere embellishments or vestiges of the genre's past. In the 21st century, wherein a deliberate attempt to evoke fear or unsettle young audiences may be met with skepticism and disapproval from both consumers and publishers, authors crafting prose for children are compelled to earnestly ponder the purpose behind infusing their works with horrifing elements. It becomes imperative for authors to conscientiously consider the broader implications of their narrative choices, ensuring that the incorporation of horror serves a more profound function than merely seeking attention or eliciting shock through the lurid and macabre.

I seek to scrutinize the symbolism and significance of horror elements in children's literature, focusing particularly on the portrayal of taboo subjects and horrific entities as symbolic embodiments of these societal taboos. Throughout this exploration, the thesis asserts that horror in children's literature transcends its conventional role as a mere reinforcement of societal values; rather, it intricately problematizes these values, prompting readers to question and reevaluate established norms. Drawing on theoretical frameworks articulated by Rosemary Jackson and Noël Carroll, the study approaches horror as fundamentally transgressive, challenging established cultural and social categories. Aligned with Carroll's perspective, the thesis posits transgression as a source of the reader's fascination, for the objects of horror are "both disgusting and fascinating, both disturbing and interesting, because they are classificatory misfits."[1] The contention put forth is that taboo topics depicted in the selected literature serve a dual purpose for young readers—both to fortify certain

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[1] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191.

values in opposition to their repugnant counterparts and to provoke a critical reexamination of cultural and social norms often considered commonplace.

This thesis endeavors to offer concise overviews and essential contextualization of selected authors and their contributions within the dynamic landscape of 21st-century children's literature. Emphasis will be placed on providing a nuanced understanding of each author's lived experiences and how these experiences shape and influence their literary works. The selected pool of authors, comprising Clive Barker, Daniel Handler, Holly Black, Neil Gaiman, and Patrick Ness, represents a spectrum wherein some are established luminaries in the realm of children's literature, while others have traversed from a broader career in horror fiction. This diversity is particularly insightful, as it allows for an examination of the shifts in style and approach that authors accustomed to a wider audience must navigate when delving into the domain of children's literature, specifically concerning the delicate balance required for child-appropriate horror.

The structural framework of this thesis comprises three principal chapters, each examining taboo subjects within the selected literature: death and violence, gender and sex, and family and friends. Within each chapter, conceptualized as pairs of thematically interrelated terms engaged in a dynamic interplay, subchapters dissect specific topics prevalent across the chosen works.

The first chapter delves into the profound and frequently addressed taboos of death and violence, encompassing a spectrum that spans the loss of a loved one, contemplation of one's mortality, and the ethical dimensions of violence, scrutinizing the moral responsibilities of those grappling with it.

The second chapter navigates the nuanced terrain of gender and sex, where the transgressive facets of horror emerge as particularly significant. This exploration entails an analysis of masculine and feminine identities, with a dedicated focus on how these identities are both defined and reexamined, incorporating a notable examination of gender fluidity as a concept explored within the selected literature.

The third and final chapter directs attention to the pivotal theme of family and friends, particularly salient for the child reader. Here, the conceptualization and depiction of family undergo critical examination as the traditional understanding of a family is subjected to scrutiny and contrasted against alternatives.

Theoretical Framework of the Thesis

Within the scope of this thesis, a foundational framework for the exploration of the role of horror in children's literature will be established through the insights of two esteemed literary theoreticians, Noël Carroll and Rosemary Jackson. Their theoretical contributions will guide and inform the investigation into the nuanced dynamics of horror within the context of literature for young readers. The term "taboo" will be employed to signify socially prohibited or discouraged concepts and their associated norms, denoting a set of behavioral standards specific to a given culture. The central argument posited in this thesis contends that the representation of horror in the selected children's literature exhibits a particular adeptness at delving into and transgressing the boundaries imposed by taboos. In the process of boundary-pushing, these narratives not only challenge prevailing values but also introduce alternative perspectives, offering young readers a broader spectrum of values concerning fundamental aspects of life, including family, self-perception, and mortality. In doing so, the narrative interrogation of these taboos serves to call into question not only societal values but also the status of individuals who defy or violate these established norms.

In the context of this thesis, it becomes imperative to precisely define the terms under scrutiny, namely "children's literature" and "horror." The definition of horror is approached within the intersection of two theoretical categories, merging Noël Carroll's conception of the horror genre with Rosemary Jackson's overarching concept of fantastical fiction as a literary mode.

Defining children's literature for the purposes of this thesis aligns with F. J. Harvey Darton's conception, asserting that such literature encompasses "printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach them, nor solely to make them good, nor to keep them profitably quiet."[2] Despite certain limitations inherent in this definition, particularly concerning the evolution of the literary medium in the 21st century, its articulation remains well-phrased and pertinent to the selected literature primarily published in print. Of particular

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[2] F. J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1.

significance is the emphasis on reading pleasure, a facet directly correlated with the fascination evoked by horror elements within the chosen works.

In this thesis, horror is treated as a genre predominantly characterized by "an emotional state wherein, essentially, some nonordinary physical state of agitation is caused by the thought of a monster, in terms of the details presented by a fiction or an image, which thought also includes the recognition that the monster is threatening and impure."[3] Central to this analysis is the notion of a monster, which I consider an embodiment of societal taboo. Horror monsters, by their very nature, assume the role of transgressive figures. They are "un-natural relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. "[4] The complexity of their position as transgressors makes monstrous figures especially compelling for understanding how traditionally accepted values are challenged and critically reexamined within children's literature featuring horror elements.

I consider the horror genre as subordinate to the conceptualization of fantastical fiction presented by Rosemary Jackson. Jackson's perspective considers fantastical fiction not as a distinct genre but as a literary mode that assumes various generic forms. Her definition deviates from the more commonly recognized conception put forth by Tzvetan Todorov, suggesting that fantastical narratives "assert that what they are telling is real—relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so—and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what—within those terms—is manifestly unreal."[5] Jackson's expansive view of the fantastic aligns with the selected literature, where narratives are intricately connected to what readers identify as real while introducing unreal elements that intrude upon, underline, and at times redefine the familiar reality within the narratives. It is crucial to note a departure from Jackson's stance in this thesis, as it does not adhere to the notion that all fiction or the horror genre itself is inherently subversive; rather, it acknowledges the capability of subversion. The analysis of the selected works will be tasked with presenting arguments, either in favor or against their subversiveness.

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[3] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 35.
[4] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 34.
[5] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 20.

1. Overview of the Selected Authors and Their Work

1.1 Clive Barker

In the exploration of Clive Barker's literary contributions, it is imperative to establish his unique authorial profile. Barker stands out as an eclectic author, synthesizing a diverse array of artistic influences and storytelling techniques. Born in the war-scarred city of Liverpool, Barker's upbringing was influenced by his middle-class family with a lineage steeped in maritime traditions. Narratives passed down from his father and grandfather, inspired by their service in Asia and Oceania, left an indelible mark on Barker's imagination. This was only reinforced by the fact that Barkers' home functioned as a boarding house, accommodating a growing number of foreign employees visiting Liverpool.

The examination of Clive Barker's childhood offers a revealing glimpse into the formative experiences that would shape his distinctive worldview and creative endeavors. In the author's own reflection on his early years, he nonchalantly remarked, "I don't perceive it as being out of the ordinary … though that may say something about me."[6] That said, characterizing Barker's childhood as uneventful would be a significant understatement.

His childhood was marked by two vivid and unsettling encounters with death. The first was a firsthand witness to the tragic demise of a stunt parachutist during an air show, an incident that left an enduring imprint on Barker's psyche. Later, the family relocated due to the profound shock caused by a local murder that reverberated through the neighborhood. The profound impact of these encounters with death is palpable in Barker's creative work, manifesting on multiple occasions in his exploration of the macabre and the gruesome.

Barker himself acknowledges the significance of the first encounter, describing it as an inciting event that fueled his "hunger to see what should not be seen, to show what should not be shown."[7] This early exposure to the morbid spectacle, partially shielded from view by the protective hand of his mother, set the stage for Barker's

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[6] Douglas E. Winter, *Clive Barker: The Dark Fantastic* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 12.
[7] Winter, *Clive Barker*, 17.

inclination towards exploring the forbidden and pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in artistic expression.

Clive Barker's artistic inclinations took root early in his life, fostered by the supportive environment provided by his parents, who, despite not fully embracing the darker and more macabre aspects of his interests, encouraged his creative pursuits. From his days in elementary school, Barker actively engaged in painting and puppetry, showcasing a burgeoning talent and developing an early appreciation for crafting physical props and art objects. This early exposure to artistic expression laid the foundation for the distinctive visual elements that would later permeate Barker's creative work.

Barker's voracious appetite for various forms of media became evident during his formative years. He immersed himself in a diverse range of influences, including early Marvel comics, prints of William Blake, and the literary masters of horror, with Edgar Allan Poe prominently figuring among them. It was during this period that Barker also discovered the captivating world of horror cinema, exposing himself to the visceral and increasingly eroticized dimensions of the genre. Barker recalls this phase as instrumental in cultivating "a growing identification with the monsters, an attraction to their glorious differences."[8] This fascination with the monstrous, rooted in his early exposure to horror cinema, resurfaced prominently in Barker's later fiction, becoming one of the hallmark features that distinguishes his work.

He faced challenging years during his time at Quarry Bank Grammar School, an all-boys English public school that he perceived as stifling his creative endeavors with its harsh protocols and antiquated mindset. His experiences at the institution instilled in him a lifelong disdain for traditional educational settings, fostering Barker's belief that "for imaginative children … the deprivation comes not at home, but in school."[9] The restrictive environment of Quarry Bank left an enduring impact on Barker, who found himself at odds with the institution's conformity-driven ethos. His creative spirit clashed with the rigid protocols and outdated perspectives, creating a discord that fueled his future resentment towards conservative institutions.

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[8] Winter, *Clive Barker*, 34.
[9] Winter, *Clive Barker*, 40.

In the later years at Quarry Bank, Clive Barker's trajectory took a transformative turn as he became actively involved in the world of theatre. This newfound passion propelled him towards a primary aspiration of becoming a playwright, evolving from early provocative plays featuring gay romance to a fully avant-garde theatrical approach. As he progressed through his studies and subsequent years, Barker's dedication to theatrical endeavors intensified, leading to the establishment of a theatre troupe with some of his fellow students and friends. Their performances garnered attention in Liverpool and later in London.

Barker's theatrical evolution unfolded from initial playful provocations to experimental performances, often incorporating mime as a distinguishing feature of the troupe's presentations. These years of theatrical exploration not only cultivated his creative versatility but also marked his immersion in the artistic community, where he forged connections with filmmakers and writers alike. Over time, Barker found himself increasingly drawn towards the medium of short stories, recognizing it as a more expressive medium to articulate the ideas that seemed to elude capture within the confines of his plays.

At this point, Clive Barker emerged as an author renowned for his inclination towards the bizarre and the gruesome, achieving significant acclaim with his first anthology of short stories titled *Books of Blood*. With this publication, Barker firmly established his literary identity, refusing to be confined to any rigid genre categorization. His work seamlessly traverses the realms of fantasy, horror, and the new weird, amalgamating their conventions to craft a distinctive conception of anti-horror. Anti-horror, as articulated by the author, represents a deliberate subversion of conventional formulas within the genre "pushing the reader into a realm of ambiguity, … a place of possibilities, some dark and dangerous, others bright and beautiful, and all of them liberating."[10]

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[10] Winter, *Clive Barker*, 191.

1.1.1 Clive Barker's *The Books of Abarat*

The focal point of this thesis is Clive Barker's trilogy collectively known as *The Books of Abarat*. This trilogy follows the sixteen-year-old protagonist, Candy Quackenbush, as she embarks on adventurous travels through the eponymous realm of Abarat. Contrasting starkly with our own world, Abarat is depicted as a parallel reality governed by physical laws, ecosystems, and cultural landscapes that diverge significantly from the familiar. These differences often take on bizarre or uncanny character pushing the narrative towards the area of weird fiction and horror, further enhanced by Barker's penchant for avant-garde aesthetics. The resulting genre mosaic presents a rich source of transgressive imagery closely related to taboo subjects under investigation in this thesis.

An integral aspect of the thesis entails an in-depth examination of the female characters encountered within the trilogy. Across various ages and roles, these characters serve as focal points for analysis, offering insights into diverse aspects of female representation in the narrative. Of particular interest is the multifaceted protagonist, Candy Quackenbush, and her journey of self-discovery, which forms a central thematic thread within the trilogy. In addition to Candy, attention will be directed towards two prominent antagonists, Princess Boa and Mater Motley, each portrayed in markedly different ways. Furthermore, the thesis will delve into the significance of women's organizations within the story, with a focus on the coven of Seamstresses aligned with Mater Motley and the Sisters of the Fantomaya, who are intricately linked to both Boa and Candy.

Accompanying the varied assortment of women will be a selected group of male characters paralleled with the protagonist. This selection will be focused predominantly on two male antagonists, the Caliban-like sorcerer Christopher Carrion and Candy's abusive father William Quackenbush. The examination of parallels and distinctions among these characters will provide insights into the recurring patterns discernible in the portrayal of abusers across the selected literature.

1.2 Holly Black

Holly Black's literary oeuvre is distinguished by her unwavering focus on folklore and its darker, more unsettling origins. Her work exhibits a clear preference for fairytale figures reminiscent of the tales recounted by the Brothers Grimm, rather than the portrayals popularized by Disney. In articulating her creative vision, Black candidly expresses her inclination towards "an idea of fairies that was not some little girl who sparkled with wings. I wanted people to think of fairies as being the capricious and dangerous creatures from folklore."[11]

It is perhaps no wonder that Black came to appreciate the more mysterious and obscure aspects of fairy lore, as she grew up in a historical Victorian house surounded by her mother's collection of folklore books and curiosities. Her first published works reflect these interests in a signature mixture of folklore elements and modern fantasy, coined by the author as "suburban fantasy … juxtaposition between industrial stuff and something as organic as fairies."[12]

It is at this intersection between modern human civilization and the eldritch folklore that horror often arises in Black's work. This convergence is vividly exemplified by her depictions of goblins fashioning shards of discarded glass into replacement teeth or the construction of palaces from scrap metal. What distinguishes Black's approach to horror is the portrayal of these unsettling phenomena not as a consequence of corruption stemming from human contact, but rather as opportunistic adaptations by certain fairies. This is a marked tendency of Black's fairy characters which could be seen as an attempt to emulate or even surpass humanity through its own inventions. The results of these attempts are often depicted as distorted reflections of human ambitions and passions. Through these distortions, Black deftly highlights taboo subjects and transgressions, liberated from conventional human limitations and magnified to monstrous proportions for the purposes of narrative exploration.

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[11] "Author's Fairy Tale Comes True," *Edmonton Journal*, (February 2008). https://web.archive.org/web/20121107074842/http://www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/news/culture/story.html?id=5486cf2f-6676-4419-b842-f179f5a29e06&k=35229.
[12] "Holly Black: Through the Maze," *Locus* 554, no. 5 (May 2006): 84.

1.2.1 Holly Black's *The Spiderwick Chronicles*

In the scope of this thesis, particular attention will be directed towards *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, a captivating pentalogy that traces the adventures of the Grace siblings as they discover dangerous secrets pertaining to a hidden civilization of fairies coexisting with humanity. Central to the narrative is the notion of a concealed world existing alongside our own, shrouded in secrecy through the employment of magic and natural mimicry. Within the confines of this newly discovered world, the protagonists of the series encounter a plethora of instances that challenge conventional norms and boundaries, manifesting as monstrous entities and enigmatic phenomena.

Central to the examination in this thesis are the three Grace siblings—Jared and Simon, the nine-year-old twins, and their thirteen-year-old sister, Mallory. Throughout their adventures, the Grace siblings encounter a multitude of fairies, each embodying transgressive qualities and serving as catalysts for introspection and growth. These fairy beings, ranging from benevolent sprites to malevolent entities like the malicious ogre Mulgarath, serve as mirrors for the protagonists' own inner conflicts. Through their interactions with these fairies, the siblings are forced to confront their own identity struggles, grappling with issues of gendered expectations, aggression, and family loss.

Of special interest is the examination of how the supernatural occurrences within the narrative serve to either uphold or challenge traditional notions of family structure and dynamics. Particular attention will be paid to the juxtaposition of Jared Grace and Mulgarath, whose characters embody contrasting facets of masculinity. Through the lens of Jared, readers are invited to explore the impact of divorce and parental discord on individual identity and emotional well-being. His struggles with masculine insecurities and aggressive behaviour are presented as manifestations of deeper issues. In contrast, Mulgarath emerges as a dark distortion of traditional masculine archetypes, embodying aggression, dominance, and a propensity for violence.

1.3 Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman's works featured in this thesis are deeply rooted in his childhood experiences and artistic journey, drawing inspiration from both realms. Born in Hampshire, England, and later relocating to West Sussex, Gaiman's formative years were characterized by a sense of flux and uncertainty. This sentiment is palpable in his exploration of cultural heritage, as his family's affiliation with both Judaism and the Church of Scientology posed challenges in establishing a cohesive identity, described by Gaiman's family as navigating the complexities of being a "Jewish Scientologist."[13]

Despite the spiritual milieu of his upbringing, Gaiman displayed nothing but disinterest in his parents' beliefs, instead immersing himself in voracious reading from a young age. His eclectic literary diet encompassed a diverse array of works, ranging from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and the vibrant universe of DC comics. This early exposure to a rich tapestry of stories fuelled Gaiman's fascination with the origins of narratives and comparative mythology, instilling in him a deep appreciation for folklore as a medium ripe for reinterpretation and reinvention. As Gaiman aptly reflects, "when I was growing up, I wanted to read something that was unapologetically a fairytale, and just as unapologetically for adults."[14]

Gaiman's burgeoning career was heavily influenced by his extensive knowledge of literature and his adeptness at mimicking various narrative styles. As he candidly acknowledges, "I was very, very good at taking a voice that already existed and just parodying it."[15] While Gaiman may not have viewed this phase of his career with particular pride, it ultimately served as a stepping stone towards his discovery of the world of comics, where he would ultimately channel his creative energies and make a significant impact on the medium.

Neil Gaiman's introduction to the comic medium lead to a realization that the novel and short story formats he had previously honed felt constrained by centuries of literary tradition. In contrast, comics offered an uncharted frontier for a writer of

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[13] Dana Goodyear, "Kid Goth: Neil Gaiman's Fantasies," *The New Yorker* (January 2010): 48-55.
[14] Neil Gaiman, "Happily Ever after," *The Guardian* (October 2007). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/13/film.fiction.
[15] Goodyear, "Kid Goth: Neil Gaiman's Fantasies," 48-55.

serious fiction, promising boundless creative possibilities—a sentiment encapsulated by Gaiman himself as "I can do stuff nobody has ever done. I can do stuff nobody has ever thought of."[16] With the guidance of revered comic authors such as Alan Moore, Gaiman delved into the intricacies of the medium, ultimately mastering its unique narrative language and leveraging it to defy conventional storytelling boundaries.

Gaiman's breakthrough in the comic world came with the publication of works like *Black Orchid* and the iconic *Sandman* series. In these works, Gaiman deftly reimagined characters from the Bronze Age of Comic Books, infusing them with new depth and poetic resonance. The fusion of supernatural horror, metaphysical inquiry, and avant-garde artistic sensibilities, courtesy of Gaiman's longtime collaborator David McKean, elevated *The Sandman* into a groundbreaking and influential work, earning Gaiman widespread acclaim and cementing his status as a luminary within the medium.

The success of *The Sandman* afforded Gaiman unprecedented creative control and freedom, empowering him to craft narratives that transgressed traditional limits of the medium. This newfound latitude allowed Gaiman to explore progressive themes and diverse characters, such as "pre-operative transsexuals, dysfunctional families, mixed-race couples, spurned lovers, addicts, and young adults with tattoos and brightly colored hair"[17] pushing the boundaries of the medium.

Gaiman's pivot to children's literature represents a more recent development, marked by the publication of works like *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*, both of which are central to the discourse of this thesis. In these works, astute readers can discern echoes of Gaiman's broader themes, as he adeptly appropriates and tailors transgressive and horror-adjacent motifs for younger audiences. It is this rich tapestry of transgressive themes that forms the crux of further analysis within this thesis.

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[16] Tim E. Ogline, "Myth, Magic, and the Mind of Neil Gaiman," *Wild River Review* (November 2007). https://web.archive.org/web/20120915045414/http://www.wildriverreview.com/4/worldvoices-neilgaiman.php.
[17] Goodyear, "Kid Goth: Neil Gaiman's Fantasies," 48-55.

1.3.1 Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*

Coraline stands as Neil Gaiman's first foray into the realm of children's literature, a daring narrative that challenges young readers with its chilling tale of uncanny encounters and dark themes of parental neglect, dysfunctional family dynamics, and the maturation of its young female protagonist. Set against the backdrop of an enigmatic apartment, recently inhabited by the titular protagonist Coraline Jones and her family, the narrative unfolds as Coraline embarks on a journey of discovery, delving into the eerie mysteries lurking within her new home.

At its core, *Coraline* navigates the intricate intersection of familial relationships and the multifaceted concept of womanhood, offering rich terrain for analysis. Central to the narrative is Coraline herself, a resilient and inquisitive eleven-year-old starved for the attention of her preoccupied parents. Her curiosity and need for fulfilment lead her to uncover a hidden world mirroring her own, encountering disturbing reflections of her own unfulfilled desires.

Of particular interest is the novel's eclectic ensemble of female characters. Apart from the Coraline and her often inattentive mother Mel, central to the thematic exploration of motherhood is the eerie figure of the Other Mother. This uncanny entity, with her ability to ensnare children in illusory realms tailored to their desires and assume the shape of their loved ones, embodies the darker facets of motherhood—possessive, manipulative, and devoid of genuine kindness or care.

Beyond the central cast, notable characters include Coraline's ambiguously queer neighbours, Mrs. Spink and Mrs. Forcible. As retired actresses sharing an apartment and a passion for Scottish Terriers, they offer an engaging depiction of alternative family structure providing support and guidance to Coraline throughout the novel.

1.3.2 Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*

Neil Gaiman's second venture into children's literature maintains the signature macabre charm and thematic depth of his earlier work while adopting a gentler narrative tone. *The Graveyard Book* diverges from the unsettling horror elements of *Coraline* yet retains its serious themes, such as the exploration of mortality, family, and belonging. The novel unfolds against the backdrop of a haunting tragedy, following the childhood of a lone survivor—an infant—after his family falls victim to a brutal murder. Despite its gentle delivery, the narrative does not shy away from grisly scenes, confronting readers with the stark realities of loss, death and survival.

Central to the story is the protagonist, a young boy named Nobody by his unlikely adoptive family, who finds refuge in a nearby graveyard inhabited by a spectral community of ghosts and undead beings. The convergence of themes of family and death is palpable as Nobody, affectionately known as Bod, forges deep connections with his otherworldly companions, who serve as both guardians and mentors in his formative years.

The cold-blooded killer responsible for the murder, known only as Jack to the reader, looms ominously beyond the confines of the graveyard, casting a perpetual shadow over the narrative. For the young protagonist, the realm of the living remains an elusive and perilous place, beckoning him with the promise of companionship and answers pertaining to his past. Throughout Bod's journey, the male figures connected to his life serve as representations and reflections of his own masculinity, each offering a unique perspective on the complexities of manhood. Among them, the enigmatic antagonist Jack emerges as a predatory force, relentlessly pursuing Nobody for mysterious purposes, while the stoic grave keeper Silas assumes the role of a paternal guardian.

Of interest is the enigmatic fraternity referred to as the Jacks of All Trades, an occult collective which includes the notorious antagonist Jack among its ranks. This group of men obsessed with power attained through acts of violence and brutality serves as a thematic intersection between masculinity, violence, and death, explored further in the thesis.

1.4 Daniel Handler

Daniel Handler, better known to younger readers by his pseudonym Lemony Snicket, stands as a unique figure in the realm of horror-themed children's literature. What sets him apart is his distinctive approach to crafting chilling narratives devoid of supernatural elements, opting instead for a fusion of genres that includes mystery, Gothic, and metafiction as primary ingredients. This deliberate departure from conventional norms within the industry reflects Handler's critique of the saturation of children's literature with tropes centred on "sports or fantasy themes."[18]

Handler's literary work is characterized by a presence of absurdist humour, an affection for literary allusions, and a penchant for Gothic motifs, creating a peculiarly atmospheric experience that remains accessible to young audiences. His Jewish heritage and familial narratives tied to the Holocaust, profoundly shaped the thematic undercurrents of his work. The stories passed down within his family, permeated by the grim realities of the Second World War, instilled in Handler a worldview characterized by a blend of darkness and absurdity. As the author himself remarks these aspects of his family history had "a huge effect on *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* … just the notion that terrible things can happen at any reason and … are not punishments for bad behavior, just as good things happening are not rewards for good behavior."[19]

It was not until later into his writing career that Handler was met with fame and critical acclaim brought about by the publication of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, a series of children's novels conceived as a "mock-gothic"[20] narrative. The adventures of three orphaned siblings hunted by a diabolical distant relative display author's signature metafiction and absurdist tendencies, providing a substantial material tied to the motifs of family loss, violence and gender stereotypes.

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[18] Karen Sparks, "Daniel Handler," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified February 24, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Daniel-Handler.
[19] Daniel Handler, "The Man Behind Lemony Snicket Talks About Writing For Kids And His Childhood Fears," interview by Terry Gross, *www.npr.org*, January 13, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/01/13/509587895/the-man-behind-lemony-snicket-talks-about-writing-for-kids-and-his-childhood-fea.
[20] Daphne Merkin, "Lemony Snicket Says, 'Don't Read My Books!'," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 2001, 62.

1.4.1 Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

Handler's series of thirteen novels stands as a unique example of horror fiction tailored for children, distinguished by its notable absence of the supernatural. This absence does not imply a lack of fantastical elements; rather, the series veers towards the absurd and speculative, favouring scientific gadgets and peculiar scenarios over magical or otherworldly phenomena. The horror embedded within the series draws inspiration from the more mundane aspects of Gothic fiction, finding its roots in dilapidated structures, ominous family legacies, and the terrifying depths of human depravity.

The story of three orphaned siblings attempting to survive the increasingly lethal schemes of a villainous thespian known as Count Olaf easily betrays its Gothic roots and subverts some of its traditional troupes. The Gothic inspiration serves as a conduit for exploring taboo subjects and transgressive themes within the series. Handler deftly navigates through realms of moral ambiguity, crafting both antagonists and protagonist who operate on the edge, thereby challenging traditional notions of right and wrong. It is through this questioning of moral boundaries that the series achieves its most introspective and provocative moments, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the complexities of human behaviour.

The transgressive essence of the series finds its most relevant expression in the intricacies of its characters, particularly within its main cast. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, the orphaned siblings at the heart of the narrative, defy traditional gender expectations, showcasing a multifaceted exploration of identity and morality throughout their perilous journey. Count Olaf, their unyielding nemesis, epitomizes the motif of transgression, brazenly flouting norms surrounding family and violence. The cadre of antagonists aligned with Olaf further underscores the series' exploration of transgressive themes. United by their status as societal outcasts, these characters challenge conventional notions of good and evil, blurring the lines between social acceptability and villainy. Their collective portrayal as a motley crew of misfits introduces an element of moral ambiguity, compelling readers to confront the complexities of human nature and the inherent subjectivity of moral judgment.

1.5 Patrick Ness

Marked by an insightful exploration of the trials and tribulations of childhood and adolescence is the work of Patrick Ness, reflecting his own early experiences grappling with issues of gender and sexuality. Being born into a conservative Christian family with a military background, Ness was acutely aware of the societal taboos surrounding identity and the ramifications of deviating from established norms. His upbringing instilled in him a deep-seated understanding of social transgression and its consequences, compelling him to navigate the complexities of self-discovery and identity. Speaking on his religious background, Ness admits that "being raised in that church I never would have spoken about being gay. You have to keep yourself hidden."[21] Taking away from the experience, the author's later work would openly feature the topic of gender and queerness as well as the destructive impact of religious extremism.

Following his initial forays into literature, Patrick Ness achieved widespread acclaim in the realm of children's literature with the release of *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, the first instalment in his *Chaos Walking* trilogy. This science fiction saga offers a compelling reimagining of American colonization, delving deep into themes of warfare, masculinity, and the complexities of communication through the perspective of Todd Hewitt, a nearly thirteen-year-old protagonist.

Set against the backdrop of a recently colonized planet, the narrative unfolds in a world where a peculiar native microbe has endowed men with the ability to telepathically broadcast their innermost thoughts and emotions. Through Todd's eyes, readers are thrust into a tumultuous landscape where the boundaries between truth and deception, intimacy and isolation, are blurred beyond recognition in "a world where it is impossible to escape information overload."[22]

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[21] Nicolette Jones, "Class Writer Patrick Ness on His New Novel About a Day in The Life of a Teenager Coming Out," *RadioTimes.com*, (May 2017), https://www.radiotimes.com/books/class-writer-patrick-ness-on-his-new-novel-about-a-day-in-the-life-of-a-teenager-coming-out/.
[22] Alison Flood, "Patrick Ness Beats Established Writers to Booktrust Teenage Prize," *The Guardian* (November 2008). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/nov/18/booktrust-teenage-prize-patrick-ness.

1.5.1 Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking*

Patrick Ness's seminal contribution to children's literature comes in the form of the acclaimed *Chaos Walking* trilogy, a sci-fi saga that captivates readers with its historically inspired setting and thought-provoking themes. At the heart of this narrative lies the story of Todd Hewitt, a young boy nearing his thirteenth birthday, navigating the challenges of life on a newly colonized planet inhabited seemingly only by men.

The series unfolds against the backdrop of a unique and unsettling phenomenon, a native pathogen that grants men the ability to telepathically broadcast their innermost thoughts and emotions. This unprecedented breach of privacy plunges Todd and his fellow settlers into a state of perpetual exposure, where the boundaries between public and private rapidly dissolve. In response, the community adopts a rigorous mental discipline aimed at preserving a semblance of individuality amidst the relentless onslaught of psychic noise.

Alongside this extraordinary ability comes a devastating consequence in a form of the purported extinction of the entire female population, leaving Todd's community bereft of women and haunted by unanswered questions. Fuelled by suspicion and driven by a deep-seated curiosity about the fate of his absent mother, Todd embarks on a journey of discovery that leads him to uncover the sinister truths lurking beneath the surface of Prentisstown, his native settlement. As Todd ventures beyond the confines of his home, he is confronted with the harsh realities of a world far more complex and morally ambiguous than he had ever imagined.

Central to the exploration of this thesis are the dynamic characters of Todd and Viola, whose intersecting journeys propel the narrative forward and offer profound insights into themes of identity, hope, and the human condition. Todd, the young protagonist grappling with questions of masculinity and violence, serves as a focal point for examining the complexities of self-discovery in a world marked by uncertainty and upheaval. His quest for understanding, both of himself and the world around him, unfolds against a backdrop of societal norms and expectations, inviting readers to ponder the nature of masculinity and its intersection with notions of power and authority.

Viola, the enigmatic girl discovered by Todd on the outskirts of his settlement, represents a beacon of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape. Her arrival introduces a sense of possibility and renewal, challenging Todd to confront his preconceived notions and embrace the prospect of a brighter future. Through their evolving relationship, Ness deftly explores themes of communication, resilience, and the transformative power of human connection in the face of adversity.

Equally compelling are the numerous male figures encountered throughout the narrative, each offering a unique perspective on masculinity and its relation to power. Among them, the inhabitants of Prentisstown and especially their authoritarian mayor, David Prentiss, loom large as embodiments of patriarchal authority and control.

2. The Taboo in Children's Literature

2.1 Death and Violence

The exploration of death and its portrayal in literature, particularly children's literature, is a highly contentious yet profoundly impactful subject. The mere consideration of such sombre themes within the context of literature aimed at young readers can often be perceived as either morbid or potentially harmful. This prevailing societal attitude towards death, especially in relation to children, has resulted in its depiction being approached with extreme caution, if addressed at all. Traditional representations of death usually frame it in "a therapeutic way ... often by working against the idea of death as permanent."[23]. This tendency towards soothing narratives may inadvertently stifle more daring inquiries into the nature of death, deemed inappropriate or incomprehensible for young audiences.

Despite the long-standing tradition of sanitized depictions of death, there has been a notable shift in recent decades, supported by the finding "that in the last thirty years or so, death's presence in books for children of all ages has increased markedly."[24] This trend reflects a growing trust in children's reading comprehension abilities and a corresponding demand for narratives that tackle more serious and potentially darker themes to captivate younger audiences. This development is particularly intriguing as it speaks to the evolving literary strategies employed to address the culturally sensitive topic of death, especially within a readership perceived as vulnerable and in need of socialization.

The central aim of this thesis is to delve into the motif of death, with a particular emphasis on its transgressive nature and the societal taboos that surround it, especially concerning child readers. To that end, I will draw upon the work of Kathryn James and Roberta Seelinger Trites, supplemented by pertinent academic articles and papers contributed by a diverse array of experts within the field of children's literature studies. While it is widely acknowledged that "culture's representations of death may be read collectively as a text to give insights into its social systems, death ethos, conceptions

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[23] Kathryn James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 126.
[24] James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 3.

of selfhood, temporal orientation, and religious and secular attitudes,"[25] it is also crucial to recognize that death inherently challenges these established boundaries.

Death, by its very nature, remains unknowable and categorically irreconcilable with the structured and predictably secure conception of life. As such, it demands a cultural narrative that attempts to grapple with its complexities and uncertainties. In fantastical literature, to which genre the majority of children's literature belongs, "death's role is to blur the boundaries between reality, dream, and the supernatural; to fracture domestic structures; and to separate child from adult, "normal" from "abnormal", disorder from order, self from other—in short, to undermine cultural stability."[26] This thesis seeks to explore the multifaceted way in which literature, particularly aimed at children, navigates these cultural narratives surrounding death, while also probing the ways in which it transgresses societal norms and expectations.

Closely intertwined with the taboo surrounding death is that of violence, particularly when it culminates in an untimely demise. The portrayal of murder stands as one of the most culturally transgressive actions regularly depicted in literature. Its pervasive presence and significant role in human culture have given rise to a complex system of societal taboos, narratives, and exceptions, encompassing both approved and despised contexts of violence. Within this framework, violent death holds particular relevance in children's literature, as it serves as a vehicle through which adolescents grapple with the concept of mortality. Through the depiction of such violent acts "adolescents learn about their own mortality by witnessing the death of someone who is not necessarily going gently into that good night."[27] By confronting such themes within the safe confines of literature, children are afforded the opportunity to contemplate the fragility of life and its moral implications in a controlled and mediated environment.

Another significant taboo related to violence is that of abuse, particularly when it is inflicted upon children. In the context of this thesis, the exploration of abuse as a theme relevant to young readers resides at a complex intersection of societal transgressions intertwined with violence, sexuality, and family dynamics.

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[25] James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 2.
[26] James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 113-114.
[27] Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 120.

Consequently, it serves as a pertinent subject for analysis, shedding light on the intricate interplay of these themes within children's literature.

The depiction of murderers, abusers, and their methods also warrants deeper analysis concerning the portrayal of socially undesirable actions and the motivations underlying them in children's literature. This examination becomes even more pertinent upon the recognition that, within the selected literature, murder and abusive behaviour are not solely relegated to antagonists but are also exhibited by protagonists. The inclusion of such morally ambiguous actions perpetrated by main characters raises questions about how this behaviour is framed within the narrative and what insights it offers into societal attitudes towards unlawful or morally abhorrent actions. By exploring the portrayal of protagonists engaged in such behaviour, alongside their villainous counterparts, this thesis seeks to unravel the complexities of violence related ambiguity within children's literature. It delves into the ways in which these narratives navigate the moral landscape, challenging readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that even those they may identify with can perpetrate acts of violence or abuse under certain conditions.

Considering the intersection between death and violence, this chapter will be subdivided into additional subchapters that explore various manifestations of these themes within the selected literature. Each subchapter will delve into distinct aspects of the topic, providing in-depth analysis and examination. The first subchapter will focus on depictions of death in children's literature, exploring how authors navigate the delicate balance of presenting mortality in a manner that is both sensitive and age-appropriate for young readers.

In this section I will examine the different approaches taken by authors to address death, including its portrayal as a natural part of life or a terrible transgression and its role in character development and narrative progression. The second subchapter will centre on murder and its perpetrators, delving into the portrayal of characters who commit acts of violence and the motivations behind their actions. The third subchapter will examine abuse in all its forms, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. I will explore the depiction of both perpetrators and victims of abuse in children's literature, shedding light on the ways in which authors navigate these sensitive topics and raise awareness of the impact of abuse on individuals and families.

2.1.1 In Death's Power

The representation of death in the selected sample of children's literature is characterized by its versatility and complexity, often defying easy categorization and encompassing contradictory aspects. In Barker's *The Books of Abarat*, death is portrayed as both an instrument of control and abuse, presenting a moral conundrum when viewed as a form of punishment, as well as a deeply personal loss of identity rather than a mere cessation of vital functions. In Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, death takes on various forms, ranging from an indiscriminate and sombre inevitability to a monstrous crime perpetrated by those who prey on the vulnerable. Similarly, in Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, death is depicted as more of an absurd accident devoid of malice or purpose, unless manipulated through human intervention. By exploring these diverse representations of death in children's literature, this chapter aims to unravel the complexities and nuances inherent in the treatment of mortality within the genre. Each work offers a unique perspective on death, challenging readers to confront their own beliefs and perceptions surrounding this universal aspect of human existence.

Barker's trilogy stands out from the other selected works due to its expansive exploration of death, which extends beyond the purely physical realm to encompass the death of identity. The series certainly does not shy away from depicting death in its corporeal form, both on a large and small scale, its third instalment, *The Absolute Midnight*, delves even into themes of mass genocide with haunting allusions to hellish and Holocaust imagery. Despite these depictions, the primary focus of the narrative lies in its broader examination of death, emphasizing the loss of identity and the existential implications of mortality.

The theme of death in the series is intricately tied to the contrasting perspectives of the series' protagonist, the jaded yet kind Candy Quackenbush, and one of its antagonists, the sorcerer Christopher Carrion, who is warped both mentally and physically. Despite their vastly different outlooks on life and death, these characters share a crucial commonality—a yearning for rebirth, a desire to escape their current circumstances and be granted another life.

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For both Candy and Carrion, their desire for rebirth is a form of transgression, an attempt to reach beyond the confines of their current life. Candy despises her childhood with an abusive father in rural Minnesota, a situation she summarizes as "boredom, violence and tears,"[28] and whole-heartedly welcomes the opportunity to leave her life behind for the unknown of Abarat. Carrion desires change and an opportunity for renewal, projected as a desire "to lay down the foundations of a New World and rebuild it in his image,"[29] a dream that throughout the series develops from megalomaniacal delusions to an ardent determination to defy his abusers and carve out a new life for himself.

Death or its symbolic surrogate serves as a pathway towards escape, development and self-realization, which is in alignment with the general tendency of children's literature to present "death as a significant event influencing the growth of the adolescent subject ... tends to have implications for how that subject formulates and perceives their own sense of (gendered and sexual) self."[30] This pattern of rebirth and transformation is evident in the journeys of both Candy and Carrion throughout the trilogy. Despite Carrion's age not qualifying him as a child, his emotional and interpersonal abilities are depicted as childish within the context of the story, placing him at an adolescent level in terms of character development. For Candy, the trials she faces serve as catalysts for her inner strength and self-assurance, as she learns to navigate the dangers of her world and fight for those she loves. A pivotal moment in her journey occurs when she survives a near-death experience in a willing procedure meant to separate her soul from a feminine entity that has shared her body since birth, such an act perceived as severely transgressive in the setting.

Similarly, Carrion undergoes a profound transformation following his near-death experience at the end of the first instalment in the trilogy. The following resurrection leads to a shift in his perspective, as he grapples with newfound complexities and uncertainties regarding matters of life and death. This contrasts sharply with his previous nihilism and indifference to human suffering, highlighting the extent to which his brush with mortality has altered his worldview.

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[28] Clive Barker, *Abarat: The First Book of Hours*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 98.
[29] Barker, *The First Book of Hours*, 93.
[30] James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 7.

In Barker's work, the encounter with death and mortality serves as a transformative rite of passage, granting insight and newfound power to those who overcome it. This motif aligns with a longstanding tradition in children's literature, wherein confronting one's mortality and accepting it without succumbing to nihilism is portrayed as a source of strength and wisdom. It could be said that when characters "overcome their tragic vulnerability and avert catastrophe, transforming the tragedy of their own mortality into at least some level of triumph, they experience a heightened awareness of what power they do and do not hold in their lives."[31]

In Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, the power associated with death and the liminal space it occupies is a central theme that underscores the protagonist's journey. Following the brutal murder of his family, the orphaned child finds refuge in the nearby graveyard, under the protection of its spectral inhabitants—a rare exception granted due to the pleas of the protagonist's recently deceased mother and the kindness of the local undead. Named Nobody, the protagonist is bestowed with a set of supernatural abilities known as the "Freedom of the Graveyard ... so the Graveyard is taking care of you. While you are here, you can see in the darkness. You can walk some of the ways that the living should not travel. The eyes of the living will slip from you."[32] These abilities are a direct consequence of Nobody's tragic upbringing and early encounter with death, illustrating the significant ways in which mortality shapes his identity and destiny.

The association of death with power is further exemplified in the book's antagonists, the occult organization known as the Jacks of All Trades, who adhere to a particularly morbid creed: "Magic you take from death. Something leaves the world, something else comes into it."[33] This villainous group serves as a stark contrast to Bod's own powers, underscoring the depiction of death as morally ambiguous and dependent on human intervention. Their portrayal highlights the notion that death itself is morally neutral; it is the human element that imbues it with ethical significance. The responsibility for the consequences of death lies not with the undead characters, who have already departed from the passions and conflicts of the living, but with the living individuals who wield power over life and death.

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[31] Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 121.
[32] Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 19.
[33] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 119.

The responsibility placed on the living in Gaiman's narrative is intricately linked to his depiction of life as potential—the inherent ability to effect change and influence both one's own life and the world in which we reside. This concept is articulated to Nobody by his spectral surrogate mother, who emphasizes the boundless possibilities that come with being alive: "You're alive, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you change the world, the world will change. Potential. Once you're dead, it's gone. Over."[34] In *The Graveyard Book*, death is not portrayed as the cessation of consciousness. Rather, the novel's pages are populated by undead characters who retain all the attributes associated with life but lack the power to influence the world and their own existence. To be dead in the narrative is to be rendered inconsequential, stripped of agency and the ability to effect change.

Among the selected literature, Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* takes the most nonchalant approach to death. While the demise of a human being is indeed a source of grief and puzzlement for its protagonists, it reflects their own struggle to come to terms with the sudden loss of their parents. Despite death's undeniable presence in the narrative and its portrayal as grim and difficult to contend with, it is not depicted as inherently dreadful. In the series, death is often treated with a sense of detachment, focusing more on the aftermath of loss rather than the act of dying itself. The most negative associations with death are found in cases of murder, where a life is abruptly cut short by the intent of others, highlighting the terrifying aspect of human monstrosity rather than of death itself. The central tragedy of the series—the demise of the Baudelaire parents in a fire—is approached with a mixture of disbelief, grief, and confusion, a "dark and curious feeling of falling that accompanies any great loss."[35]

In the series, death, particularly that of their parents, serves as a significant rite of passage for the trio of protagonists, following a pattern evident in previous selected literature. The close encounter with death functions as a form of initiation, a drastic change that demands new resourcefulness and resilience from the young protagonists. This portrayal aligns with the established tendency of death to offer a "metaphor for the grief of leaving childhood's naiveté behind and taking up the responsibility of

[34] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 80.
[35] Daniel Handler, *Book the Second: The Reptile Room*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 98.

caring for oneself psychologically if not physically."[36] The trio's journey is marked by numerous deadly threats, each requiring them to draw upon their inner strength and ingenuity to survive. Through their trials and tribulations, they undergo a transformative process, evolving from naive children into resilient and self-reliant individuals capable of facing life's challenges head-on.

In Handler's work, dealing with death is depicted as empowering for those who are able to move forward without being demoralized or morally weakened by the experience. Despite the protagonists often grappling with how to process their grief and emotions surrounding the loss of loved ones, they are consistently affected and perturbed by death, even that of their enemies. The narrative strongly admonishes the thought of murder and condemns those who would engage in it with no regard for the sanctity of life. This sentiment is articulated through the words of Klaus, the middle child of the protagonist trio: "It doesn't take courage to kill someone ... It takes a severe lack of moral stamina."[37] This assertion underscores the narrative's stance on the ethical implications of violence and the importance of maintaining moral integrity in the face of adversity.

In summary, a discernible pattern associated with the motif of death emerges upon analysis of the selected literature. Death itself is portrayed as ambiguous and devoid of agency that would make it inherently terrifying. It is the introduction of the human element, particularly the act of killing, that imbues death with negative connotations. Intent renders death untimely and unnatural, leading to the production of taboo that elicits fear and revulsion. Across the studied literature, there is a noticeable commonality in the portrayal of death as an unfathomable reality of human existence that cannot be controlled or evaded, thereby imbuing it with a sense of power that transgresses human conceptions. The encounter with death and the ability to prevail are depicted as rites of passage with significant influence on protagonists and antagonists alike. It could be concluded that "confrontation with death seems essential for adolescents to gain knowledge of death's power and of their own powerlessness over it."[38]

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[36] Karen Coats, "In the U-Bend with Moaning Myrtle: Thinking about Death in YA Literature," in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*, ed. W. Michelle Wang, Daniel K. Jernigan, and Neil Murphy, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 108.
[37] Daniel Handler, *Book the Eighth: The Hostile Hospital*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 220.
[38] Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 120.

2.1.2 The Many Faces of Violence

The depiction of violence is another taboo topic that has regained prominence in children's literature in recent decades. Its inclusion has sparked controversy among scholars and the general public, with concerns raised about the potential impact of depicted violence on young readers. It is worth noting that violence has long been a part of children's literature, appearing prominently in morality tales, adventure literature, and fairytales, often as a form of punishment. This double-standard in depiction of violence clearly points to the fact that "violent events are not simply so but are called violent because they bring together different concepts of social order. To regard certain practices as violent is never to see them just as they are. It is always to take up a position for or against them."[39]

The resurgence of violence in children's literature reflects the evolving landscape of literary themes and ongoing discussions about the boundaries of acceptability in storytelling for young audiences. Modern authors' inclination to incorporate once-taboo themes signifies a growing trust in the capabilities of child readers to comprehend and engage with complex topics that were previously deemed inaccessible. This increasing trust is manifested in children's texts through "an increasing confidence in the ability of young readers to decode the operations of violence and, thereby, to defuse its potential impact on them."[40] By including taboo themes, authors and publishers are acknowledging that young readers possess a level of maturity and understanding that enables them to navigate themes such as violence with critical awareness and emotional resilience.

I will focus on examining the role of violence, its impact on victims and perpetrators, within the selected literature, aiming to analyse potential patterns and approaches used in depicting this controversial motif. The discussion will delve into how violence shapes and influences the identities of both protagonists and antagonists,

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[39] Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, "Introduction: Representing Violence, or 'how the west was won'," in *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, (London: Routledge, 1989), 9.
[40] Mavis Reimer, "Introduction: Violence and Violent Children's Texts," in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 22, no. 3, (Fall 1997): 103.

with a particular focus on the moral judgments associated with different forms of aggression and violence.

A central theme to be explored is the notion that "violence is always about power and force in some sense."[41] This concept will guide the investigation into the contexts where violence is viewed as transgressive against culturally and socially established norms, as well as the justifications given for such violence. Additionally, attention will be given to how the associated taboos inform the perception of violence as a force capable of influencing the world for better or worse. By analysing the depiction of violence in the selected literature, we can gain insights into how authors navigate and portray this complex theme, addressing questions of morality, power dynamics, and societal norms. The examination will aim to uncover underlying messages and themes related to violence, its consequences, and the moral implications for both individuals and society at large.

The literature examined in this section includes Holly Black's *Spiderwick Chronicles*, focusing on the protagonist Jared Grace, a nine-year-old boy struggling with his own aggression. This analysis is complemented by Peter Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy, which portrays a protagonist grappling with violence as a fundamental aspect of his identity, as well as antagonists who embodies the epitome of violence associated with masculinity. These core works will be accompanied by depictions of violence from Neil Gaiman's and Clive Barker's works as well, offering a comprehensive exploration of violence in children's literature. By examining these diverse narratives, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how violence is portrayed, perceived, and addressed within the context of children's literature. The analysis will delve into the emotional and psychological complexities faced by young protagonists and their antagonists, highlighting the ways in which violence intersects with themes of identity, morality, and personal growth.

In *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, violence plays a significant role in the narrative, particularly in relation to one of its protagonists, Jared Grace. Jared is depicted as struggling to control his violent impulses following his parents' divorce, a theme that recurs throughout the series. The challenges Jared faces are often addressed through

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[41] Reimer, "Introduction: Violence and Violent Children's Texts," 103.

the lens of his mother's pleas, such as "you need to stop letting your anger control you,"[42] reflecting her concerns for his emotional well-being and the impact his outbursts have on the family. Jared's internal struggle with aggression is intricately linked to his family dynamics and his evolving sense of identity and masculinity. He perceives aggression as a coping mechanism and a means to address his personal challenges, often resorting to rage when confronted with emotional or physical obstacles. This disposition towards violence is mirrored in the series' antagonist, the cruel and violent ogre Mulgarath, who embodies stereotypical masculine traits associated with aggression and violence.

The dynamic between Jared and Mulgarath reveals itself as Mulgarath attempts to manipulate and isolate Jared by assuming the boy's appearance, effectively becoming a darker reflection of Jared's own self. This parallel underscores the negative aspects of Jared's personality, highlighting the destructive consequences of unchecked violence driven by a need for control and power. Mulgarath embodies traits of cruelty and control, his desires for "a world of flesh and blood and bone"[43] reflect carnal and domineering nature. This portrayal serves as a stark contrast to Jared's internal struggle with aggression and his journey towards self-awareness and restraint.

The conflict between Jared and Mulgarath represents a symbolic battle between the forces of unchecked violence and the quest for inner balance and control. It is through this conflict and Jared's eventual triumph over Mulgarath through self-restraint that he conquers his own propensity for violence. This tendency of protagonists to overcome their own aggression externalized as monstrous antagonists aligns with the broader implication observed in the selected literature, that "the challenge faced by children in learning constructive responses to aggression will determine their achievement of maturity."[44]

In *Chaos Walking*, the motif of violence plays a pivotal role in shaping one's identity, particularly in relation to masculinity. Todd Hewitt, the twelve-year-old protagonist of the trilogy, grapples with the belief that the ability to employ violence

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[42] Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, *The Field Guide*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 86.
[43] Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, *The Wrath of Mulgarath*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 109.
[44] Maureen Nimon, "Violence in Children's Literature Today," in *Dreams and Dynamics: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship*, ed. Sigrun Klara Hannesdottir, (Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse), 31.

and the capacity to kill are fundamental to his masculinity. He experiences inner turmoil, feeling that his inability to harm others is a weakness that diminishes his sense of manhood. Todd agonizes over the idea that he must be capable of violence to be considered an adult, stating, "whatever the weakness is in me that I can't kill a man even when he deserves it, it's got to change for me to be a man."[45] As the trilogy progresses, Todd undergoes a journey that challenges these beliefs. Through the guidance of his father figures and the female deuteragonist Viola, Todd begins to appreciate the value of empathy and compassion. He comes to realize that his initial reluctance to kill and his subsequent regret over resorting to violence are not signs of weakness but rather strengths that contribute to his identity.

Todd's journey is a testament to the reinvention of masculinity, built upon self-awareness, emotional maturity, and the courage to connect and communicate with others. His ability to embrace empathy and reflect on the consequences of violence allows him to forge a new understanding of what it means to be a man. Ultimately, Todd's story challenges traditional notions of masculinity rooted in aggression and dominance, offering a more nuanced and empathetic portrayal of male identity. In *Chaos Walking*, the antagonistic force opposing Todd's quest is embodied by the men of his native Prentisstown, particularly the warmongering and virulently misogynistic Mayor Prentiss. The entire community of Prentisstown, excluding Todd and his two surrogate fathers, exhibits violent tendencies and overtly fascistic inclinations. Their animosity is directed towards outsiders and particularly women, whom they view as inherently deceitful and inferior. As the narrative unfolds, a series of events escalates into an all-out war, highlighting themes of violence and mass abuse.

The core of the series revolves around a resolute denouncement of war, portraying it as a destructive force that engulfs and consumes everything in its path. The sentiment "war is a monster, ... War is the devil. It starts and it consumes and it grows and grows and grows ... And otherwise normal men become monsters, too,"[46] encapsulates the thematic approach across the series, mirrored and reflected across its main characters. The narrative delves deep into the consequences of unchecked

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[45] Patrick Ness, *Chaos Walking: The Complete Trilogy*, (Somerville, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2011), 207.
[46] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 299.

aggression and the transformation of individuals into monstrous versions of themselves under the influence of war.

In *Chaos Walking*, Mayor Prentiss embodies a stark contrast to the series' message and Todd's efforts to reject violence as a fundamental aspect of his identity. Prentiss is depicted as a monstrous figure whose beliefs directly oppose Todd's journey towards empathy and non-violence. This contrast is epitomized in Prentiss's statement, "it's war that makes us men in the first place. Until there's war, we are only children"[47] emphasizing his glorification of violence and conflict as essential markers of masculinity. Prentiss serves as a representation of the series' critique of war and aggression, highlighting the destructive consequences of such ideologies. His character signifies a broader theme within the selected literature, where human antagonists are portrayed as the true monsters, surpassing supernatural creatures in their capacity for cruelty and malice. This shift from supernatural monsters to monstrous humans as primary antagonists is a recurring theme in children's literature, emphasizing the idea that the real threats often come from within society itself. Even in stories where non-human entities like the ogre Mulgarath in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* or the Other Mother in *Coraline* are the antagonists, they mimic human behaviours and motivations, amplifying the terror they invoke.

The motif of the human monster is vividly portrayed in *The Graveyard Book* through the character of Jack, commonly referred to as the man Jack. This designation carries a sense of irony as Jack is introduced during the brutal murder of an entire family, sparing no one, not even the toddler protagonist. His character is depicted as intensely predatory and ruthless, often described with imagery evoking primal aggression, such as "He growled in the back of his throat, like a beast of prey, angry and frustrated."[48] Despite his involvement in crime and the occult, Jack remains fundamentally human. This portrayal of a murderous villain tainted with various taboo associations can be found in works by Barker and Handler, where villains exhibit a similar propensity for violence and cruelty despite their undeniable humanity.

This observation sheds light on the evolving conception of the monster in fiction, particularly within the realm of horror literature. While in the traditional

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[47] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 747.
[48] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 10.

understanding of horror, as suggested by Carrol, "the presence of monsters gives us a neat way of distinguishing it from terror, especially of the sort rooted in tales of abnormal psychologies,"[49] the reality of the monstrous motif in contemporary children's literature is far more nuanced. The challenge lies in categorizing the human antagonists found in the selected literature as mere criminals, deviants, or psychologically abnormal characters. These figures transcend simplistic labels and are instead portrayed as complex embodiments of taboo. They exhibit behaviours typically associated with inhuman monsters while retaining their human appearance, personalities, and relatable attributes such as ambitions, biases, and mundane mannerisms.

This complex interplay between the monstrous and human in character depiction reflects a broader trend in children's literature to problematize the traditional monster motif. By scrutinizing what constitutes monstrosity, authors implicitly question the boundaries of humanity as well. This exploration leads to a nuanced continuum of monstrosity, closely tied to the transgressive qualities of characters, which can be portrayed in both positive and negative lights or even oscillate between these extremes. "Maybe we're becoming villains after all,"[50] ponder the protagonists of *Unfortunate Events* after ensuring their survival through disguise and deceit, encapsulating the moral and thematic complexity with which young readers are provided. These narrative approaches blur the line between traditionally held taboos, the hero, and a monster, challenging readers to grapple with the ambiguity.

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[49] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 15.
[50] Handler, *The Hostile Hospital*, 241.

2.1.3 Abuse and its Depiction

The issue of abuse, particularly child abuse, is an especially taboo subject within literary discourse. Its portrayal often elicits discomfort and raises questions about its suitability in children's literature, with concerns that what is unsettling for an adult reader must be deemed inappropriate for a child. Despite these challenges, it is crucial to acknowledge the reality of abuse and the important "role that both fiction and nonfiction books can play in promoting a discussion of problems, including child abuse."[51]

While the depiction of abuse can be unsettling, it serves a vital purpose in raising awareness and fostering empathy and understanding among readers. By presenting accessible depictions of abuse in engaging literary works, authors aim to allow readers, especially young ones, to empathize with characters who experience abuse. This empathetic depiction validates the experiences of victims and, ideally, empowers readers to recognize abuse and take appropriate actions, such as seeking help or resisting abusive behaviours. Fortunately, in recent decades, literary fiction for young readers has approached the topic of abuse with renewed interest and sensitivity, with the issue "no longer considered a taboo subject for a young adult novel; even sexual abuse has at last broken that barrier."[52] This shift carries several important implications for children's literature and its authors.

One crucial consideration is how abuse will be depicted in a manner that is both respectful and informative while remaining palatable to the reader. Another aspect to explore is the characterization of abuse victims in a way that offers sufficient variety and relatability for the readership. Similarly, depicting abusers in realistic terms without being overly frightening or confusing to young readers is a delicate task. Authors must navigate the portrayal of perpetrators while avoiding stereotypes or sensationalism that could detract from the gravity of the subject matter. In my analysis of the selected literature, I aim to delve into these issues with a special focus on how characters in abusive relationships are depicted and treated throughout the narrative. I utilize the scholarly contributions of Kristy Lyn Berschman and Albertina Navarro

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[51] Kristy Lyn Berschman, "The Portrayal of Child Abuse in Young Adult Literature," MA diss., (University of Northern Iowa, 1985), 4.
[52] Berschman, " The Portrayal of Child Abuse in Young Adult Literature," 88.

Rios as theoretical pillars to bolster my assertions concerning the portrayal of abuse within children's literature.

The evolution of the depiction of abuse in children's literature is a topic of significant interest and scrutiny. In the past, any portrayal of abuse was often implied, and overt mentions of violence and especially sexual aspects were typically excluded from children's books. There has been a noticeable shift in recent years as authors and publishers seek to address these sensitive topics more directly. The trend observed clearly shows that "the abuse depicted in children's literature has changed in nature, with plot and character, becoming more bold and graphic. In the past the themes of incest and abuse were merely hinted at, whereas in the current literature these are central to the characters of the story."[53]

Despite this progression, there remains a delicate balance between providing a truthful depiction of abuse and ensuring that it is appropriate and engaging for young readers. Authors and creators must navigate this challenge carefully, taking into account the age and maturity of their audience while still conveying the gravity and impact of abuse in a meaningful way. This becomes apparent in the exploration of the widely varied depiction of abuse and abusers across the selected literature. The examination of abuse is particularly pertinent in works such as *The Books of Abarat* series, the *Chaos Walking* trilogy, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman. These publications delve into the significant impact of abuse on the protagonists and portray multiple abusers in significant antagonistic roles. Each of these works approaches the theme of abuse with distinct levels of realism, graphic content, and narrative depth and as such offers a relevant resource for analysis.

Exploring the depiction of abusive situations and the potential justifications within the selected literature is a critical aspect of understanding how authors navigate this sensitive topic in children's literature. One of the key areas of interest is how abusers are portrayed and how they perceive themselves within the narrative, considering the complexities and challenges inherent in depicting such taboo figures in literature for young readers. Authors face a delicate balance when portraying abusive characters. While the actions of abusers must be depicted as reprehensible and

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[53] Albertina Navarro Rios, "Child Abuse in Contemporary Children's Literature: A Critical Multicultural Analysis," EdD diss., (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2006), 22.

condemned within the narrative, oversimplifying or vilifying them can lead to unrealistic portrayals that fail to capture the nuanced reality of abusive individuals. Abusers can come from any background, relationship, or demographic, and they may possess a range of characteristics beyond the stereotypical villainous traits.

One of the challenges is avoiding the depiction of abusers as tied solely to certain stereotypes or groups, as this can create false associations in the minds of young readers and detract from understanding less obvious forms of abuse. Abusers in close family or with seemingly pleasant demeanours are examples of complexities that authors need to navigate authentically. In the selected literature, I will examine how authors handle these complexities and whether they present nuanced depictions of abusers that reflect the diverse and multifaceted nature of abusive behaviour. By analysing the ways in which abusive situations are depicted and potentially justified within the narratives, I aim to shed light on how authors grapple with portraying this challenging subject matter while remaining sensitive to the needs and understanding of their young readership.

Abusive parent figures are a prevalent theme that recurs throughout the selected literature, portraying a complex and impactful dynamic in the lives of the protagonists. These abusive roles often manifest through parent substitutes or figures who assume parental authority, whether perceived as such by the victim or self-imposed against the victim's wishes. Notable examples of such characters include Count Olaf from *Unfortunate Events*, William Quackenbush and Mater Motley in *Abarat*, the Other Mother in *Coraline*, and David Prentiss in *Chaos Walking*.

An important observation is the relatively equal representation of male and female parental abusers across the selected literature, each capable of inflicting comparable levels of cruelty and aggression upon their victims. Apart from the Other Mother, these characters are not portrayed as inherently supernatural beings but rather as human individuals with well-developed personalities, capabilities, and distinct qualities beyond their abusive tendencies. In terms of familial relationships, only William Quackenbush and Mater Motley are biologically related to their victims, highlighting a significant shift in the burden of abuse from blood relations to surrogate family figures.

The prevalent type of abusive characters across the selected literature leans towards patriarchal abusers, with a notable majority of male abusers fitting into this pattern. These characters often embody fatherly personas, using this guise to justify their authority and control over their victims. They may even extend this dominance beyond familial contexts, exerting influence in broader societal or hierarchical settings. One such example is Mayor Prentiss, who projects a strongly paternal attitude as part of his military leadership, often intertwined with strong fascist overtones. His authoritative demeanour and paternalistic approach contribute to his control over the community and his manipulation of the protagonist and other characters. William Quackenbush assumes a patriarchal role tied to a religious position of an alternative preacher, quickly becoming an extension of the abusive attitudes he inflicted upon his family.

After the three orphaned protagonists of *Unfortunate Events* witness the first signs of an abusive attitude from their new guardian, a supposed distant relative Count Olaf, they react with indignation and questions. In response to being confronted about his behaviour, Olaf simply states "I have become your father, and as your father I am not someone to be trifled with."[54] This response is delivered as self-evident by Olaf, and it is readily understood that he considers the children to be entirely subservient to his authority with no agency or autonomy of their own. The children's attempts to resist or negotiate are met with verbal abuse, deprivation of basic needs, and even physical violence.

The depiction of Count Olaf is especially horrifying as his abuse displays the most obvious sexual overtones of all the abusers in the selected literature. This tendency is expressed as a continuous sexual harassment of the oldest sister of the three siblings, the fourteen-year-old Violet. Evocative depictions of Olaf's behaviour towards Violet, such as "smiling eagerly down at her as if she were a brightly wrapped birthday present that he couldn't wait to rip open"[55] or "holding a knife under the table, rubbing the blade gently against Violet's knee for the entire meal"[56] leaves little doubt as to his intentions. The entire issue is spelled out for the reader when Olaf orchestrates a mock wedding with Violet in hopes to gain Baudelaire's fortune through a legal

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[54] Daniel Handler, *Book the First: The Bad Beginning*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 46.
[55] Daniel Handler, *Book the Third: The Wide Window*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 43.
[56] Handler, *The Reptile Room*, 63.

loophole, confiding in her: "You're such a lovely girl, after the marriage I wouldn't dispose of you like your brother and sister"[57]

Depictions of an abusive fatherhood can be viewed as fitting within the broader archetype of the dark father, a character type that transgresses societal norms associated with parental roles or distorts them into more unsettling versions. This archetype embodies traits such as possessiveness masquerading as protectiveness, cruelty portrayed as strength, and an authoritarian demeanour disguised as firm parenting. They frequently aim to indoctrinate their victims, conditioning them to comply with their authority and adopt their personal worldview. The dark father figure thus serves as both a subversion and a reflection of traditional ideals of fatherhood, highlighting the inherent ambiguities in portraying fathers as infallible guiding authorities with noble intentions.

In Barker's *Abarat* series, the portrayal of the abusive father evolves dramatically throughout the narrative. William Quackenbush is initially introduced as a recently unemployed alcoholic who mistreats his three children and wife as a maladaptive response to frustration and feelings of emasculation and social rejection. Following a supernatural encounter involving his eldest daughter Candy, he turns to religion, crafting a narrative that frames his personal failures as a prophetic journey towards becoming a preacher. This shift enables William to escalate his abusive behaviour beyond the confines of his home, extending it to encompass the entire community with heightened levels of cruelty and misogyny directed at his congregation. As the series progresses, his abusive fatherhood becomes intertwined with religious symbolism, culminating in him being depicted in a cult-like manner, such as being referred to in a following way: "The Father is Right. Always. He knows the Truth and He speaks it in words we understand. Accept His wisdom and beg His Forgiveness."[58]

A parallel pattern of patriarchal authority emerges in the character of David Prentiss, although in his case, religious influence is supplanted by political power. Among all the depicted abusers, Prentiss stands out as exceptionally manipulative and insidious, using moral ambiguity as a shield to justify his actions and portraying his

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[57] Handler, *The Bad Beginning*, 109.
[58] Clive Barker, *Abarat: Absolute Midnight*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 305.

numerous abuses as regrettable necessities borne out of circumstance. Prentiss exhibits paternalistic tendencies towards his victims, framing his abuse as an unpleasant yet necessary duty. For instance, after subjecting Todd to a brutal interrogation beating, he speaks to him in a manner that hints at this paternal attitude: "There will be time … for you to come to trust me. For you, perhaps, to come to even *like* me. To even think of me, one day, as a kind of father to you …"[59]

Female abusers adopt a comparable approach to their male counterparts, embodying the dark mother archetype. Despite certain parallels, notable distinctions exist in the portrayal of maternal abuse. Contrary to the notion of a nurturing and compassionate parent, dark mothers exhibit possessiveness and tend to view their victims as mere extensions of themselves. The child victim, in turn, often becomes a provider of different forms of support without regard for their individual needs or autonomy. Victims are frequently drawn into abusive relationships by relying on the dark mother figure as a source of validation and attention, which is disguised as genuine care. Any expression of doubt or resistance is met with severe criticism, as the victims are accused of being ungrateful and morally deficient, justifying further abuse.

In *Coraline*, the portrayal of an abusive mother takes on a more nuanced stance. Coraline's mother is depicted as consistently irate and emotionally distant, failing to provide the nurturing and personal connection Coraline desperately seeks. This form of abuse is downplayed in the novel, rationalized as a temporary consequence of her stressful work life and financial hardships. A much more sinister and disturbing depiction of abuse emerges through the character of the Other Mother, a supernatural entity which mimics Coraline's parents in appearance and behaviour. The Other Mother preys on vulnerable children by ensnaring them in deceptive realities, presenting idealized versions of their parents and homes, with Coraline becoming her latest victim.

Any facade of affection exhibited by the Other Mother proves to be conditional and manipulative, a realization that dawns on Coraline as the narrative progresses. What is striking is not the absence of love from the Other Mother's perspective, but rather the egocentric and controlling nature of that supposed affection, devoid of any regard for individual autonomy. Gaiman encapsulates this sentiment succinctly: "It

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[59] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 383.

was true: the other mother loved her. But she loved Coraline as a miser loves money, or a dragon loves its gold. In the other mother's button eyes, Coraline knew that she was a possession, nothing more."[60] The possessiveness and objectification of children as mere extensions of mother's identity and desires constitute a defining trait of the maternal abusers depicted. These characters rationalize and justify any degree of cruelty and suffering inflicted upon their victims by asserting an entitlement to treat their own offspring as they see fit. This distorted perspective extends to the extreme notion of viewing their children's lives as a debt owed to them, to be manipulated and controlled without regard for the children's well-being or autonomy.

The character of Mater Motley epitomizes the extreme embodiment of the dark mother archetype. Initially introduced as a grandmotherly figure advising and manipulating her grandson Christopher Carrion, it gradually becomes evident that Motley is the primary abuser in their relationship. What sets her depiction apart is her attire, a dress meticulously crafted from numerous rag dolls sewn together, each harbouring the trapped soul of one of her victims. Among these souls are her own children, denied the release of death and exploited for her own purposes. When confronted about the cruelty she inflicts on her own family, Motley responds: "They're family, after all. My flesh and blood. They wouldn't even have existed if I hadn't endured the gross befoulments of the womb."[61]

The portrayals of abusers in the chosen literature exhibit several shared characteristics, including their paternalistic demeanour, lack of regard for children as individuals, and the view of their victims as objects to be controlled. Despite these similarities, male and female abusers differ in their approaches and attitudes towards their victims. Male abusers typically blend their patriarchal mindset with other forms of authority, assuming the role of unwelcome mentors to their victims. In contrast, female abusers cultivate dependency and heavily emphasize gratitude, treating children as mere extensions of themselves rather than autonomous individuals.

The way in which victims respond to these diverse forms of abuse constitutes the second part of the current analysis and is equally crucial for young readers' understanding of abuse and their own relationship to it. Understanding how characters

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[60] Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 58.
[61] Barker, *Absolute Midnight*, 404.

in literature react to abuse provides valuable insights into the complexities of victimization, resilience, and the dynamics of power and control. By examining these reactions, young readers can develop a deeper comprehension of the impact of abuse on individuals and gain a greater awareness of the importance of empathy, support systems, and self-advocacy in facing such challenges.

The depiction of abuse victims holds significant importance for readers, as they ideally should empathize with and draw inspiration from these portrayals. Following this narrative framework, all protagonists and even certain antagonists ultimately triumph over their abusers and demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. The theme of perseverance and the capacity to endure challenges without compromising one's physical and moral integrity are central elements in the portrayal of abuse victims, ascribing to the notion children's books "need to have at their core literary characters who are themselves resilient and in the process of overcoming hardship."[62] By showcasing characters who exhibit resilience and determination, these narratives not only provide a sense of hope and empowerment but also serve to develop empathy and engagement among the readership.

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[62] Rios, "Child Abuse in Contemporary Children's Literature," 93.

2.2 Gender and Sex

The exploration of gender and sexuality in children's literature is often considered a highly sensitive and taboo subject, yet its depiction is pervasive and intrinsic to even the seemingly innocuous publications. The portrayal of family dynamics, a recurring theme throughout the selected literature, inherently serves as a statement about gender and sexuality, albeit within the confines of societal norms and the prevailing cultural context that shapes the literary work. As children's literature evolves and tackles increasingly complex themes, even once-unapproachable topics such as child sexuality and gender development become available to analysis.

Whatever moral or psychological concerns could be levered against the depiction of sexuality and gender development in children's literature, the fact remains that "Shielding children and children's literature from sexuality can never fully succeed: doing so may drive more blatantly graphic displays of sexuality underground, but sexuality cannot be quelled in a narrative in which a child's maturation is depicted."[63] This acknowledgment underscores the inevitability of sexual and gendered themes surfacing in narratives that explore the natural progression of a child's growth and maturation, a necessity for any narrative development. By navigating these topics with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, children's literature can contribute positively to young readers' understanding of themselves and the world around them.

In this chapter, my focus will centre on examining the portrayals of femininity, masculinity, and gender fluid identities within the chosen literature. For the context of this thesis, I adopt the definition of queerness by Tison Pugh "not as a synonym for homosexuality but as a descriptor of disruptions to prevailing cultural codes of sexual and gender normativity."[64] Using Pugh's framework, I aim to delve into the transgressive nature of gender and sexuality as presented in children's literature, highlighting the diverse expressions of these themes through a varied cast of characters. Moreover, the academic works provided by Perry Nodelman, Alba Alonso

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[63] Tison Pugh, *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children's Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 5.
[64] Pugh, *Queerness of Children's Literature*, 6.

Feijoo, Thomas W. Bean, Helen Harper, Merrion F. Fox, Zoe Jaques, and additional scholars will be relevant to this overarching chapter.

Of particular focus will be the protagonist characters and their antagonists, specifically those who actively grapple with their gender identity and sexuality. The way in which characters express their gender is a result of authors choices and the subliminal cultural standard which allows or forbids. "The focus on gender implies a hidden awareness of children as at least potentially sexual beings and suggests that the possibility that sexuality is at least part of the sublimated, hidden adult content of children's literature,"[65] therefore such gendered depictions can give us insights about how gender and sexuality is perceived and delivered to the child audience.

A compelling example of this dynamic can be found in the works of Patrick Ness, particularly in his protagonists Todd and Viola. Their journey is significantly intertwined with the theme of redefining gender roles and asserting their identities within a hostile environment that seeks to impose predefined gender norms upon them. One notable manipulative force in this narrative landscape is portrayed through the character of David Prentiss, a bellicose leader intent on reshaping masculinity to suit his military objectives. Prentiss works with elements of misogyny, fascism, and machismo as tools to assert control over his army and impose a rigid notion of masculinity that aligns with his authoritarian vision.

In the context of gender exploration in literature, Clive Barker's *Abarat* series serves as a rich source of multifaceted portrayals of femininity. Barker skilfully presents female characters across a spectrum of identities, from the protagonist Candy, who undergoes a journey of self-discovery and identity formation, to the antagonistic yet complex Mater Motley, whose abusive behaviour is intertwined with her feminine identity as a matronly figure opposing Candy's quest..

The intricate interplay between gender and sexuality will be further enriched through an exploration of the depictions found in the works of Black, Gaiman, and Handler. Of particular interest will be how their protagonists either embody or transgress traditional gender norms, and how these authors navigate the representation of antagonists in terms of sexuality and gender.

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[65] Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Hopkins Press, 2008), 176.

2.2.1 In Search of the New Masculine

The depiction of masculinity in children's literature presents a complex and often overlooked topic within gender studies. Unlike the equally important examination of feminine identities, expanding and redefining masculinity for young readers receives less academic attention. It is still frequently the case that the "figure of the boy is considered in children's literature as a subject-in-becoming, whose objective is to become a subject by moving from the dichotomy child to adult."[66] The transition from boyhood to manhood is often depicted as a series of heteronormative and gendered steps, influenced by cultural and temporal ideals of masculinity. This traditional depiction places pressure on male characters to conform to prescribed roles and behaviours associated with masculinity, such as courage, competitiveness, and self-control.

The depiction of boyhood in literature is viewed with scrutiny, with societal expectations demanding a performative rehearsal of masculine traits and activities. This performative aspect can be seen as a social construct that reinforces traditional gender roles and the notion that boys must adhere to specific behaviours to be deemed masculine. With the development of children's literature, instances where authors challenge these stereotypes and offer alternative representations of masculinity are becoming more common.

By examining how masculinity is depicted in children's literature and exploring alternative narratives that challenge traditional gender norms, we can foster critical thinking and promote healthier concepts of masculinity among young readers. This nuanced exploration is essential in creating a more inclusive and understanding society where individuals are free to express themselves authentically, capitalizing upon "the promise and possibility of challenging simplistic, rigid, and essentialized views of masculinity"[67] that some of these new works offer.

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[66] Alba Alonso Feijoo, "Masculinities in English Children's Literature from a Gender Perspective," MA diss., (University of Vigo, 2015), 127.
[67] Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper, "Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction," *Reading Psychology* 28, (February 2007): 14.

The narrative of *Chaos Walking* delves significantly into the themes of masculinity, particularly through the lens of its protagonist, Todd Hewitt, and the antagonist, David Prentiss. The dichotomy between Todd and Prentiss serves as a focal point for exploring the complexities of masculinity within the story. Todd's journey in the male-only community of Prentisstown, which has militaristic and fascistic undertones, highlights his struggle to navigate and redefine his own masculinity.

The societal expectations in Prentisstown revolve around loyalty, military prowess, and the capacity to kill, shaping a version of masculinity that emphasizes aggression and control. The deliberate discouragement of education, which is considered by the town authorities "detrimental to the discipline of our minds,"[68] and lack of exposure to external influences perpetuates a manufactured ignorance, reinforcing a narrow and rigid definition of masculinity. The authoritarian policies enforced by Prentiss and the complicity of figures like the local preacher Aaron further contribute to the suppression of individuality and intellectual growth. The notion that "smart boys make useless men"[69] underscores the systemic limitations imposed on boys and men within this society, inhibiting their potential for personal growth and self-discovery.

The absence of women in Prentisstown is a central theme that underscores the constructed nature of masculinity and the societal implications of misogyny. The town's history, marked by a presumed pandemic that wiped out women, sets the stage for a narrative steeped in patriarchal control and toxic masculinity. Todd's upbringing in this environment, primarily cared for by two surrogate fathers who are implied to be a gay couple, offers a unique perspective on gender roles and family dynamics. The town's culture actively promotes misogyny through both overt rhetoric from figures like Prentiss and his followers, as well as more subtle but pervasive stereotypes that simplify and dehumanize women as the unknown other.

At the onset of the series, as Todd nears his thirteenth birthday, he has never encountered a woman and his understanding of the opposite gender is limited to narrow stereotypes fed to him by the town elders. "Girls are small and polite and smiley. They wear dresses and their hair is long … They do all the inside-the-house

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[68] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 20.
[69] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 52.

chores, while boys do all the outside. They reach womanhood when they turn thirteen, just like boys reach manhood, and then they're women and they become wives,"[70] is the most that comes to Todd's mind when mentioning women. His focus is entirely on reaching adulthood, particularly the age of thirteen when boys are deemed men in Prentisstown, highlighting the pressure placed on individuals to conform to societal expectations of masculinity.

Todd's concept of masculinity in *Chaos Walking* is deeply intertwined with his most cherished possession, a hunting knife gifted to him on his birthday as "a present for a man."[71] This knife symbolizes the traditional expectations of masculinity in Prentisstown, where strength, aggression, and the ability to kill are highly valued traits. Todd's attachment to the knife reflects his desire to conform to these societal norms and prove himself as a man in the eyes of his community. As Todd delves deeper into the hidden history of Prentisstown, he uncovers a dark truth—the systematic murder of all women in the town, orchestrated by Mayor Prentiss shortly after Todd's birth. This revelation shatters Todd's perception of his own identity and forces him to confront the toxic and violent aspects of the masculinity idealized in his hometown.

The hunting knife, once a symbol of aspiration and adulthood, now becomes a stark reminder of the oppressive and destructive nature of masculinity in Prentisstown. Todd is faced with the challenge of redefining his concept of masculinity and finding alternative ways to express his identity without perpetuating the harmful ideologies of his community. The conflict surrounding masculinity and its complexities is further accentuated through the character of David Prentiss, who serves as Todd's primary adversary throughout the narrative.

Prentiss's character is depicted as an authoritarian abuser and a vehement misogynist who uses ideology and political pretences to justify his actions. He cloaks his oppressive nature behind the guise of a tough but rational politician, presenting his actions as necessary steps to restore order and traditional gender roles. He rationalizes his behaviour by claiming that "the borders between men and women had become blurred, and the reintroduction of those borders is a slow and painful process."[72] The rhetoric employed by Prentiss to justify his ideology falls short of masking the true

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[70] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 58.
[71] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 15.
[72] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 460.

nature of his oppressive beliefs and practices. This becomes evident through the actions of his followers and even his own, further underscored by the sentiments echoed by his son, Prentiss Junior: "Dogs is dogs and women turn out to be dogs, too … you keep the ones that're whores and you shoot the ones that're not."[73]

The portrayal of Prentiss and his men as manipulative and abusive figures underscores the broader themes of oppression and resistance within the narrative. Todd's conflict with Prentiss represents a larger struggle against oppressive systems that uphold rigid gender roles and limit individual autonomy based on gender identity. As worded to Todd in the narrative itself: "If they can turn you into the kind of man they want … If they can snuff out that part of you that's good, the part of you that won't kill, then they win … If they can do it to you, they can do it to anyone. And they win."[74]

The striving for a better masculine model is at the core of the narrative throughout the *Chaos Walking* trilogy. This identity search is portrayed as a difficult process with many setbacks for Todd, such as his simplistic and even patronizing perception of women or tendency for violence and abusive behaviour under pressure. All of these are addressed and worked on throughout the narrative with the help of Viola Eade, a girl coming with the second wave of colonizers to the planet. Significant influence is also Todd's fathers, especially Ben, the gentler and more emotionally aware of his parents.

One of the key challenges Todd faces is his simplistic and sometimes patronizing perception of women, reflecting the ingrained gender norms and biases of Prentisstown. Additionally, Todd's tendency towards violence and abusive behaviour under pressure highlights the toxic aspects of traditional masculinity that he grapples with throughout the story. These flaws and struggles are not ignored or glorified in the narrative. Instead, they are addressed and actively worked on as Todd navigates his evolving understanding of himself and his relationships.

Viola Eade, a pivotal character who joins Todd from the second wave of colonizers, plays a significant role in challenging Todd's preconceived notions and helping him confront his biases. Todd's fathers, particularly Ben, contribute to his

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[73] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 199.
[74] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 205.

growth by embodying a gentler and more emotionally aware masculinity. Ben's influence encourages Todd to embrace vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and introspection, qualities that are often undervalued in the notions of manhood Todd was taught.

An intriguing parallel to the protagonists' journey of developing masculinity can often be observed in the antagonists who oppose this search for identity, often embodying the worst aspects of masculinity. In Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, the protagonist's quest for self-discovery is imperilled by a sinister antagonist known as Jack, a mysterious murderer affiliated with the occult group called Jacks of All Trades. The presence of Jack and his association with an all-male organization, as highlighted in the narrative with the statement "there were no women ... They were all men,"[75] underscores a particular aspect of masculinity which they embody.

Jack's character exhibits traits that align with traditional and often toxic aspects of masculinity, highlighting themes related to predation, power, and identity. His calculating cruelty and inclination towards violence are portrayed as extensions of his identity, drawing parallels to the depiction of weapons as symbols of masculinity. The narrative emphasizes Jack's connection to his murder weapon, portraying it as an integral part of his identity. The description of his knife being treated with tenderness: "his knife was in his pocket, safe and dry inside its sheath, protected from the misery of the elements,"[76] reflects a sense of intimacy and reverence towards the weapon. This treatment of the knife not only underscores its significance as a tool of violence but also symbolizes Jack's reliance on it to assert control and instil fear.

The parallel drawn between Jack's weapon and Todd's knife in *Chaos Walking* further accentuates the motif of weapons as extensions of masculine identity within the context of the narrative. Both characters use their respective weapons as symbols of authority and agency, albeit in vastly different ways. Todd's knife, initially seen as a symbol of maturity and manhood, evolves throughout the story as he grapples with the complexities of violence and self-discovery and is ultimately discarded. On the other hand, Jack's knife represents a darker and more sinister manifestation of masculinity, intertwined with his penchant for cruelty and murder.

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[75] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 75.
[76] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 16.

In children's literature, both male protagonists and antagonists contribute to the exploration of masculinity, presenting a nuanced perspective on gender identity and societal expectations. Antagonists often embody a version of masculinity that needs to be challenged, redefined, or overcome, serving as a foil to the protagonist's journey of self-discovery. Throughout these narratives, protagonists grapple with their own flaws, insecurities, and struggles, offering a relatable and sympathetic portrayal for the reader. This portrayal humanizes the protagonist's experiences and emphasizes that the development of masculinity is not a straightforward or linear process but rather a complex and highly individualized journey with its share of setbacks and challenges.

The narrative often highlights the importance of supportive figures and role models in this journey of self-discovery. These supportive characters serve as lifelines and anchors for the protagonist, offering guidance, empathy, and understanding during their darkest moments. Whether it is a mentor, a friend, or a family member, these figures play a crucial role in shaping the protagonist's understanding of masculinity and providing a positive influence amidst adversity.

2.2.2 Rethinking the Role of Femininity

The representation of female characters in children's literature has been a longstanding issue of significant interest within the realm of gender studies. It is evident that many works of children's literature tend to background or even erase female characters from roles of significance, going as far as to suggest that "the underlying message conveyed to children is that women and girls occupy a less central role in society than do men or boys."[77] The absence or marginalization of female characters in children's literature is not just an artistic concern but also a social one. It reflects and reinforces broader societal attitudes and biases about gender roles and the value placed on women's contributions and experiences. By limiting the representation of female characters, literature can inadvertently contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and inequalities.

Addressing this deficiency in female representation is a crucial challenge for contemporary authors and creators of children's literature. As "gender stereotypes in literature prevent the fullness of female human potential from being realized by depriving girls of a range of strong, alternative role models"[78] it requires a concerted effort to create narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of human experiences, including diverse and well-developed female characters in roles that are central, meaningful, and empowered. A more inclusive approach to female representation in children's literature not only benefits young readers of all genders by providing a more accurate reflection of the world but also contributes to promoting empathy, self-perception, and respect for diverse perspectives and identities. By doing so, authors play a vital role in shaping a more equitable and inclusive literary landscape that fosters, or at least reflects, positive social change.

During my analysis of the selected literature, I discovered a notable and encouraging trend: there is a significant representation of female characters in roles that are central to the narrative. What's even more impressive is that even secondary characters exhibit psychological depth, initiative, and capabilities that extend beyond

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[77] Janice McCabe, Emily Fairchild, Liz Grauerholz, Bernice A. Pescosolido and Daniel Tope, "Gender in Twentieth-Century Children's Books: Patterns of Disparity in Titles and Central Characters," *Gender & Society* 25, no. 2, (April 2011): 201.

[78] Merrion F. Fox, "Men Who Weep, Boys Who Dance: The Gender Agenda between the Lines in Children's Literature," *Language Arts* 70, no. 2, (February 1993): 84.

traditional gender stereotypes. Across all the novels and series I examined, female characters are portrayed as either protagonists or deuteragonists, highlighting their importance and agency within the stories. One of the strengths I observed was that even characters with relatively smaller roles, such as Scarlett Perkins in *The Graveyard Book*, play significant and meaningful parts in the protagonists' journeys. This demonstrates a conscious effort by authors to give depth and relevance to female characters, recognizing their contributions and impact on the overall narrative.

When examining female protagonists in the selected literature, several common characteristics stand out prominently. These protagonists are frequently depicted as teenage girls with complex family backgrounds, showcasing resilience in the face of adversity. They exhibit traits such as being active, curious, and courageous, embodying a sense of agency and determination in their actions and decisions. One notable feature of these female protagonists is their emotional intelligence and perceptiveness regarding the behaviour and motives of other characters. This keen insight allows them to navigate challenging situations and relationships with a nuanced understanding, contributing to their development and capability.

A notable commonality among these female protagonists is their pragmatic and down-to-earth approach to interacting with male characters. Instead of idealizing male characters or conforming to traditional gender roles, these female protagonists engage with male characters as equals, fostering relationships built on mutual respect and collaboration. This portrayal challenges stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive and equitable representation of gender dynamics. An illustrative example of this grounded approach is seen in Candy's handling of a situation where a male character needs assistance with wound treatment that requires undressing. In response to his shyness, Candy reassures him with a matter-of-fact statement: "Don't worry, I've got brothers. It's no big deal to me. You're just another boy."[79] This response reflects her comfort and ease in treating male characters with the same level of respect and understanding as she would with anyone else.

In *Chaos Walking*, Viola travels and engages in challenges alongside the male protagonist Todd, sharing equal responsibilities and overcoming obstacles together. This partnership is characterized by mutual support and cooperation, highlighting their

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[79] Clive Barker, *Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 181.

shared humanity and capabilities irrespective of gender. The theme of equal treatment and collaboration extends to other literary works such as *Coraline* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, where female characters demonstrate comparable or even superior skills and resilience compared to their male counterparts. This pattern reinforces the notion that gender does not determine one's abilities or worth and emphasizes the importance of valuing individuals based on their character, skills, and actions rather than predefined gender roles.

The selected literature emphasizes the theme of defying gender stereotypes, particularly concerning female characters. Many of the female protagonists depicted in these works encounter various forms of sexism or abuse based on their gender, and they demonstrate active resistance against such mistreatment. An important aspect of these depictions is the portrayal of female characters as multidimensional individuals with diverse experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities. They are not limited to passive or stereotypical roles but are shown as capable, resourceful, and assertive individuals who can navigate complex challenges and advocate for themselves.

Mallory Grace from *The Spiderwick Chronicles* exemplifies a depiction that defies traditional gender stereotypes, particularly in her portrayal of traits typically associated with masculinity. She engages in competitive fencing, showcasing assertiveness and physical activity that might be considered traditionally masculine. Mallory is characterized as the most assertive and active among her siblings, displaying a range of emotions from anger to a tendency to conceal her feelings, which sometimes proves to be detrimental. Mallory's discomfort and vocal rejection of gender expectations are further highlighted in her interactions with a fairy who judges her appearance. When the fairy comments, "That's no girl ... Where's her dress?"[80] it serves as a direct challenge to Mallory's identity and how she is perceived based on societal expectations of femininity. Mallory herself later admits "I *hate* dresses,"[81] establishing this counter normative trend further.

Similar trend of female protagonists interested and excelling at what could be considered traditionally masculine pursuits can be observed in Handler's *Unfortunate Events*, namely the character of Violet Baudelaire, who is introduced to the reader as

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[80] Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, *Lucinda's Secret*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 73.
[81] Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, *The Ironwood Tree*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 75.

exceedingly technically minded with "a real knack for inventing and building strange devices, so her brain was often filled with images of pulleys, levers, and gears."[82] Violet is shown to be one of the most rational, inventive and competent people in a series featuring predominantly male characters. She assumes a leadership role within the sibling trio, exhibiting qualities of outspokenness and responsibility that guide their actions and decisions in often hard and dangerous circumstances.

Violet's disinterest in skills traditionally associated with femininity is underscored throughout the narrative. At one point, she remarks that her know-how extends to "how to repair those windows, and how to clean the chimney, because those sorts of things interest me. But I don't know how to cook anything except toast."[83] The depiction of female protagonists like Violet Baudelaire challenges and subverts traditional gender norms in a transgressive manner. By showcasing Violet's proficiency in "masculine" skills and her disinterest in activities typically associated with femininity, the narrative attempts to deconstruct traditional gender roles and expectations.

Pertinent to the issue of female representation is also the portrayal of women's groups and organizations in children's literature. These institutions often serve as platforms for showcasing female leadership and empowerment. Whether it is a group of female character banding together to overcome challenges or a formal organization led by women, these portrayals highlight the capabilities, strengths, and resilience of female characters in positions of authority and influence.

These depictions offer explorations of intergenerational relationships among women and provide opportunities to delve into the dynamics between generations, exploring themes of mentorship, support, and shared experiences. Such portrayals also allow for the exploration of personal connections and friendships among female characters. Through authentic and meaningful relationships, readers witness female characters as independent people whose lives and motives are not necessarily related or dependent upon male characters.

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[82] Handler, *The Bad Beginning*, 3.
[83] Handler, *The Bad Beginning*, 31.

During my analysis of female groups in the selected literature, an intriguing pattern emerged, albeit somewhat puzzling. While individual female characters are portrayed in diverse roles and with a range of personalities, female organizations are consistently depicted as either morally grey or outright antagonistic. This pattern raises questions about the underlying themes and messaging within these narratives. It suggests a dichotomy between the portrayal of individual female characters, who are often nuanced and multifaceted, and the depiction of female groups as collective entities, which tend to be portrayed in a more negative light. Three distinctive female factions emerge after analysis of the selected literature.

The Seamstresses and the Sisters of the Fantomaya can both be found in Barker's *Abarat* series, while the Healers feature prominently in Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy. The Seamstresses are a coven of witches, attendants and acolytes to Mater Motley, the series' main antagonist. From their very introduction they are depicted as unsettling, cultish and misandrist group working towards war and genocide. Few members of the group receive deeper characterization and if they do, it is often before their demise. Even these brief characterizations give an impression of a misfit group devoted to their cause for various reasons, the most relevant among them the perception that they are fighting against a world controlled by men that oppress them.

The creed of the group is expressed strongly across the series, amounting to a total rejection of the gendered roles assigned to them by broader society and animosity towards men in general. This sentiment is stated as such:

We have no love of love, or of children, or of making bread. We are not made to tend fires and rock cradles. We are the unforgiving something upon which despairing men will break their fragile heads. There is no making peace with them, no husbanding them. They must be beneath our heels or dead and buried beneath the earth upon which we walk.[84]

The expression of misandrist tendencies within the depicted women's groups adds a layer of complexity to the narratives, reflecting the intersection of abuse trauma and reactions to oppression. While the three groups vary in how negatively they are portrayed, they all exhibit resentment towards men to some extent, often in response to depicted oppression of women within the setting. Among the examined factions, the

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[84] Barker, *Days of Magic, Nights of War*, 63.

Seamstresses emerge as the most negatively depicted, embodying extremist views and actions that veer into misandry. Their portrayal raises questions about the nature of their grievances and the validity of their responses, particularly in the context of the broader societal dynamics depicted in the narratives.

It is noteworthy that the resentment expressed by these groups is rooted, at least in part, in experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by women within the narrative. This nuanced portrayal introduces complexities into the themes of abuse trauma and justifiable reactions to oppression, challenging readers to grapple with the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics and power structures. Nonetheless, the depiction of all three women's organizations as somewhat extremist poses challenges in terms of nuance and representation. While children can benefit from narratives that explore themes of women's empowerment and resilience, the lack of nuanced portrayals within these factions may limit the opportunities for readers to engage critically with such complex issues.

The Sisters of the Fantomaya offer a stark thematic and narrative contrast to the Seamstresses within the Abarat series. Positioned as a group of magically gifted women dedicated to preserving peace and preventing genocide, they serve as mentors and guardians to the protagonist, Candy Quackenbush. Unlike their more sinister counterparts, the Sisters embody wisdom and gentleness, guiding Candy's journey with subtlety and care. Despite their noble intentions, the Sisters' actions are not without controversy. Their decision to implant another living soul into Candy at her birth, under the guise of safeguarding Abarat's peace, raises ethical questions about the extent of their authority and the lengths they are willing to go to achieve their goals. This moral ambiguity is further compounded by Candy's confrontation with the Sisters, during which she challenges their self-righteousness and bias against men: "You were too busy accusing the *Bad Man* ..., the *woman* couldn't be the wicked one, right?"[85]

In Ness's *Chaos Walking* series, the female faction of Healers reflects the complex and conflicting dynamics of gender equality within the futuristic society portrayed in the narrative. The Healers, comprised primarily of highly skilled nurses and caregivers, emerge as a formidable force in the community, possessing medical

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[85] Barker, *Absolute Midnight*, 234.

knowledge and expertise that rival any medical practitioner. Despite the evident capabilities of female professionals within the Healers, men continue to dominate positions of authority and recognition within the medical field, with only male surgeons and doctors being acknowledged as such within the setting. This disparity raises questions about the underlying power structures and biases that govern the society depicted in the series.

The plight of the Healers takes on a heightened significance as misogyny and targeted oppression against women intensify. As the antagonist of the series, David Prentiss, exerts increasingly oppressive governance over the society, the Healers find themselves at the forefront of resistance against his regime. Facing escalating threats to their autonomy and well-being, the Healers mobilize to form a resistance movement aimed at challenging Prentiss's authoritarian rule. Their efforts are met with harsh reprisals from the authorities, who label their actions as terrorism. The depiction of the Healers' resistance as terrorism adds a layer of complexity to their portrayal, highlighting the fraught nature of their struggle against systemic oppression. Utilizing homemade explosives and sabotaging infrastructure, the guerilla forces formed by the Healers and their sympathizers employ tactics that are perceived as threatening to the society at large.

As with the other women's organizations depicted, elements of misandry and stringent gender dynamics emerge, complicating Healer's role as a force of resistance against an authoritarian regime. Despite their noble objectives, the group exhibits signs of bias and cruelty, stating that "men are creatures of war"[86] inherently predisposed to violence and aggression. While the Healers may be aligned with the cause of fighting against oppression, they are not immune to the pitfalls of prejudice and extremism. Their willingness to plant explosives among civilians and even their own members underscores the morally ambiguous nature of their tactics, highlighting the morally grey areas inherent in acts of resistance and revolution.

The recurrent depiction of female factions as controversial or corrupt within the examined literature raises questions about the underlying patterns and implications of such portrayals. While it is understandable that authors may seek to present nuanced explorations of power dynamics and moral ambiguity, the consistent framing of

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[86] Ness, *Chaos Walking*, 602.

female-led institutions in an ambiguous or negative light risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes about women's competence and intentions. By portraying all female-led organizations as controversial, biased, or corrupt, authors run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes that women are inherently incompetent or possess malicious agendas. This framing may inadvertently contribute to broader societal narratives that undermine women's empowerment.

In conclusion, the female characters portrayed in the analysed literature occupy a diverse array of roles that are integral to the narrative fabric. Often taking centre stage as protagonists, these characters are imbued with intricate and independent personalities, showcasing a range of strengths and flaws that transcend conventional gendered stereotypes. Through their portrayals, these female characters emerge as individuals with agency and complexity, challenging societal expectations and norms. They are not confined by traditional gender roles but rather embody multifaceted identities that reflect the richness and diversity of human experience.

The portrayal of female characters becomes increasingly nuanced and contentious when examining the depiction of women's organizations, which are often depicted as morally ambiguous at best and extremist at worst. While acknowledging that themes of power and political influence inherently invite scrutiny and moral ambiguity, the selected literary sample presents female-led organizations in morally ambiguous or outright villainous terms, with only individual members portrayed as heroic. This pattern may stem from an anti-institutional tendency within the selected literature, where organizations of any kind are depicted as prone to corruption or moral compromise. Nonetheless, it also inadvertently reinforces a troubling perception that institutions under female leadership are inherently flawed or prone to irrational decision-making.

2.2.3 The Carnivalesque and Gender Fluidity

The examination of gender and sexuality in the overarching chapter has predominantly focused on the traditionally established bimodal framework of masculine and feminine traits and behaviours. The current chapter takes a different approach by exploring instances and attitudes towards characters with ambiguous or fluid gender identities within the selected literature. In doing so, it delves into the realm of liminality and transgression, challenging traditional notions of gender and its societal implications. Such an inquiry inevitably confronts the boundaries of societal norms, exploring characters and narratives that defy conventional categorizations. These transgressive elements are particularly pronounced in the concept of the carnivalesque, a literary mode that permits taboo actions and expressions within designated and sanctioned contexts.

The carnivalesque mode, rooted in a rich literary tradition, has historically served as a socially accepted outlet for expressing attitudes and states considered undesirable or taboo in conventional settings. Within the contemporary literary landscape, this mode provides authors "with the means to play with unorthodox subject matter within a safe framework"[87] in a manner that is both palatable to a broader audience and conducive to the exploration of novel concepts.

Central to the carnivalesque mode is its ability to blur boundaries across a spectrum of fundamental topics, with gender being just one among many. Through this lens, the very notion of what it means to be human, animate or inanimate, living or dead, is called into question, challenging the seemingly solid foundations of cultural perception. Within the carnivalesque space, traditional norms and conventions are subverted, producing narratives that "offer potentially radical destabilizations of hierarchies of being … while at the same time often containing that very subversion in ways that reinforce hegemonic codes of human dominion."[88] This tendency of the carnivalesque to advocate for traditional structures while seemingly subverting them will be of further interest in this chapter.

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[87] James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 146.
[88] Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

Neil Gaiman's work provides a compelling example of the carnivalesque mode, particularly in his exploration of undeath and its intersection with gender. Within his narratives, Gaiman's portrayal of ghosts and revenants challenges traditional norms while simultaneously reinforcing them over the long term. Gaiman's characters existing in a state of undeath are often remarkably life-like and personable despite their supernatural status. In spite of their presentation, these beings are acutely aware of their separation from the living, viewing themselves as a distinct class of beings with no potential for growth or change. While they may still identify as human, their existence is marked by stagnation and a sense of detachment from the living world.

In *The Graveyard Book*, the carnivalesque elements are vividly showcased through the portrayal of undead characters, particularly during the Dance Macabre. This event, where "they took hands, the living with the dead, and they began to dance,"[89] serves as a striking example of the merging of seemingly exclusive categories, such as life and death. During the Dance Macabre, traditional boundaries between genders and ages are dissolved as dancers create pairs regardless of these distinctions. Partners change frequently, leading to a fluid and ever-changing rhythm of the occasion. This breaking down of barriers allows for a temporary liberation from societal norms and expectations, creating a space where individuals can engage freely with one another without the constraints of traditional roles or identities.

Some of Gaiman's spectres offer intriguing insights into gender identity, highlighting the detachment they feel from their own existence and physicality, which leads to a newfound perspective on gender. A poignant example occurs in *Coraline*, when the titular protagonist encounters a child ghost and expresses uncertainty about their gender. The ghost reflects on this question, recalling their own experience: "When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled … But now that you ask, it does seem to me that one day they took my skirts and gave me britches and cut my hair."[90] Clearly aware of the cultural ramifications of gender, the ghost decides after a moment of thought to present as a boy to Coraline, even though his fellow spectres

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[89] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 71.
[90] Gaiman, *Coraline*, 48.

express their disinterest at the topic, simply stating that "tain't something we give a mind to."[91]

In Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, there is a notable portrayal of a character with an ambiguous gender identity, which serves as a curious instance of reinforcing traditional taboos about gender fluidity. This character is ridiculed, demonized, and even evokes terror in the trio of protagonists, not due to their behaviour or antagonistic role, but simply because of their gender ambiguity. Throughout the narrative, the narrator and characters express fear and disgust towards the character solely based on their appearance and identity.

The reader can learn that "what frightened Violet was that you couldn't tell if this person was a man or a woman,"[92] and be reminded of how confusing and frightening it is not to be sure "whether to add 'sir' or 'madam.'"[93] The description provided by the narrator does no favours to the representation, seemingly content to depict the character as a hulking monstrosity barely capable of speech. Protagonists of the series demonstrate a stubborn inability to comprehend or accept gender ambiguity, at one point running away from the character in question, screaming "She's awake! … He's awake! It's awake!"[94]

The selected literature exhibits a duality in its treatment of gender, both challenging and reinforcing traditional binary norms. Characters and situations existing in liminal spaces offer opportunities for exploration of gender fluidity, as boundaries and taboos are more malleable in such contexts. These instances often align with the carnivalesque mode, which permits boundary-pushing within socially sanctioned scenarios. Gender fluid characters in these narratives frequently inhabit liminal existences, depicted as beings that are not entirely human or are dehumanized in some way. These portrayals prompt reflection on societal attitudes towards gender ambiguity and fluidity. While the depiction may be ambiguous at times, the literature under examination is unafraid to interrogate and engage with the concept of gender fluidity, presenting it for consideration by young readers.

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[91] Gaiman, *Coraline,* 48.
[92] Daniel Handler, *The Wide Window*, 134.
[93] Daniel Handler, *The Wide Window*, 140.
[94] Daniel Handler, *The Wide Window*, 139.

2.3 Family and Friends

The depiction of family in literature, while often upheld as a sacrosanct institution, also serves as a platform for exploring the complexities and ambiguities inherent in familial relationships. Traditional standards dictate expectations between partners, parents and children, and other family members, with deviations from these norms viewed with varying degrees of taboo. Flagrant transgressions, such as domestic abuse or incest, are almost universally condemned in literary depictions, reflecting societal attitudes.

Despite the clear ramification of familial taboos, the selected literature also reveals the ambiguity surrounding the precise boundaries of what constitutes family and related relationships. The ambiguity inherent to literary depictions makes obvious that "the definition of family cannot be a fixed one, for families are fluid; they vary considerably in their make-up and in their traditions, and they are always culturally specific."[95] This lack of firm definition invites exploration and introspection, challenging readers to consider the fluidity and complexity of familial bonds beyond conventional norms. The objective of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of families in the chosen literature, drawing upon the research conducted by Ann Alston and her extensive exploration of the motif of family within children's literature throughout history.

Children's literature serves as a fertile ground for exploring familial themes, offering a portrayal of the idealized family structure alongside deviations from traditional models. While "adult literature tends to celebrate the individual, children's literature is steeped in family matters,"[96] reflecting the formative role that family plays in a child's life. These narratives not only reinforce the conventional family ideal but also present alternative depictions of family structures. From single-parent households and same-sex parents to communal child-rearing arrangements and chosen families, the literature under examination offers a diverse spectrum of family representations that challenge normative assumptions.

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[95] Ann Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7.
[96] Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, 8.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, family takes centre stage, yet traditional nuclear families are notably absent from the narrative's forefront. The orphaned Baudelaire siblings serve as the protagonists, and while their deceased parents are pivotal to the story's backdrop, they remain more like cherished memories than fully developed characters. Instead, the series predominantly revolves around the siblings' interactions with a series of eccentric guardians, some of whom are distant relatives. These guardians, far from embodying traditional parental figures, are depicted as ill-equipped to meet the material and emotional needs of the orphaned children.

The series' primary antagonist, Count Olaf, serves as the worst of the guardians the Baudelaire siblings encounter. Initially posing as a fatherly figure, Olaf abuses his position and schemes to seize the Baudelaire fortune. After losing guardianship, he continues to stalk and harass the siblings in increasingly dangerous ways, taking advantage of their subsequent guardians' naivety and the overall neglectful attitude of the adults around them. Olaf's predatory tendencies towards children represents a stark subversion of the parental figure. His abusive and exploitative behaviour towards the Baudelaire siblings occurs under the neglectful eyes of other adults in the series. This portrayal calls into question societal attitudes towards family, highlighting a disturbing prioritization of privacy and household autonomy over the welfare of children.

The series depicts a range of guardians, each with serious flaws including self-absorption, neglectful attitude, cowardice, and a dismissive stance towards the concerns of children. This is depicted as the fatal flaw of the adult world: a refusal to respect and seriously consider children's pleas for help. Throughout the series, the Baudelaire siblings often find themselves in perilous situations, pleading for assistance from the adults around them, only to be met with dismissal or indifference. This negligence creates opportunities for abusers like Count Olaf to harm children without consequence.

The final attitude of the series towards family is mixed. While the nuclear model of the Baudelaire parents is portrayed as idyllic, it remains distant and perhaps unattainable. Adoption, on the other hand, is depicted in a severely negative light. The series offers a consistently positive depiction of family only through the sibling bond among the trio of protagonists, providing them with solace and support in the darkest of times.

In Neil Gaiman's works for children, positive depictions of a nuclear family are rare, if not entirely absent. Closest would be the portrayal of Coraline's somewhat neglectful parents, which offers a rather disillusioned picture of traditional family dynamics. Instead, the author explores alternative family structures in his narratives, providing the reader with a set of alternatives which are depicted mostly positively.

In *The Graveyard Book*, we encounter a single mother household as well as a community of ghosts that engages in communal child-rearing. When the protagonist of the novel, merely a toddler at the time, finds his way into a nearby graveyard after the brutal murder of his entire family he is adopted by its spectral denizens. It is decided that "it is going to take more than just a couple of good-hearted souls to raise this child. It will ... take a graveyard."[97]

Such alternative family structures are depicted with their unique challenges and peculiarities, but they are never portrayed outright negatively. Nobody Owens, the protagonist who is raised by the denizens of the graveyard, grows up to be a kind, thoughtful, and resourceful young man with a strong moral compass. Despite his unfamiliarity with the world of the living, his upbringing among the ghosts of the graveyard serves to provide him with perspective rather than acting as a handicap. Through Nobody's character development, Gaiman illustrates the potential for positive growth and resilience within alternative family environments.

In his works, Gaiman challenges conventional notions of family and explores the diverse forms that familial relationships can take. While conventional families may be viewed with a degree of scepticism, alternative family structures are portrayed as valid and beneficial, each bringing its own set of challenges and advantages. This trend mirrors similar tendencies found in other works of children's literature, such as Holly Black's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* and Clive Barker's *Abarat* series. These alternative family models often incorporate an element of choice, featuring companions and friends who supplant or replace biological relations. Chosen families emerge as the most prominent alternative to a more traditional model and can be found in all examples of the selected literature.

In *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, the theme of family spans generations and consistently proves to be both a source of struggle and difficulty, as well as providing

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[97] Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 12.

support and a sense of maturity through its trials. The Grace siblings, who serve as the protagonists, are all impacted by their recently divorced family and the challenges that arise from living in a single-mother household. These difficulties are further reflected in the past struggles of their ancestor Arthur Spiderwick and his family. There is no perfect family depicted in the series, but despite the numerous challenges the three Grace siblings find support and strength between each other, reflecting the sibling dynamic already encountered in *Unfortunate Events*.

Traditional family structures are re-examined and questioned, with this process best embodied in the depiction of Arthur Spiderwick. At the start, he is portrayed as a dignified patriarch and the protagonists' ancestor, gradually transforming into a more nuanced and controversial figure throughout the pentalogy. Reflecting upon the portrait of Spiderwick, the reader is provided with this depiction later in the series: "He didn't even look nice to Jared anymore. The Arthur in the painting was thin-lipped with a crease between his brows that Jared now figured was annoyance. He was probably thinking about leaving his family even then."[98]

Such developments of an image perceived as enigmatic and dignified at the beginning mirrors Jared's disillusionment with his own father and the idealized notion of a nuclear family lost through divorce. Even if a certain amount of resolution and acceptance comes from later meetings with Spiderwick himself, kept alive by magical means, the traditional family model loses its lustre throughout the series. Alternatives provided by Jared's single-mother household, the relationship with his siblings, and the wider community of fairies they come to trust and understand are depicted as fully capable of replacing and providing the function of a more conventional family. This development challenges the traditional family structure and highlights the resilience and adaptability of chosen families and alternative support networks.

In Barker's *Abarat* series, the conventional family is portrayed as a site of tragedy and abuse, rarely depicted as a positive force in the lives of characters. Both protagonists and antagonists are subjected to abuse by their relatives, deconstructing any notion of unimpeachable family relationships. Friends and companions emerge as a viable alternative to the often oppressive family environment, serving as a support network and source of comfort for characters dealing with experiences of domestic

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[98] Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black, *Lucinda's Secret*, 56.

abuse. This depiction challenges traditional notions of family as a safe haven, while offering an alternative in the form of chosen relationships and found families.

The portrayal of marriage within the series reflects a pervasive scepticism towards the institution, as the majority of characters identified as married face significant challenges. Instances of characters feeling constrained, deceived, or subjected to abuse within their marriages are prevalent throughout the narrative. Despite this critical perspective on marriage, the series does not extend this scepticism to romantic relationships in general. Numerous depictions of loving unions and relationships can be found within the narrative, suggesting that while marriage may be portrayed sceptically, the concept of romantic love remains valued and celebrated within the series.

The comprehensive examination of family depictions in the selected literature reveals a notable inclination towards alternative family structures, juxtaposed with critical portrayals of conventional ones, particularly the nuclear family. This inclination may be attributed to the sensitive exploration of topics such as domestic abuse, which intersects with the motif of family and its representations. Nevertheless, it is discernible that alternative family models are presented in a positive light, albeit with accompanying challenges and obstacles that characters must navigate.

Conclusion

The analysis of children's literature through the lens of horror reveals a rich tapestry of themes and motifs that extend far beyond mere entertainment or instruction. The deliberate infusion of horror motifs serves as a vehicle for challenging societal norms and exploring taboo subjects in a manner that both captivates and connects with young readers. Through the selected works of Clive Barker, Daniel Handler, Holly Black, Neil Gaiman, and Patrick Ness, this thesis has explored the ways in which children's literature navigates themes of death, violence, gender, sex and family, presenting complex characters and narratives that provoke critical reflection.

The exploration of death and violence within the selected literature has underscored the transgressive nature inherent in these themes, compelling readers to confront their own mortality and grapple with ethical considerations surrounding violence. These confrontations emerge as rites of passage, endowing characters—and by extension, readers—with a heightened sense of empowerment as they navigate these narrative journeys. The portrayal of violence then emerges as a multifaceted intersection, delving into issues of masculinity, agency, and abuse. The depiction of abuse and its perpetrators poses a significant challenge to both authors and readers alike, as this crucial topic demands a delicate balance between naturalistic portrayal and accessibility for audiences. By portraying abusers as embodiments of taboo subjects while retaining their humanity, the literature complicates traditional notions of good and evil, compelling readers to reassess simplistic categorizations and develop deeper understanding of this challenging topic.

Gender and sex emerge as rich and multifaceted motifs within the realm of children's literature. Characters and situations in the examined works challenge binary norms, embracing the fluidity of gender identities. Masculinity is depicted as diverse, breaking away from traditional models and presenting a spectrum of examples through protagonists and antagonists alike. Central to many narratives under examination is the struggle for the reinvention of masculinity, shedding light on the need to find alternatives to the often glorified traits of aggression, control, and cruelty.

Similarly, the portrayal of female characters and organizations offers a nuanced perspective that encourages readers to interrogate traditional gender roles and power dynamics. There is a discernible tendency towards depicting assertive and capable female protagonists and side characters, challenging the passive roles that female characters have often been relegated to in the past. The depiction of women's organizations emerges as a particularly contentious aspect of gender-related portrayals within the literature. This may be intertwined with the broader anti-institutional tendency prevalent in the selected works, raising questions about the portrayal of female-led institutions and their alignment with societal norms and expectations. The entire conception of gender is further questioned through the conception of carnivalesque and the adjacent liminality which allows for transgression of traditional gender boundaries.

The depiction of family structures in the selected literature showcases a diversity of models, often juxtaposing conventional nuclear families with alternative structures. This exploration is deeply intertwined with themes of abuse and resilience, offering young readers insights into the complexities of familial relationships and the possibility of alternative support systems. One notable aspect is the depiction of sibling support as a viable alternative to traditional family structures, highlighting the bonds forged between siblings as sources of strength and solidarity. Additionally, the literature offers a pervasive and positive portrayal of found families, emphasizing the capacity for individuals to create meaningful connections outside of biological ties.

The concept of the carnivalesque emerges as a prevalent aspect of horror in children's literature, offering a liminal space conducive to both subversive exploration and the reinforcement of societal taboos. By relegating such subversion to the realm of the bizarre and unnatural, the carnivalesque simultaneously invites readers to confront societal norms while containing these challenges within a fantastical framework. While carnivalesque spaces may seem self-contained, the insights gleaned from the self-explorations they afford transcend the confines of the fantastical, retaining relevance upon re-entry into the everyday reality. This presents a potential benefit to both the characters inhabiting the narrative and the readers immersed in carnivalesque literature.

Young readers are not shielded from relevant issues surrounding taboo topics such as gender, death, or abuse; instead, they are exposed to them through captivating and nuanced depictions intrinsic to horror literature's fascination with the controversial, lurid, and macabre. In children's fiction of the 21st century, there is a departure from the historical tendency of horror to reinforce societal taboos by casting them in monstrous and aberrant creatures. The bizarre and the peculiar is often portrayed with a positive spin and understanding, while villainous elements are closely linked to ordinary and all-too-human horrors of the day-to-day. Within this literary landscape, conventional boundaries dissolve, granting the opportunity to peel away the seemingly immutable realities of one's life and society. Such awe-inspiring revelations align with the best traditions of horror literature, encouraging readers to question and explore beyond the comfortable confines of the familiar.

Resumé

Analýza dětské literatury skrze prizma hororu odhaluje bohatou mozaiku témat a motivů, které svou povahou přesahují pouhou zábavu nebo vzdělávání. Záměrné zapojení hororových motivů slouží jako prostředek pro subverzi společenských norem a zkoumání tabuizovaných témat způsobem, který zaujme a osloví mladé čtenáře.

Zkoumání smrti a násilí ve vybrané literatuře zdůraznilo transgresivní povahu těchto témat, nutící čtenáře, aby se potýkali se svou vlastní smrtelností a etickými úvahami ohledně násilí. Tyto konfrontace fungují jako přechodové rituály, které postavám - a tím i čtenářům - dodávají pocit síly a emancipace. Zobrazováním násilníků jako ztělesnění tabuizovaných témat a zároveň zachováním jejich lidskosti zkoumaná literatura komplikuje tradiční představy o dobru a zlu. Nutí tak čtenáře, aby přehodnotili jednoduché kategorie a rozvinuli hlubší porozumění této náročné problematice.

Gender a sexualita vystupují jako bohaté a mnohostranné motivy v rámci dětské literatury. Maskulinita je zobrazena jako rozmanitá, odklání se od tradičních modelů a poskytuje spektrum příkladů skrze protagonisty i antagonisty. Podobně i zobrazení ženských postav a organizací nabízí vhled do problematiky podněcující čtenáře ke zkoumání tradičních genderových rolí a mocenských dynamik. Celá podstata genderu je dále zkoumána skrze koncepci karnevalového módu a souvisejícího liminálního prostoru, který umožňuje překročení tradičních genderových kategorií.

Zobrazení rodinných struktur ve vybrané literatuře ukazuje rozmanitost modelů, často konfrontující konvenční nukleární rodiny s alternativními strukturami. Toto zkoumání je hluboce provázáno s tématy zneužívání a houževnatosti, nabízející mladým čtenářům pohledy do složitostí rodinných vztahů a možnosti alternativních podpůrných systémů.

Ve výsledku tato práce zdůraznila mnohostrannou povahu hororu v dětské literatuře, demonstrující jeho schopnost řešit vážná témata a komunikovat je mladým čtenářům. Tím, že se zabývají tabuizovanými tématy a kritikou společenských norem, autoři dětské hororové literatury přispívají k rozvoji kritického myšlení a empatie u svých čtenářů, přičemž obohacují literaturu pro nadcházející generace.

Annotation

This master's thesis aims to analyse a selection of 21st century children's literature written in English by five different authors – Clive Barker's *The Books of Abarat*, Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Holly Black's *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* together with *The Graveyard Book* and Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking*. It focuses on significant horror motifs in the examined works and their relation to three categories of foundational taboos – Death and violence, family and friends, sex and gender. Development of these categories in literary history will be put into perspective and inspected for current trends in children's horror. The thesis sets out to prove a connection between the three taboos and examined horror motifs, categorize them and analyse their manifestations in children's literature of the 21st century.

Key words

taboo, horror, children's literature, death, violence, abuse, sex, gender, gender roles, femininity, masculinity, gender fluidity, carnivalesque, subversion, liminality

Anotace

Tato diplomová práce si klade za cíl analyzovat výběr dětské literatury 21. století psané v angličtině pěti různými autory – *Abarat* Clivea Barkera, *Řadu nešťastných příhod* Daniela Handlera, *Kroniku rodu Spiderwicků* Holly Blackové, *Koralinu* spolu s *Knihou hřbitova* Neila Gaimana a *Nespoutaný chaos* Patricka Nesse. Zaměřuje se na významné hororové motivy v zkoumaných dílech a jejich vztah ke třem tabuizovaným kategoriím - Smrti a násilí, rodině a přátelům, pohlaví a genderu. Vývoj těchto kategorií v rámci literární historie bude postaven do perspektivy a zkoumán pro současné trendy v hororové literature pro dětského čtenáře. Cílem práce je pak prokázat spojení mezi zmíněnými tabu a zkoumanými hororovými motivy, kategorizovat je a analyzovat jejich projevy v dětské literatuře 21. století.

Klíčová slova

tabu, horror, dětská literatura, smrt, násilí, zneužívání, pohlaví, gender, genderové role, femininita, maskulinita, genderfluidita, karnevalový mód, subverze, liminalita

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