

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

THE GOOD SEED

**CHILDHOOD AND THE GOTHIC IN
CHILDREN'S FICTION (1990s – Early 2000s)**

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INTRODUCTION: DEFINING CHILDREN'S GOTHIC FICTION

Harry's eyes darted downwards, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, greyish, slimy-looking and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water ...

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

This dissertation sets out to examine how children's authors of the 1990s and early 2000s incorporate Gothic elements in their stories about growth and maturation to depict childhood as a time of fear and anxiety, apparently challenging pastoral and romanticized views of childhood. Whereas both children's literature and the Gothic genre have already been extensively studied, the intersection between both genres has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention. This is hardly surprising, for although old nursery rhymes and bedtime stories were already rife with ghouls and other monsters, not until the 1990s has the Gothic, as we understand it, become a dominant mode in literature for older children. As Jackson, Coats and McGillis claim, "many contemporary texts for children are resolutely Gothic in form and substance"; i.e., they "invoke and parody specifically Victorian settings", deal with "common thematics of double consciousness, metafiction, and moral disintegration", and include different forms of humor, "from the exaggerated grotesqueries of the villains to the subtle play of parody that has been at the heart of Gothic since its inception" (2008: 4). Villains that attempt to defy the laws of nature, dark secrets kept in old libraries, Gothic castles, graveyards and haunted houses are all now part of children's books.

In the subsequent chapters, I will look into four of the most celebrated and popular works of children's fiction published in English during the 1990s and early 2000s which make extensive use of Gothic elements: namely, J.K. Rowling's *Harry*

Potter series (1997-2007), Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002), Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000) and Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* series (1999-2006). I selected these four works both for their shared and their differing features. In the first place, these are all novels that have been praised by both readers and critics, and are aimed primarily at older children: Neil Gaiman's novels for children, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and the first four *Harry Potter* books are generally classified as aimed at children aged eight and up, whereas Pullman's trilogy and the last three *Harry Potter* books usually fall under the twelve and up category (Eccleshare, 2009). Furthermore, all these novels feature preadolescent protagonists that strive to grow up in Gothic environments, and whose maturation processes are paralleled by their struggle to defeat the villains that hunt them. On the other hand, the four works differ from each other in the way they borrow from the Gothic genre, which allows me to explore the use of different Gothic themes and devices in children's fiction.

Although my dissertation will focus on these four works of fiction, there are many other novels and series written in the 1990s and early 2000s that incorporate Gothic elements, and I will keep referring to them throughout my discussion. Novels such as Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2003-2009), Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series (2005-2009), Diana Wynne Jones's novels, Clive Barker's *The Thief of Always* (1992) and many others will be discussed in relation to the primary sources I selected. Other series of books, like Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* (2001-2012), were ruled out on the grounds that they had not been completed when I began working on this dissertation, but I will also comment on them occasionally. Earlier classics of children's fiction that include some Gothic

elements will also be taken into account as precedents for the texts I analyze, such as C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series (1950-1956), Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) and Catherine Storr's *Marianne Dreams* (1958). Finally, it is also important to note that this dissertation focuses exclusively on children's novels that are meant to be read independently. i.e., without adult mediation. Consequently, picture books will not be part of my discussion, since I believe that studying the Gothic effect caused by the interaction between words and images requires a different methodology. Before I proceed to further outline the objectives of this dissertation, however, the question of how to define 'children's literature', 'Gothic' and 'children's Gothic' must be raised.

Defining Children's Literature

Broadly speaking, attempts to define children's literature can be classified into four main currents. First, there is the idea that children's literature comprises a group of texts with observable shared characteristics, such as simplicity of style, an optimistic tone and an action-driven plot (e.g. McDowell, 1973). Second, it has also been claimed that the term 'children's literature' can be applied to anything children happen to read (e.g., Zipes, 2001). Third, the expression 'children's literature' has also been viewed as a purely commercial label that has little to do with what children actually read (e.g., Townsend, 1971; Zipes, 2001). And, finally, children's literature has been defined as an adult activity based on adult ideas of what children need (e.g., Nodelman, 2008). There is some degree of truth in all four definitions, which are in fact interrelated and complement each other, but I have found the last one to be especially useful for my own purposes.

The first challenge to define children's literature is, as Perry Nodelman observes, how unusual a category it is, for it "defines an audience rather than a time or a place or a specific type of writing like romance or tragedy" (2008: 3). Several critics have pointed out the problems of defining children's literature by its intended audience. Jack Zipes, for example, claims that "children's literature does not exist. If we take the genitive case literally" (2001: 39). In other words, real children do not really *own* children's literature; it is not even produced *by* them, not to mention that, most of the times, they do not even choose what they read, and when they do, their choices might not reflect what adults understand when we talk of children's literature. According to Zipes, if children and childhood are social constructs, children's literature is also imaginary. On the other hand, Zipes affirms that, "If a student studies for a Ph.D. in the field of children's literature in a department of English at a university (...), he or she faces reading more books produced for young readers than any young person will ever read" (2001: 74). The problem with defining children's literature by its target audience is, therefore, that children may actually not be the only, or the main, target audience. The actual readers of what we understand as children's literature may actually be teachers, librarians and scholars. Thus, Zipes suggests discussing "the institution of children's literature", that is, "all the different kinds of texts which we help produce, promote, and disseminate and to which children are exposed", and this includes "cartoons, texts of sports cards, stories that accompany dolls (...), board games, gum wrappers, comic books, leaflets and booklets that accompany tapes and CDs", among other things (2001: 58).

Nevertheless, Zipes himself admits that "this is not the children's literature that we commonly assume when we use the expression" (2001: 58). I wholeheartedly agree with Nodelman's assertion that

for someone who hopes (...) to develop a useful knowledge of how literature does or might operate as an adult practice with intentions toward child readers, claiming that anything any child ever reads is children's literature is a seriously counterproductive move. (...) It prevents any development of understanding of what adults most often mean—what has most cultural power—when they use the phrase 'children's literature'. (2008: 4)

On the other hand, a similar claim is that 'children's literature' is just a commercial label. As John Rowe Townsend states, "The only practical definition of a children's book today—absurd as it sounds—is 'a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher'" (1971: 10). Townsend's assertion has interesting implications for it means that which books constitute children's literature is not decided by children but by adults. Yet, I believe that this should not lead us to give up the attempt to define it, but rather it should be a starting point to reach a more accurate definition. Myles McDowell, for example, criticizes Townsend's claims that the difference between children's literature and adult literature is artificial and maintained only for commercial convenience (1973). Instead, McDowell proposes focusing on the observable features that might distinguish children's literature from adult literature.

If defining the category by its audience is problematic, it is equally so to propose a definition that successfully includes all the texts we regard as children's literature merely by concentrating on recurrent themes, archetypes and other textual features. According to McDowell, there are observable differences between adult and children's literature: "children's books are shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; (...) children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive" and so on (1973: 54). Although it is true that most children's books possess these characteristics, they are by no means *essential* features of children's literature. For one thing, the idea that children's books are shorter has been recently contradicted by

the publication of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, the longest of which is *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* with seven hundred and sixty-six pages in the edition I am using. On the other hand, saying that dialogue and incident are privileged over description and introspection may as well apply to an Agatha Christie novel as to a children's book. The presence of child protagonists, on the other hand, is not exclusive to children's literature either, not to mention that there are children's stories that feature older protagonists like marriageable princes and princesses. And the same applies to the optimistic tone, a convention that can be found in many genres aimed at an adult readership, such as romantic comedy. McDowell concludes that one of the essential differences between children's and adult fiction is that "a good children's book makes complex experience available to its readers; a good adult book draws attention to the inescapable complexity of experience" (1973: 56). I find this classification far from satisfactory, because my attempt here is not to define what a 'good' children's book is, but what children's literature is; yet there is an underlying assumption in McDowell's assertion that is worth exploring.

Barbara Wall criticizes McDowell's conclusion as "unhelpful and unproven" (1991: 8-9), yet she admits that what is significant about it is that Townsend noticed a difference in how narrators of children's and adult literature address their narratees, even though he did not concentrate on it. Wall proposes "concentrat[ing] on the way narrators address the readers-in-the-text, the narratees" as a method to determine whether a book is a children's book or not (1991: 2). Wall claims that "If a story is written *to* children, then it is *for* children, even though it may also be for adults. If a story is not written *to* children, then it does not form part of the genre *writing for children*, even if the author, or publisher, hopes it will appeal to children" (1991: 2, original emphasis). As Wall explains, "My conclusions are founded on the conviction

that adults, whether or not they are speaking ironically, speak differently in fiction when they are aware that they are addressing children” (1991: 2). What I find most enlightening about Wall’s method is that she shifts the attention from the *real* audience to an *implied* audience. Along the same lines, Nodelman states that “children’s literature is written by adults and that it is what it is because of how it addresses its audience, because of what adults believe children are” (2008: 151). In other words, children’s literature constructs its audience in accordance with adult views of childhood. However, it cannot be undermined that the textual characteristics highlighted by McDowell are there because they conform to adult conceptions of children and childhood, and their assumptions regarding the needs of children. Taking all this into account, the most satisfying definition of children’s literature I have found, and which will underlie my discussion of children’s Gothic, is Nodelman’s assertion that “it is a genre of literature whose defining characteristics can be accounted for by conventional assumptions about and constructions of childhood”. Such assumptions, he adds, are by no means immutable or universally true (2008: 188).

The danger of this definition, however, is that it might lead to children’s literature being regarded as a mere adult imposition, even a malevolent strategy to control, homogenize and ‘colonize’ children. In her psychoanalytic examination of “what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech” (Rose, 1994: 2), Jacqueline Rose proposes that “If children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book” (1994: 1-2). Similarly, Maria Nikolajeva claims that “‘lending out a voice’ to a silenced minority is unethical, because the author is in any case writing from a superior position and cannot adopt the minority’s subjectivity. (...) lending a voice always means usurping the voice” (2002b: 186). Indeed, since it is produced by adults,

children's literature inevitably depicts childhood in a way that satisfies adult desires for childlikeness and innocence, and this may have nothing to do with how real children see themselves. It is also undeniable that children's fictions portray child characters that conform to adult standards of morality and social acceptability in what seems to be an attempt to educate and socialize child readers by getting them to identify with those characters—even though, of course, the idea that children identify with these child characters is also an assumption and may not always be true. Yet, it cannot be overlooked that children's writers also write to give children pleasure. It might be argued that this pleasure is just a way of luring children to texts that will teach them to repress their childish desires and to become acceptable adults, but I find this to be a self-contradictory affirmation. If didacticism must be disguised as childish pleasure so that the child learns it without realizing, this means that children's literature cannot exist if the child does not desire. As Nodelman states,

This formulation (...) imagines that a child cannot learn not to desire excitement, adventure, instant gratification, and so on unless the child does desire those things in the first place so that the pleasing can be an effective means to the teaching. If the teaching actually occurred, the desire would no longer exist, and the child could no longer be taught by this means. (2008: 180)

This inevitably questions the didactic dimension of children's literature. Although I will argue throughout this dissertation that the novels I analyze are didactic, I concur with Nodelman's views that this didacticism carries an implicit acknowledgement that it will fail. As Nodelman adds, "Presumably, then, child readers are untaught enough by each one [book] to enjoy the process of the next book's attempt to please and thus teach them. All this suggests how little adults trust that the learning ever does actually occur" (2008: 180).

For this reason, I do not see children's literature as any more repressive than other forms of literature. In my view, children's literature aims to satisfy both the adult and the child's desires, which may be at odds with each other or may surprisingly turn out to be not so different from each other. As Nodelman states, "it [children's literature] tends simultaneously to celebrate and denigrate both childhood desire and adult knowledge" and "its ambivalence results from these pulls in opposite directions" (2008: 181). On the other hand, as regards the fact that adults impose their own views of childhood on children, I again adhere to Nodelman's claim that "[defining people] in ways that leave them with a sense of lack, of something more about themselves that they want to know or be but can't express" may be repressive, but "it is equally repressive for all human beings, not some specific quality of texts for children to be especially condemned and gotten rid of" (2008: 171).

In light of the above, the definition of children's literature I have found most useful for the purpose of this dissertation is that which defines the category "by adult use, not by what children read", without necessarily implying a negative view of this adult use (Nodelman, 2008: 150). It might be, then, useful to take into account what children actually read—as Zipes suggests—in order to analyze reader response, but this is outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, my main aim here is to concentrate on how children's authors use Gothic conventions in children's literature in ways that reflect recurrent adult assumptions about children and childhood. Finally, throughout my discussion I will deliberately use the terms 'children's literature' and 'children's fiction' on different occasions. I will use the term 'children's literature' whenever I refer to the genre in general and 'children's fiction' when making reference to the works I analyze. Since I am only dealing with novels, and poetry and drama are left out of my discussion, I find it more accurate to talk about 'children's fiction'. Having clarified one

of the key concepts I will be dealing with, I will now turn to examine the definitions of ‘Gothic’ and the problems that arise when we apply this term to children’s fiction.

Gothic and Children’s Gothic

Ever since it started to attract critical attention, the term ‘Gothic’ has been applied to so many different texts and cultural productions, and it has mixed with so many other genres and forms of entertainment, that it is no longer all that clear what we mean by ‘Gothic’. As Gothic specialist David Punter states in his seminal work *The Literature of Terror*,

It [‘Gothic’] is a word which has, even now, a wide variety of meanings, and which has had in the past even more. It is used in a number of different fields: as a literary term, as a historical term, as an artistic term, as an architectural term. And as a literary term in contemporary usage, it has a range of different applications. (1996a: 1)

As Punter adds, when we apply the term ‘Gothic’ to literature, we often refer to “a group of novels written between the 1790s and the 1820s” by authors like Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, Charles Robert Maturin and Mary Shelley (1996a: 1). These novels bring to mind a particular set of characteristics: “an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense” (1996a: 1). Nevertheless, as Punter affirms, in contemporary criticism, the term ‘Gothic’ means much more than this: “over the last two centuries, it has acquired a number of other usages, some of them apparently only tangentially related to the ‘original Gothic’, and it is now a term which crops up continually both in academic discourse and also in more popular reviews of fiction” (1996a: 1-2). Before discussing how the term ‘Gothic’ applies to late twentieth

and early twenty-first century children's fiction, therefore, an examination of our contemporary usage of 'Gothic' is in order.

According to Punter, the term 'Gothic' is currently applied to historical romance novels, to "a literature of psychic grotesquerie", such as Joyce Carol Oates's fiction, and "to horror fiction itself, in the common form of the ghost story"; for example, the works by H. P. Lovecraft or M. R. James, or the horror films of the 1930s (1996a: 2-3). In line with Punter's discussion, Catherine Spooner also looks into the broad current usage of 'Gothic' in her study *Contemporary Gothic*:

In contemporary Western culture, the Gothic lurks in all sorts of unexpected corners. Like a malevolent virus, Gothic narratives have escaped the confines of literature and spread across disciplinary boundaries to infect all kinds of media, from fashion and advertising to the way contemporary events are constructed in mass culture. (2006: 8)

In the early twenty-first century there is not only Gothic fiction, but there are also Goth musicians, Goth dolls, Goth clothing and accessories, Gothic TV series and video games, Gothic theme pubs and so forth. As Punter states about the Gothic from the 1980s onwards, it has become "more and more difficult for the critic to separate out any one cultural strand, (...), as new films, for example, are virtually overwhelmed by the vast industry which goes into producing associated accessories" (1996b: 145).

Other critics, however, would state that this is not 'real' Gothic, but a degeneration of the term. As Maria Beville claims, "'the Gothic' is a term that has been over-used and over-creatively interpreted in recent times. (...) Popular culture and critics alike seem to have immersed themselves in a romantic notion of Gothic as a style or aesthetic defined by a number of emotive characteristics and standard devices" (2009: 8). Thus, Beville identifies Kurt Vonnegut and Bret Easton Ellis with Gothic, but denies this label to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, claiming that "the Gothic elements in the

latter are at base superficial and that such texts are not really Gothic” (2009: 9). Instead, Beville calls this trend ‘candygoth’:

The popularity of the ‘candygoth’ (...) is evidence of our predisposition to concentrate on Gothic stylistic conventions. While its shadows and sombre tones, its stormy landscapes and characters are of course paramount to its artistic presentation and to its terrifying effects, they are and should be seen, not as ornamental literary devices, but as derivative of the Gothic’s concern with terror and with encountering the unrepresentable in sublime experience. (2009: 9)

I find Beville’s definition too exclusionary as it does not apply to manifestations of the Gothic in popular culture which use the genre’s conventions for other purposes such as self-parody or titillating and melodramatic entertainment. This, in my view, undermines the Gothic’s capacity to blend with the stylistic conventions of other genres, such as children’s fiction.

In the first place, dismissing certain works of popular fiction as superficial imitations of earlier Gothic texts is incongruous, since the imitated texts are imitations of other texts themselves. According to Spooner, “Gothic offers no resistance, as Romantic or Modernist ideologies might do, to be swallowed up by simulation, since its counterfeit nature preempts this move, even welcomes it” (2006: 35). Spooner also highlights that “As a form it [the Gothic] has always been about fakery. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), often cited as the first Gothic novel, was supposed to be a medieval manuscript, newly discovered and translated by the author” (2006: 32). In the second place, another aspect that Beville’s definition excludes is the Gothic genre’s potential to produce parody, which is another intrinsic trait of the whole cultural phenomenon we understand as ‘Gothic’. As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik suggest,

Rather than setting up a binary between ‘serious’ and ‘comic’ Gothic texts, it is perhaps best to think of Gothic writing as a spectrum that, at one end, produces horror writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief and,

at the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to be taken seriously. (2012: 323)

Horner and Zlosnik also cite *The Castle of Otranto* to illustrate how “The comic turn in Gothic is not an aberration or a corruption of a ‘serious’ genre; rather, it is intrinsic to a mode of writing that has been hybrid since its very inception” (2012: 323).

All in all, I believe that the current proliferation of contemporary Gothic calls for a broader definition of the term that includes all the different manifestations of the genre. As Punter claims, “in studying Gothic fiction almost nothing can be assumed, not even the limits of the field” (1996a: 18). In order to account for this flexibility of the term ‘Gothic’, Punter proposes “look[ing] back beyond Gothic *fiction* and into the history of the word ‘Gothic’ itself” (1996a: 4, original emphasis). As Punter further explains, in the eighteenth century,

Gothic stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern; the barbaric as opposed to the civilized; crudity as opposed to elegance; old English barons as opposed to the cosmopolitan gentry; indeed, often for the English and provincial as opposed to the European or Frenchified. Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilised values and a well-regulated society. (1996a: 5)

Taking into account all the connotations that the term ‘Gothic’ has acquired over the centuries, it is hardly surprising that we still use it today to describe, not only texts that aim to represent terror and sublime experiences, but also other cultural manifestations that, in one way or another, challenge middle-class standards of good taste and propriety, or which are opposed to realist modes of representation.

In light of the above, I will stick to Punter’s definition of ‘Gothic’ as “a mode – perhaps *the* mode – of unofficial history” (1996b: 187). As Punter explains, the Gothic concerns itself with “the relative nature of ethical and behavioural codes” (1996b: 184), with taboo and with the idea that “‘realism’ is not the whole story” (1996b: 186), and it is this uncertainty that fear stems from. As fear is present in all the texts that we

consider Gothic, another useful definition that I will apply to the children's texts I have selected is Dani Cavallaro's idea that "the representational field where the interaction of terror and horror is most patent is that of the Gothic", a term which refers to "a cultural discourse that utilizes images of disorder, obsession, psychological disarray and physical distortion for the purposes of both entertainment and ideological speculation" (2002: vii). In the first place, this definition does not restrict the use of the term 'Gothic' to literature. Although this dissertation focuses exclusively on literature and other forms of entertainment lie beyond its scope, I acknowledge that cinema and other cultural productions have popularized the Gothic in children's culture as well. Second, Cavallaro's definition applies both to 'serious' texts and to popular texts by emphasizing the Gothic's both entertaining and ideological quality. And, what is more, Cavallaro also points out that "many dark texts are often as funny as they are scary: their mood is frequently one of grotesque humor and jocular tenebrism. The comic dimension is reinforced by elements of theatricality that range from the operatic to the burlesque" (2002: 1). Acknowledging the comic dimension of the Gothic is particularly important when it comes to studying it in connection with children's literature, for humor plays an extremely relevant part in representing Gothic experiences for the young.

Nevertheless, the term still presents some problems when it is applied to works of children's literature. Some of the recurrent features of children's literature I have enumerated before seem to be fundamentally at odds with Gothic conventions. For instance, according to Roderick McGillis, we tend to associate children's literature and Gothic fiction with completely different tones and moods:

In the Gothic, children may die and innocence may fall, tainted by infection growing from a bad seed. The Gothic is not, at least traditionally, a cheery genre. Human failure is possible in the Gothic. The Gothic world is

decidedly not a pleasant place; it is ambiguous at best. It is not safe. The Gothic is the opposite of the pastoral. It thrives on darkness, deep forests, and dank city streets. (2008: 227-8)

By contrast, Nodelman states that “children’s literature is characteristically hopeful and optimistic in tone” (2008: 216). This is not to say, of course, that the Gothic is always pessimistic and that children’s literature is necessarily pastoral. Gothic romances, for instance, in which lovers overcome all obstacles, also end in an optimistic tone. Moreover, despite the Gothic’s focus on the grim aspects of life, such as death and failure, this genre’s capacity to simultaneously celebrate life should not be overlooked. As McGillis himself points out, “The art of the Gothic haunts us in order to elicit not only the scream or the gasp (...) but also to elicit the shock that prompts desire for change” (2008: 230). On the other hand, in the texts I analyze, Gothic themes and motifs are deployed precisely to move away from pastoral visions of childhood. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that such ideals are ultimately dismissed and can never be recovered. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, the Gothic becomes instrumental to express nostalgia for an idyllic childhood precisely by showing us its dark opposite.

Another difference between the Gothic and children’s literature that McGillis points out is the fact that “we might think of children’s literature as a literature that promotes positive social behavior and growth, rather than describing transgression and decay. Fragmentation and dissolution characterize the Gothic. This is a genre that seeks to disorient us” (2008: 227). I believe that this is a key difference between children’s Gothic and adult Gothic. This is not to say, of course, that adult Gothic is not concerned with promoting acceptable behavior, for it certainly is. Just like children’s literature, Gothic fiction for adults may have a didactic dimension, showing the faults of humankind and the sins of the fathers that will later affect their offspring, and using

images of monstrosity to otherize that which threatens social order. The key difference, however, is *how* the two genres seek to promote this positive behaviour. As Horner and Zlosnik affirm, “Despite some differences of opinion about what constitutes ‘Gothic’, most critics would probably agree that Gothic writing always concerns itself with boundaries and their instabilities” (2012: 321). As regards children’s literature, on the other hand, Nodelman describes it as “a literature whose very nature seems tied up with the idea of exclusion, of existing in the first place exactly in order to leave things out” (2008: 110). As these two quotations suggest, boundaries are unstable in Gothic fiction, and this instability is reflected in both form and content, in its fragmentary narratives, unreliable narrators and explicit representations of terror and horror. In children’s literature, by contrast, the tendency to exclude keeps certain boundaries fixed and almost intransgressible, even in books that make extensive use of Gothic devices. Children’s literature seeks to promote positive behavior by excluding that which creates discomfort to adults.

As I stated earlier in my discussion of children’s literature definitions, the unwritten ‘rules’ of the genre are dictated by adult ideas of childhood and of what is good for children, and this is reflected in the genre’s conventions. As Kimberley Reynolds puts it, “childhood and children’s literature are in a dialectical relationship” (1994: xi). Not surprisingly, whereas certain Gothic themes and motifs can be used in children’s literature, there are others that have to be excluded, subverted or adjusted to the genre’s prerequisites. Nodelman very well illustrates this as follows: if a picture-book writer wanted to publish a children’s story about monsters, he would have little trouble, because previous picture books about monsters have been published and praised, and this makes it an acceptable position to be taken:

Unless, of course, he described the wrong kind of monsters—monsters made of human feces come to life, perhaps, or monsters who made children happy by fondling their privates or who encouraged children to brush their teeth every day and to refuse all candy and then turned out to be evil and wrong. A writer with a feel for the subtleties of the game would reject such ideas outright, for they are simply not currently possible. (2008: 123)

Nodelman's claim highlights how what authors include or exclude always reflects prevalent ideas about childhood, and how the texts resist alternative, more transgressive representations. In short, there can be monsters in children's literature as long as they are the *right* kind of monsters. It is precisely this tension between Gothic elements and children's literature conventions that I am interested in exploring. In the next four chapters I will argue that Rowling, Gaiman, Pullman and Snicket's novels are all built on this ongoing tension, i.e., how one can represent childhood as Gothic while preserving the child protagonist's goodness at the same time, especially when advances in child psychology tell us that children who suffer from abuse are likely to become abusers themselves. Although the presence of Gothic elements in children's fiction of the last couple of decades has already been discussed, there is not—to my knowledge—a study about how the Gothic actually contributes to the perpetuation of idealized views of childhood in children's literature.

The Good Seed

As I stated earlier, scholarly interest in children's Gothic is relatively recent. My own interest in this subject was aroused by Sabine Büssing's *Aliens in the Home: The Child in Horror Fiction* (1987), which examines the figure of the child, but only in Gothic fiction for adults. In this study, Büssing discusses how childhood has become a central theme in contemporary Gothic, and yet, as Büssing states, "a child's stream of

consciousness (...) occurs ridiculously seldom” (1987: 8). It was this particular comment that inspired me to look into contemporary children’s novels in which Gothic experiences are focalized through child characters. Several previous discussions of children’s Gothic have focused on the effect such reading material may have on child readers, and, curiously, two main reactions can be identified which are radically opposed to each other: whereas some parents and certain journalists and reviewers find it too transgressive, critics see therapeutic value in it, and some even find it conservative rather than subversive.

The suitability of Gothic fiction for the young is one of the main points of discussion among parents, journalists, pedagogues, psychologists and critics. Wall Street Journal columnist Meghan Cox Gurdon, in her review “Darkness Too Visible”, argued that contemporary fiction for teens is now “So dark that kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings are now just part of the run of things in novels directed, broadly speaking, at children from the ages of 12 to 18” (2011). Apparently Gurdon is not aware of the fact that there is nothing new about the presence of kidnapping, pederasty, incest and brutal beatings in children’s literature or in Gothic fiction with minors as protagonists. Such topics are already present in classic fairy tales aimed at children below the age of twelve, not to mention nursery rhymes. As was to be expected, Gurdon’s criticism was answered by authors of children’s and young adult fiction, like Neil Gaiman and *The Princess Diaries* author Meg Cabot, who claimed that dark fiction for older children and adolescents is not harmful but helpful (in Flood, 2011). As young-adult novelist Laurie Halse Anderson claimed, “Books don’t turn kids into murderers, or rapists, or alcoholics. (Not even the Bible, which features all of these acts.) Books open hearts and minds, and help teenagers make sense of a dark and confusing world” (in Flood, 2011). The idea that children need adult help to make sense

of this “dark and confusing world” that adults themselves have created is, of course, an adult assumption which may not even be true. Yet, I do agree with Anderson’s defense of young-adult and children’s literature, for, as I will discuss in the subsequent paragraphs, there is no clear evidence that fictional violence creates real violence.

Whereas the appropriateness of dark fiction for young readers remains a controversial issue among adult readers—as evinced by Amazon reviews and the above-quoted articles—most scholars of children’s fiction currently agree that experiencing fear and violence in the safe context that fiction provides has proved to be beneficial for children, allowing them to come to terms with their own anxieties. Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) constituted a turning point in this field. Before Bettelheim, similar views had already been put forth by C.S. Lewis, who already criticized attacks on the fairy tale. Lewis differentiated between two types of children’s fears: phobias, which he states cannot be controlled by literary means, and the knowledge that we are “born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventures, heroism and cowardice, good and evil” (2006: 23). According to Lewis, avoiding the latter “would indeed be to give children a false impression and feed them on escapism in the bad sense” (2006: 23). This idea was given a psychological basis by Bettelheim, whose own work is based on Freudian theories of childhood, particularly the idea that “Cruelty in general comes easily to the childish nature, since the obstacle that brings the instinct for mastery to a halt at another person’s pain (...) is developed relatively late” (Freud, 1991: 110-1). According to Bettelheim, trying to hide the existence of evil is ultimately confusing for the child, who is aware of its own ‘cruel’ nature:

There is a widespread refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures—the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that *they* are not always good (...). This contradicts what

they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes. (1991: 7, original emphasis)

For Bettelheim, the value of fairy tales lies in the fact that “good and evil are given body in the form of some figures and their actions, as good and evil are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in every man. It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires the struggle to solve it” (1991: 8-9). Bettelheim also adds that “Presenting the polarities of character permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two, which he could not do as readily were the figures drawn more true to life, with all the complexities that characterize real people” (1991: 9). In the novels I analyze, good and evil are also clearly differentiated: they are usually embodied by the child protagonist and the villain, respectively. However, being aimed at older children, these novels also attempt to problematize these polarities and embrace ambiguity, as I will discuss in the subsequent chapters.

Bettelheim’s study, however, focuses exclusively on fairy tales. Recent psychological studies have applied these ideas to other forms of children’s entertainment, defending the importance of encountering fear, violence and representations of evil in contemporary novels, television, video games and even rap songs. In his cultural history of violent entertainment, Harold Schechter denies that we live in uniquely violent times and that violence in the media should be held responsible for real-life crimes. As he explains, not only do people tend to sentimentalize the past, but there is also something about popular culture that always provokes outrage, especially among ‘respectable’ people (2005: 18). According to Schechter, this hostility has always existed:

The pattern is always the same. A new medium of mass entertainment comes along that is aimed at – or embraced by – kids and the working class. Very quickly, high-minded reformers begin to denounce it as a sign of social

decay, a corrupter of the young, a threat to the very existence of civilization as we know it. (2005: 120)

Schechter cites the example of penny dreadfuls in the Victorian era and the 1860s dime novel in America, which at that time were criticized for exactly the same reasons as popular entertainment nowadays: their violence and graphic gore, which were held responsible for the corruption of the youth (2005: 30-1). In line with Bettelheim, Schechter claims that “As psychoanalysis teaches, one of the primary functions of horror stories is to help the audience manage its unspoken fears – cope with profoundly disturbing experiences – by giving them a narrative shape” (2005: 157). Therefore, for Schechter, make-believe violence is not gratuitous or harmful, but “it is precisely this discomfort with one’s darkest urges that accounts for the perennial hostility towards the popular arts” (2005: 136).

Along the same lines, American comic book author Gerard Jones analyzes the essential role that make-believe violence plays in the child’s development. Jones found that most psychological research on the subject focused on the negative effects of fictional violence on children, but very few of them actually tried to find out why children love it. As Jones states, “mostly I found young people using fantasies of combat in order to feel stronger, to access their emotions, to take control of their anxieties, to calm themselves down in the face of real violence, to fight their way through emotional challenges” (2002: 6). On the other hand, Jones claims that it is adults’ anxiety over make-believe violence that might have the undesired effects that we fear:

We don’t help children much learn the difference between fantasy and reality when we allow their fantasies to provoke reactions from us that are more appropriate to reality. (...) we blur the very boundaries that they’re trying to establish. We teach them that pretend shooting makes adults feel threatened in *reality*, and therefore their own fantasies must be more

powerful and more dangerous than they thought. (2002: 56, original emphasis)

What matters more to Jones is not so much the entertainment per se but the use children make of it. However, he points out, “In order for children to use their fantasy play to master their fears, they must be able to view it fully as fantasy. To help them differentiate between fantasy and reality sometimes requires that we learn a little about the difference ourselves” (2002: 112). Like Bettelheim and Schechter, Jones concludes that “Taking away the entertainment that enables them to grapple with reality won’t make their reality better but may only leave them more defenseless against it” (2002: 103). This is not to say, of course, that children will not be disturbed by violent fiction, or that adults should expose them to it just because psychoanalysts say it may help them cope with real fears. In fact, Jones warns against exposing children to something they have not shown an interest in (2002: 103).

Thus, some adult readers blame children’s Gothic for the corruption of the youth for its explicit renderings of those aspects of humanity that should remain concealed, whereas children’s literature scholars keep pointing out the conservative nature of the genre. As I have already discussed, some scholars even criticize the fact that children’s literature destroys childlike desire by imposing adult views. Although empirical research of the effects of children’s Gothic on real child readers is outside the scope of this dissertation, the theories of Bettelheim, Schechter and Jones have been extremely useful to define my position when it comes to the appropriateness of children’s Gothic. I therefore start from the premise that the texts I analyze are in no way harmful per se, and that they are works of literature worthy of readerly and scholarly attention and consideration. What is more, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the texts I analyze are still *children’s* texts; that is, they still conform largely to the conventions of

the genre and promote acceptable views of childhood notwithstanding their Gothic content. Their disruptive potential is, therefore, limited. In this sense, I agree that children's literature is mostly a conservative genre and that any threat to conventional ideas of what adults think is good for children is, at best, a mild one. As Reynolds states, "many of the underlying premises about writing for children at the end of the twentieth century have their roots in social practice and publishing decisions in operation at the end of the nineteenth century" (1994: x). Contemporary children's literature is still largely built on what can be considered a cult of childhood characterized by "an exaggerated and unrealistic sense of difference between adult and child", "the feeling that growing up involves the loss of special qualities that may never be recovered", the conception of the child as a pure and sexless creature, and the idea that the child needs adult protection from the 'ugly' facts of life (Reynolds, 1994: 4). As Warner states,

children have always been cherished. But the present cult of the child loves them for a new and different reason. It insists on children's intimate connection, above all, to a wonderful, freefloating world of the imagination. Their observable, active fantasy life, their fluid make-believe play seem to give them access to a world of wisdom, and this in turn brings them close to myth and fairytale. (1994: 37)

Such ideas were, according to Warner, "grown in the ground of Romanticism" (1994: 37). Yet, it is one thing to say that children's literature reflects conservative views and attitudes towards childhood, and quite another to affirm that it actually succeeds in passing its moral lessons on to its younger readers, an idea of which I have already declared myself skeptical.

Apart from the studies I have just discussed which defend the suitability of such reading material for the young, there are other academic works that aim to bring these texts in from the margins of criticism, incorporating them within larger areas of study.

In *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (Jackson, Coats and McGillis, 2008), the authors examine the meaning and significance of Gothic elements in a wide range of contemporary children's texts, focusing on different themes such as cyberfiction elements, humor, gender roles, intertextuality and so on. As Reynolds affirms,

Now that children's literature has become a recognized area of research and teaching in higher education, a case could be made for ceasing to regard it as a discreet area and incorporating it within the spread of categories applied to the study of 'adult' literature. Placing children's literature studies within well-developed scholarly contexts associated with particular periods, genres, writers, publishing practice, and/or critical approaches could enhance the status of children's texts and authors, bringing them in from the periphery of academic study. (2011: 60)

In keeping with *Haunting the Borders*, it is one of the purposes of this dissertation to read the selected children's texts as Gothic texts, incorporating them within the Gothic Studies field.

In this dissertation, however, I intend to pay attention not only to what recent children's novels have in common with the adult Gothic genre, but also to the particularities of Gothic writing *aimed at younger readers*, an aspect that I think is not sufficiently emphasized in previous readings of children's Gothic texts. In *Haunting the Borders*, the authors stress the connection between the Gothic and children, but they do not concentrate so much on the obstacles and limitations that the Gothic encounters when attempting to pervade a genre like children's literature. Jackson, Coats and McGillis claim that Gothic elements have always been part of children's literature and that they can already be found in old nursery rhymes and bedtime stories which aimed to scare children into good behavior. For them, "the really strange development of the eighteenth century was the transformation of the Gothic narrative into an adult genre, when it had really belonged to children's literature all along" (Jackson, Coats and

McGillis, 2008: 2). The Gothic is certainly befitting to deal with some of the main preoccupations of children's literature such as the formation of a stable identity, the tension between knowledge and desire, conflicts between adults and children, and the ability to tell good from evil. What is more, the Gothic is often regarded as a childish genre due to its 'cheap thrills' and its interest in the irrational and the sensational. Yet, the differing features that I have already discussed cannot be overlooked. The difference between adult Gothic and children's Gothic is not only a matter of stylistic complexity, or of inverting the roles of adult Gothic hero and child doppelgänger. It is much more than that; it is a matter of what to exclude and what to include, and for what purpose.

I would also like to question the idea that the irruption of the Gothic in children's literature of the 1990s and early 2000s

(...) reflects our culture's changing attitude toward the innocence of children, as well as what seems to be a cultural shift in our willingness to unilaterally assign blame. (...) Sure we blame the adults who shamelessly exploit them, but we also begin to experience a sense of unease about the degree to which they are complicit in their own exploitation. In keeping with a more general trend to complicate victim/abuser status, we begin, in a strange way, to dignify the child by granting him or her complex motivations that are not the results of a bland innocence. (Jackson, Coats and McGillis, 2008: 7)

The main objective of this dissertation will be to revise this assertion by examining how childhood and the figure of the child are represented in the texts I analyze. For one thing, the above-quoted passage makes it sound as if ambivalence towards children was a new thing. According to Marina Warner, "the Child has never been seen as such a menacing enemy as today" (1994: 43). At the same time, however, "the nostalgic worship of childhood innocence (...) is more marked today than it ever has been" (Warner, 1994: 34). Yet, even if this ambivalence might be more acute today, as Reynolds puts it, "these antagonistic feelings no doubt go back as far as human society" (1994: 2). On the other hand, the anxieties of our era may not be enough either to

account for the Gothic revival in children's literature. According to Spooner, critics of contemporary Gothic "tend to resort to clichés: millennial anxiety is one of the most common (...); desensitization to the everyday horrors of the modern world another (this argument is at least as old as the 1790s when it was introduced by the Marquis de Sade)" (2006: 8). As Spooner adds, "Gothic texts deal with a variety of themes just as pertinent to contemporary culture as to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (2006: 8). Thus, my dissertation will aim to answer the following questions: first, to what extent are Gothic themes and devices deployed to complicate the victim/abuser status and question romanticized views of childhood? And second, what conceptions of childhood do we see reflected in children's Gothic?

The fundamental thesis of this dissertation is that, despite the Gothic's potential to complicate the victim/abuser status and permanently question ideals of childhood and stable selves, the figure of the child as inherently 'good' and on a journey towards a stable and mature identity predominates. In fact, child characters' Gothic environments and their confrontations with villains ultimately reinforce, not only the moral and intellectual superiority of child protagonists that often function as role models for readers, but also conventional ideas of which environments children should occupy. As Rebecca Knuth argues in her study *Children's Literature and British Identity*, English children's stories have always been "a means of fostering acceptable worldviews", and she adds, "The worldview they were to acquire encouraged them to be 'good' according to the way that their society defines a good person" (2012: 1). Notably, three of the works I discuss here are British—*Harry Potter*, *Coraline* and *His Dark Materials*—and their child protagonists are clearly inheritors of the Victorian children's literature tradition that sought to mold the British national character as defined by morality, a sense of duty and responsibility, and heroism. As I will further argue in the subsequent

chapters, this British ideal prevails and conquers the Gothicity that surrounds these child characters. *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, on the other hand, is an American children's series of books, which, as I will argue, draws heavily on this ideal as well. Handler, however, combines this with a much more cynical view of the world, and he praises the 'good' child at the same time that he acknowledges its artificiality and the difficulty to be 'good' in an evil world.

It could be argued that the fact that children's Gothic seeks to promote acceptable behavior bears an implicit acknowledgement that children are prone to be disruptive and need to be taught otherwise. Yet, what I sustain is that works of children's Gothic do not reflect this in a straightforward manner. Instead, they stick to the belief that "the child and the soul are somehow interchangeable, and that consequently children are the keepers and the guarantors of humanity's reputation", which still has purchase today and reflects an increasing need to keep childhood innocent (Warner, 1994: 35). It is not my intention, however, to simply dismiss the texts I analyze as utterly conservative and undermine writers' attempts to innovate, break with taboos and experiment with narrative form. I argue that the works by Rowling, Gaiman, Pullman and Handler certainly innovate on many levels and provide alternatives to idealized visions of childhood and standard adulthood by means of secondary characters and alternative fantasy worlds. Therefore, it could be affirmed that these texts are already being subversive merely by showing that there are alternatives. Yet, what I argue is that, in children's literature, positive visions of the child's journey towards maturity predominate, and the texts I analyze adhere to this convention. Child characters in children's Gothic are, therefore, not bad seeds like the children in the adult Gothic novels that Büssing discusses, such as William March's *The Bad Seed* (1954) or

Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967). Harry, Coraline, Lyra and the Baudelaires are *good* seeds; they are bearers of redemptive qualities.

To make my point, in the subsequent chapters I provide close readings of the four works of children's fiction that best support my theory, concentrating on how Gothic and children's literature conventions intertwine to represent childhood textually. Since most Gothic Studies critics (e.g., Botting, 1996; Cavallaro, 2002) often sustain that Gothic narratives mirror Gothic psyches that are, in turn, mirrored by Gothic landscapes, the structure of this dissertation reflects my aim to highlight this interdependence of narrative, setting and psyche in children's Gothic. For this reason, the different sections in every chapter look into each one of these levels. All four chapters will open with an examination of narrative form, the way in which the adult narrator addresses the child narratee and treats the child protagonist. I believe that we cannot study how children's books depict Gothic experiences without examining the voice that presents this to the child reader in the first place. In fact, narrative form in children's fiction is one of the features that resists the Gothic more strongly. According to Wall,

(...) loveliness and ugliness, sadness and delight, comedy, tragedy and horror are all part of life, and might all appropriately be part of fiction for children, provided that the voice of the narrator, the voice which presents these things to children, is a voice which speaks to them with love and respect. (1991: 273)

As Wall's quotation suggests, it is of utmost importance that narrators of children's fiction address their narratees in a way that reflects an appropriate relationship between adult and child. As a consequence, the unreliable first-person narratives that are so common in adult Gothic are harder to find in children's Gothic. In fact, most narrators of children's literature tend to be reassuring, friendly adult voices that make Gothic

experiences more palatable to child readers, and the effect this has on a Gothic narrative should be taken into consideration.

The second section in every chapter will focus on the depiction of the child's environment or "literary landscape" (Carroll, 2011: 2). I believe it is necessary to devote one section in every chapter to analyzing landscape because, as Jane Carroll states, "[it] is a central concern of canonical British fantasy for children" (2011: 1), and also because setting is one of the levels of narrative in which the Gothic is most patent. Furthermore, as Nodelman puts it, children's texts "imagine physical space as meaningful and symbolic—invest their settings with meanings, make them representations of what the characters mean to themselves and to each other. The physical worlds they describe tend toward allegory and have ideological import" (2008: 80). As Nodelman's words suggest, setting plays an extremely relevant part in characterization, and in the case of children's fiction, the depiction of the spaces the child occupies is instrumental to understand how childhood is constructed. What is more, Gothic settings in particular are often used to articulate a discourse about appropriate places for the child. Contrary to what may be expected, Gothic settings not always represent undesirable environments, but in many cases they become the place where the child protagonist feels at home.

On the other hand, a third section will be devoted to looking into child and adult characterization, especially the relationship between child hero(ine) and adult villain. Throughout this dissertation I will refer to the protagonists of the novels I deal with as 'children' or 'preadolescents'. Although Harry Potter is seventeen by the end of the series and Violet Baudelaire is fourteen, what matters to me is not their 'biological' age but the qualities that are attributed to them. What characterizes these fictional children is the fact that, whereas they are morally and intellectually mature, they remain innocent

of power and sexuality in the end. Surely, Harry, Lyra and Violet and Klaus Baudelaire go from being asexual beings to suddenly starting to notice the opposite sex; yet, their sexual awakenings are puerile, and sex never actually happens. Speaking about Harry Potter, Nikolajeva affirms that

Sexually, Harry is eternally pre-pubertal. (...) A few innocent kisses is the farthest our hero ever gets. (...) As compared to some sexually advanced teenagers in contemporary young adult fiction, Harry is ridiculously uninformed. Yet this is also a children's literature convention. (2009: 237)

I argue that this applies to the other child characters I deal with. Paradoxically, these fictional children become adults prematurely, but in many other aspects they remain children eternally. The same happens with the issue of power. According to Trites, "The chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature from children's literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative" (2000: 16). For Trites, children's literature focuses on "the child's sense of Self and her or his personal power", while in young adult fiction "protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are" (2000: 2-3). Indeed, the child characters under discussion here always rely on their own personal power, which is generally linked to their braveness, intelligence, their capacity to love and other intrinsic qualities. On the other hand, the texts constantly emphasize that they are not in the least attracted to becoming part of the powerful social forces that oppress them. Thus, even by the end of the *Harry Potter* series when Harry is 'biologically' a teenager, characterization still conforms largely to children's literature conventions.

As this suggests, my approach to characterization will combine a mimetic and a semiotic approach. On the one hand, I read literary characters as textual constructions, not as real people, even if they are psychologically plausible in many ways. I argue that the characterization of Harry, Coraline, Lyra and the Baudelaires is not only based on

psychological studies of real children, but rather they are inheritors of a literary tradition of child characters heavily influenced by fairy tales as well as adult fantasies and assumptions regarding what children are like and what they need. According to Nikolajeva, whereas the mimetic approach “has been widely applied to adult as well as children’s novels, the second [the semiotic approach] has been seriously neglected”, and she adds, “Since nonrealistic genres comprise a considerable part of children’s fiction, we would limit our understanding of character by applying only mimetic approaches” (2002a: 8). In this dissertation, I find it of utmost importance not to treat literary characters as if they were medical cases. Although developments in child psychology and theories of education have definitely influenced the way in which child characters are portrayed and perceived,

literary characters do not necessarily follow the prescribed behavioristic patterns or the observed course of mental disturbances. Even when authors are familiar with developmental psychology, they are not obliged to construct their characters in consistency with it. (Nikolajeva, 2002a: 9)

The novels I analyze tell stories of children whose parents were brutally murdered, children who are forced to live with and endure the abuse of unloving relatives, children who are persecuted and lured by villains, and yet they never fail to be polite and loyal to others. Noticeably, such representations of the child depart radically from what child psychology tells us about children who have grown up in abusive environments. As I have already stated, the main feature that these child characters share is their fundamental goodness. They may lie sometimes, or trick others, or even wish to destroy the villains that persecute them, but their goodness is never permanently questioned, and this responds purely to children’s literature conventions, for—as psychoanalysis has taught us—the innocence of children is not a psychological reality but an adult fantasy.

On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that, in children's literature of the 1990s and early 2000s, there *is* an attempt to give child characters more psychological complexity and plausibility. What is more, since child characters "serve as ideological (or rather educational) vehicles" (Nikolajeva, 2002a: x), they can certainly be read as representatives of a particular ideology and of their age, class, gender and nationality among other traits. Thus, I share Nikolajeva's view that "a reasonable approach is something between these two polarities [mimetic and semiotic]" (2002a: 18). In the novels I analyze, characters have qualities of type characters of folklore and Gothic fiction, and they also possess some plausible psychological features. Therefore, I believe that the most reasonable approach is to read them as textual constructions, while taking into account those passages in which psychological complexity and mimesis are achieved. For this purpose, I have incorporated those ideas from narratology, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, and childhood studies that best suit my purpose of understanding the role of Gothic elements in children's fiction. Finally I would like to stress that, since my discussion does not go beyond the textual level, whenever I use the terms 'author' and 'reader' I always refer to the *implied* authors and readers, unless I explicitly announce that I am alluding to their real counterparts or citing the authors' actual words.

Finally, the fifth section in every chapter will be devoted to examining how fear in children's Gothic is inextricably linked to the books' didactic dimension. Fear of death in *Harry Potter*, fear of losing one's home and everything the child holds dear in *Coraline*, fear of sexuality in *His Dark Materials* and fear of becoming a villain in Snicket's series force child characters to make decisions that will define who they are and will lead them to learn crucial lessons for life about love, sacrifice, family and morality, among other things. The function of this final section in every chapter is to

argue that terror, horror and violence are not simply meant to be thrilling but they are also there for a didactic purpose—to elicit commentary and reflection on the existence of evil. Of course, it could also be argued that this didacticism is there as an excuse to make terror, horror and violence acceptable in a children’s book and that what we actually have is “violence and depravity masquerading as moral instruction” (Schechter: 2005: 58). Either way, this reveals yet another way in which children’s fiction resists the Gothic: a children’s text can be Gothic as long as the presence of Gothic elements is justified by didactic reasons, regardless of whether these moral lessons actually have an effect on the reader.

After justifying the chapters’ structure, I would also like to say a few words on the order in which they appear. In every chapter I will examine how certain children’s literature conventions prevail, such as adult control over the child and the narrative, consolation, stability, hope and morality, even though they are temporarily challenged by Gothic elements. Still, I will also pay attention to how, in some cases, authors manage to transgress these conventions, albeit only moderately or temporarily. For this reason, I have arranged the chapters from what I consider to be the most conservative work of fiction to the most subversive one in terms of the challenges they pose to children’s literature conventions. Thus, I start with *Harry Potter*, which empowers the child by turning him into a Gothic hero but finally re-establishes and celebrates adult control by turning Harry into ‘Dumbledore’s man’. The second chapter deals with *Coraline*, which celebrates the child’s stable identity while acknowledging that this stability is constantly under threat. In the third place, I deal with Pullman’s trilogy, which challenges one of the main children’s literature tenets, namely, the fact that certain knowledge should be concealed from children (even though Pullman himself is cautious with certain issues and deals with them metaphorically). And finally, I devote

the last chapter to Lemony Snicket, whose children are exceptionally good but also explicitly represented as the adult narrator's fantasy. I would like to clarify that this is by no means a claim that *Harry Potter* is an absolutely conservative series, or that Snicket's series is completely subversive. I believe that the conservative and the subversive often coexist in texts, and no sharp distinction can be made. Yet, I believe that we can certainly establish a gradation when it comes to the extent to which children's literature conventions are challenged in the four works I concentrate on. I argue that the texts I analyze are possible because they conform to acceptable ideas of what children's literature should do. However, I also acknowledge how authors manage to find subtle ways of interrogating such ideas, though some of them more daringly than others. As I will discuss, romanticized depictions of the child are predominant, even in Snicket's series, but even if alternative views do not predominate, they are there, and their mere presence already interrogates dominant ideologies.

CHAPTER 1 – DUMBLEDORE’S MAN: USING AND ABUSING THE CHILD GOTHIC HERO IN J.K. ROWLING’S *HARRY POTTER*

1.1. Sorting Harry: *Harry Potter* and the Conflation of Genres

Now slip me snug about your ears,
I’ve never yet been wrong,
I’ll have a look inside your mind
And tell where you belong!

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

The enormous success of the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) has turned British novelist J.K. Rowling (born 1965), into the most popular children’s writer of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹ Ever since the publication of the first *Harry Potter* book, children’s fantasy novels with Gothic and mythological elements have been flooding the children’s book market as well as the movie industry. Some of the fantasy and adventure series for children and young adults published in the English language after the success of *Harry Potter* are Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi’s *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2003-2009), Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series (2005 – 2009), Anthony Horowitz’s *Alex Rider* series (2000-2013), and Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* series (2001-2012), to name a few. As for the influence of *Harry Potter* on cinema, not only have Rowling’s seven novels been adapted into eight movies, but it is probably no coincidence that other children’s fantasy series have also been adapted during the last decade; namely, C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) and Philip Pullman’s *Northern Lights* (1995), both of which were made into

¹ J.K. Rowling was ranked the most powerful celebrity of 2007 by *Forbes*, and was named the ‘Most Influential Woman in Britain’ in 2010. She has won countless awards, such as the National Book Awards Children’s Book of the Year (1999) for *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the Whitbread Children’s Book of the Year (1999) for *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the Hugo Award for Best Novel (2001) for *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the Bram Stoker Award for Best Work for Young Readers (2003) for *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and the Hans Christian Andersen Literature Award (2010), among many others (see Wikipedia article “J.K. Rowling”).

movies in the early 2000s.² In fact, the scope of *Harry Potter*'s influence on early-twenty-first-century children's fiction is another reason why I find it fitting to begin my discussion talking about Rowling's series. Although fantasy and Gothic elements in children's books are really nothing new, the astounding popularity of the *Harry Potter* series has not only made it acceptable for a children's book to deal with very intense Gothic content, but it has also made it mainstream.

The *Harry Potter* series deals with Harry's seven-year education at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and his quest to defeat the dark wizard Voldemort, aided by his two best friends, Ron and Hermione. The series comprises seven novels, namely, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997),³ *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).⁴ Rowling has also published *Quidditch Through the Ages* (2001), *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001) and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (2008), which purport to be the actual books appearing in the novels.⁵ Apart from the *Harry Potter* books, Rowling has written three adult novels, *The Casual Vacancy*

² So far, three of C.S. Lewis's Narnia novels have been adapted for the screen: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, released in 2005; *Prince Caspian*, released in 2008; and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, released in 2010. As for Pullman's trilogy, only the first novel, *Northern Lights*, was made into a movie with the American title *The Golden Compass* in 2007.

³ Published as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the United States.

⁴ I will use abbreviated titles from now on: *Philosopher's Stone*, *Chamber of Secrets*, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and so on.

⁵ *Quidditch through the Ages* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* both benefit the charity Comic Relief (see Wikipedia article "*Quidditch through the Ages*"). *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, on the other hand, was originally handwritten and illustrated manually by Rowling herself, and only seven copies were made. One of the original copies was auctioned and the money went to The Children's Voice charity campaign (see Wikipedia article "*The Tales of Beedle the Bard*").

(2012), *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013) and *The Silkworm* (2014)—the last two published under the pseudonym 'Robert Galbraith'. Yet, *Harry Potter* remains to this day her most celebrated work of fiction, but also her most notorious one. As D.M. Soulliere explains,

(...) while Harry Potter has enjoyed tremendous publishing and box office success, the novels and films have also generated enormous controversy among concerned parents, educators, and various religious groups. Such concern, mainly focused on the portrayal of witchcraft and the occult in the novel series, has led to attempts to ban the books from schools and libraries and a push for Harry-free reading in some homes. (2010: website)

However, such "Potter panic", as Soulliere (2010: website) calls it, mostly created by Christian Right groups in the United States, has not succeeded in diminishing the series's popularity among children and adults (Soulliere, 2010: website).

Why so Successful?

Not only have the *Harry Potter* novels achieved cult status among adult and child readers, but the series has also attracted plenty of critical attention—most of it positive⁶—and from many different scholarly perspectives. Broadly speaking, criticism about *Harry Potter* can be divided into five main currents. There are narratological studies focusing on Rowling's use of narrative devices and generic conventions (e.g. Nikolajeva, 2009; Alton, 2009); readings from a gender studies perspective and other sociological approaches (e.g. Gallardo-C and Smith, 2003); philosophical and

⁶ With some exceptions like Harold Bloom, Jack Zipes and A.S. Byatt, who have strongly criticized Rowling's work. In "Can 35 Million Book Buyers Be Wrong? Yes", Harold Bloom laments "the dumbing-down it [the *Harry Potter* series] leads and exemplifies" and unfavourably compares it to "superior fare, such as Kenneth Grahame's 'The Wind in the Willows' or the 'Alice' books of Lewis Carroll" (2000). A.S. Byatt, on the other hand, expresses her disbelief at the fact that adults read and enjoy *Harry Potter*, claiming that "We like to regress" (2003). And finally, Jack Zipes has also been critical about Rowling's novels, affirming that "the plots are the same, and in my opinion, the story lines become tedious and grating after you have read the first" (2001: 176).

theological analyses of the content of the novels (e.g. Sehon, 2010); studies from an educational perspective (e.g. Taub and Servaty-Seib, 2009); and cultural studies readings dealing not only with the texts, but with *Harry Potter* as a cultural and commercial phenomenon (e.g. Bousquet, 2009). Although my analysis takes into account all these different perspectives, the articles and books that have influenced my reading the most belong to the first group.

Many of the studies that examine Rowling's use of genre and narrative seek to answer one central question: "Why are the *Harry Potter* books so popular?" (Granger, 2009: x). In *Harry Potter's Bookshelf*, John Granger points out the importance of discussing issues like narrative voice and setting in order to answer this question, "because her [Rowling's] decisions about how to move the plot along, the voice in which to tell the story, as well as the stage setting for the drama determine in large part how much any reader will be engaged enough to read the book" (2009: 3). Other critics, like Nikolajeva, have highlighted Rowling's treatment of genre, claiming that "the attraction of the novels lies exactly in the fact that they do not clearly adhere to a particular genre" (2009: 234). And, along the same lines, Alton affirms that "Rather than creating a hodgepodge with no recognizable or specific pattern, Rowling has fused these genres into a larger mosaic, which enhances readers' generic expectations and the ways in which the series conveys literary meaning" (2009: 199). The genres that, according to critics, are most prominent in the *Harry Potter* series are mystery, Gothic, detective fiction, the school story, the sports story, fantasy, adventure and quest romance among others (Alton, 2009: 199-200).

Although the main focus of this dissertation is Rowling's use of Gothic elements to represent childhood in *Harry Potter*, I have found it impossible to discuss this

without referring to this larger ‘mosaic’ of genres and the Gothic’s place in it. For instance, analyzing the depiction of the child’s environment in this case implies looking into how the Gothic setting blends with the literary representation of the British boarding school. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is not to look into Gothic elements in isolation, but rather to determine how the Gothic interacts with the other genres present in Rowling’s novels, and how her selection and treatment of literary devices and generic conventions make her novels acceptable enough to be labeled ‘children’s fiction’ despite the disturbing Gothic passages. In “Harry Potter and the Secrets of Children’s Literature”, Nikolajeva highlights the series’ “compliance with or deviation from the conventions of children’s literature” and affirms that “both can, paradoxically, account for their [the books’] popularity” (2009: 225). I believe that many of Rowling’s attempts to deviate from children’s literature conventions have to do with her incorporation of Gothic elements in the novels, and how they are deployed to represent the worlds of children and adults. Therefore, examining Rowling’s use of Gothic can not only shed some light on prevalent conceptions of childhood that influence present-day children’s fiction, but it can also shed further light on the larger discussion about the success of *Harry Potter*. After all, Gothic elements in children’s literature have always been a means to make texts more appealing for child readers. As Jackson, Coats and McGillis affirm, “While Gothic conventions are readily familiar to child readers who find mental analogues in their formulaic landscapes and often humorous approach to psychic horrors, children are kept interested through the constant changes made to the conventions, the new twists and surprises” (2008: 5).

The Gothic in *Harry Potter*

The presence of Gothic elements in Rowling's novels has already captured the attention of critics. As Susanne Gruss points out, "That Gothic is one of the popular genres Rowling borrows from is beyond doubt" (2011: 39). Consequently, there is practically no Gothic element in the *Harry Potter* series that has gone unnoticed by scholars. Veronica L. Schanoes, for example, analyzes *Harry Potter* as a metafictional text and looks into how the representation of written narratives, "the duplicitous nature of writing in her [Rowling's] books", is inextricably linked to her construction of good and evil (2003: 131). Other Gothic Studies readings of the series have paid attention to Gothic elements like the villain (Rothman, 2011) and his characterization as the hero's other (Steveker, 2011), Rowling's representation of benign monsters (Saxena, 2012), the use of Gothic devices to represent female development (Cummins, 2008), and the culmination of the Gothic in *Order of the Phoenix* and how the movie adaptation is 'degothicized' (Gruss, 2011).

All these previous Gothic Studies readings of *Harry Potter* are of utmost importance to my own argumentation. Yet, what I find missing in this overall discussion is a more careful examination of the purpose Gothic elements fulfill in a text primarily aimed at older child readers. In other words, do these Gothic elements challenge or reaffirm contemporary conceptions of childhood and conventions of children's literature? In order to answer this question, each one of the subsequent sections focuses on one main Gothic element and how it affects Rowling's representation of the child and adult worlds. I argue that Rowling's use of Gothic imagery provides opportunities for portraying a world where the child is empowered, but this is overturned by the series's closure when the child turns out to be a weapon to maintain adult normativity. If Harry is "the boy who lived" and the boy who defies the Dursley's rules at the

beginning of the series (Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 1997: 18),⁷ by the end, he has irrevocably become “Dumbledore’s man” (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 2005: 326).⁸ As stated in my introductory chapter, my discussion will begin with an examination of Rowling’s narrative voice and her playing with the narrative conventions of Gothic fiction.

1.2. Not Alone in the Dark: Finding Consolation in Rowling’s Narrative

So Matilda’s strong young mind continued to grow, nurtured by the voices of all those authors who had sent their books out into the world like ships on the sea. These books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message: You are not alone.

Roald Dahl, *Matilda*

My main argument in this section is that, despite Rowling’s use of Gothic imagery to depict the tensions between children and adults, it cannot be ignored that the way her narrator treats her child protagonist and her narratee reflects a relationship of friendliness and complicity between the two age groups. The novels deal with tragic and horrifying events in Harry’s life, focusing on such unsettling issues as bullying, child abuse and death. Yet, the friendly, reassuring, third-person voice of an adult who easily identifies with the child provides the consolation that is expected from children’s books. In his essay “On Fairy Stories”, Tolkien stated that fairy stories must provide consolation to readers’ unfulfilled desires, ambitions and fears (2008: 73), and I would certainly say that this applies to children’s literature as well. Harry’s Gothic adventures

⁷ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

⁸ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

are framed by Rowling's comforting tone, a contrast which, I argue, is one of the elements that mark a Gothic tale as intended for younger readers. This is not to say that the adult narrator's authority is never questioned or even Gothicized by the presence of unreliable character-narrators inside Rowling's own narrative, like Tom Riddle or Rita Skeeter. However, as I will discuss, these fake narratives ultimately reassert the narrator's credibility and reinforce the view of the adult storyteller as the child's ally. This supports this chapter's underlying thesis that Gothic devices are deployed to preserve and celebrate, not to transgress, adult control over the narrative and over the child's world in *Harry Potter*.

Rowling's Narrator

Granger defines Rowling's narrative voice as "third person *limited* omniscient view" (2009: 26, original emphasis). Rowling's narrator is omniscient inasmuch as she knows everything that is going on in and out of Harry's mind: "we see all the action in the books as if there were a house-elf sitting on Harry's shoulder with a minicam. This obliging elf can also tell us everything Harry is thinking and feeling in addition to showing us what he sees around him" (Granger, 2009: 27). On the other hand, this perspective is limited because, most of the time, "we don't see any more than Harry sees" (Granger, 2009: 27), with a few exceptions like the opening chapters of *Philosopher's Stone*, *Goblet of Fire*, *Half-Blood Prince* and *Deathly Hallows*, which describe events in which Harry is not involved. Nevertheless, Granger points out that "because we're not restricted to Harry's narration, it *seems* as if we're seeing a larger bit of the story than if Harry just told it himself" (2009: 27, original emphasis); and hence the illusion of omniscience created by Rowling's narration, an illusion that is

fundamental to the narrative misdirection that characterizes the seven books, a point to which I will return in due course.

When the narrator is inside Harry's mind, Rowling often uses narrated monologue to represent Harry's consciousness, among other types of figural narration. Narrated monologue is "a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse" (Nikolajeva, 2002: 178), a term first coined by Dorrit Cohn in *Transparent Minds* (1983). According to Cohn, narrated monologue can be regarded "as the moment when the thought-thread of a character is most tightly woven into the texture of third-person narration" (1983: 111). The following passage exemplifies this technique:

And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than them? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been *he* who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered, and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed? (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 2003: 13, original emphasis)⁹

Despite being in the third person and presented as part of the narrator's discourse, these are clearly Harry's thoughts, not the narrator's. Despite the fact that this technique gives prominence to the child's mind, it is still markedly different from first-person narration, inasmuch as "the continued employment of third-person references indicates, no matter how unobtrusively, the continued presence of a narrator. And it is his *identification*—but not his *identity*—with the character's mentality that is supremely enhanced by this technique" (Cohn, 1983: 112). I believe that, in children's literature—and in *Harry Potter* in particular—narrated monologue provides the child reader with an adult voice that is likable because of how comfortably she identifies with the child. This not only

⁹ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

brings the reader closer to the character, allowing him or her to have access to the character's thoughts and feelings, but it also provides comfort because it is an understanding adult voice that tells the story, an adult voice that seems not to have forgotten what it is like to be Harry's age. Nikolajeva, however, sees narrated monologue as a covert way of transmitting ideology: "we may believe that authorial control is thus eliminated or at least subdued, while it is in fact merely hiding behind the characters. Covert didacticism and covert ideology can more easily be practiced through narrated monologue" (2002: 180). A closer examination of Rowling's narrative voice should help clarify to what extent she practices covert ideology by means of her narrator.

Rowling's narrative manner and her use of language have been compared to those of previous British writers, particularly Enid Blyton (Granger, 2009: 44; Gallardo-C and Smith, 2003: 191) and Roald Dahl (Smith, 2003: 82; Gallardo-C and Smith, 2003: 191). Wall describes Blyton's narrative manner as one that puts children's interests first with her "short sentences and simple vocabulary, the lack of detailed description of settings or analyses of situations or character, the dominance of dialogue, together with her remarkable skill in the manipulation of events and the management of pace" (1991: 190). Like Blyton's works, Rowling's narration also privileges the interests of the child and adolescent audience with her simplicity of style and her action-driven plot. Wall, however, also points out that Blyton's "restricting of what is told to what is known and understood by the children in her stories, the confining of the language and syntax to the level of their minds (...) has meant inevitably that Blyton's are books for children to grow out of, not to grow into" (1991: 193). This is certainly not the case with Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which is enjoyed by both adults and

children, and which—as I further discuss in the subsequent paragraphs—also satisfies the needs of an adult readership.

Rowling's addressees are older children, and this is best exemplified by the presence of comic Gothic elements and Dahlesque gross-out humor. Nevertheless, some omissions in the text as well as the strong presence of adult moral commentary throughout the series also reveal Rowling's inclination to please those adults that might be watching over the child reader's shoulder. This can be appreciated in the following passage in which Fred and George Weasley—Ron's elder brothers, authors of many 'tasteless' jokes—talk about their latest invention, a magic fudge that allows students to skip classes by giving them a fever. In this dialogue, a 'bad' word is deliberately omitted:

'Does it work?' enquired Ron hopefully (...).
'Well, yeah,' said Fred, 'your temperature'll go right up.'
'But you get these massive pus-filled boils, too,' said George (...).
'I can't see any boils,' said Ron, staring at the twins.
'No, well, you wouldn't,' said Fred darkly, 'they're not in a place we generally display to the public.'
'But they make sitting on a broom a right pain in the –'
(*Order of the Phoenix*, 336)

Gross-out humor is introduced for the child reader's enjoyment. Yet, the omission in the last line reveals some self-consciousness about the presence of adults and a wish to please them as well. Thus, like Dahl who "puts himself in league with an implied child reader" (Wall, 1991: 193), Rowling's narrator encourages the child—and the childlike adult—to forget about political correctness, though always within acceptable limits.

The fact that Rowling's narrator privileges the interests of a child addressee is also apparent in her satirical portrayal of certain unsympathetic adult characters whose authority is undermined by Rowling's poignant sense of humor. This again echoes Dahl, who

ranges himself, not merely like Blyton, with children, but with children against adults. His stance shows him assuming that children will join with him and squirm delightedly at what many adults will find either nauseating or disgusting, will squirm all the more delightedly in fact because they do so with the approval of the adult who has joined them. (Wall, 1991: 194)

In *Harry Potter*, Mr Dursley, for instance, is scornfully described as “large and neckless”; Mrs Dursley is “horse-faced and bony”; and Dudley “blond, pink and porky” (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 1998: 9).¹⁰ Such descriptions might be considered hilarious by some, but tasteless and offensive by others. Gregory G. Peptone, for instance, declares that he does not share Rowling’s fascination with “pop culture vulgarity” (2012: 224). Julie Cross, on the other hand, referring to Roald Dahl in particular, acknowledges that

This opportunity for children to have the satisfaction of laughing at a ‘stupid’ adult is a long-standing mainstay of children’s fiction. It is well established that children in middle childhood in particular enjoy the superiority and mastery aspect of seeing and laughing at the misunderstandings of naïve and stupid characters. (2008: 60-1)

Yet, Cross also believes that “Dahl’s world of grotesque caricatures can be too simplistic. (...) and there are strong elements of moral didacticism which may not be desirable” (2008: 59-60). Cross regards the “farce and slapstick revenge and even gross-out, scatological humour” in Dahl’s books—also present in *Harry Potter*—as a lower form of humor, inferior to “the humour of incongruity, a more cognitive, higher type of humour”, as found in other books for children like Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2008: 61), which I will discuss in Chapter 4. I have some reservations regarding Cross’s negative view of Dahlesque forms of humor, for I believe they fulfill the very basic need of laughing at that which in real life creates

¹⁰ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

anxiety.¹¹ And, certainly, bullies and child abusers are a very real anxiety for real children.

These are only a few of the features that Rowling's narrator has in common with those of other British children's writers that put the interests of the child reader first. However, as I already suggested, saying that Rowling puts children's interests first is only partly true. Even if the language and humor prioritize children's preferences, adult expectations are still largely satisfied, albeit indirectly. Although the narrator in *Harry Potter* never moralizes explicitly nor tells children how to behave, by no means is the novel devoid of adult moral commentary. It is enough to look at *which* characters are portrayed as stupid through humor. It is not the wise, authoritative teacher; or the protective, biological parent; or the studious child. Rather, the ridiculed characters are parents who spoil their children, and kids who prefer video games to books, as in the following ironic passage about Harry's dumb cousin Dudley: "By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programmes he'd wanted to see and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 35). Rowling's caricatures also indulge the adult's wish to criticize the way other people raise their children and complain about how naughty kids are these days. Humor thus functions as a device to indicate which characters represent undesirable qualities, and the reader is incited to share the narrator's disapproval. The appeal of Rowling's narrator is, therefore, twofold: on one hand, she is likable to child readers because she sides with Harry against the Dursleys. On the other hand, adult readers can easily identify with her because the views she represents are markedly adult.

¹¹ For a more in-depth commentary on humour in children's fiction, see Chapter 4.

This takes me back to Nikolajeva's assertion that indirect, covert ways of inculcating ideology may prove to be more effective. In *Harry Potter*, however, the "voice of adult values"—to use Perry Nodelman's expression (2008: 33)—is not only implicit and hidden behind narrated monologue and humorous passages, but it is also explicit. Rowling never actually hides the fact that her novels have a didactic dimension. Although she claimed that "I never think in terms of What am I going to teach them [children]?", she also admits that "undeniably, morals are drawn" (in Grossman, 2005). Significantly, explicit didacticism is not uttered by the narrator in *Harry Potter*, for this is generally regarded as writing down and has fallen out of favour in contemporary children's fiction. In *Rhetoric of Character*, Nikolajeva explains how "the implied author is responsible for the ideology of the text" and that in a mainstream (adult) novel "a character can serve as the author's mouthpiece" (2002: 4). However, she points out, in children's fiction,

The author's views cannot thus be directly expressed through the child character without the narrative assuming an unnatural tone. A possible solution is to use an adult secondary character who will provide the desired opinions and counterbalance the child character's 'false' beliefs and assumptions. (2002: 4)

This is precisely the role that Dumbledore, the Hogwarts headmaster, fulfills in *Harry Potter*. Acting as mentor and moral guide for Harry—and, in turn, for the reader—Dumbledore is in charge of explaining, at the end of every book, the significance of the events that have taken place. Not surprisingly, Granger compares him to the "Doctor ('learned man' in Latin) [who] explains the importance of good deeds in spiritual life" at the end of morality plays (2009: 176). Even in *Deathly Hallows*, when Dumbledore is already dead, Rowling adds a plot twist that allows him to talk to Harry from beyond the grave. This does not mean, however, that adult authority goes unquestioned. With

the construction of fake narratives and fictional narrators inside her narrative, Rowling provides a complex commentary about texts, (adult) narrators and their reliability.

Riddle, Beedle and Other Fictional Narrators

The presence of fake narratives and narrators not only adds to the Gothic feel of the series, but also provides a commentary on textuality that is relevant to my analysis of the adult-child relationship in Rowling's series. Schanoes states that, in *Harry Potter*, "Certain passages regarding writing in the books seem to explicitly indicate a textual metaconsciousness" (2003: 138). We already see this at the beginning of the first book when Dumbledore and McGonagall leave baby Harry at the Dursleys' doorstep and McGonagall exclaims: "there will be books written about Harry – every child in our world will know his name!" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 15). From the beginning, this establishes a relationship between the fictional books inside her narration and the actual book the reader is holding. Narratives in *Harry Potter* are represented as both enlightening ("The Tale of the Three Brothers" in *Deathly Hallows*) and deceptive (Tom Riddle's diary in *Chamber of Secrets* or Rita Skeeter's news articles in *Goblet of Fire* and *Deathly Hallows*), sometimes leading the child protagonists to safety and sometimes to confusion and even mortal danger. Therefore, as Schanoes adds, "These passages of metaconsciousness openly force the reader to reflect upon the potential dangers and instability of the very text she holds in her hands" (2003: 138).

According to Do Rozario, in children's books, "material rather [than] allusive intertextuality—the book, ink, and paper—becomes the Gothic manifestation" (2008:

209). Do Rozario mentions Jonathan's Stroud's *The Bartimeous Trilogy* (2003-2010),¹² Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* trilogy (2003-2008),¹³ and Marcus Sedgwick's *The Book of Dead Days* (2003) and its sequel *The Dark Flight Down* (2005).¹⁴ These are all children's novels that turn the book into a Gothic object through which the boundary between fiction and reality becomes permeable. I would also add DiTerlizzi and Black's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2003-2009),¹⁵ Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (see Chapter 4) and, of course, the *Harry Potter* series. Do Rozario explains this proliferation of books inside books stating that

Books are increasingly regarded as archaic, particularly those that are bound and engraved, intimating that they have joined other Gothic props and objects. Technology, in essence, displaced the book into the supernatural. Even the covers of these children's books recreate themselves as ancient relics, covers mimicking leather and stone with old-fashioned calligraphy imprinted upon the binding. The books wear their tactile antiquity on their sleeves. (2008: 213)

In Rowling's magical world, however, the child hero's life story is constructed not only through books, but also through other types of narratives: memories kept in bottles, prophecies in magic balls, unwritten legends, newspaper articles and symbols engraved on tombstones. All these different narratives contain bits and pieces of Harry's life, which is as fragmented as the texts themselves. Like Gothic ruins and castles, all these books and recorded memories represent the physical return of the past to the present. In fact, the first mystery in Harry's story and the only clue he has about his past is the

¹² Stroud's fantasy trilogy is about a young magician, Nathaniel, who lives in an alternative historical reality in which magicians are the dominant class.

¹³ In the *Inkheart* trilogy by German writer Cornelia Funke, Meggie's father has a gift that makes fictional characters come out of books when he reads aloud.

¹⁴ Sedgwick's fantasy novels are also about a young magician, Valerian, who has only four days left to live as a result of a deal he made with evil, and the information he needs to save his life is hidden in the *Book of Dead Days*.

¹⁵ In *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, the Grace children move to a new house where they find a book that reveals that fairies and other nastier creatures exist and are living among us.

lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. The scar itself is not a text, but it is certainly a mark that contains meaning and can be ‘read’, as Dumbledore suggests in an apparently trivial and humorous comment at the beginning of the first book: “Scars can come in useful. I have one myself above my left knee which is a perfect map of the London Underground” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 17).

Turning the book into a Gothic object, Rowling’s representation of narratives is inextricably linked to the construction of good and evil in her novels. As Schanoes states, “Rowling’s articulation of a uniquely complex understanding of morality is both dependent on and integral to the duplicitous nature of writing in her books” (2003: 131). That narratives and texts can be Gothic, blurring the boundaries between fiction and lived experience, is best exemplified in Rowling’s series by Tom Riddle’s diary, which controls the minds of those who write on it. It is precisely their trust in the diary’s personal and friendly tone that leads both Harry and Ginny Weasley to mortal peril in *Chamber of Secrets*. At the beginning, Tom Riddle teases Harry’s curiosity and lures him by saying that the diary “*holds memories of terrible things. Things which were covered up*” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 179, original italics). Eventually, however, it all turns out to be a trap to take Harry to Tom Riddle, who finally reveals himself as Lord Voldemort’s younger self. Significantly, during Harry and Riddle’s confrontation, the latter mocks Ginny for having confided in the diary: “I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply *loved* me. *No one’s ever understood me like you, Tom ... I’m so glad I’ve got this diary to confide in ... It’s like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket...*” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 228, original emphasis). Tom Riddle is thus comparable to the narrator of children’s Gothic: he is a kind, sympathetic stranger that promises to tell amazing things to children, things that adults are hiding from them. Yet, as the

outcome of Harry's experience with the diary suggests, narratives that are told by apparently kind, friendly and sympathetic strangers are not to be trusted blindly. Another similar example—though more satirical than Gothic—is Gilderoy Lockhart, who brags in his books about all the things he has done. Lockhart also turns out to be a fraud, an incompetent wizard who became famous by stealing other people's achievements. When he is found out by Harry, Lockhart simply tells him that “Books can be misleading” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 220).

The fact that Rowling is constantly underlining the unreliability of narratives and friendly narrators calls the trustworthiness of her own narrative into question. According to Spooner, “The construction of fake histories is integral to Gothic texts. (...) The narrator may be unreliable or inarticulate. It is often framed by supporting narratives that elaborate on or question the story told inside” (2006: 38). In my view, however, the presence of fake narratives in Rowling's series does not aim to discredit the figure of the storyteller. As the examples I have provided suggest, in *Harry Potter* unreliability is linked to “official narratives, [which] despite a pretense of accuracy, objectivity, and coherence, are revealed to be made of unreliable, arguable assumptions and manipulative misinterpretations” (Schanoes, 2003: 138). With characters like Rita Skeeter, who manipulates Harry's life in her newspaper articles, and Dolores Umbridge, who is not a writer but is also guilty of manipulating information, Rowling seems to be warning her readers against narratives that claim to be telling the truth, like newspaper articles, biographies or diaries. Rowling's critique, however, does not seem to include fiction.

Schanoes's article was published in 2003, four years before *Deathly Hallows*, and therefore “The Tale of the Three Brothers”, the only example of a ‘fake’ fictional

narrative in *Harry Potter*, does not appear in her discussion. Still, I believe Schanoes gets it right when she speculates that,

Fiction does not rely on an allegedly objective authority and does not demand blind acceptance; rather, the success of an unequivocally fictional narrative depends on a complicity between writer and reader, a willing suspension of disbelief. Perhaps the collusion between writer and reader required by fiction renders it harmless in Rowling's schema. (2003: 143)

Schanoes's guess is confirmed in *Deathly Hallows* with Beedle the Bard, a fictional storyteller who "lived in the fifteenth century" (Rowling, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, 2008: xiii) and wrote stories for wizarding children.¹⁶ This fictional storyteller does much more than just reinforcing one of the main moral lessons in the series, the fact that attempting to escape death ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Beedle's tale also provides a commentary on narrative. When Harry, Ron and Hermione first hear "The Tale of the Three Brothers" at Mr Lovegood's house, the latter insists that the story actually happened and the Deathly Hallows exist. Hermione, the most rational of the three, dismisses the idea as "completely ridiculous" (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 2007: 334).¹⁷ Even Ron, who is less given to critical thinking than Harry or Hermione, also expresses his disbelief: "that story's just one of those things you tell kids to teach them lessons, isn't it? 'Don't go looking for trouble, don't pick fights, don't go messing around with stuff that's best left alone! Just keep your head down, mind your own business and you'll be OK.'" (*Deathly Hallows*, 336). And yet, in

¹⁶ Beedle the Bard could be the Charles Perrault or the Geoffrey Chaucer of Rowling's magical world, except that his fairy tales are told from the point of view of witches and wizards. In *Harry Potter's Bookshelf*, Granger emphasizes the resemblance between "The Tale of the Three Brothers" and Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" (2009: 181). On the other hand, in Rowling's introduction to *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, it is said that "much of his life remains shrouded in mystery" (2008: xiii), which is also reminiscent of William Shakespeare.

¹⁷ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

the end, both Ron and Hermione are proven wrong. Beedle's story is indeed a cautionary tale with fantasy added to make the story more attractive to children, but it turns out to be based on real facts. Thus, not only does "The Tale of the Three Brothers" contain truth, but it also proves to be crucial in the series's denouement. Similarly, in *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry's History of Magic teacher tells students that the legend about the chamber of secrets is "such a very *sensational*, even *ludicrous* tale...", "A tale told to frighten the gullible", as opposed to "solid, believable, verifiable *fact!*" (*Chamber of Secrets*, 113-5, original emphasis). In the end, it turns out the legend was true, and history a false account, manipulated by a former Hogwarts headmaster to save his own reputation. I read this as an affirmation of the capacity of fictional stories, and particularly children's stories and fairy tales, to transmit knowledge without necessarily claiming to hold the absolute truth as other types of narratives do.

Consequently, this does not contradict but it affirms what Rowling is doing: she is also telling a fictional story from which truth and knowledge can be gained, yet with no pretence of absolute authority. In fact, Rowling makes it clear that her account belongs to the realm of fictional storytelling from the very first page of the first book when she talks about "the dull, grey Tuesday *our story starts*" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 7, my emphasis), an expression that recalls the oral tradition. Thus, I do not believe the presence of fake narratives in the series suggests that Rowling's narrator—and for this matter, all narrators—is also unreliable. Unreliability and danger in Rowling's fictional world are associated with 'objective' narratives, not with fiction. There certainly are character-narrators in *Harry Potter* that contradict the adult narrator's account, such as Rita Skeeter, the outrageously manipulative journalist through whom Rowling satirizes sensationalist newspapers. Rita Skeeter's articles viciously distort the 'truth' which is,

after all, the narrator's version of the story, but they are so over the top that the reader knows from the beginning that she is not to be trusted. The effect created by these fake narratives is therefore mostly satirical and does not, in my opinion, challenge the credibility of Rowling's narrator. It certainly cannot be overlooked that Skeeter's lurid account of Dumbledore in *Deathly Hallows* actually contains much truth, but even then, Rowling gives the Headmaster the chance to explain his own story himself, and it is his own account that prevails in the end.

It is true that, as Schanoes explains, Rowling uses generic conventions to confuse and fool the reader, and it is relevant to refer back to narrative misdirection at this point. For example, the characterization of Severus Snape is deliberately misleading. He has "the dark looks of a gothic villain. By all conventional narrative cues, Snape's nastiness should indicate that he is a villain of the deepest dye. But Snape is not evil. Snape is a good guy who protects Harry on several occasions and risks his own life in the fight against Voldemort" (Schanoes, 2003: 132). Certainly, Rowling's narrator constantly makes the reader see that appearances are deceptive and that people—and objects—are sometimes not what they seem to be. At the end of *Philosopher's Stone*, when Harry confronts evil Professor Quirrell, whom he believed to be harmless, "Quirrell mocks Harry, and, by extension, Rowling mocks her reader for being taken in by a particularly sly combination of her own writing and her use of genre conventions" (Schanoes, 2003: 131). I insist, though, that this does not make Rowling's narrator unreliable, but intentionally and playfully misleading. At the end of every book, the 'truth' is always found out, and, any loose ends are neatly tied up at the end of the series, when all the different pieces of the story come together. There is nothing in the text that suggests an alternative outcome, as happens in unreliable narratives. In *Harry*

Potter, any attempt to mislead the reader is only temporary, which takes me back to the sense of security or, in Tolkien's words, the consolation that the series ultimately conveys.

After analyzing how narrative voice provides a reassuring narrative frame for Harry's Gothic story, I will now turn to analyze Gothic elements and the representation of childhood as a Gothic period of time. Do Rozario points out that "In the absence of an actual castle, books themselves create the architecture, libraries, shelves, boxes, and piles of books configuring paper and ink secret chambers and passages, dungeons, and wild woods" (2008: 216). In *Harry Potter*, however, both Gothic elements are present: a labyrinthine narrative and a labyrinthine castle. Harry's castle, however, acquires very different connotations: it becomes his home despite its perils.

1.3. Harry, the Orphan of the Castle: Child Empowerment and the Gothic Setting

In the old days at home the Neverland had always begun to look a little dark and threatening by bedtime.

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

As several critics have noted, Rowling's series is highly influenced by British school stories that narrate the maturation and socialization of boys and girls, such as Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857),¹⁸ Enid Blyton's *The Naughtiest Girl* (1940 – 1952), *St. Claire's* (1941 – 1945) and *Malory Towers* (1946 – 1951). *Harry Potter*, however, does not simply conform to the school-story formula, but rather re-imagines it

¹⁸ Hughes's novel was extremely influential on the British school story genre, and it shares many similarities with *Harry Potter*. It relates eleven-year-old Tom Brown's experience (based on the author's own experience) in Rugby School, a public school for boys. There he makes friends with Harry East, he is bullied by a boy named Flashman and finds the support of Dr Arnold, the headmaster.

by combining it with other popular genres like the detective story, the adventure story and the Gothic. Granger, for example, describes *Harry Potter* as a series of “gothic schoolboy novel[s]” (2009: 104). Similarly, Alton states that “Harry Potter signifies a return to the traditional Victorian boarding school or public school story, but with the element of fantasy added” (2009: 210). In *Harry Potter*, the Gothic castle merges with the boarding school, a setting which already appears in Jill Murphy’s *The Worst Witch* series (1974-2013),¹⁹ Ursula LeGuin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968)²⁰ and Diana Wynne Jones’s *Witch Week* (1982),²¹ but which has been popularized worldwide by Rowling. Throughout this section, I argue that, despite conforming to Gothic conventions, Hogwarts is not a place of confinement and alienation as castles traditionally are in Gothic romances. On the contrary, when Harry goes to Hogwarts, he is freed from his closeted existence in Number 4 Privet Drive and finds his true home. The Gothic setting thus becomes, for the child, a liberating alternative to the dullness, or even the abuse, found in the conventional home. On the other hand, the alienating quality of the traditional Gothic castle is transferred to the English middle-class suburban home where Harry is ill-treated and humiliated because of his “unnaturalness” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 2000: 41).²²

¹⁹ In Murphy’s series, Mildred Hubble goes to Miss Cackle’s Academy for Witches, which “looked more like a prison than a school, with its grey walls and turrets” (2001: 7).

²⁰ LeGuin’s novel also features a school for young wizards, “a fort or castle it seemed, built of mighty grey blocks of stone” (2010: 35).

²¹ In *Witch Week* there is Larwood House, a boarding school for witch-orphans.

²² Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

At Home in the Gothic Castle

Rowling has revealed in interviews that she never attended boarding school and that “the [boarding school] culture was not one I’d enjoy” (in Hattenstone, 2000). As Steege states, “rather than pointing to real boarding schools as the foundation for Hogwarts, it is more accurate to say that Hogwarts and Harry’s experiences there are based on British popular culture conceptions of what is known as ‘public school stories’” (2004: 141). I will not go into detail here about how *Harry Potter* conforms to the school story genre, for this has already been discussed by numerous critics before (Granger, 2009; Alton, 2009; Smith, 2003; Steege, 2004). Suffice it to say that Rowling borrows the genre’s formula of a young boy sent to boarding school, where he makes friends and enemies, proves his worth in classes and competitions, and learns responsibility and self-reliance, among other social values. All the school-story stock characters are also there: the strict teacher, the benevolent headmaster, the hero’s best friends, the bullies and the pranksters, to name a few. The boarding school setting in *Harry Potter* was, according to Rowling herself, necessary for her story: “the school had to be a boarding school because most of the magic happens in the middle of the night, and if it was a day school you wouldn’t get the same sense of community” (in Hattenstone, 2000). Not only does the boarding-school setting allow child protagonists to be together in one place, but it also allows the author to do away with parental authority, giving the fictional child more independence to set off on adventures. As Nikolajeva puts it, “The absence of parental authority allows the space that the fictive child needs for development and maturity, in order to test (and taste) his independence and to discover the world without adult protection” (2009: 230). In Harry’s case, of course, parental authority is eliminated by having his parents killed by Voldemort right at the onset of

the story. Still, the boarding school setting ensures that Harry can make friends whose parents are not around either. This provides, as Nikolajeva affirms, “excellent opportunities for empowerment” (2009: 233).

The school story empowers child protagonists by portraying a world where children are active and do what adult protection would prevent them from doing. Although the school is certainly not without authority figures, writers usually make sure that they are not too much of a hindrance by equipping fictional students with some sort of ‘weapon’ to fool teachers, prefects and caretakers. In *Harry Potter*, magical objects like Harry’s Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder’s Map ensure that the three protagonists can roam the castle at night without being seen. Furthermore, Rowling stresses the fact that the school in *Harry Potter* is not a place where authority has to be met with blind acceptance and obedience by giving Hogwarts a headmaster who understands that rule-breaking is sometimes necessary. In fact, it is Dumbledore himself who gives Harry the Invisibility Cloak that allows him to break so many rules. This representation of adults and children is another element that has elicited comparisons between Rowling and Blyton, who “gives them [children] an unashamedly make-believe world in which children are supreme, in which dangers and problems exist merely for them to overcome. Parents and adults are there, and help when invited to do so, but they seldom act as constraints” (Wall, 1991: 189). Rowling’s adult figures have a similar function to Blyton’s. In *Harry Potter*, though, this empowerment of the child characters and the relative lack of parental authority last only until the fourth book. In the first four novels, children are the ones who are in charge of solving mysteries, like Blyton’s Famous Five or the Secret Seven. In the last three books, however, we find out that Rowling’s young heroes are actually fulfilling a ‘grand plan’ set up by an adult (a

point to which I will return in section 1.5.). Yet, for now, I will focus on this empowerment that the Gothic boarding-school setting provides.

Apart from being a narrative device, the school setting inevitably carries its own cultural meaning: the school is, first and foremost, a normative space for children in contemporary Western society. As Heather Montgomery states, “The UNCRC emphasizes that the proper place for children is at school or at home with their families” (2009a: 6).²³ The school is thus constructed as a space where the child is protected from the world of labor and money, and the boarding school in particular emphasizes this separation between child and adult spheres even more. This concept of the school as a safe place for children is constantly highlighted in *Harry Potter*. Hogwarts is described as the safest place for young witches and wizards—especially for Harry, who is under constant threat—protected by spells and ruled by the only wizard Voldemort fears. In addition, Hogwarts is also like a substitute home for its students with its “common room, a cosy, round room full of squashy armchairs” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 96), its fireplaces, and its rich banquets in the Great Hall. As Professor McGonagall tells first-year students when they first arrive: “while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 85). Hogwarts can therefore be read as a metaphorical representation of this adult attempt to protect childhood which underlies the whole saga.

Surprisingly, Rowling uses Gothic imagery to represent this space of child protection. When asked about how she visualizes Hogwarts, Rowling replied that it is “A huge, rambling, quite scary-looking castle, with a jumble of towers and battlements”

²³ ‘UNCRC’ stands for the ‘United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’, which came into force in 1989. Its aim is “to protect and promote children’s rights in the fields of health, education, nationality, and the family” (Montgomery, 2009a: 6).

(in Scholastic.com, 2000). Hogwarts has all the characteristics of a Gothic castle: it is massive, it is inhabited by ghosts and a poltergeist, it has “stone walls (...) lit with flaming torches” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 85), “labyrinthine passages” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 164), dark corridors, dungeons, tricky staircases with vanishing steps, moving portraits and a Forbidden Forest full of beasts and dangerous creatures. Furthermore, violent entertainment is allowed at Hogwarts, as students are encouraged to engage in dangerous games and competitions like Quidditch—the wizard sport—or the Triwizard Tournament. This certainly does not sound like a description of a safe place for the child as adults understand it, and it seems to contradict my reading of Hogwarts as a symbol of child protection. It is important to note, though, that the series differentiates between violent entertainment occurring in a supervised environment, and the real violence perpetrated by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. It is the latter that children have to be protected from at Hogwarts.

Still, the school and the Gothic castle bear radically opposed cultural meanings. As I have discussed, the school is a proper space for the child as adults understand it, a repository of knowledge and rationality—although, when seen from the child’s point of view, it may turn out to be a place of oppression and abuse, as we see in *Jane Eyre* or Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*. On the other hand, in *The Contested Castle*, Ellis defines the Gothic castle as “the dark opposite” of “the ‘safe’ sphere of home”, a depiction of “the home as a place of danger and imprisonment” (1989: x). In the Gothic tradition, the castle alienates and confines its inhabitants. What is more, Botting states that the castle, as well as other medieval buildings in Gothic fiction,

(...) in their generally ruinous states, harked back to a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition and fear. Architecture, particularly medieval in form (although historical accuracy was not a prime concern), signaled the spatial and temporal separation of the past and its values from those of the

present. The pleasures of horror and terror came from the reappearance of figures long gone. (1996: 3)

Yet, despite its Gothic appearance, Hogwarts is not scary, seen from the point of view of Harry and his peers. On the contrary, right from the beginning, “The castle felt more like home [for Harry] than Privet Drive had ever done” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 126).

Before moving on with my reading of Hogwarts as a Gothic castle, I would like to discuss the significance of turning Gothic settings into the child’s home, which has become a popular trope in children’s fiction. The Gothic space, far from being alienating, has become a more fun and interesting alternative to conventional spaces for children, not only in literature, but also in comic Gothic movies and shows from *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) and *Scooby-Doo* (1969-1970) to more recent movies like *Despicable Me* (2010)²⁴ and *ParaNorman* (2012).²⁵ On the other hand, as child characters increasingly feel at home in Gothic settings, conventional spaces are turning into repositories of abuse and hypocrisy in children’s fiction. We see this, for instance, in Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* (2008)—inspired by Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894)²⁶—about a child named Nobody Owens, whose home is a graveyard that protects him from the dangerous world outside. I find this reversal relevant because, after all, castles, graveyards and ruins were used to represent *adult* fears of death, decay and the return of the past, and it is only fitting that they acquire

²⁴ In *Despicable Me*, directed by Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud, three little girls are adopted by Gru, a ‘villain’ whose home parodies typical Gothic mansions.

²⁵ *ParaNorman*, directed by Chris Butler, is about a little boy, Norman, who can see dead people and yet he is not afraid; on the contrary, he enjoys talking to them, and his whole room is decorated with Gothic posters and objects.

²⁶ In “Acknowledgements”, Gaiman admits that “First, foremost and for ever: I owe an enormous debt, conscious and, I have no doubt, unconscious, to Rudyard Kipling and the two volumes of his remarkable work *The Jungle Book*” (Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 2008: 311).

different meanings in children's fiction. Moreover, traditional Gothic settings seem to have lost their old power to elicit fear after having been parodied on countless occasions. As adult Gothic has found new settings to represent fear, the fears associated with old castles and graveyards have increasingly become risible when compared to the real horrors found in some households. As 'proper' spaces for children have been Gothicized, traditional Gothic settings have been displaced to the realm of parody and children's fiction.

It is also significant that, as Gothic settings have become part of children's fiction, the figure of the child has joined the Gothic imagery to represent turn-of-the-century fears in adult Gothic, as Büssing discusses in *Aliens in the Home*. The child figure is 'otherized' in adult Gothic, as in William March's novel *The Bad Seed* (1954), Richard Donner's horror movie *The Omen* (1976), Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) and "Children of the Corn" (1977), among many others. In these works of Gothic fiction for adults "the child has in a way taken over the function of the *Doppelgänger*" (Büssing, 1987: xvi). In fact, the child and the Gothic are, after all, not so alien from each other, for they have both often been 'otherized' by dominant ideologies. While the child figure has been demonized to reflect "the parents' failure to control them" (Martín Alegre, 2001: 107), the Gothic has often been considered a *childish* form of entertainment, lacking in taste and sophistication. It is therefore not surprising, in my view, that authors increasingly depict Gothic settings as the child's home, not only because old castles have been so overused that they are not scary anymore, but also because of this identification between Gothic and childishness that adults themselves have created. Furthermore, in keeping with a general interest in representing the way children

experience the world, writers borrow imaginative Gothic settings that might be more effective than ordered, structured and tidy conventional homes and schools.

Moving back to Rowling's depiction of the Gothic castle, this identification between Gothic and childlikeness is apparent in the way Hogwarts is described:

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. (*Philosopher's Stone*, 98)

As this passage reflects, Hogwarts is almost like a live being. It is playful, capricious, unpredictable and sometimes deceitful. Hogwarts is, in fact, very much like a child. Like a Gothic castle reflecting the psychological state of its inhabitants, the confusing and unpredictable nature of Hogwarts' doors and staircases mirrors the confusion of first-year students who cannot find their way to classes. The Gothic castle in *Harry Potter* plays a similar role to Wonderland in Carroll's *Alice* novels, or Neverland in Barrie's *Peter Pan*: it is a tricky, confusing place, constantly subject to change. According to Nodelman, Alice's Wonderland "reverse[s] the conventional hierarchy and privilege[s] childhood openness to possibility over the limited certainties of adult knowledge" (Nodelman, 2008: 40). I argue that this is also true of Rowling's Hogwarts. Being a school, we would expect Hogwarts to represent the world of adult rules and regulations, and yet it is this "childhood openness to possibility" that predominates. It is precisely in *Order of the Phoenix*, when conservative Professor Umbridge (on behalf of the Ministry of Magic) tries to turn Hogwarts into a more ordered and disciplined school, that the castle becomes a trap for Harry and his schoolmates. Significantly, in order to overcome the strict limitations imposed by Umbridge, Harry and his friends

resort to the Room of Requirement. Described as a room that magically becomes whatever the person requires at any particular moment, from a broom cupboard to a fully equipped classroom, the Room of Requirement is a literal representation of this “openness to possibility” that Nodelman describes, as well as a sign of the space’s resistance to being controlled by the Ministry.

Thus, Rowling’s setting empowers the child thanks to not only the school-story formula, but also the fact that the school is a Gothic castle that metaphorically represents a childlike view of the world. Of course, it would not be accurate to say that adult views and forms of knowledge are completely absent. Hogwarts is, after all, a school. What the merging of the boarding school and the Gothic castle does, in my view, is to turn Hogwarts into a space where adult knowledge (the school) conflates with the child’s desire (the magic Gothic castle). It is a space where the child experiences the benefits of adult protection and wisdom, while at the same time he has enough space to relish his childlikeness.

Hogwarts provides, thus, a sharp contrast to the suburban ordinariness of Privet Drive. If, in the eighteenth century, “Gothic style became the shadow that haunted neoclassical values, running parallel and counter to its ideas of symmetrical form, reason, knowledge and propriety” (Botting, 1996: 32), Rowling’s magical world is the shadow that haunts the Muggle world of tidiness and conventionality. Like the Gothic being associated with bad taste in the eighteenth century, the Dursleys see everything having to do with magic as abnormal and disruptive. This contrast between Hogwarts and Privet Drive is emphasized, for example, when Harry first sees the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts, and the narrator states that “This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn’t have let it in the house” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 87).

Similarly, when Harry first visits a wizard house, The Burrow (the Weasley's home), and he sees their garden, it is pointed out that "the Dursleys wouldn't have liked it – there were plenty of weeds, and the grass needed cutting" (*Chamber of Secrets*, 32). Contrary to Privet Drive, the wizarding world is not associated with order and cleanliness, but it is the place where Harry feels loved and appreciated. It is in the Gothic setting, despite its untidiness and outlandishness, that the child protagonist feels at home. Rowling reinvents the boarding school, turning it into a space where knowledge and self-discovery are possible, precisely because it is not completely safe or perfectly organized. On the other hand, the function that the Gothic castle fulfills in traditional Gothic romances—trapping and alienating its inhabitants—is transferred to Number 4 Privet Drive. As Harry tells Dobby, the house-elf, "I don't *belong* here. I belong in your world—at Hogwarts" (*Chamber of Secrets*, 17-8, original emphasis).

Alienated in the Home

The beginning of Rowling's *Harry Potter* imagines childhood as constricted by the English middle-class suburban home. According to Knuth, in British children's literature, "England is home", and home "is a place where one can relax and feel secure and comfortable in one's own identity" (2012: 9). This identification between home and England is also present in *Harry Potter*. The Dursleys' home is explicitly said to be located in Surrey, and their Englishness is constantly highlighted. Number 4 Privet Drive, however, is not a place where Harry can feel comfortable. At the Dursleys', Harry is forced to sleep in the cupboard under the stairs in *Philosopher's Stone*, and to hide his magic all through the series. Whereas the Gothic castle—and the wizarding world in general—turns out to be a liberating space where Harry feels at home despite

the dangers he is exposed to, Number 4 Privet Drive is the space where he is literally and metaphorically inside the closet for being “a highly unusual boy” (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 1999: 7).²⁷ In *The Family in English Children’s Literature*,²⁸ Ann Alston describes the home in children’s literature as “at once a place of security, a haven from the outside world, and a place of constraint” (2008: 89). Number 4 Privet Drive is both: it is a space where Harry is constantly humiliated and abused, though later on in the series it is revealed to be a sanctuary, a space protected by Dumbledore’s spells, where Harry cannot be touched by evil wizards.

Number 4 Privet Drive is a satirical representation of the average English middle-class suburban home, “silent and tidy (...), the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 18). There, Harry lives with the Dursleys, his Muggle aunt and uncle and his cousin Dudley, who “didn’t approve of imagination” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 10) and “had a very medieval attitude towards magic” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 8). Number 4 Privet Drive is, therefore, the opposite of Hogwarts, where astonishing things happen all the time. It is the space that stands for tidiness, order and routine, ‘normalcy’ and propriety. Consequently, an unusual boy like Harry is a misfit in such a world: “Harry Potter’s appearance did not endear him to the neighbours, who were the sort of people who thought scruffiness ought to be punishable by law” (*Order of the Phoenix*, 7). From the Dursleys’ point of view, Harry is “just as strange, just as – as – as *abnormal*” as his deceased parents, whom they despise for being freaks and “weirdos” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 46). Significantly, Hogwarts and other parts of the wizarding world—like Diagon Alley and Platform 9 ¾—are said to be

²⁷ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated book title and the page number(s) will be provided.

²⁸ By ‘English children’s literature’ Alston means children’s literature written in English. She analyzes British, American and Canadian books.

invisible for non-magical people. As Hermione explains, “If a Muggle looks at it [Hogwarts], all they see is a mouldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE” (*Goblet of Fire*, 185). Metaphorically, this could be understood as an acknowledgement that access to the wizarding world is reserved to special people who are able to see beyond the mundane. Muggles, on the other hand, whose lack of imagination and preference for the ordinary blind them to this alternate reality, belong to the world of dullness and materialism; in other words, the world of adulthood in its most negative sense. Furthermore, the “DANGER” in the entrance sign alludes not only to the possible collapse of the “mouldering old ruin”, but also to the ‘dangerous knowledge’ that magic represents for Muggles. It is no wonder that Harry identifies with the world Hogwarts symbolizes, for if Hogwarts is invisible to Muggles and ‘dangerous’ to approach, this is exactly the way Harry feels at the Dursleys, invisible and feared.

Placing the child protagonist in such an alienating family environment sets the scene for Harry’s family romance: “When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 27). Thus, starting each book with Harry at the Dursleys’, the novels affirm that the proper space for a child is not necessarily a comfortable, well-to-do household, but a place where he is loved, be it a working-class home (the Weasleys) or an outlandish school (Hogwarts). Moreover, such a beginning also stresses a romanticized view of the child as an imaginative being who aspires to transcend the dullness of everyday life. As Nodelman states, children’s texts “tend to begin by imagining children as being discontented with the restrictions of home, to equate childlike desire with lust for what lies beyond the

safe walls adults provide, the constricting childhood adults imagine” (2008: 63). This opening is indeed recurrent in children’s fiction, especially in books that provide a fantasy world as an alternative to home.

This initial presentation of childhood as constricted by surrogate parents is also what, according to Granger, triggers the reader’s sympathy for Harry: “She [Rowling] pulls the ultimate empathy-winning card in English literature and plays it to the hilt. Harry Potter is an orphan, and, not only does he not have loving parents, he is saddled with relations who are almost unbelievably cruel to him” (2009: 17-8). Granger compares Harry Potter to Dickensian characters like Oliver Twist, Pip and David Copperfield, and he stresses the power of the orphan novel to elicit the reader’s sympathy (2009: 18). In her orphan story, Rowling denounces middle-class hypocrisy and bigotry, perpetrated not just by adults but also by children. In Harry’s neighborhood, nasty kids and bullies—Dudley and his friends—are supreme, and parental authority completely undermined. In a Dursleyish world, the home is a haven only for the biological child in the family, the ‘normal’ boy who blows up aliens on his computer, does not touch books, does not listen to the news—“As if a normal boy cares what’s on the news” (Mr Dursley in *Order of the Phoenix*, 8)—and hits other smaller kids. A boy with special qualities like Harry, on the other hand, is the outcast, the weirdo, the runty kid with glasses who is bullied because he does not conform to Dursleyish standards of ‘normality’.

Despite the connections between Harry and Dickensian orphans, Granger acknowledges that “If Harry needed a new name, it would be ‘Jane Eyre’” (2009: 86). Harry’s confrontations with the Dursleys at the beginning of every book in the series echo Jane’s life with the Reeds before she is sent to Lowood Institution. Although,

unlike Jane, Harry feels at home at his school, the abuse Harry is submitted to by some of his teachers—especially Snape and Umbridge—also recalls the ill-treatment Jane suffers at Lowood. I would add, however, that in some passages Harry is more like Bertha Mason than Jane Eyre. In *Chamber of Secrets*, for example, the Dursleys try to conceal Harry from view by keeping him upstairs, on the grounds that he is “very disturbed” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 20), very much in line with how Rochester conceals his first wife. On the other hand, a more recent precedent for Harry is Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, an extraordinary girl who is also rejected by her family because she is different: she loves reading books instead of watching television, she is an extraordinarily quick learner, and she has telekinetic powers. Like Harry, she finally finds someone who understands her (Miss Honey) when she is sent to school. All these characters, however, have a common fairy-tale precedent, Cinderella.

The fact that Harry, despite being a male character, occupies a space in the home that has been traditionally occupied by female characters has already been noted by Gallardo-C and Smith in their article “Cinderfella” about gender roles in *Harry Potter*. As they explain, Harry moves “from passive subject at home (Cinderella as servant) to active subject at Hogwarts (Cinderella at the ball)”, and this “inevitably lead[s] to the hero’s ‘blooming’” (2003: 191). On the other hand, in *The Contested Castle*, Ellis argues that “the Gothic, too, is preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually ‘fallen’ men) are locked out, and others (usually ‘innocent’ women) are locked in” (1989: ix). As the beginning in each *Harry Potter* book suggests, Harry is locked in like many female characters in Gothic fiction (Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason), rather than locked out like many male wanderers, such as Melmoth or Frankenstein’s monster. However, I think it is more accurate to argue that Harry has qualities of both the Cinderella-type of Gothic heroine

(like his being locked inside the hostile home) and the male Gothic hero who is deprived of a home. Whereas Harry is locked in with a nasty family, he is deprived of the ideal family he desires.

The Dursleys are, in short, a bad family model, and their home a constraining space for the ‘good’ child that Harry represents. Yet, according to Alston, “A bad family (...) simply reasserts notions of dominant ideology; in deviating away from what is constructed as the norm it becomes other and as a result serves to promote the qualities of the ‘good’ traditional family” (2008: 31). Alston exemplifies this referring precisely to *Harry Potter* and how “the Dursleys are unfavourably compared to the Weasleys at every turn” (2008: 31). Certainly, while Rowling rejects the downfall of parental authority and the nasty kid’s supremacy of modern nuclear families, she idealizes the working-class extended family represented by the Weasleys. Imagining the Weasleys as a poor family in which parents cannot afford to spoil their kids with material goods, Rowling sets them as a family ideal in which love and respect have not been corrupted by money and consumerism. That the Weasleys represent this ideal of harmony and unity is further emphasized when one of their children, Percy, repudiates his family to achieve a good job position, and his parents and siblings feel utterly betrayed by him. Thus, Rowling does not overthrow the ideal of home as a haven; she reinforces this idea by showing readers what a bad home is like. What the novels seem to uphold is that bigotry can destroy families—as happens with Percy Weasley—and it can turn the home into a prison for those family members who do not conform to the norm, as happens to Harry at the Dursleys’.

Rowling herself has stated that the *Harry Potter* books are “a prolonged argument for tolerance, a prolonged plea for an end to bigotry” (in *The Leaky Cauldron*, 2007). Indeed, magic can be metaphorically read as anything that is frowned upon by

the conservative society the Dursleys represent. In Privet Drive, magic is ‘the unspeakable’; it is surrounded by a discourse of silence, and the Dursleys only speak of it in euphemisms. They call it “THE M WORD” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 8), “your abnormality” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 20, original emphasis), “funny stuff” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 20, original emphasis), and witches and wizards are referred to as “his [Harry’s] lot” (*Order of the Phoenix*, 8, original emphasis). The Dursleys are as scared of pronouncing the word ‘magic’ as the wizarding community is of speaking Voldemort’s name. Thus, Rowling emphasizes how intolerance and bigotry are often the result of fear. As she affirms, “The wizards represent all that the true ‘muggle’ most fears: They are plainly outcasts and comfortable with being so. Nothing is more unnerving to the truly conventional than the unashamed misfit!” (in Weir, 1999). The problem with Rowling’s proclaimed argument for tolerance is that it is fundamentally at odds with her story formula about a boy who discovers that he has special powers that distinguish him from ‘ordinary’ human beings. Although Rowling insists throughout the series that Muggles and wizards should regard each other as equals, her world is clearly divided between special people (witches and wizards) and unspecial, uninteresting people (Muggles).

Although Rowling’s representation of the Dursleys is profoundly satirical, the ideas these characters defend are almost as despicable as those embodied by Voldemort’s Death Eaters. Actually, that the Death Eaters’ brutality is an extreme manifestation of the conservative ideas upheld by the Dursleys becomes apparent as the series progresses. For example, we are told that “he [Mr Dursley] tended to judge other men on how big and expensive their cars were” (*Goblet of Fire*, 49). The car as a symbol of status and power can be equated to wands in the wizarding world, especially

the Elder Wand, which many wizards have coveted because it is said to be the most powerful wand in the world. Yet, as Hermione affirms when she expresses her skepticism over the Elder Wand, “Wands are only as powerful as the wizards who use them. Some wizards just like to boast that theirs are bigger and better than other people’s” (*Deathly Hallows*, 337). Rowling thus subverts the image of the wand as a symbol of power, by making it clear that the power resides in the person, not in symbolic—phallic—objects. What is more, the power of the Elder Wand is finally undermined when it becomes clear that most of its masters end up dead and, especially, when Harry rejects it. Another aspect that likens the Dursleys to the Death Eaters is their dislike for the weak and the vulnerable. For instance, for Aunt Marge (Mr Dursley’s sister)—who Granger sees as a caricature of Margaret Thatcher (2009: 154)—an unemployed person is a “no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 27), and she says she will not have “this namby-pamby, wishy-washy nonsense about not hitting people who deserve it” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 24). However, it is Marge’s preoccupation with blood that most recalls the Death Eater philosophy: “It all comes down to blood (...). Bad blood will out”, she says (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 26).

As these passages show, Rowling resorts to both satire and the Gothic to represent conservative thinking. The ‘mildest’ extreme of such ideas is embodied by the Dursleys and dealt with satirically. Yet, when Harry enters the wizarding world, Rowling shows the most radical end of the spectrum. As Rowling explains, “I wanted Harry to leave our world and find exactly the same problems in the Wizarding world” (in *The Leaky Cauldron*, 2007). Gothic language and imagery take over, and the bearers of such ideas are not risible characters, but terrifying dark wizards. Like Aunt Marge,

they approve of (magically) torturing ‘people who deserve it’, i.e., those they consider inferior and weaker because they do not have ‘pure’ blood.

Last but not least, despite all the elements that make Privet Drive a place of confinement, it is revealed to be a refuge for Harry by the end of the series. We learn in *Order of the Phoenix* that Dumbledore delivered Harry to the Dursleys as a plan to protect him while he was underage: “While you can still call home the place where your mother’s blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge” (*Order of the Phoenix*, 737). Yet, Dumbledore’s original plan to protect Harry turns the boy into the object of abuse and humiliation. Harry is trapped inside a home where he is protected from dark wizards, but subjected to the evils of the Muggle world. In my view, this strengthens the connection between Privet Drive and the castle in traditional Gothic: like a Gothic hero(ine), Harry is locked in in the name of protection. Dumbledore’s plan to protect Harry is similar to the plight reflected in female Gothic: “the harm done to women in the name of protecting them from the world” (Ellis, 1989: xiv). In *Harry Potter*, however, what is at stake is the harm done to a child by adults—by the Dursleys, but also by Dumbledore, who is after all responsible for leaving Harry with them.

To sum up, as a symbolic space, Privet Drive represents the ambivalence inherent in child protection, the thin line between protecting and confining. As a narrative device, it serves to trigger the child protagonist’s desire for a proper home, equating childlikeness to imagination and nostalgia for a world where family values prevail. Alston claims that, in children’s fiction, “Family is the ideal, the epic end-point of the Odyssean journey (...), at which home and family are recovered” (2008: 1). This is certainly the case of *Harry Potter*, in which the child’s desire is not so much

associated with adventure, but with home and family. It is not coincidental that, at the end of his quest, Harry is rewarded with marrying Ginny Weasley and becoming part of the Weasley family. Thus, Rowling's novel aligns with the rhetoric of family that, according to Alston, most children's texts bear, the idea that "true happiness it seems is impossible without the love and support of a dedicated family" (2008: 1). Rowling, however, reverses stereotypes and turns the cozy middle-class home into a constricting space, whereas the wizarding world, which "burst with the strange and unexpected" (*Chamber of Secrets*, 37) is where the child protagonist truly feels at home. Hogwarts is thus a space where the child is also protected, but it is a kind of protection that allows for self-discovery and empowerment, stimulating rather than stifling the imagination. Despite the fact that the castle represents an ideal vision of childhood, it is also acknowledged that there will always be a secret passageway that will allow the seed of evil to sneak its way inside. In one way or another, Voldemort—Rowling's incarnation of evil—always manages to get inside the castle and inside Harry's mind in an acknowledgement that childhood can never be truly and completely safe. This takes me to the next main point in my discussion: the concepts of selfhood and childhood that predominate in Rowling's novels, as evinced by the child's confrontation with his other, the adult villain.

1.4. The Strange Case of Harry Potter and Tom Riddle: Resurrecting Essentialist Notions of Selfhood and Childhood

[T]his curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people. 'But it's no use now,' thought poor Alice, 'to pretend to be two people! Why, there's hardly enough of me left to make *one* respectable person!

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

After looking into how the Gothic setting allows for the child's empowerment, this section focuses on another Gothic element that grants complexity to the child figure: the doppelgänger motif. According to Jackson, Coats and McGillis,

The ethical innovations of some recent children's Gothic (...) seem to hinge on children assuming at least some responsibility for the irruption of the Gothic in their worlds (...). Rather than seeing the Gothic as an anomalous intrusion into their lives from some external and alien force, the children in many contemporary Gothic novels court their dark side, and own it as an aspect of the self. They don't nurse any illusion that they are innocent victims in the drama in which they find themselves. (2008: 8)

The dark side as an aspect of the self is indeed a central issue in the *Harry Potter* series. The subject is dealt with not only through Harry's connection with Voldemort, but also through secondary characters who are victims of a divided existence such as Severus Snape and Remus Lupin. Yet, although Rowling certainly plays with the idea that the self is not a unified whole, to what extent does this idea prevail when it applies to the child protagonist? Throughout this section, I examine Rowling's use of the doppelgänger motif to represent the child's identity, arguing that Rowling's text eventually goes back to the ideal of unitary selfhood and the Victorian, pre-Freudian idea that cruelty and perversity are exterior to the child. Although there are other works of children's Gothic that conform to Jackson, Coats and McGillis's statement, it is interesting that the most popular children's Gothic series actually contradicts this.

Rowling's Evil Innocent

Whereas plenty of academic articles have been written on Harry and the type of heroism he embodies, there are not very many academic sources on how his identity is defined in opposition to his arch-enemy. The most in-depth and insightful analysis of the relationship between these two characters is probably Lena Steveker's article in which

she reads *Harry Potter* “in the tradition of Victorian Gothic fiction” (2011: 70), focusing on “the concept of identity that Rowling’s hero represents” (2011: 69). Other scholars, like Granger and Pepetone, have already pointed out similarities between Rowling’s Voldemort and nineteenth-century Gothic villains. Granger, for instance, states that “Voldemort is the classic gothic villain. The parallels with Jekyll and Frankenstein are clear. Tom Riddle, Jr., is an overreaching Dark Wizard on a quest to live forever” (2009: 87-8). Likewise, Pepetone affirms that “Voldemort (like Jekyll) has liberated himself from restraints that define his human synergy” (2012: 163). Steveker, however, points out how Rowling’s series differs substantially from its nineteenth-century predecessors when it comes to representing identity:

In contrast to texts such [as] Stevenson’s *Strange Case*, however, the Potter heptalogy clearly privileges a Cartesian concept of unitary Selfhood, thus being less advanced than the notions of duality and multiplicity both feared and acknowledged in late Victorian literary discourse. The idea that it is possible for the self to tolerate division is in fact strongly criticized several times in Rowling’s texts. (2011: 77)

My reading of identity in *Harry Potter* relies very much on Steveker’s article, but I will focus not only on what the relationship between child and other says about the concept of selfhood, but also on what it says about the concept of childhood privileged by Rowling’s series.

As Steveker very well points out, the emphasis on Harry and Voldemort’s connection throughout the seven novels seems to suggest that Voldemort is Harry’s both internal and external other:

Rowling draws on the Gothic concepts of both outer and inner doubling, merging them in the character of Voldemort. Since his body and his consciousness exist independently of Harry’s, Voldemort represents Harry’s *external* monstrous other and, because of the mental connection they share, he also serves as Harry’s *internal* monstrous other. (2011: 74, original emphasis)

Indeed, Rowling already stresses the identification between hero and villain early on in the series. We know that Harry and Voldemort's wands are 'brothers' (*Philosopher's Stone*, 65), that the Sorting Hat thinks Harry would have done well in Slytherin (*Philosopher's Stone*, 91), and that Voldemort transferred some of his powers to Harry when he attempted to kill him (*Chamber of Secrets*, 245). It is in *Order of the Phoenix*, though, when his mental connection with Voldemort really starts to affect Harry's personality and threaten his good nature, a phenomenon that coincides with Harry's entering adolescence. In order to suggest the possibility that monstrosity may actually come from within the child, Rowling resorts to dreams and has Harry dream that he *is* Voldemort: "‘I was You-Know-Who,’ said Harry, and he stretched out his hands in the darkness and held them up to his face, to check that they were no longer deathly white and long-fingered" (*Order of the Phoenix*, 517, original emphasis). This possibility, however, is revoked by the series's ending when it turns out that, if Harry ever came close to evil, it was only because he had been *possessed* by Voldemort, not because he had *become* Voldemort. The child in *Harry Potter* is thus associated with special qualities like goodness, imagination and incorruptibility. This is not to say that Harry is an ideal child, for he is certainly not immutable or without defects. Yet, although we often see Harry "plotting ways of getting Malfoy expelled" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 146) or blowing up his aunt (*Prisoner of Azkaban*), we know that Harry is intrinsically good because he constantly chooses to define himself in opposition to Voldemort, and this aspect of his self never changes.

Having Harry's gruesome dreams and angry feelings finally explained away by his being possessed by Voldemort allows Rowling to tackle the corruption of innocence without actually having her innocent truly and permanently corrupted. In this sense, Harry has a lot in common with what Büssing calls the 'evil innocent' of adult Gothic

fiction: “Evil attacked the child as an outward force, and adult human beings (sometimes assisted by heavenly powers) had to rescue the helpless creature whose life and soul depended on the success of their mission” (1987: 101). According to Büssing the first famous representative of the ‘evil innocent’ is to be found in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1889), and this figure was popularized again in the second half of the twentieth century with works like William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* (1971). This figure also appears in late-twentieth-century Gothic novels for children and young adults, as in Margaret Mahy’s *The Haunting* (1982),²⁹ giving children’s authors the chance to temporarily transgress the innocent child, while preserving it at the same time. As Büssing affirms, “authors gladly employ evil spirits to give the ‘aberrations’ of their child protagonists a plausible justification” (1987: 103). The difference, however, is that Harry is never rescued by an adult, but he has to save himself by defeating Voldemort.

Thus, although Rowling plays with conventions of psychological Gothic, the series eventually opts for supernatural Gothic, sustaining that evil had been external to Harry the whole time. As Steveker very well points out,

Rowling’s text finally negates the notion of inner relationality (...) by ascribing unity and separateness to its hero’s identity. The [final] scene symbolizes the rebirth of Rowling’s protagonist, (...). [H]e returns as an autonomous individual who has rid himself of the inner presence of his monstrous other. (2011: 79)

The young protagonist’s fragmented self thus turns out to be only a temporary condition in Rowling’s series. As McCallum states, “In many contemporary adolescent fictions the double is represented as an aspect of the developmental process” (1999: 77). Instead of deploying the double motif to represent the self’s permanent multiplicity, such fictions use it to represent a temporary phase of instability which is eventually

²⁹ In Mahy’s novel, eight-year-old Barney is haunted and mentally possessed by his uncle’s ghost.

overcome to give way to maturity. Similarly, in *Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*, Alison Waller affirms that “an individualistic identity is set up as the ideal and any attack through the threat of uncertainty or erasure cannot be sustained” (2009: 88). This is also the case in *Harry Potter*, but fragmentation in Rowling’s novels is not only temporary, it is also demonized. In the works of adolescent fiction analyzed by McCallum—*Charlotte Sometimes* (1969), *Eva* (1988), *Jacob Have I Loved* (1981) and *Stranger with My Face* (1981), “States of fragmentation and/or multiplicity experienced by characters as a consequence of the double motif are conceptualized as conditions of the possibility of subjectivity, rather than as aberrations” (1999: 77). In *Harry Potter*, by contrast, the fragmentation of the soul *is* conceptualized as an aberration and described almost like a disease, as in this passage describing Harry’s sensations after finding out that Voldemort has access to his mind: “He [Harry] felt dirty, contaminated, as though he were carrying some deadly germ, unworthy to sit on the Underground train back from the hospital with innocent, clean people whose minds and bodies were free of the taint of Voldemort” (*Order of the Phoenix*, 434). As this passage suggests, fragmentation is equated to contamination and dirtiness, as opposed to the cleanliness and the freedom of innocence.

Harry and Voldemort are not the only fragmented psyches, though. Rowling’s novels provide a wide range of secondary characters with duplicitous natures. Severus Snape, for instance, is—as his name suggests—clearly internally ‘severed’: he is torn between hating Harry for being James’s son, and protecting him to honor the memory of Harry’s mother, Lily, with whom he has always been in love. As regards Remus Lupin, the werewolf condition he suffers from bears connotations of rape, pedophilia and venereal disease. It is explained that Lupin was bitten by Fenrir Greyback, a vicious grown-up werewolf who specializes in biting children, when he was a little child. Lupin

himself refers to his condition as if it was a disease, for he talks about “my symptoms” and about “being ill at the full moon” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 253). In all these cases, fragmentation is not treated as a natural phase in adolescence or as an unavoidable aspect of the human condition, as Dumbledore’s words suggest: “‘Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Harry, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well – not quite whole. You had suffered” (*Order of the Phoenix*, 736). This passage clearly links fragmentation and incompleteness to extreme suffering, for the loss of a loved one in Snape’s case, and as a result of child abuse in Lupin and Harry’s cases.

On the other hand, whereas characters like Harry or Lupin are victims of a fragmented existence they did not choose, Lord Voldemort is the character who deliberately chose to do away with the unity of his own soul, dividing it into seven fragments. In Rowling’s wizarding world, this is connected to the darkest magic and to remorseless evil; choosing such an existence turns one into a monstrous villain, very much in the Faustian tradition. This manifestation of the doppelgänger is represented in *Harry Potter* by the Horcruxes, the magical objects that enshrine pieces of Voldemort’s soul, preserving it from death. This echoes Freud’s idea that “the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, (...) the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body” (1988a: 356). As Freud adds, however, “From having been an assurance of immortality, it [the double] becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (1988a: 357). Likewise, Voldemort’s Horcruxes eventually precipitate his destruction, because, in Rowling’s world, tearing one’s soul apart results in making it more fragile and easy to destroy. It could be argued that not all doubles in the series are portrayed as monstrous. Animagi, for example—wizards who can voluntarily turn into an animal—can be said to represent a more benign form of duality. Yet, although sympathetic characters like McGonagall or Sirius Black are animagi, the series

acknowledges that there is something transgressive about shape-shifting by the fact that animagi have to be registered and controlled by the Ministry of Magic.

Internal doubles thus have negative connotations in the *Harry Potter* novels. They are not a ‘natural’ aspect of the human condition—as they are, for instance, in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (see Chapter 3). Inner multiplicity is, in Rowling’s wizarding world, an aberration which turns a man into a monster, a transformation that is metaphorically represented by Voldemort’s outward appearance becoming more reptilian and less human. Fragmentation is, thus, linked to monstrosity and, consequently, to transgression. As Steveker states,

By having Slughorn condemn Horcruxes as moral outrage, the text is clearly marking the notion of multiplicity as transgressive and highly dangerous for both individual and society. (...) With its strongly derogatory connotations of contamination and exploitation, this term clearly posits the internal other as a violation of the self’s cohesion and stability. (2011: 77)

It seems that, in the world of *Harry Potter*, individuals are ‘whole’ by default, and this unity can only be broken by either evil or trauma. Whereas fragmentation of the self is a phase that ought to be surmounted, wholeness is the ideal that Harry seeks to attain. When he finally eradicates Voldemort, not only is he rewarded with a family, but also with Dumbledore’s words “Your soul is whole, and completely your own, Harry” (*Deathly Hallows*, 567). As Steveker points out, it is “the liberal-humanist notion of a unitary, autonomous and knowing self – or rather Self” that predominates in Rowling’s novels (2011: 69-70). As Steveker adds, “with Harry, a hero is still an *essentially solitary man* rescuing the world from evil” (2011: 81, original emphasis). Similarly, Berberich states that Harry Potter “has thus breathed, literally, new life into an old ideal”, the gentleman ideal (2011: 142). It is therefore curious that Rowling chose such a conventional hero when, as she herself has stated, her story is about misfits fighting against convention. Once again, Rowling’s explicit moral message is contradicted by

the formula she chose for her story. As Knuth states, “Mid- and late-twentieth-century writers have taken on the task of writing more inclusive stories that support diversity, multiculturalism, and social equality” as opposed to Victorian and early-twentieth-century British writers that focused on “an individualism rooted in collective identity, a common cultural consciousness, and a pride in the innate decency of the British people” (2012: 12). In Rowling’s case, however, this old ideal pervades her writing despite her efforts to celebrate diversity.

Although I share Steveker and Berberich’s views, I believe there is another factor to be considered: *Harry Potter* is children’s fiction, and therefore the representation of the hero relies not only on conceptions of identity, but also on prevalent conceptions of childhood. According to Montgomery, “The child envisaged by the Convention [the UNCRC] is an individual, autonomous being, an inheritor of the liberal, humanist ideals of the Enlightenment” (2009a: 6). Since children’s literature always reflects prevalent ideas of and attitudes towards childhood, it is therefore not surprising that the individualistic child on a quest for a stable identity predominates in books for children, a point to which I will return in Chapters 2 and 3. Yet, as the conservative and the subversive often coexist in texts, postmodern views of selfhood and childhood are not completely absent from Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. In fact, the existence of earlier texts suggesting that evil may come from within the child enables Rowling to play with readers’ expectations.

Referring to Maurice Sendak’s picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), Nodelman affirms that “By the early 1960s the influence of psychoanalytic views of the human mind and its unconscious on both writers and educators would have left a space open for the idea that the monsters children most need to be protected from are within rather than outside of them” (2008: 121-2). In *Harry Potter*, Rowling makes readers

believe that she is going in this direction and that Harry does have a dark side. And this is possible because previous works of Gothic and children's fiction have done that. For example, passages like this suggest this possibility: "Unfortunately, the back of his mind was no longer the secure place it had once been" (*Order of the Phoenix*, 520). The suggestion that "the back of his mind", i.e., Harry's subconscious, is not a safe place points towards a psychoanalytic interpretation. In the end, however, it turns out that the reader has been misled and Rowling goes back to an older, yet still relevant and widespread, tradition in which evil is external to the child, as in "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Suck-a-Thumb" in which "both violence and monstrosity (...) are exterior to the child protagonists, forces from outside them, antithetical to their own childishness" (Nodelman, 2008: 121).

Thus, more subversive views on the child's identity are suggested by Rowling's text, but rejected in the end. It could be argued that the novels are already subversive merely by showing that a fragmented existence is possible. What is more, it could even be affirmed that, Gothicizing this alternative, Rowling is actually making it more attractive, for, as Ken Rothman (2011) has noted, Voldemort is an attractive villain. These arguments, however, say more about reader response and the effects the novels may have in spite of the author's intentions, than about the dominant discourse on childhood that children's fiction upholds. In the next part of this section, I examine the qualities the villain represents—besides fragmentation—and how, by rejecting these qualities, Harry defines himself as a mature hero.

The Haunting of the Future

In his chapter “Hearts of Darkness”, Rothman argues that Voldemort has joined Darth Vader and other villains who have transcended repulsiveness to become “popular commodities and cultural icons” (2011: 202). Rothman, however, does not examine what makes these villains so attractive, and concludes that “he [Voldemort] lacks the capacity to haunt the nightmares of even young children”, a claim for which he provides no evidence (2011: 213). In fact, Ralph Fiennes, the actor who plays Voldemort in the movie adaptations, explained in an interview how a kid who was visiting the set even burst into tears when he saw him in character (in *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2011). In my view, attraction and repulsion are tightly linked when it comes to Gothic villains, and it is sometimes the most terrifying and repulsive villains that achieve cult status—which does not necessarily make them less terrifying. Regarding Rowling’s Voldemort, I believe his repulsiveness and the fact that he is never sentimentalized account for his appeal. As Jackson, Coats and McGillis affirm,

Gothic villains (...) attract us because they are flamboyant and irrepressible. Their desire refuses to be contained. They are audacious, living with sublimity as a common occurrence of the everyday. They are, in that psychoanalytical sense, both ourselves and our ‘other’. (2008: 13)

Voldemort is, indeed, an irrepressible character, whose desires for power and immortality are taken to the extreme—sexual desire, on the other hand, does not seem to be part of his villainous nature. One of the main differences between Voldemort and the ‘good’ characters in the novels—those that are set up as role models—is precisely that the latter have either rejected or repressed these desires. Dumbledore, for example, who toyed with the dark arts in his youth, finally realized that “I was not to be trusted with power” (*Deathly Hallows*, 575). Power in Rowling’s series is, thus, presented as a dangerous and highly destructive force, and one of the things that define Harry’s

heroism is that he is not even remotely attracted to it. Rowling makes sure that she exposes her hero to this temptation in every book in order to show how Harry never yields to it. In the first book, for instance, Harry obtains the philosopher's stone, and yet he never even considers using it for his own benefit. Likewise, at the end of the series, Harry becomes "the worthy possessor of the Hallows" because he uses them, not to conquer death, but to enable his self-sacrifice (*Deathly Hallows*, 577).

With such 'repressed' heroes as Harry and Dumbledore, Voldemort's appeal is hardly surprising. Voldemort is the character that satisfies the reader's curiosity, showing us what happens when a young man rids himself of morality and rationality in order to pursue his ambition. He represents what Dumbledore could have become had he not stopped himself in time, and what Harry could have been if Dumbledore had not protected him from fame. Voldemort embodies, in other words, the future that haunts the child figure, and this haunting of the future is twofold. On the one hand, Voldemort is a literal representation of the fear of aging and dying, very much like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray. Like Dorian, Voldemort used to be a handsome young man whose appearance deteriorates with his evil deeds, and whose defiance of death eventually leads him to self-destruction. On the other hand, Voldemort is also the monster the child may become if adults refuse to accept their responsibilities as parents, teachers or guardians. In *Half-Blood Prince* we learn that Tom Riddle—Voldemort's younger self—comes from a highly dysfunctional family. He is the son of Merope Gaunt, a witch, and Thomas Riddle, a Muggle who abandoned her. As Merope died after giving birth, young Riddle grew up in an orphanage. By contrast, although Harry's childhood was not happy either, his mother and father died to save him, and, in Rowling's magical world, being 'marked' by such an act of love makes all the difference. What is remarkable about Voldemort is that, although we get glimpses of his horrible childhood,

Rowling makes it clear that he was always evil, and no sympathy is ever attributed to him.

According to Fred Botting, in the late twentieth century, “The new frame turns Gothic horror into a sentimental romance”, a tendency which he calls “the end of Gothic” (1996: 178). As Botting states, the villain is no longer “coherently or consistently presented as a sublimely imaginary figure of evil” (1996: 178). Rather, it is the ambivalent Gothic figure, both victimizer and victimized, that predominates. Along the same lines, Granger states that “The bad guys of the old books are all new-book good guys, or at least very sympathetic characters to whom we are obliged to give a break for the challenges they’re facing” (2009: 108). Botting mentions Coppola’s film adaptation of *Dracula* (1992) with which he claims that “Gothic dies, divested of its excesses, of its transgressions, horrors and diabolical laughter, of its brilliant gloom and rich darkness, of its artificial and suggestive forms” (1996: 108). I would add that, before Coppola’s *Dracula*, we already find Gothic villains that complicate the victim/villain status, such as Louis in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1968) or Darth Vader (1977-1983). The sentimentalized villain has also made its way into children’s fiction, as is the case of Pullman’s Mrs Coulter and Snicket’s Count Olaf, who redeem themselves before they die by showing that they are capable of loving someone (see Chapters 3 and 4). Yet, as Botting states, “Dying, of course, might just be the prelude to other spectral returns” (1996: 180), and, certainly, the traditional Gothic villain as an embodiment of what society most fears was (literally) resurrected with Voldemort one year after the publication of Botting’s book.

As I stated, Voldemort is portrayed as inherently evil, and the books evoke no sympathy for him. Not even in *Half-Blood Prince* when Harry learns about Voldemort’s tough childhood in an orphanage does the text elicit pity for the villain. Rowling makes

it very clear that Voldemort was always evil, even as a child “he was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control” (*Half-Blood Prince*, 259). Voldemort’s back-story is there to provide a plausible explanation for his irrepressible greed for power, but it is in no way meant to justify his villainy. I am not implying here that Rowling’s moral world is either black or white, for she offers many degrees of evil and goodness through certain secondary characters. Snape, for example, is a very unsympathetic character, and yet he also turns out to be a hero in the end. As Schanoes states,

Rowling forces her reader to distinguish between nastiness and wickedness, between subjective hatred and objective evil. She forces her reader to think beyond herself and her private identification with Harry to develop an awareness of the alliances necessary in order to do the right thing. (2003: 132)

Paradoxically, the objective evil in *Harry Potter* is prejudice and the unquestioned belief in absolute ‘truths’ such as the superiority of ‘pure bloods’. As Granger claims, the “qualities of postmodern thinking and literature are at the moral heart of *Harry Potter*”. The series shows a “tendency to question the defining myths of our culture” (Granger, 2009: 113-4), and it also puts forth the idea that “our perception of reality is untrustworthy” (Granger, 2009: 115). There is, however, an underlying contradiction in presenting prejudice and unquestioned beliefs as objective evil. Certainly, claiming that there *is* such a thing as ‘objective’ evil is not very relativistic. In *Harry Potter*, a relativistic view of evil means a lack of morals, and this is associated with villains. We see this, for example, in Quirrell, who tells Harry “A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 211). What is at stake here is the fact that Quirrell blindly and ignorantly believes in Voldemort’s view of good and evil; he never questions his

master's authority. As Granger puts it, "prejudiced and unloving fundamentalists and ideologues" and "these people, who do not embrace relativism and ecumenism as core truths, are the intolerant people postmoderns will not tolerate", and they are the villains of Rowling's universe (2009: 129).

As this suggests, in children's fiction, the Gothic villain comes in very handy to represent, in a 'tangible' form, the consequences of not listening to the author's didactic and ideological message. Voldemort embodies a state of fragmentation brought about by his immoral actions; he personifies the qualities that may lead to the downfall of society and which should be left behind if one is to make a positive entrance into adulthood. When Voldemort's grand plan to live forever and destroy Harry backfires, Dumbledore points out that he did it "in his ignorance, in his greed and his cruelty" (*Deathly Hallows*, 567). As often happens in children's fiction, the villain in *Harry Potter* is an adult, and this device apparently undermines adult authority. Voldemort, however, is an adult, but not a *mature* adult. In fact, the qualities that are associated with Voldemort—ignorance, greed and cruelty—are tightly linked to childishness and immaturity. As Nodelman puts it, childhood is often "defined [by adults] by its ignorance and consequent willingness to act on desire" (Nodelman, 2008: 35), and children's literature in general presupposes that children need to be taught to embrace adult knowledge so as not to act on desire. The qualities that *Harry Potter* encourages readers to give up are, therefore, childish qualities. It is important, at this point, to distinguish between the childish and the childlike. In section 1.3., I argued that Hogwarts is the world of childlike desire, and this type of desire is extolled, while those characters who are too 'grown-up' to appreciate it are satirized. With Voldemort, however, Rowling gives shape to those *childish* qualities that ought to be revoked to give way to adult knowledge. Rowling Gothicizes the childish and the immature; these

are the objective evils that threaten to destroy the individual (Harry) and even society (the wizard community). Voldemort is the immature adult who “takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*” (Dumbledore in *Deathly Hallows*, 568, original emphasis). Voldemort is immature but not childlike, and, as Pepetone affirms, the cult of childhood “celebrates the child-like not the childish” (2012: 221).

In this sense, I agree with Jackson, Coats and McGillis when they state that the emergence of children’s Gothic reflects our culture’s acknowledgement that children may not be so innocent after all. The existence of a literature for children that aims to teach that ignorance, selfishness and cruelty are wrong is already presuming that the child is—or has an inclination to be—ignorant, selfish and cruel. What I argue is that if we concentrate on the representation of childhood, the texts do not reflect this adult anxiety in a straightforward manner. Instead, authors prefer to project childish qualities on an adult villain in order to aesthetically preserve the idealized child, a child who is mature enough to tolerate differences and save the world, but immature enough to know nothing about power and sexuality. The ‘rules’ of children’s literature would not allow, for example, to have the story told from Tom Riddle’s point of view. A story for children about how a vicious child grows up to be a villainous adult is—as far as I know—not currently possible. As Waller states, “positive versions of development are the ideal and texts resist an alternative representation of young people” (2009: 34). Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* series is one of the few works of children’s fiction with a villainous child protagonist. Yet, Artemis gradually changes throughout the series: he moves from being a criminal that kidnaps a fairy to sacrificing himself to save the world. Thus, in the end, Colfer’s series is also about a child doing the ‘right’ thing.

Villains in children's Gothic are acceptable as long as they are represented as 'the other', as is the case of Tom Riddle in *Harry Potter*, or as a temporary phase in the child's developmental process, as in *Artemis Fowl*. Children's authors portray the child, not as it is, but as it should be, whereas those qualities that are considered undesirable for the individual and society are projected on the 'other'. The villain is thus inextricably linked to the didactic dimension of the story. This is evidenced by the fact that Harry's quest to destroy Voldemort is also a quest for knowledge. Harry's confrontations with Voldemort and his Death Eaters are always followed by a conversation between Dumbledore and Harry—master and pupil—from which moral lessons are drawn. By way of example, when Harry faces Voldemort for the second time, he starts to notice certain similarities between himself and the villain. In his subsequent conversation with Dumbledore, the headmaster teaches him that "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*Chamber of Secrets*, 245). With every confrontation with the villain, Harry acquires values that will help him construct a mature and stable identity. He learns that "humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things which are worst for them" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 215), and that "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery" (*Goblet of Fire*, 736), among many other lessons for life. Harry's quest can be understood as what Peppetone calls a "*positive* quest for understanding" which, as he explains, "leads from trauma to introspection and critical self-examination, acceptance (of responsibility for one's own role in bringing about a painful, or undesirable outcome) and finally transcendence, defined as the overcoming of one's Gothic dilemma" (2012: 36, original emphasis). Peppetone distinguishes between two main types of quests in the Gothic imagination, the positive quest and the negative quest, which he defines thus:

Instead of introspection, those who choose the negative path proceed from trauma to denial (...). This second stage typically leads to projection, i.e., a psychological strategy whereby one literally attributes unacknowledged character flaws and motivations to another individual or group (race, nation, religion, political party etc.) (...). Frequently, projection terminates in an unintended act of psychic self-mutilation or dismemberment, an act that climaxes ironically in the destruction of that which one most cherishes (...). (2012: 36)

In Rowling's series, Harry and Voldemort represent these two patterns of response, positive and negative, respectively. Seldom do we find, in Gothic fiction for children, a child protagonist that represents the negative quest. It could be argued that cautionary tales that show what happens to children who misbehave are examples of the child's negative journey. However, the novels I analyze show a clear current preference for projecting the negative quest on a separate (usually adult) character, leaving the child figure intact.

To conclude this section, the fact that Harry's entrance into adulthood coincides with Voldemort's final self-destruction deserves a commentary. I stated earlier that moral lessons are drawn after every confrontation between child hero and villain. What is significant about Harry and Voldemort's final battle is that Harry is no longer the innocent child who does not know what he is doing, and who manages to get out of dangerous situations by sheer luck and deus ex machina. In the final battle at Hogwarts, Harry is already perfectly aware of what he is doing, and roles are reversed. Harry, the pupil, becomes the master and he lectures Voldemort about the foolishness of his acts, telling him "I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't" (*Deathly Hallows*, 591). As this quotation suggests, it is not magical skills or force that place Harry in a more powerful position than Voldemort; it is his possession of adult knowledge learnt from Dumbledore. In fact, in this final battle, Harry *speaks* like Dumbledore, calling Voldemort by his real name and giving him a

chance to repent: “I’d advise you to think about what you’ve done ... think, and try for some remorse, Riddle...” (*Deathly Hallows*, 594). As this shows, the voice of adult values has successfully been passed on from teacher to pupil, and the pupil has finally become the teacher. In this last scene, Harry has *become* Dumbledore. What is more, after being destroyed, the piece of Voldemort’s soul that resided in Harry is represented as “a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, (...) shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath” (*Deathly Hallows*, 566). This can be metaphorically understood as immaturity in its most negative sense being defeated by maturity. Voldemort is eventually reduced to an unwanted child, whereas Harry has successfully completed his development from boy to man. In *Harry Potter*, which started celebrating childhood as an age of desire and imagination, the child must literally and metaphorically die in the end.

1.5. Slaughterhouse 9 ¾: Sacrificing the Child for Adult Normativity

Next moment he was standing erect on the rock again, with that smile on his face and a drum beating within him. It was saying, ‘To die will be an awfully big adventure.’

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

At the end of *Philosopher’s Stone*, Dumbledore explains to Harry how his friend Nicolas Flamel is going to die after the destruction of the stone, and he reassures Harry by saying that “it really is like going to bed after a very, *very* long day. After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 215, original emphasis). As Rowling herself has affirmed, “Death is an extremely important theme throughout all seven books. I would say possibly the most important theme” (in

Pattison, 2001). This final section looks into how Rowling treats the subject of the child's death. Deaths in *Harry Potter* are mostly linked to violence, and the novels aim to teach acceptance and transcendence as part of Harry's positive Gothic journey. In *Harry Potter*, the child has to die both literally and metaphorically in order to maintain adult normativity. On the one hand, Harry has to accept his death in order to fulfill Dumbledore's grand plan to destroy Voldemort and save the world. At the same time, the child's desire has to 'die' in order to give way to adult knowledge.

In the previous sections, I have examined how the Gothic setting is a metaphoric representation of the child's desire, and how it is extolled by Rowling's highly appealing depiction of Hogwarts. Likewise, giving the child figure the responsibility to destroy the villain also contributes to this empowering representation of the child, who emerges as a Gothic hero, a transformation which is aligned with maturity. As Nikolajeva points out, though, "paradoxically enough, children are allowed, in fiction written for their enlightenment and enjoyment *by adults*, to become strong, brave, rich, powerful, independent—on certain conditions and for a limited time" (2009: 227, original emphasis). As the *Harry Potter* series is based on children's literature conventions, the child's empowerment also turns out to be temporary. This final section examines the representation of the child's death in *Harry Potter*, both at a literal and at a metaphoric level. I argue that Harry's final acceptance of death marks the moment in which the world of childlike desire ends and gives way to adult knowledge.

The Death of the Child

Although many fairy tales and children's stories begin with death—usually of one or both parents—only a minority of children's books *ends* in death, and when they do, the

central concern tends to be helping child readers understand and accept it, rather than showing that stories may sometimes end tragically and with no hope for recovery. Thus, most children's stories that deal with death end in transcendence, not in tragedy. For example, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) depicts the child's experience of loss and grief, but, by the novel's closure, Jesse, the protagonist, has already come to terms with his friend Leslie's death. What is even rarer in a children's book is to have the main child character die in the end, though there are some exceptions. Reynolds, for instance, discusses Serge Kozlov's *Petit-Âne* (1995), a picture book in which the child is a suicidal figure. Even then, as Reynolds states,

death is presented as neither traumatic nor dramatic. This lack of tragedy may associate the events with the world of child's play, reflecting the reassuring things adults often say to children when someone has died (they are out of pain, they have gone to heaven or a similarly happy place, they are not really gone because they live on in our memories). (2007: 96)

Another notable example is Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943), a classic children's book that also ends with the child character's suicide. However, as *Petit-Âne*, Saint-Exupéry's book also gives consolation in the end when the Little Prince reassures the narrator—and, in turn, the reader—by saying that he will always be able to hear his laughter only by looking at the stars.

This takes me back to what I argued in the first section of this chapter, the fact that terrible things can happen in a children's book as long as reassurance is found somewhere, either in the voice of the narrator or in the happy ending or both. Tolkien remarks on the importance of the Consolation of the Happy Ending in fairy stories—or, as he calls it, the *Eucatastrophe* (the good catastrophe)—by affirming that “Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it” (2008: 75). For Tolkien, the Happy Ending is an indispensable ingredient, not because it provides a

form of escapism—which for Tolkien is not a negative term—but because “it can give the child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart” (2008: 75). Furthermore, as Tolkien observes, the *eucatastrophic* tale “does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance” (2008: 75, original italics). Yet, even if the final happy turn of events implies the possibility of an unhappy ending, it is worth examining why children’s Gothic resists the explicit representation of sorrow and failure as the journey’s end, while such an ending is extremely common in adult Gothic.

One of the assumptions underlying children’s literature is that children are more ignorant and helpless than adults, and therefore they need the texts that adults produce for them in order to learn and overcome this state. Yet, as Nodelman argues, “there is something else that adults commonly believe children need from their literature: protection, both from knowledge and from experience” (2008: 158). Although, as Nodelman states, “what children’s literature excludes varies from time to time and from adult to adult”, what all children’s texts have in common is “the idea that there is something or other that children should not learn” (2008: 158). Thus, children’s literature is didactic but it is also concerned with “*not* being didactic about the wrong things” (Nodelman, 2008: 158, original emphasis). The reluctance to vividly portray the sorrow associated with death or to end a story with the tragic death of the protagonist is, in my view, directly related to this exclusionary quality of children’s literature in the name of child protection. Most texts assume that children have not yet acquired the necessary emotional and intellectual ‘tools’ to deal with trauma. They therefore aim to teach child readers to overcome traumatic experiences, but they do so without depicting them too vividly. As Bettelheim affirms, “There is no greater threat in life than that we

will be deserted, left alone. (...) and the younger we are, the more excruciating is our anxiety when we feel deserted, for the young child actually perishes when not adequately protected and taken care of” (1991: 145). Such views of childhood make the consolation of the happy ending an almost obligatory device if a text is to be considered a children’s text, and as Bettelheim adds, “Consolation requires that the right order of the world is restored; this means punishment of the evildoer, tantamount to the elimination of evil from the hero’s world—and then nothing stands any longer in the way of the hero’s living happily ever after” (1991: 144).

Being aimed at older child readers (as compared with Kozlov and Saint-Exupéry’s books), the *Harry Potter* series does portray death as both dark and tragic. Not only does Harry’s story begin with his parents’ murder, but in the last four books, Harry also experiences the death of two father figures (his godfather Sirius Black and Dumbledore), as well as the death of friends his own age, a sinister reminder that death may come for young people too. As deaths in *Harry Potter* are caused through magical means (the Killing Curse), they tend to be ‘clean’ instead of gruesome. Even when characters die violently, magic allows for the absence of gore, eliminating the horrific from the representation of murder. Rowling does not use the language of horror to portray death in *Harry Potter*, but rather the language of melodrama to describe Harry’s reactions to it. For instance, after Cedric Diggory’s sudden murder by Peter Pettigrew following Voldemort’s orders, Harry’s reaction is described thus: “For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric’s face, at his open grey eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which looked slightly surprised” (*Goblet of Fire*, 691). Even more dramatic is Harry’s reaction to Sirius’s death when Harry is not only in denial of his godfather’s death, but also in a

state of mental shock: “There was movement going on around them, pointless bustling, the flashes of more spells. To Harry it was meaningless noise, the deflected curses flying past them did not matter, nothing mattered” (*Order of the Phoenix*, 712). Thus, Rowling does not linger on the horrific, but she rather appeals to the reader’s emotions by concentrating on the tragedy and how it affects Harry.

As Taub and Servaty-Seib have noted, “nearly all of the deaths in the Harry Potter series do occur as the result of violence/evil”, an equation that they regard as “potentially problematic” because

death cannot and should not be equated with these concepts. Death is not ‘dark’ in and of itself. The inappropriate representation in Western society of these ideas as consistently merged has and is likely to continue to perpetuate the mistaken notion that death is some kind of abnormality of our existence: and evil force. In reality, death is the inevitable end for all living beings. It is a natural stage in development. (2009: 23)

In my view, this statement simplifies Rowling’s representation of death and overlooks the fact that this is precisely the point that Rowling is putting forth: death is not dark per se. It is true that *Harry Potter* mostly portrays violent deaths, which is hardly surprising if we consider that it is a story about a war. It is also true that the agents of death in Rowling’s magical world are gruesome, malevolent creatures like the Dementors or the Inferi, thus associating death with decay and evil. Yet, the series distinguishes between the horrible ‘death’ of the soul brought about by Dementors and inspired by Rowling’s own experience of depression, and the actual biological death, which *is* the unavoidable destiny of all human beings. In Rowling’s world, remaining alive in a soulless body after the Dementors’ kiss is worse than dying. As she herself has stated, her representation of depression as dark, hooded figures that suck all the happiness out of the world “was entirely conscious. And entirely from my own experience. Depression is the most unpleasant thing I have ever experienced. (...) It is that absence of being able

to envisage that you will ever be cheerful again. The absence of hope” (in Treneman, 2000).

On the other hand, with “The Tale of the Three Brothers”, Rowling emphasizes the futility of the human attempt to avoid death. The message that the tale articulates is that life must be lived to the full so that, when death comes, it will not be so hard to accept. This is exemplified by the third brother in the tale, who escaped death for years with his Invisibility Cloak, and when his time came, “*he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life*” (*Deathly Hallows*, 332, original italics). This illustrates precisely Taub and Servaty-Seib’s claim that death is not dark or evil per se. In the *Harry Potter* world, death may be perceived as evil, as it is by Voldemort, or it may be a friend, as it is for the third brother and for Dumbledore. Since Taub and Servaty-Seib’s article was first published in 2003—before the conclusion of the *Harry Potter* series—they do not mention one very important death in the series which is not the result of violence: Dumbledore’s death. Although in *Half-Blood Prince* we are led to believe that Dumbledore was murdered by Snape, it is revealed in *Deathly Hallows* that the Hogwarts Headmaster was actually already dying and he asked Snape to kill him “to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation” (Dumbledore in *Deathly Hallows*, 548). Dumbledore’s death is therefore not murder, but euthanasia. This further emphasizes the idea that death is not necessarily a consequence of evil, but it may even be the best solution to an undignified life.

This conception of death is precisely what the child protagonist embodies in *Harry Potter*. Since Harry possesses the Invisibility Cloak, one of the three hallows in Beedle’s tale, the text immediately establishes identification between Harry and the third brother. In contrast to Voldemort, Harry does not seek to flee from death, but he

accepts to die if this means saving others as his parents did for him. Not only does the series portray the child's experience of the death of others, but also the child's experience of his own death. That death is sometimes better than life is something that Harry quickly learns early on in his adventures. When Harry first meets the centaur Firenze in the Forbidden Forest, he already poses this question to Firenze: "If you're going to be cursed for ever, death's better, isn't it?" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 189). I find it significant that this scene takes place in the Forbidden Forest, a dark place which can be read symbolically as the terrain of the unknown and the feared to which death is associated. In *Deathly Hallows*, Harry finally finds out that "His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms", and that this had been planned by Dumbledore himself, whom he regarded as his protector (*Deathly Hallows*, 554). In this moment of realization, the language of terror takes over: "Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him. Would it hurt to die?" (*Deathly Hallows*, 554). It is not the tragedy of death that is emphasized here, but the fear of dying, the fear of the unknown. Finding out that Dumbledore had actually planned Harry's death (a topic I will discuss in detail in the next subsection) is probably one of the grimmest moments in the series. Yet, Rowling finally twists the situation around and, once more, consolation is achieved through the series's happy ending.

If we take the seven *Harry Potter* books separately, *Goblet of Fire*, *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince* do not have very reassuring endings, but they rather end in a menacing tone, as the closing line in *Goblet of Fire* shows: "As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come ... and he [Harry] would have to meet it when it did" (*Goblet of Fire*, 796). However, the reader still manages to find comfort in the fact that, by the end of the books, Harry is still alive and he is not alone, as the closing line in

Half-Blood Prince emphasizes: “in spite of the final meeting with Voldemort he knew must come (...), he [Harry] felt his heart lift at the thought that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with Ron and Hermione” (*Half-Blood Prince*, 607). This reference to a “golden day” recalls Lewis Carroll’s “golden afternoon” with Alice Liddell, the feeling that innocence is not yet completely lost (Carroll, 1998: 5). What is more, I believe what matters is not only the ending of each book, but the ending of the whole series. After all, *Harry Potter* readers know that the books are part of a series, and although some of the books do not end as reassuringly, readers know that that is not *the end*.

The ending of the *Harry Potter* series coincides with Tolkien’s definition of the *eucatastrophe*. Although many characters die in the final battle at Hogwarts making the ending bittersweet, it is the joy of seeing Harry survive his last duel with Voldemort and the satisfaction of having the latter finally destroyed that predominate. This final joy, however, is possible precisely because of how likely it was for the story to end badly. Actually, before the relief of the happy ending, Rowling has shown us Harry’s death; she has shown us the child protagonist realizing that he is going to die, and she has made us feel his terror for one whole chapter. Since throughout the whole series Rowling insists that no magic can revive the dead, the reader is led to believe that the series will indeed end with the death of Harry Potter when the narrator says that “He saw the [Voldemort’s] mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone” (*Deathly Hallows*, 564). Yet, grief for Harry does not last long, as in the very next chapter we learn that Harry is not really dead; he is still protected by his mother’s sacrifice that lives on in Voldemort’s body after he took some of Harry’s blood thinking it would strengthen him. If Harry’s survival and Voldemort’s destruction were not

enough, Rowling adds an epilogue in which she shows Harry and Ginny, and Ron and Hermione happily married with children nineteen years later. Not only has Harry managed to rid the world from Voldemort, he has also attained his heart's deepest desire: a family. In my view, the main function of this epilogue is to reassure readers that evil has definitely been destroyed and order restored. To those—like myself—who prefer interesting uncertainty to dull reassurance, the epilogue may come across as quite disappointing. Even so, I must admit that knowing that Harry will be fine after all he has been through does transmit joy. This takes me to my next, and final, point which is that this ending reflects another convention of children's literature, the fact that “the adult world must have control over the child” (Nikolajeva, 2009: 230).

Goodbye to Hogwarts

The child's death in *Harry Potter* is also metaphorical inasmuch as Harry goes from being a rule-breaking, adventurous kid who can solve mysteries better than adults, to becoming Dumbledore's 'weapon'. Harry, Ron and Hermione never actually complete their seven-year education. In *Deathly Hallows*, they feel compelled to leave Hogwarts to fulfill the task that Dumbledore has left them. They are therefore deprived of their childhood too soon. What is more surprising about this is that Dumbledore's use and abuse of Harry is not Gothicized. On the contrary, this is questioned but finally accepted. Of course, it would not be accurate to affirm that Rowling's narration never casts doubt on Dumbledore. In fact, Harry's crisis in *Deathly Hallows* has to do precisely with his loss of faith in his mentor and his discovery that Dumbledore, whom he believed to be a role model, had been guilty of neglecting his family and of experimenting with dark magic in his youth. Yet, Dumbledore's authority is reasserted

in the end when his plan actually works: Voldemort is destroyed, Harry does not die, the world is finally safe, and Harry acknowledges Dumbledore's merit by naming one of his children Albus. As Nikolajeva points out, "the wheel of power has gone full circle. Adult normativity is irreversibly cemented" (2009: 240).

Although Dumbledore's use of Harry suggests a horrible reality, the series ends in an optimistic tone. Rowling's series starts out providing an empowering representation of the child by means of characterization and setting, only to turn her child protagonist into a mere instrument in the end. As Nikolajeva states, "Dumbledore's irresponsible use of Harry 'for the greater good' (a Jesuit motto), revealed in the last volume, corroborates that the child is secondary and instrumental to the wishes and purposes of adults" (2009: 240). Furthermore, the series only partly criticizes this. Throughout the whole series, Rowling portrays Harry's resistance to be "the boy who lived" (*Philosopher's Stone*, 18) and the "Chosen One" (*Half-Blood Prince*, 324). Harry ardently rebels against the role that the wizarding community has bestowed on him, the role of "giving people hope" (*Half-Blood Prince*, 324). When, the Minister for Magic asks Harry to collaborate with the Ministry, Harry defiantly tells him "I don't want to be used" (*Half-Blood Prince*, 325). And yet, in the last book it is revealed that Harry has actually been used all along. As Snape tells Dumbledore "you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter" (*Deathly Hallows*, 551). Harry, however, despite his (moderately) rebellious nature, accepts to be used this time. Not only does he admit that he is "Dumbledore's man through and through" (*Half-Blood Prince*, 326), but he also accepts to be "the boy who had already been marked for slaughter" (*Deathly Hallows*, 555). Rowling's criticism of adult authority, therefore, does not seem to apply to Dumbledore. On the contrary, there is very little commentary on Dumbledore's

unethical use of Harry, which is eventually forgotten altogether, making the happy ending possible.

Despite Rowling's constant critique of an unquestioned belief in authority, she eventually seems to acknowledge the necessity to believe that someone is in charge, be it God or a wise, powerful man like Dumbledore. As Rowling herself has admitted, "my struggling with religious belief and so on I think is quite apparent in this book" (in Vieira, 2007). As a result of Rowling's statement, Granger defines *Harry Potter* as "an allegory of the modern struggle to believe" and Dumbledore as "a stand-in for God" (2009: 190). The series is therefore extremely ambiguous when it comes to the representation of adult authority. Despite Rowling's constant undermining of politicians, journalists and incompetent parents, the truth is that the series is full of adult commentary and it celebrates authority. Furthermore, as I have discussed, the moral lessons that Dumbledore transmits to Harry are mostly warnings against the terrible effects of desire. As Taija Piippo states, in *Harry Potter*, "the most often posed situation resulting from desire is dysfunctional, threatening, or even fatal" (2009: 65). This is best exemplified by Harry's fascination with the Mirror of Erised, a magic mirror which "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts" but "will give us neither knowledge or truth" (Dumbledore in *Philosopher's Stone*, 157). Similarly, other magical objects like the Philosopher's Stone and the Deathly Hallows also stand for one of humanity's deepest desires, the desire to conquer death, which, as I have already discussed, is embodied by Voldemort. Such desires are represented in Rowling's novels as highly destructive, and the objects that represent these desires are finally destroyed for the better. Dumbledore warns Harry against the Mirror of Erised saying that "Men have wasted away before it" (*Philosopher's Stone*,

157). Likewise, he explains to Harry that “the Stone was not really such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all” (*Philosopher’s Stone*, 215). As this suggests, the *Harry Potter* series exemplifies one of the many underlying contradictions of children’s fiction that Nodelman highlights. Children’s fiction appeals to what adults understand as the child’s desire by constructing worlds like Hogwarts in order to teach that such desire must be controlled (Nodelman, 2008: 36).

In the end, Harry accepts to be the symbol of hope that the wizarding community wants him to be, and the *Harry Potter* series finally adheres to the children’s literature conventions it temporarily challenges through Gothic conventions. The most important one is the optimistic ending. As Nodelman notes, “since a happy ending inevitably implies an optimistic view of reality, children’s literature is characteristically hopeful and optimistic in tone” (2008: 216). Although the series’s content becomes more Gothic and disturbing from *Order of the Phoenix* onwards, it finally goes back to the fairy-tale tradition and the consolation of the happy ending. As the epilogue shows, unity and harmony have finally been achieved, and the series ends with Harry and his friends on platform 9 ¾ waving goodbye to their children as the latter are setting off to Hogwarts.

1.6. Conclusions: “All was well”

The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well.

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

This line closes the *Harry Potter* series, reassuring readers that order has been properly restored. In the BBC documentary *Harry Potter and Me*, Rowling explains how a

mother wrote her a letter complaining about the disturbing ending of *Chamber of Secrets*, in which Harry fights and kills a basilisk. In response to this criticism, Rowling stated that “I’m not writing to make anyone’s children feel safe” (in Pattison, 2001). Voldemort actor Ralph Fiennes has also pointed out the strong Gothic content of the *Harry Potter* series and, particularly, the final scene in *Goblet of Fire* in which Harry faces Voldemort in a graveyard: “if you strip away the fairy-tale fantasy package, what you get is a little boy tied up while an older man humiliates him” (in Heyman et al., 2005). Yet, the thing is, if the fairy-tale fantasy elements were not there, we would not be talking about *Harry Potter*. In fact, we probably would not be talking about children’s fiction at all. As I hope my discussion has demonstrated, Rowling’s representation of violence, child abuse and monstrosity is acceptable precisely thanks to her use of satire, comic Gothic, and fairy-tale and fantasy elements, most importantly the magical setting. Furthermore, although Rowling claims that she does not write to make children feel safe, *Harry Potter* aims to temporarily disturb the reader only to finally return him or her to the safety associated with adult knowledge and control. Whereas it is a common device in adult Gothic to end with a warning that evil will return, at the end of *Harry Potter* there is no such indication. On the contrary, Harry’s body and mind are finally clean, childish desire has been destroyed, and the world is now a safe place. The Gothic has been eradicated, and ideal visions of childhood and adulthood have been reasserted.

The Gothic in Rowling’s series, therefore, is not used to permanently question the stability of identities, subjectivities or places. Instead, it has two main, apparently contradictory, functions. Gothic imagery is used, on one hand, to build a make-believe world that allows for the child’s empowerment by representing the openness to possibility and the desire for adventure that adults assume characterizes childhood. And,

on the other hand, Gothic elements are also deployed to demonize desire. I have already discussed how the series seems to differentiate between childish and childlike desire, representing the former as foolish and the latter as wonderfully imaginative. I wonder, however, if such a flimsy distinction can solve the underlying contradiction in Rowling's depiction of desire—I am not pointing my finger at Rowling here, for I have already explained how this contradiction underlies children's literature in general. The question here is to what extent childish and childlike desire are so alien from each other and to what extent they can be dealt with separately as if one could exist without the other. In any case, what I am interested in is the fact that Rowling *constructs* them as two separate, almost antithetical, forms of desire and attempts to solve the contradiction that underlies the children's literature convention of appealing to the child's desire in order to teach him or her to repress it. Rowling seems to approve of desire as long as it is not strong enough to disrupt society's order. Yet, is this not what magic was supposed to symbolize in *Harry Potter*? Earlier, I quoted Rowling stating that wizards represent everything which defies conventionality and disrupts the Muggle world. In this sense, magic and desire have very much in common, but the ending of the series implies that desire—and, by implication, magic—is acceptable only if there is also a rational mind to control it; lest it cause too much trouble. In other words, it is acceptable as long as it does not threaten conventionality too much. I am not implying here that the *Harry Potter* series succeeds in teaching young readers to repress desire. Even if the Gothic and childhood are put at the service of adult normativity, I have already expressed my skepticism over the effectiveness of didacticism in children's literature. In fact, I would say that the overwhelmingly enthusiastic fandom that Rowling's series has sparked has much more to do with child readers' desire for adventures and Gothic thrills than with their wish to be instructed by their elders.

Regardless of the actual effect this may have on child readers, Rowling's didacticism is notably influenced by prevalent ideas that children should not be taught by means of fear but by means of respect and understanding. This is reflected not only in her friendly narrative voice, but also in her use of the doubling motif. No matter how scary a villain Voldemort is, he is *the other*. Rowling shows her reader how a human being may destroy him or herself, but this happens, not to the hero with whom the reader is likely to identify and sympathize, but to the other. And this introduces yet another contradiction related to Rowling's use of the Gothic. *Harry Potter* aims to teach its implied reader that prejudice, greed and cruelty are the evils of our times and should be eradicated. In the novels, these qualities are presented almost as antithetical to childhood. As I have argued throughout this chapter, despite his occasional rule-breaking and his sometimes irrational outbursts, Harry Potter is inherently a 'good' child, and evil is ultimately exterior to him. Rowling constructs childhood as almost incorruptible. Although the possibility exists, no child in the *Harry Potter* series ends up with his or her soul utterly damaged, not even the vicious Draco Malfoy. Yet, when this construction of childhood is put at the service of didacticism, this reveals yet another less obvious assumption. By aiming to teach the child reader not to be cruel, prejudiced or greedy, the series acknowledges that real children are prone to be cruel, prejudiced and greedy and their behavior needs to be corrected. Thus, the view of the child as not so innocent after all is not overtly present in the *Harry Potter* series, but it is implicit. This is also acknowledged by the fact that, as I already stated, in order to teach these lessons the child must be lured by the Gothic first. The *Harry Potter* novels acknowledge the fact that children are attracted by Gothic elements, which provide the necessary pleasure that will presumably allow moral lessons to sink in. Paradoxically, these moral lessons usually have to do with rejecting evil, which is what has drawn the

child in the first place. Therefore, the novels demonize cruelty, but at the same time they appeal to the child's—and the adult's—inclination to it.

This takes me back to the question of why *Harry Potter* is so popular. I suspect *Harry Potter*'s popularity has to do in large part with how its contradictions actually reconcile apparently incompatible desires. It appeals to the child's fantasy of empowerment and heroism, at the same time that it satisfies the adult fantasies of child protection and of being in control. Although the next chapters examine how other contemporary children's authors use Gothic elements to mildly subvert conventional representations of childhood and overcome the contradictions that the blending of the Gothic and children's fiction entails, it is safe to say that, as Peppone puts it, "Ultimately the distant mirror that the cult of childhood [and, by extension, children's literature] holds up to the modern world is a Mirror of Erised" (2012: 156), showing us childhood as we want to see it, not as it is.

CHAPTER 2 – FRAGILE THINGS: GOTHICIZING CHILDHOOD AND INDIVIDUALITY IN NEIL GAIMAN’S *CORALINE*

2.1. No Golden Afternoon: A Gothic Studies Reading of *Coraline*

Long has paled that sunny sky:
Echoes fade and memories die:
Autumn frosts have slain July.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

Because of the dark tone of his books for children and young adults, prolific English writer Neil Gaiman (born 1960) is usually referred to whenever the Gothic and children’s literature are discussed. Gaiman is the author of novels, graphic novels, short stories, picture books and screenplays, for which he has won numerous literary awards.³⁰ He is best known for his dark fantasy series of graphic novels *The Sandman* (1989-1996), as well as fantasy novels for adults like *Stardust* (1999), *American Gods* (2001), *Anansi Boys* (2005) and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013). Other popular works by Gaiman are his collections of short stories, *Smoke and Mirrors* (1998), *Fragile Things* (2006) and *M is for Magic* (2007); and his books for children *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* (1997), *Coraline* (2002), *The Wolves in the Walls* (2003), and *The Graveyard Book* (2008), among many others. Gaiman is also the author of the screenplay for the BBC series *Neverwhere*, which he later adapted into novel form, and he cowrote the scripts for Dave McKean’s movie *MirrorMask* (2005) and Robert Zemeckis’s film adaptation of *Beowulf* (2007).

³⁰ Here is a brief selection. Gaiman won the Bram Stoker Award for *The Sandman: The Dream Hunters* (Best Illustrated Narrative) in 2000, for *American Gods* (Best Novel) in 2001, and for *Coraline* (Best Work for Younger Readers) in 2003. He also won the Newbery Medal in 2009 and the Carnegie Medal in 2010 for *The Graveyard Book*, among many other awards and honors (see Wikipedia article “Neil Gaiman”).

Gaiman's Dark Fairy Tales

Influenced by the works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton (Gaiman, 2012), fantasy, Gothic and children's literature conventions intersect in Gaiman's books, especially *The Wolves in the Walls*, *Coraline*, *MirrorMask* and *The Graveyard Book*, which are all about child or adolescent protagonists facing terrors. I selected *Coraline* as one of the primary sources to be analyzed in this dissertation on the grounds that it is precisely Gaiman's skilful blend of Gothic conventions, fairy-tale elements and children's fiction themes that has captured the attention of critics, reviewers and readers. On the other hand, I ruled out *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask* because they are a picture book and a movie respectively, and the interaction between words and images is not covered by this dissertation.³¹ As for *The Graveyard Book*, I decided not to concentrate on this novel because "[the book's] focus is on the quiet and important lessons of life and maturation" (Bleiler, 2011: 277), and the child's experience of fear is not as emphasized as in *Coraline*. Still, although these works by Gaiman are not central to this dissertation, I will occasionally refer to them for their thematic similarities to the books I analyze, and for their thought-provoking representations of childhood and the Gothic.

Coraline is the first book Gaiman wrote with a child audience in mind, as he stated in an interview: "Some of my adult books, *Stardust* and *Neverwhere* were YALSA American Library Association 'Picks for Younger Readers', but this is the first time I've written a book for children and it is being marketed as a book for children" (in Grant, n.d.). Adapted into a stop-motion animated film directed by Henry Selick in 2009, *Coraline* is probably one of Gaiman's most popular works. It tells the story of

³¹ Actually, *MirrorMask* was published as a picture book based on the movie, written by Gaiman and illustrated by McKean, later in 2005. Originally, however, it was conceived as a movie.

Coraline Jones, a girl who has just moved with her parents into a big, old house divided into flats. Although her exact age is not specified, her behavior suggests that she is between eight and ten years old. Bored with the ordinariness of her life and the absent-mindedness of her busy working parents, Coraline sets out to explore the house and the garden, and she finds a locked door that captures her attention. When she asks her mother to open the door for her with an old black key, the door reveals nothing but a brick wall. Coraline's mother explains that on the other side there is just an empty, uninhabited flat. Intrigued by the door, Coraline unlocks it again one day while her parents are away, and this time she discovers a passage that was not there before. To her surprise, when she emerges at the other end of the corridor, she finds herself right where she started: in the drawing room of her own house. Despite appearances, Coraline soon realizes that there is something unfamiliar about this strange mirror-image of her own house. When she meets the pale, thin woman that awaits her in the kitchen and introduces herself as her 'other mother', Coraline learns that she is in her 'other home', where her 'other parents and neighbors' have time for her, the food is delicious and her toys come to life. Yet, from the very beginning, there is also a sense of creepy uneasiness: Coraline's other parents have black buttons for eyes, and they seem only too eager to make her a part of the family. Coraline soon finds out that she can stay in the other home forever, but the price to pay is to let her other mother sew buttons into her eyes.

The idea of a preadolescent girl stepping into a world that mirrors and distorts her own evokes other children's literature classics influenced by the fairy-tale tradition, especially Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872), Frank Baum's *The Wonderful*

Wizard of Oz (1900), or C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). However, the quirky book cover of the 2002 Bloomsbury edition illustrated by Dave McKean anticipates that this will not be a "golden afternoon" (Carroll, 1998: 5), and so does Lemony Snicket's blurb claiming that "This book tells a fascinating and disturbing story that frightened me nearly to death" (in Gaiman, 2002: book cover). Unlike its precedents, *Coraline's* door does not hide "the loveliest garden you ever saw" (Carroll, 1998: 12). More in keeping with the Bluebeard fairy tale, *Coraline's* door conceals childhood terrors embodied by the other mother, and the sense that evil is lurking around in every corner masquerading as a domestic haven pervades *Coraline's* other home. In fact, the book has been advertised with particular emphasis on its blending of Gothic and fairy-tale elements. For instance, Terry Pratchett stated that "This book will send a shiver down your spine" and that "It has the delicate horror of the finest fairy tales" (in Gaiman, 2002: "Praise for CORALINE"). Similarly, Philip Pullman described it in his article "The other mother" as "a marvelously strange and scary book" with "the creepy atmosphere of the other flat" (2002b). On the other hand, its resemblance to Carroll's *Alice* novels is also constantly highlighted in reviews. According to Pullman, "The story occupies a territory somewhere between Lewis Carroll's *Alice* and Catherine Storr's classic fantasy of warning and healing, *Marianne Dreams*" (2002b)³².

Apart from its Gothic and fairy-tale quality and its resemblance to *Alice*, another feature that is generally emphasized in reviews is the fact that the book satisfies both child and adult readers, as happens with *Harry Potter*. That the book attracts a double

³² Catherine Storr's *Marianne Dreams* (1958) is another portal narrative. Marianne is a sick girl who, bored and upset with the idea of spending the whole summer term in bed, begins to draw to entertain herself. Marianne draws a house on a prairie and finds herself transported into that house every night. Soon she realizes that she has been drawing with a magic pencil and that everything she draws appears in her dreams. When some of her drawings start to have terrifying consequences and affect other people, not only in the dream, but also in real life, Marianne will have to find the way to set things right, at the same time that she will have to find the strength to overcome her sickness.

readership is acknowledged in several blurbs and reviews, together with the claim that a strange and scary book like *Coraline* can actually have a good effect on children. According to Pullman, “Adults find it terrifying; children lap it up” (in “Tall Tales, top reads and page turners”, 2002); and Brooke describes it as “Enchanting and creepy by turns, *Coraline* is a very grown-up fairy tale for all ages” (2009). Thus, most reviews stress the Gothic element as what makes *Coraline* so special a children’s novel, while at the same time reassuring buyers that children will not be negatively influenced by such reading material. In fact, Gaiman himself claimed in an interview that children and adults respond very differently to the book: “We’re getting two completely different reactions from two completely different reading audiences” (in Grant, n.d.). As Gaiman further explains,

Reading audience number one is adults. Adults completely love it and they tell me it gave them nightmares. They found it really scary and disturbing, and they’re not sure it’s a good book for kids, but they loved it. Reading audience number two are kids who read it as an adventure and they love it. They don’t get nightmares, and they don’t find it scary. I think part of that is that kids don’t realize how much trouble *Coraline* is in—she is in *big* trouble—and adults read it and think, ‘I know how much trouble you’re in.’ (in Grant, n.d., original emphasis)

In contrast to what Gaiman affirms, book critic and journalist Yvonne Zipp states that she does not find *Coraline* as terrifying as most reviewers have described it, claiming that “There are certainly scary moments here, but the energy is more ominous than terrifying, and the Brothers Grimm trafficked in more gore” (2002). Yet when it comes to children reading it, Zipp adopts the cautious attitude that Gaiman speaks of: “The publisher claims it’s for children 8 and up, but I’d feel uncomfortable buying it for anyone younger than 10 or 11”. In my view, *Coraline* is as accessible as any other book for children eight and up, and as C.S. Lewis stated in his defense of fear in children’s literature, “We do not know what will or will not frighten a child” (2006: 23). Still, I

understand Zipp's reluctance. As I will argue throughout this chapter, Gaiman's *Coraline* may be more disturbing and less inclined to reassure its readers than *Harry Potter*. My supposition, however, is based purely on Gaiman's use of Gothic conventions, and I do not claim to have empirical evidence.

What is relevant about all these reviews is that most adult readers find the novel appealing, but also disquieting both for themselves and for their children. As I stated earlier, the cathartic effect of fear in fairy tales for children was already studied by Bettelheim in his classic *The Uses of Enchantment*. The fact that *Coraline* bears the imprint of fairy tales has sparked Bettelheim-inspired psychoanalytic readings of Gaiman's novel that claim that it allows child readers to come to terms with their fears by giving them a safe narrative frame. In the following subsection, I will review previous academic discussions of *Coraline*, place my own reading within this larger discussion and discuss the relevance of Gaiman's novel in this dissertation.

A Gothic Studies Approach to *Coraline*

There are few academic articles about Gaiman's fiction for children, and practically all of them are psychoanalytic studies influenced by Freud's essay "The 'Uncanny'" (1919) and Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*. In the latter, Bettelheim draws on the Freudian idea that "only by struggling courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds can man succeed in wringing meaning out of his existence", and he claims that fairy tales can help children in this process (1991: 8). Most critics read *Coraline* as a dark fairy tale that aims to help child readers face their fears of growing up. It could be argued that the book is mostly about *girls'* anxieties about womanhood, but most critics do not make this distinction and refer to child readers in general. David

Rudd suggests that “*Coraline* is centrally concerned with how one negotiates one’s place in the world; how one is recognized in one’s own right rather than being either ignored on the one hand, or stifled on the other” (2008: 2). According to Rudd, Gaiman’s representation of the Freudian Uncanny—“that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud, 1988a: 340)—is especially useful to deal with questions of identity. Similarly, Richard Gooding also claims that “The house that Coraline discovers on the other side of the drawing room is (...) a near-literal manifestation of the *unheimlich*” (2008: 394), and Coraline’s experience there leads her to an “increased self-awareness” (2008: 399), but also to a repression of her “oedipal rivalries” (2008: 403). As I stated in my introduction, I have reservations about reading child characters as though they were real-life medical cases, for their actions often respond to plot necessities rather than to theories of the child’s psychosexual development. As I will argue throughout this chapter, Coraline does not behave consistently with Freudian theories of the uncanny and child sexuality. She is often not afraid of things that would be uncanny in real life, and nothing in the text suggests that she is competing with her mother for her father’s attention, which in my view rules out the oedipal rivalries theory. I acknowledge, though, that there is a clear effort on the author’s part to depict the child, not just as a type character, but as a more psychologically complex being, and I will take this into account throughout my discussion.

On the other hand, in their reading of *Coraline* as a postfeminist fairy tale, Parsons, Sawers and McInally state that “Gaiman deploys the trope of the evil, powerful ‘other’ mother as a vehicle through which the protagonists resolve questions of identity, one’s (gendered) place in the world, and the kind of interpersonal relationships that are

culturally sanctioned” (2008: 371). For Parsons et al., what Coraline learns to repress in the end of the novel is “her fantasy of feminine power and agency”, because what has to be discarded for the little girl to achieve a normative position is a powerful female character—the ‘phallic’ mother (2008: 371). Therefore, they claim that “What appears to be a feminist agenda (...) is also a fantasy”. Although I will rely on Parsons et al.’s article when I examine the representation of mother and daughter (see section 2.4.), I find their argument too simplistic. In the first place, the idea that the other mother is an embodiment of feminine power and that, by Gothicizing her, Gaiman’s novel is rejecting female empowerment is, in my view, a misconception and a simplification. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels*, Roberta S. Trites stresses that “Feminist power is more about being aware of one’s agency than it is about controlling other people” (1997: 8). As I will further discuss in section 2.4., Gaiman’s other mother is a Gothic villainess that attempts to gain power by stifling others, very much like Rowling’s Voldemort. Thus, her ‘power’ may be feminine, but it is in no way feminist, and I do not see the rejection of such power as incompatible with Coraline’s empowerment. My analysis of Gaiman’s use of the evil mother as the doppelgänger in his Gothic tale will therefore aim to revise this interpretation.

Whereas the above-mentioned authors psychoanalyze the child character, other authors psychoanalyze Gaiman’s readers. Nick Midgley interprets *Coraline*—together with *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask*—as a tale of terror that can have therapeutic and cathartic effects on child readers. Midgley claims that fear is central to a child’s life and that “emotional development cannot truly take place unless those deep fears—about loss, about abandonment, about our own destructive potential—can be reworked at each stage of our lives, continually confronted and engaged with” (2008: 140). This is why he regards Gaiman as one of those “children’s authors who help us on

our journey through life” (2008: 140), much like Bettelheim. Like Midgley, Karen Coats also embraces the belief that experiencing fear in the safe context that Gaiman’s narrations provide is beneficial for child readers:

Their [children’s] worlds do not provide them with circumstances that adequately represent for them the violent, bleeding cut that is psychically necessary for them to learn to be alone in the presence of their parents. Their outer lives give them no actual contexts for the fear that accompanies the inner dramas and psychic losses that are an inevitable legacy of growing up. Well-made Gothic can fill in those gaps, giving concrete expression to abstract psychic processes, keeping dark fascinations and haunting fears where children can see them, and mingling the horror with healthy doses of humour and hope. (2008: 91)

Yet, Coats is taking for granted that Gaiman’s works are only read by children who lead happy lives without real fears, which may not necessarily be the case. Furthermore, the therapeutic effects described by Midgley and Coats presuppose that the child will be frightened in the first place, and this contradicts what Gaiman himself states about his child readership not being scared by *Coraline*. Of course, the author might be wrong, but I find this contradiction significant because it shows how complicated it is to talk about the effects a particular work of fiction may have on readers without having empirical evidence.

In light of the above, this chapter sets out to examine Gaiman’s *Coraline* as a children’s novel in which traditional Gothic elements are introduced in a plotline that is original and innovative in itself, but also reminiscent of classic works of children’s fiction and fairy tales. Although I do not wholeheartedly agree with all the previously mentioned articles, they have largely influenced my own reading of Gaiman’s novel, and I will therefore refer back to them throughout my own analysis. In the next four sections I examine the Gothic themes and motifs deployed by Gaiman; namely, the big house, the double, the ghost, the persecuted minor and the recurrence of fear. I analyze

how these Gothic tropes are used to deal with conventional themes of children's literature: the world seen through the child's eyes, the child's place in the home and the family, the confrontation of desire and knowledge, and the celebration of maturity and a (relatively) stable identity. After my reading of *Harry Potter* as a series that temporarily acknowledges the child's evil potential only to do away with this idea completely by the end, I here argue that Gaiman's novel also celebrates the child's individuality and her attainment of a stable identity while acknowledging that this is a fragile ideal through his use of Gothic conventions. As in the previous chapter, I will begin by examining how Gaiman's narrative technique reflects an appropriate relationship between adult and child in support of my claim that this is one of the children's literature conventions that can hardly be transgressed by the Gothic.

2.2. Secrets beyond the Child's Mind: Gaiman's *Coraline* as a Child-Centered Novel

I don't know whether you have ever seen a map of a person's mind. Doctors sometimes draw maps of other parts of you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child's mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time.

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

The child's mind is a relatively unrepresented theme in fiction (as compared to representations of the adult's psyche). Strange as it may seem, even in children's literature, unfolding its secrets has not always been the author's main priority. As Wall states, referring mostly to nineteenth-century British authors, the concern of some children's writers for pleasing both a child and an adult audience sometimes prevented them from developing a discourse with which they could speak comfortably to and

about children (1991: 42). On this matter, Nodelman affirms that children's literature inevitably seeks the gratification of adults as well as children, and that this is one of the intrinsic characteristics of the genre. As a consequence, he argues, "The divided child is the only possible child constructed by children's literature" (2008: 187). Despite this unavoidable doubleness, offering more or less plausible representations of the child's mind in children's fiction has increasingly become a matter of importance as developments in child psychology have taken place, and as children have increasingly been granted individuality since Freud. We see this in the works of contemporary British children's writers such as Catherine Storr, J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, Diana Wynne Jones or Neil Gaiman, whose narrators focus on child characters and address primarily a child narratee.

In this section I argue that Gaiman's narrative technique in *Coraline* reflects this relatively recent effort on the writer's part to give the child psychological complexity. *Coraline* is—to use Wall's (1991) phrase—a 'child-centred novel' in which events are focalized through the child character, and the narrator attempts to narrate them as a child would. This is achieved by means of a third-person narrative technique that Dorrit Cohn (1983) termed 'psycho-narration', used to represent a character's stream of consciousness. Nikolajeva (2002b) already applied Cohn's categories to the representation of consciousness in children's fiction, and Richard Gooding affirms that psycho-narration is the technique that is predominantly used in *Coraline* (2008: 395). Before proceeding to examine Gaiman's use of this narrative technique, I will attempt to define the concept and determine in what ways psycho-narration is useful to portray the child's Gothic experience.

Psycho-narration in Children's Literature and the Gothic

'Psycho-narration' is a term first coined by Dorrit Cohn in *Transparent Minds* (1983). Cohn defines it as "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" and distinguishes between dissonant and consonant psycho-narration (1983: 14). Whereas the former is characterized by a narrator who focuses on a character's psyche while remaining notably detached, in the latter the narrator is effaced and fuses with the consciousness he narrates (1983: 26). Cohn adds that, in dissonant psycho-narration, stylistic features—such as the presence of ex-cathedra statements—"all point in one direction: the narrator's superior knowledge of the character's inner life and his superior ability to present it and assess it"³³ (1983: 29). In consonant psycho-narration, on the other hand, the narrator "cannot be grasped as a separate entity within the text. His most striking characteristic is, in fact, that he is ungraspably chameleonic. He persistently adapts his style to the age and mood of his hero" (1983: 30).³⁴ As a result of these stylistic features, dissonant psycho-narration provides more authorial guidance than consonant psycho-narration, in which the narrator does not intervene to guide the implied reader.

According to Cohn, the pattern that predominated in the third-person novel well into the nineteenth century avoided psycho-narration, because the authorial narrator in the works of authors like Fielding, Thackeray or Dickens is not only "far more interested in his own commentary on events than in the meditations these events may release within the characters, he is also committed by his narrative stance to explicit,

³³ It could be argued, Cohn admits, that this superiority is always implied in all types of psycho-narration. Yet, she maintains that it is possible to give more or less emphasis to the narrator's cognitive privilege by means of stylistic features (1983: 29).

³⁴ Cohn mentions James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as an example of consonant psycho-narration.

often didactic, evaluation” (Cohn, 1983: 23). In contrast, in psycho-narration, “a fictional consciousness holds center stage” overshadowing the narrator’s own subjectivity (Cohn, 1983: 26). In *The Gothic Text* (2005), however, Brown disagrees with Cohn’s assertion that psycho-narration was avoided in eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, arguing that early Gothic writers like Horace Walpole already explored psycho-narration in order to convey “the sense for the uncertainty of personality and the fluid boundary between conscious and subconscious moments, aware and repressed responses, deliberation and feeling” (2005: 40). Brown’s affirmation is of great significance to this section, for it shows how useful psycho-narration is to represent a character’s Gothic experience, a point to which I will return in due course.

Given the didactic stance of many children’s fiction narrators, it is hardly surprising that psycho-narration—especially *consonant* psycho-narration—is only a recent development in this genre. According to Nikolajeva, “Conspicuous, didactic, authoritarian narrators of traditional children’s fiction seldom have the ability or interest to penetrate the secrets of a child’s mind” (2002b: 180). Carroll’s *Alice* novels, on the other hand, are a step forward in developing a narrative technique with which the narrator comfortably observes and talks about nothing but the child. Still, Carroll hardly ever penetrates Alice’s mind, but shows her talking to herself instead, using quoted monologue³⁵ to represent her thoughts, as in this passage: “‘I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen by this time?’ she [Alice] said aloud. ‘I must be getting near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think—’” (Carroll, 1998:

³⁵ Defined by Cohn as “a character’s mental discourse” presented as direct speech (1983: 14). According to Nikolajeva, “This [quoted monologue] is the most primitive and also the most direct way of conveying internal life. Established in the mid-nineteenth century, such phrases can sometimes appear outdated or unnatural. But since the development of narrative technique is usually delayed in children’s fiction (as compared to the mainstream), quoted monologue is still frequently used in children’s novels”. She also adds that “Quoted monologue conveys inner speech, endophasy, but it cannot convey the unconscious because it is dependent on language” (2002b: 175).

10).³⁶ With the works of early-twentieth-century writers, such as John Maisefield, Arthur Ransome, Noel Streatfield, Walter de la Mare and Geoffrey Trease, Wall affirms that “the modern narrative stance was confirmed. The voice of the narrator ceased to dominate, and the personality of the narrator gave place to the consciousness of the child protagonist” (1991: 186). Nikolajeva mentions Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) as an early example of dissonant psycho-narration in which the narrator focuses on the child’s inner world, although still showing that her knowledge is superior to the character’s (2002b: 181).

As for consonant psycho-narration, Nikolajeva claims that “Because of its ambiguity, it is seldom, if ever, used in traditional children’s literature, and it has so far only been used by a limited number of sophisticated children’s writers, such as William Mayne, Alan Garner, Lois Lowry, Virginia Hamilton, and Patricia MacLachlan” (2002b: 182), all of them writing in the second half of the twentieth century. In accordance with the assumption that child readers need an adult voice to guide them through the narrative, consonant psycho-narration has often been avoided in children’s fiction, for this narrative device grants the implied reader a great deal more freedom to form his or her own judgment than dissonant psycho-narration. In fact, the idea that narrators should not be intrusive and talk down to child narratees is only a recent development (Wall, 1991: 13). It is also true, though, that this view presupposes that all narrators are reliable, while, as Cohn very well points out, “a narrator’s moral evaluations are not necessarily reliable, especially in modern novels that use intrusive narrators for ironic effect” (1983: 29). Narrative unreliability, however, is hardly ever

³⁶ In the case of Lewis Carroll, however, this is not necessarily the result of a lack of interest in the child’s mind, but rather of the fact that, as Wall argues, the mid nineteenth century was still a period of experiment with narrative voice in children’s literature (1991: 64).

found in children's fiction, as I will discuss in Chapter 4 when I analyze Lemony Snicket's series as an exception to this 'rule'.

Psycho-narration in children's fiction, then, becomes prominent around the same time when Gothic elements irrupt more forcefully into this genre, i.e., the second half of the twentieth century. As Nikolajeva states, "this tendency [to reflect a child character's internal life] has only become prominent during the last twenty or thirty years" (2002b: 173). My intention here is not to claim that these two developments are inextricably linked, or that one is a consequence of the other. For one thing, psycho-narration is used in children's novels without the presence of the Gothic, and for another, Gothic novels use other types of narrative technique to represent a character's consciousness, especially first-person narration. Nevertheless, I do believe that there is a connection insofar as both developments stem from a rising interest in depicting the child's mind, conveying both the conscious and the unconscious. Nikolajeva traces this more profound interest in character in children's fiction back to the 1960s and suggests that it is due not only to our increasing knowledge in child psychology, but also to the influence of the trends in general literary criticism which depart from "the rigid structuralist approach to character, allowing literary characters a certain degree of psychological personality" (2002a: 13). Gothic elements like the uncanny or the double are used by children's writers to explore child characters' psyches, to represent indescribable or unacknowledged fears. Psycho-narration, on the other hand, allows children's authors to transmit conscious thoughts as well as the immediacy of the child character's point of view, without resorting to the first-person narrative, generally less favored in children's fiction.

Whereas (adult) Gothic fiction is rife with first-person narrators, these are much less numerous in children's fiction. This is not to say that authors have never experimented with first-person narrative voices,³⁷ but "by far the greater proportion of texts for children (...) tell[s] of the main characters' response through the medium of a third-person narrator" (Nodelman, 2008: 20). A possible explanation for this is what Wayne C. Booth affirms in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, that "choice of the first person is sometimes unduly limiting; if the 'I' has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led into improbabilities" (1983: 150). Since fictional children are often portrayed as initially ignorant, their limited access to information could restrict the narration. As Wall puts it, "That a child's inexperience both of life and of writing may clash uncomfortably with the designs of the adult story-teller is a problem that underlies this branch of first-person narration" (1991: 248). However, it could also be argued that child characters almost always find knowledge in the end, and therefore nothing prevents them from telling their own story retrospectively. Another possibility is that it is simply not easy to make a child narrator sound believable due to the prevalent assumption that children do not possess the resources to create their own stories.³⁸

As regards the representation of consciousness in the Gothic genre, Garrett states that

³⁷ Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899) is narrated by a child, even though "Nesbit did not delve deep into the child mind" (Wall, 1991: 247). Two more recent examples are American writer Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) and Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983). The former is narrated by eleven-year-old Margaret, and "the child voice directly addresses a child audience in something approaching a child's idiom" (Wall, 1991: 248). The latter, on the other hand, is narrated by the anonymous protagonist, but his voice is not a child's voice. Dahl's narrator sounds like an adult telling his childhood story retrospectively.

³⁸ This assumption is, of course, not entirely true, for children do write stories. Daisy Ashford (1881-1972) wrote her novella *The Young Visitors* (published in 1919) when she was only nine years old. Funnily enough, Ashford did not write a children's book, but a novel about adults that tries to imitate the voice of an adult narrator (Wall, 1991: 87-8). Even if this is a genuine child voice telling a story, the novella is hardly ever classified as children's literature, as also happens with Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), which she started writing when she was twelve years old.

writers from Godwin to James developed a mode especially suited for representing isolated individuals and extreme experiences. The most distinctive form of this development, from *Caleb Williams* to “The Turn of the Screw”, is the first-person narrative: victims’ accounts of their ordeals, criminals’ confessions, madmen’s monologues, whether standing alone in the form of the Gothic tale or embedded in longer narratives. (2003: 3)

In contrast, in children’s fiction there is still an obvious preference for third-person narrators even when authors are telling a Gothic story about isolated children undergoing extreme experiences. This is precisely the case of Gaiman’s *Coraline* and many other thematically similar novels about lonely children who are transported to a different world, such as Catherine Storr’s *Marianne Dreams* (1958) and *The Mirror Image Ghost* (1994), Philippa Pearce’s *Tom’s Midnight Garden* (1958), or Diana Wynne Jones’s *The Time of the Ghost* (1981). In all these novels events are focalized through child characters, focusing on their consciousness, but without completely giving up the control of a third-person adult narrator.

Despite their thematic similarities, Gaiman’s *Coraline* differs from the other novels when it comes to narrative technique. Storr, Pearce and Jones mostly make use of dissonant psycho-narration. In *Tom’s Midnight Garden*,³⁹ for instance, the narrator focuses on Tom’s mind most of the time, while stressing her own linguistic and cognitive superiority. In other words, Pearce’s narrator makes no attempt at sounding as a child’s voice would.⁴⁰ Similarly, Jones’s *The Time of the Ghost*⁴¹ is another

³⁹ In Pearce’s novel, Tom is sent away to his aunt and uncle’s while his younger brother is sick with measles. Aunt Gwen and Uncle Alan live in the city, in a flat in a big house, owned by an old lady. At night, while Tom is listening to the old grandfather clock striking midnight, he suddenly realizes that the clock has struck thirteen. Surprised, Tom sets out to investigate. When he opens the back door, the little back yard with cars is not there anymore. In its place there is an amazing garden that seems to belong to a different time. Tom visits the garden every night, and he soon realizes that he is not the garden’s only visitor.

⁴⁰ Take, for example, the passage that narrates Tom’s second visit to his midnight garden: “This grey, still hour before morning was the time in which Tom walked into his garden. He had come down the stairs and along the hall to the garden door at midnight; but when he opened that door and stepped out into the garden, the time was much later. All night—moonlit or swathed in darkness—the garden had stayed awake; now, after that night-long vigil, it had dozed off” (Pearce, 2008: 37). Here, the narrator conveys Tom’s impressions when he sees the garden again, but she does so by using a language, mystical and rich

outstanding example of how an author transmits the immediacy of the child character's point of view by means of a third-person technique, though some of the vocabulary used indicates that the narrator is not trying to hide that she is an adult.⁴² When it comes to narrating things from the child character's viewpoint, Gaiman's *Coraline* is very much in line with Jones's novel, of whose writings Gaiman has declared himself an admirer (Gaiman, 2011). However, in Gaiman's novel, the narrator not only adopts the point of view of the child character, but he also relinquishes the pretence that he knows more than Coraline. About this relatively recent tendency in children's fiction, Reynolds states that

In books such as *Marianne Dreams* a marked change in emphasis from earlier writing for children begins to emerge. While clearly the image of the child in the books and the understanding of what the child needs inevitably continues to be dictated by adults, there is a greater attempt to understand children's needs[.] (1994: 43-4)

Having discussed how psycho-narration allows writers to give prominence to the child's own experience of fear without departing from children's literature preferences for third-person adult narrators, I will now turn to analyze how this applies to *Coraline* in particular.

in rhetorical figures, which can in no way sound as a child would speak. The narrator thus makes use of her linguistic ability to portray what the child character would not be able to articulate.

⁴¹ Jones's *The Time of the Ghost* is about a young girl who one day realizes that she has become a ghost. Unable to remember her name and how she became a ghost, she struggles to solve this mysterious puzzle in the world of the living where no one can hear or see her.

⁴² Consider this passage: "She wondered if it was the heavy, steamy weather that was making her feel so odd. She had a queer, light, vague feeling. She could not think clearly – or not when she thought about thinking. And perhaps the weather accounted for the way she felt so troubled and anxious" (Jones, 2001: 8).

Narrating Coraline's Gothic Experience

Coraline is a child-centred novel that deals with the terrors a little girl encounters as she explores her new house. Wall defines 'child-centred novel' as "stories with the child's eye at the centre, and indubitably addressed to children" (1991: 245). Along the same lines, Nodelman identifies "focalization through a central child character" as "[a] quality that marks a text (...) as one intended for child readers" (2008: 18). Although it is indeed convention that children's books feature a child, or childlike, protagonist through whom the story is focalized, Wall points out that the reverse is not true: not all child-centred novels are addressed to children, as is the case with Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897). According to Wall, "the presence of a child protagonist is no guarantee that the author has a child audience in mind or that the work is suitable for children" (1991: 234). Although Wall does not explicitly use the term 'psycho-narration', she points out that, as of the late twentieth century,

many writers do try (...) to narrate 'as a kid would see it and say it', and endeavour to present, through third-person techniques, the immediacy of the child's viewpoint by centring their narratives within the minds of children, and by using language and syntax which children might use. (1991: 249)

In *Coraline*, Gaiman mostly uses consonant psycho-narration to transmit what Coraline sees, hears, thinks or feels. His subjectivity is always fused with Coraline's, and although we can only guess that she is around ten years old, syntax and vocabulary seem to be adjusted to her age and intellectual level—at least from an adult point of view:

That night, Coraline lay awake in her bed. The rain had stopped, and she was almost asleep when something went *t-t-t-t-t-t*. She sat up in bed.

Something went *kreeee...*

...aaaak.

(. . .)

Coraline wondered if she'd dreamed it, whatever it was.

(. . .)

She hoped it wasn't a spider. (Gaiman, 2002: 19-20)⁴³

The syntactic simplicity, the straightforward style and the use of onomatopoeia in this passage give the text a childish quality. Furthermore, as Gooding points out, “the strong emphasis on visual and auditory stimuli, the lack of concern with abstractions and introspection, and the simple, repetitive, and parallel syntax (...) delicately identif[y] the limits of Coraline’s self-awareness” (2008: 395). Certainly, in the early stages of the novel references to Coraline’s emotional states are vague, despite the fact that she has reasons to be distressed:

While the ominous effect of the opening chapters rests on their lack of a precise threat, Coraline has clear grievances, even if (...) she doesn’t articulate her suffering. As an only child without playmates or school to occupy her, Coraline is particularly vulnerable to the benign neglect of her parents (...). (Gooding, 2008: 396)

Yet, in the first few chapters, we only know that Coraline is bored and sometimes feels uneasy, uncomfortable or confused about things. There is also emphasis on the indescribable quality of some of Coraline’s impressions: “There was *something* hungry in the old man’s button eyes that made Coraline feel uncomfortable” (43, my emphasis). Gooding adds that, as the story progresses and Coraline becomes more mature and self-aware, the language used to describe her emotions becomes much more specific (2008: 399). Later on in the novel, Coraline is described as being “shocked” (101), “scared” (119), with “Her heart pounding in her chest” (119), making “a noise, a sound of revulsion and horror” (129). Another possible explanation could be that the initial vagueness of the descriptions reflects Coraline’s boredom and her emotional detachment from her surroundings. It is when her Gothic adventure starts that she becomes emotionally involved.

⁴³ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition. From now on, only the page number will be indicated between parentheses.

Another particular feature of Gaiman's narrative technique is that there are very few indications in the text that the narrator is observing Coraline from the outside; most of the time he seems to be inside her head. Even physical descriptions of Coraline are practically absent; we only know that she has "hazel eyes" (94) and that she is "small for her age" (112). Gaiman allows the child character to explore dangerous grounds, make mistakes and make up for them, without having an adult presence judging or admiring her, only reporting the events as the child experiences them. Furthermore, the narrator only pays attention to what Coraline finds interesting, while those issues she does not care about are left vague and undefined. For example, when the narrator states that "Both her parents worked, doing things on computers, which meant that they were home a lot of the time" (15-6), this is all the reader knows about Coraline's parents' jobs, that they 'do things' on computers. This vagueness reflects Coraline's indifference to adult issues, as well as the implied author's lack of interest in providing certain details and explanations that his target audience might not care about. This does not mean, however, that Gaiman dumbs things down, for the novel is rich in meticulous descriptions of other things Coraline *is* interested in. In fact, Coraline's curiosity is presented as one of her main qualities, but what interests her is adventure, not routine, and the adult world strikes the little girl as profoundly boring and unimaginative. It is the sense of danger and the feeling that something is out of the ordinary that trigger Coraline's curiosity. Similarly, secondary characters are described with a child's slightly malicious humor and simplified view of the world, reflecting how Coraline sees the adults around her. For instance, one of Coraline's neighbors is disdainfully referred to as "the crazy old man upstairs" (25).

Thus, most of the time Gaiman's narrative technique gives the child character full centrality in the story and reduces the adult narrator's presence and authority to its minimum expression. What is more, the narrator's knowledge generally coincides with Coraline's self-knowledge. On the other hand, the narrator does not pretend to have any control over the supernatural occurrences in the story, either. He never gives any explanation on, say, who or what the Other Mother actually is, or how she got there. Therefore, rather than omniscience, the narrative mood that predominates in *Coraline* is what Genette calls 'fixed internal focalization': the narrator knows as much as the character and his omniscience is, hence, restricted (1980: 189). Fixed internal focalization is, according to Nikolajeva, a component of psycho-narration, which "combines omniscience ('the narrator knows more than the character'), external focalization ('the narrator knows less than the character'), and fixed internal focalization ('the narrator knows as much as the character')" (2002b: 180). The narrator in *Coraline* hardly ever explains anything. In some novels the function of giving explanations is transferred to an adult character, as happens in *Harry Potter*. Adult figures do not have this function in *Coraline*. The only characters that give explanations are the ghost children Coraline meets in the other home (see section 2.3), and the black cat that roams Coraline's garden in both the real and the other home. Interestingly, the cat speaks only in the other home, and his voice is described thus: "Its voice sounded like the voice at the back of Coraline's head, the voice she thought words in, but a man's voice, not a girl's" (45). Apart from recalling Carroll's Cheshire Cat, this puzzling description allows for many different interpretations. The cat could be an embodiment of the implied author's voice. After all, his voice sounds like the voice in Coraline's head, and Coraline's mind is the creation of an author's mind—of a *man's* mind. It is also possible to read the cat simply as a father figure. In her study on fairy tales, Tatar argues how,

despite being apparently absent or passive, father figures in fairy tales can be found “lurking behind every male voice and body” (2003: 154). In any case, the cat is an adult voice who speaks condescendingly to Coraline.

In spite of Gaiman’s consistent use of consonant psycho-narration and fixed internal focalization, there are still some passages in which the narrator distances himself from the child’s consciousness, and psycho-narration becomes dissonant: “For a moment she [Coraline] felt utterly dislocated. She did not know where she was; she was not entirely sure *who* she was. It is astonishing just how much of what we are can be tied to the beds we wake up in in the morning, and it is astonishing how fragile that can be” (81, original emphasis). Whilst the first two sentences correspond to the narrator’s discourse about Coraline’s consciousness, the second part (beginning with “it is astonishing”) is one of the few examples of authorial intervention in the novel. The narrator detaches himself from Coraline’s mind to utter this ex-cathedra statement, emphasizing one of the central themes in the novel: the importance of home to define one’s self (a theme to which I will return in section 2.3.). This makes it clear that the narrator *does* know more than the child after all, even if most of the time he chooses not to show it—a choice that I read as an attempt to avoid condescending to the children inside and outside the text; a way of showing that ‘childish’ language can also be appropriate to depict experiences. When Nodelman identifies recurrent features that mark a text as being intended for child readers, one of the qualities he points out is

a sense that there is a second point of view, that of the narrator. These texts all seem to offer hints that the focalized child character is not seeing everything there is to see or possibly not understanding events in the various ways they might be understood. The narrator seems to see more and know more. (2008: 20)

No matter how hard the narrator tries to hide behind the pretended childish voice, his presence always seeps through the narrative at some point or other.

The fact that the narrator's voice is less obtrusive does not mean that its sole function is to give centrality to the child character. If this was the only reason, one could wonder why Coraline is not narrating her own story in the first person. I believe that the presence of a third-person narrator fulfills yet another important function that would not be so easily attained if the story was narrated in the first person: the presence of a narrator uninvolved in the Gothic events narrated provides the reassurance that the story itself does not endorse. Whereas the child protagonist's sense of a stable identity is put under threat by Gothic elements, the narrative voice, showing no sign of psychological or emotional disruption, invests the text with an underlying sense of (adult) control and wholeness.

It can indeed be argued that no text is 'whole', since Julia Kristeva's attack on textual wholeness and her introduction of the notion of intertextuality in her 1969 study *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Certainly, all texts are ultimately fragmentary and incomplete, reflecting "not only our own human multiplicity (...) but also the fluidity of language itself" (Abbott, 2008: 101). In fact, according to Nodelman, one of the defining characteristics of children's literature is that texts are divided, and their simplicity of style always "implies an unspoken and much more complex repertoire that amounts to a second, hidden text—(...) a 'shadow text'" (2008: 8). However, I uphold that it is possible to represent unity and wholeness textually, that is, to create the illusion of wholeness through narrative technique. In the same way, disruption can be represented by textual means, as often happens in the Gothic genre. As Abbott states,

if someone objected that life doesn't hang together, or that people (even authors) are anything but unified, a common answer is: Yes, but narratives can be. One might go on to argue that this, in fact, is one of the pleasures of narrative, as it is of art in general. Narrative is one way of creating order out

of chaos (...). The implied author, however complex or sophisticated the sensibility we attribute to her, is part of that order. (2008: 102)

Both children's literature and the Gothic are centrally concerned with order, although they tackle the subject in different ways. In most children's novels and many Gothic romances, order is disrupted only to be reestablished and celebrated in the end. In some other Gothic narratives, order is disrupted permanently, identities collapse, and fragmented texts mirror these fragmented minds. As Cavallaro states, "dark fiction unremittingly ideates the self as inevitably plural and divided, an offspring of the interaction of disparate and indeed often contradictory and warring forces" (2002: 114). Yet, even then, the Gothic *is* preoccupied with order, for "When we question a Gothic narrator's account, suspect him or her of delusion and try to construct a more probable alternative, we align ourselves with collective norms and consensual realities" (Garrett, 2003: 3).

Thus, in terms of narrative technique, Gaiman's *Coraline* is highly ambiguous. On the one hand, it uses Gothic elements to construct the self as plural and divided—particularly the motif of the double (see sections 2.3. and 2.4.). Yet, on the other hand, despite the almost constant focus on the child protagonist, the shadowy presence of the adult narrator sometimes shows through the narrative, reassuring the implied reader that someone is in control, someone who is uninvolved in and unaffected by the emotional turmoil in the story. There are, however, hints in the text that the novel sustains a representation of the self as ultimately fragmentary and that the narrator actually concurs with these views, which is what the subsequent sections will discuss. Gaiman's narrator seems to know that essentialist views of the self are fragile, but he chooses to suggest it only through subtle hints while acknowledging the value of such notions. Having examined the narrative frame of Gaiman's Gothic tale and how, as in *Harry*

Potter, it provides reassurance and grants psychological complexity to the child character, I will now turn to examine the significance of the Gothic setting, in this case the Gothic home.

2.3. Where the Uncanny Things Are: The Gothic Home as Symbolic Space for Self-definition

No matter how dreary and grey our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home.

Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

According to Nodelman, in children's fiction, "Home is a metaphor for childhood as adults invent and sustain it", and most often its meaning is explored by opposing it to its antithesis, the concept of 'away' (2008: 80). Echoing the Grimms' fairy tales "Hansel and Gretel", "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Little Thumb", Gaiman's *Coraline* leaves her own home only to end up in another home where danger awaits her in the shape of an emotionally hungry mother figure. Gaiman, however, blurs the boundaries between home and away by constructing 'away' as an uncannily similar place to home, a resemblance that is gradually effaced as the other home becomes darker and more hostile. In this section, I examine how the representation of childhood is partly dependent on how Gaiman constructs two different paradigms of home, each standing for different notions of family, adult and child relationships, individuality and power. By means of Gothic motifs, the other home is constructed as undesirable, yet necessary for the child to learn to appreciate her real home and the acceptable position of the child within the modern family. I argue that choosing 'real' over 'other', the child protagonist aligns herself with the implied author's norms. Moreover, I also examine how the home

can be read as a metaphor for the child's mind, like the haunted houses and labyrinthine castles of Gothic fiction that mirror the disturbed psyches of their inhabitants.

Home and... Away?

Several scholars have identified home and family as central themes in children's literature. Exploring the meanings of home and away is, according to Nodelman, one of the identifying qualities of a children's text. He adds that these two opposing concepts are central to children's literature "as they seem to be central to cultural ideas about childhood in the time in which a specific children's literature has existed, ideas that tend to separate children from other human beings by imagining a space in which it is safe to be childlike and thus also a less safe space beyond it" (2008: 59). Similarly, McDowell affirms that the literary theme of the quest is "a favourite" (2006: 61) in children's fiction. In *The Family in English Children's Literature*, Alston explains that "Children's literature and the mythology of the perfect sanctuary of the home grew up together during the nineteenth century" (2008: 70). It was also at that time that traditional European fairy tales were adapted for children,⁴⁴ and their influence on children's texts started to be noted. The circular home/away/home pattern of many children's stories, for instance, is clearly indebted to the fairy-tale tradition. Tatar describes it thus:

Home, normally the locus of stability and security, becomes the abode of powers at once hostile and sinister. (...) the child-hero stands as a victim of parental malice; he has been neglected, chastised, or abandoned by one of his parents. (...) Escape from home becomes his sole hope and source of consolation. Yet his flight takes him not into a magical kingdom where every

⁴⁴ The Brothers Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* was first published in 1812. This is not to say, of course, that the Grimms were the first to publish a collection of folk tales for children. In 1695, Charles Perrault had already published his collection *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (translated into English as *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals*), many of which were later retold by the Grimms. Another, less-known, collector of fairy tales was German writer Johann Karl August Musäus, whose *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* was published between 1782 and 1786.

wish comes true, but rather into a world peopled by villains with powers far more formidable than those of the villains left behind him. (2003: 72)

As going away becomes a journey for many children's fiction protagonists to come to terms with and learn to appreciate home, "the word 'home' becomes culturally loaded as it invokes nostalgia for warmth and comfort" (Alston, 2008: 70).

The ideal of home and the longing for this ideal are, thus, an intrinsic ingredient of children's fiction, as in classics like Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1910), J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), or Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952). In one way or another, all these novels represent home as the antithesis of away, and the child protagonists' sense of a stable identity in the end is inextricably linked to its return home. According to Nodelman,

the pattern is worth paying attention to exactly because of the ways in which it works to attach opposing values to home and to being away from home, forcing child protagonists to confront the difference and make choices between the opposed values in terms of how they understand what they mean and, consequently, which of the two places they would rather be in. (2008: 61)

Similarly, McCallum examines how the quest as a plot device parallels the representation of the character's identity: "Central characters are represented as internally fragmented and/or solipsistic, and their stories articulate a quest for a sense of identity which is stable, coherent, unique and whole" (1999: 68). Although McCallum refers, mostly, to adolescent fiction, this assertion can be applied to children's fiction as well.

The home/away/home or quest pattern is recurrent in Gaiman's fiction. Apart from *Coraline*, we find it in short stories like "Troll Bridge" (1999) and "October in the

Chair” (2002), his poem “Instructions” (2000), and novels like *Stardust*, and *The Graveyard Book*. Some of these works stick closer to the fairy-tale pattern: “Instructions”, for instance, describes a journey that ends back home, but home is now perceived differently by the traveler—it seems “much smaller than you remember” (Gaiman, 2008: 249). On the other hand, Gaiman’s young adult novels do not have this circular pattern; they end with the characters leaving the place where they were raised as children to immerse themselves into a world that is full of perils but also of new opportunities for life. In *Stardust*, Tristan eventually stays in the land of Faerie where he rules as a king, instead of returning to the town of Wall which was his home at the beginning. Similarly, in *The Graveyard Book*, Nobody Owens gradually loses his ability to see ghosts as he grows up, and he leaves home (the graveyard) to live in the world of the living.

In *Coraline*, the circularity of the home/away/home pattern is maintained; yet, according to Gooding, Gaiman transforms it. Gooding affirms that “In the pattern’s simplest form the border is very strict (...). The gateway is typically stable, though only intermittently open” (2008: 393), and Gooding exemplifies this by referring to Carroll’s Alice going through the mirror into Looking-glass House, Storr’s Marianne being transported by sleep to the house she has drawn, and Lucy walking into Narnia through the wardrobe in Lewis’s novel. I would also add two other recent portal narratives that are similar to *Coraline*: Penelope Farmer’s *Charlotte Sometimes* (1969), about a girl who finds herself transported to the past;⁴⁵ and, especially, Clive Barker’s Gothic novel

⁴⁵ Farmer’s novel is similar to *Coraline* in that the protagonist, Charlotte Makepeace, moves between two spaces that are the same place but different at the same time. Charlotte is a young girl in boarding-school, who wakes up one morning to find herself in her own bed at school, though the school is not quite the same: she has slipped back forty years to 1918. Unlike *Coraline*, however, Charlotte’s adventure is not Gothicized.

for children *The Thief of Always* (1992).⁴⁶ In Barker's novel, 'away' is also a house, the Holiday House, where children's wishes come true. In these narratives, the real and fantasy worlds are clearly differentiated, and the portal connects and separates both worlds. In contrast, "While conventional deployment of this pattern usually imposes strict boundaries between real and fantasy worlds, thereby containing uncanny effects within the fantasy realm, Gaiman begins to blur these boundaries" (Gooding, 2008: 393). It would not be accurate to say that the two worlds in the other novels are completely separated and do not affect each other, for it is always the apparition of an element from the other world in the real world that lures the child,⁴⁷ and the fantasy world always mirrors the real world, more or less closely. Yet, it is true that the boundary between both worlds is especially blurred in *Coraline*, as the resemblance between the real home and the other home is emphasized.

Coraline begins—like many other children's books, classic and contemporary—with the child and her family moving into a new home. In most children's novels, this change is triggered by the parents' death, as in Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) or Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In other cases, children move elsewhere because of their parents' marriage crisis, like the Grace siblings in Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black's *The*

⁴⁶ Barker's novel shares many similarities with *Coraline*. It is about a young boy, Harvey Swick, who is bored with his life and his school. One day, a stranger lures him to Holiday House, a place where children can always have fun, the sun always shines, and every night is Halloween night, Bonfire Night or Christmas Eve. Although he enjoys his time there and makes friends, Harvey increasingly gets the feeling that there is something creepy about the house. The day he and his friend Wendell try to leave, they realize that there is no way out; the house has trapped them, and there is someone living in the attic who wants to feed on their souls.

⁴⁷ The White Rabbit in *Alice*, the cyclone in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Peter Pan's shadow in *Peter Pan*, The Pencil in *Marianne Dreams*, the grandfather clock striking thirteen at midnight in *Tom's Midnight Garden*, the bed Charlotte sleeps in in *Charlotte Sometimes*, and Rictus, the strange man, in *The Thief of Always*.

Spiderwick Chronicles. This device that sets the plot in motion is also common in (adult) horror stories in which children and the family play an important role. For example, in movies like *Hide and Seek* (2005), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) or *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* (2010),⁴⁸ the family crisis followed by a change of residence is generally represented as the starting point for psychological dislocation and disarray. In all cases, the protagonist's feelings of dislocation caused by this change in his or her family life are metaphorically represented as a literal change of residence. In most cases—with the exception of *The Witches*⁴⁹—the new house is not appreciated by the child character, who feels neglected and victimized.

In *Coraline*, the precise reasons for moving to a new home are never explicitly stated, but it can be inferred that it has to do with Coraline's parents' jobs, as Selick's film version suggests. In many other children's books that begin with a change of residence, the child protagonist is put in a powerless and dependent position right from the very beginning, as is the case of Harry Potter.⁵⁰ In *Coraline*, by contrast, this does not seem to be a big deal, and the opening line already focuses on the fact that Coraline has made a discovery and possesses knowledge about her surroundings that other

⁴⁸ In *Hide and Seek*, a horror movie directed by John Polson, a young girl named Emily (Dakota Fanning) moves to a new home with her father (Robert de Niro) after her mother's suicide. Soon after, Emily starts to talk about her new imaginary friend Charlie and horrible things begin to happen. Similarly, in *Pan's Labyrinth*, directed by Guillermo del Toro, Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) moves to a new home with her mother after her father's death and her mother's marriage to another man (Sergi López), an army officer in fascist Spain. Terrorized by her stepfather, Ofelia begins to escape to a fantasy world that is also terrifying. Finally, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, directed by Troy Nixey and written by Guillermo del Toro based on a 1973 TV movie, uses the same formula: a young girl, Sally (Bailee Madison), is sent to live with her father (Guy Pearce) and his girlfriend (Katie Holmes), and she soon discovers strange creatures living in her new house who want to make her one of their own.

⁴⁹ When his parents die, the boy in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* is taken to his grandmother's, with whom he has a very close relationship.

⁵⁰ We also see this in other children's books, classic and contemporary. For instance, the first chapter in *Tom's Midnight Garden*, entitled 'Exile', opens thus: "If, standing alone on the back doorstep, Tom allowed himself to weep tears, they were tears of anger" (Pearce, 2008: 1). Likewise, one of the first things the reader is told in *The Field Guide* (the first book of *The Spiderwick Chronicles* series) is that Jared Grace feels neglected because nobody "asked his opinion on anything at all. The new house for instance" (Black and DiTerlizzi, 2003: 1-2).

characters do not have: “Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house” (11). As this suggests, the new house is initially presented as a place for exploration and discovery; not as an imposition or a trap. This already introduces Gaiman’s subversion of the domestic story: in *Coraline*, the home becomes a space of perils and adventure; the world of adventure is not outside the home, but inside. As I analyzed in section 2.2., this lack of emphasis on Coraline’s feelings at the beginning can be read as a representation of her lack of self-awareness. A psychoanalytic reading would suggest that Coraline *does* have anxieties about her new home, but they are safely kept in her subconscious. Yet, this is only speculation. What is clear is that what initially bothers Coraline is not the new home itself, but the fact that her parents do not have time to play with her, her neighbors talk nonsense and get her name wrong, and the whole house is surrounded by mist and boredom.

The description of Coraline’s house at the start of the novel already gives a hint of the kind of adult-child relationship at stake: “It was a very old house – it had an attic under the roof and a cellar under the ground and an overgrown garden with huge old trees in it” (11). I find the reference to the garden especially significant as gardens and other bucolic settings are recurrent in British children’s books. As Knuth affirms, “Often, the ideals written in British children’s stories have been agrarian and nostalgic”, and she cites Tolkien’s Shire as an example (2012: 9). In the main, gardens in children’s fiction are spaces for children to play and be childlike, separated from the adult world, evoking nostalgia for a paradisaic state of innocence, as is the case in *Tom’s Midnight Garden* or *The Secret Garden*. Unlike Tom’s garden with yew trees and hyacinths, or the lovely garden awaiting Alice behind the tiny door, or Mary’s secret garden in Burnett’s novel, Coraline’s garden is not a nice place for a child to play. It is old and

overgrown, and the almost constant rain makes it “muddy” (15) and therefore out of bounds to the child, who is not supposed to make a mess.⁵¹ Thus, from the very beginning, there are indicators in the novel that we are moving away from pastoral myths of childhood. Gaiman’s novel is about a late-twentieth-century family in which both parents work and do not have time to care for gardens. At the beginning of this section I quoted Nodelman’s words on how the home is a metaphor for childhood as invented by adults. The family situation depicted by Gaiman at the beginning of the novel is precisely one in which ‘inventing’ childhood is not the parents’ main priority. Childhood in *Coraline* is as neglected by adults as the house and the garden.

Childhood in *Coraline* is certainly not utopian. The novel presents the dilemma of the modern child: the fact that she is (apparently) freer and has more entertainment options than children in the past, and yet this does not necessarily make her happier. In her Foucauldian reading of the home in children’s literature, Alston claims that “The conflict between the adult and child is made clear in these spaces, for while adults are free to roam around the house, children are restricted to certain rooms” (2008: 90). In *Coraline* these roles are reversed: the child roams and explores the whole house, while adults are confined to their studies and their computers. Significantly, “Each of them had their own study” (16), which may be read as a sign of equality and independence—a room of one’s own. Since Coraline’s parents are engaged in their solitary occupations, they expect Coraline to do the same and demand that she finds her own forms of

⁵¹ Henry Selick’s film adaptation gives much more prominence to the garden than the novel. In the movie, Coraline’s parents are working on a gardening catalogue, but this leaves them with no time for gardening. Seeing the deplorable state of their garden, Coraline is upset. Meanwhile, in the other home, her wish of having a lovely garden is fulfilled by the other father. This, however, turns out to be one of the other mother’s tricks to lure and trap the little girl. In the end, after defeating the other mother, Coraline’s wishes come true in her real home: having finished working on the catalogue, her parents finally have time to renovate the garden. The movie ends with Coraline and her parents having a garden party with their neighbours. Thus, contrary to Gaiman’s novel, in Selick’s adaptation, a utopian space for the child is achieved in the end.

independent entertainment: “Read a book (...). Watch a video. Play with your toys”, her mother suggests (14), but these pastimes cannot make up for her parents’ absent-mindedness. What is more, parents also seem to have become much more flexible with rules: “I don’t really mind what you do, (...) as long as you don’t make a mess” (15), Coraline’s mother tells her. Yet, this does not turn out to be liberating for the child, but alienating. As the quotation implies, the child’s new ‘freedom’ is not the result of the adults’ rising interest in creating a more stimulating environment for her to explore, but it results from parental indifference. In fact, the adults’ indifference towards the world seems to have been passed on to Coraline herself, who does not take pleasure in many things. She is unimpressed by what she sees on television, where “there was nothing on but men in suits talking about the stock market, and sports programmes” (15), or what she reads in books which “seemed particularly pointless to Coraline” (35). According to Seth Lerer, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century world is “the world of ‘whatever’”, where the contemporary child shows an “urban disaffection, snarky wisdom, and ‘been there, done that’ distance” (2008: 307). Coraline’s initial situation at home reflects this modern condition that Lerer describes; the fact that having so many entertainment options at hand inside one’s home does not necessarily satisfy the child’s needs. On the contrary, it seems that having everything has diminished her capacity to value things: “Coraline had watched all the videos. She was bored with her toys, and she’d read all her books” (15). At the same time, though, it is precisely this boredom that triggers the child’s thirst for excitement and exploration. Coraline’s home, therefore, initially represents a world of blandness and boredom, a space that hinders the child’s development of an individual personality. As the story progresses, however, the home will also become the place where this stagnation is overcome.

Although Coraline does not express her feelings verbally, there are elements in the text that imply that she feels isolated. For example, when Coraline is bored, her mother suggests that she draw something, and she tries drawing the mist. She draws it thus:

M ST
I
(26 – 27)

Rudd’s interpretation of Coraline’s ‘drawing’ is that “Coraline is clearly the lonely ‘I’ which, punning on the word above, is not missed (i.e. she is overlooked). But is she refusing to be contained by the mist (insisting on her independence) or would she like to be part of it, having the mist descend and embrace, or envelop her?” (2008: 3). I interpret the mist that “hung like blindness around the house” (31) as a metaphor for the dullness and the unimaginativeness that Coraline feels surrounded by. Like the mist, boredom blurs her vision and might make her lose her way. Metaphorically, the mist stands for everything that hinders Coraline’s ambitions to lead a more exciting life; in the mist, she cannot see and, therefore, she cannot explore. She will soon learn, though, that an apparently more interesting home with more devoted parents can also be blinding, albeit in a different, much more sinister way. In light of this, I believe that the answer to Rudd’s question is ambivalent. On one hand, Coraline constantly wants to distinguish herself from the mist—the unimaginativeness—that surrounds her. This is illustrated, for instance, when her mother takes her to buy her school clothes, and Coraline wants green gloves instead, claiming that: “*everybody* at school’s got grey blouses and everything. *Nobody’s* got green gloves. I could be the only one” (33, original emphasis). At the same time, though, the price to pay for being different is loneliness. Another example of Coraline’s discontent with the world’s tendency to efface individuality is that some people get her name wrong. Her neighbors call her

‘Caroline’ instead of ‘Coraline’, depriving her name of its originality and giving her a more common one. “It’s Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline” (12), she insists, unsuccessfully.⁵² She does not realize, though, that she is also guilty of this disregard for people’s names when she calls her neighbor ‘the crazy old man upstairs’.

Like other fictional children in portal narratives, the child in Gaiman’s novel is depicted as longing for something that is beyond her immediate surroundings, like Carroll’s Alice, “tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do” (1998: 9); Baum’s Dorothy who “could see nothing but the great grey prairie on every side” and the house “as dull and grey as everything else” (1995: 11-2); and Harvey Swick in Barker’s *The Thief of Always*, bored with school and upset by the cold month of February. Like all its precedents, Coraline wishes for something more exciting than ordinary life, even if this means danger: “*In danger?* thought Coraline to herself. It sounded exciting” (31, original emphasis). Her curiosity finally leads her to open the door and walk through the corridor. However, when Coraline emerges at the other end, she does not step into a fantasy world like Alice, Dorothy and Harvey, but she finds herself back in her own living-room. Rudd reads this as a representation of what Freud called “involuntary repetition”, which “surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable” (Freud, 1988a: 359). I agree that the uncanny starts to pervade the novel as Coraline walks down the passage, as this quotation suggests:

Coraline walked down the corridor uneasily. There was something very familiar about it. The carpet beneath her feet was the same carpet they had in their flat. The wallpaper was the same wallpaper they had. (...)

⁵² Funnily enough, Neil Gaiman stated in one of his speeches that the character was initially named ‘Caroline’, and ‘Coraline’ resulted from a typing mistake in an email to his editor (see video “Neil Gaiman Addresses the University of the Arts Class of 2012”).

She knew where she was: she was in her own home. She hadn't left.

(37)

At first, the uneasiness she feels while walking down this strangely familiar corridor suggests that she might indeed have feelings of uncanniness. Yet, when she finds herself in her own home again, Coraline merely shakes her head “confused” (37). Likewise, when later on Coraline tries to escape from the other home, she finds herself surrounded by mist. Then, the mist turns into nothingness and, finally, she ends up in front of her other home again, as if walking around in circles, as also happens to Barker's Harvey Swick when the mist prevents him from escaping from the Holiday House. This moment brings to mind one of the situations described by Freud as uncanny: “when, caught in a mist perhaps, one has lost one's way in a mountain forest, every attempt to find the marked or familiar path may bring one back again and again to one and the same spot” (1988a: 359). However, in the novel, this only sparks the child's curiosity: “But how can you walk away from something and still come back to it?” she asks (89). I agree with Gooding when he affirms that “Coraline (...) generally seems immune to feelings of uncanniness” (2008: 394). The helplessness of finding oneself over and over again on the same spot, which, according to Freud would arouse feelings of uncanniness in real life, is not represented as having this effect on the fictional child. As Freud himself stated, not everything that would be uncanny in real life is uncanny when represented in fiction: “we see how independent emotional effects can be of the actual subject-matter in the world of fiction” (1988a: 376).

I read this representation of the child as immune to uncanniness as a plot necessity rather than an attempt to present an accurate literary representation of the Freudian uncanny. Gooding, on the other hand, accounts for Coraline's reactions from a mimetic standpoint and states that “children are theoretically less sensitive” to these

moments of uncanniness (2008: 294). As he explains, “the young child’s sensitivity to the uncanny is limited because the process of repression is ongoing and she has not yet surmounted the animistic stage of development” (2008: 392). It is not the aim of this dissertation to study uncanniness in real children, yet I acknowledge that assumptions on this matter influence the way children are represented in fiction. I mentioned in the introduction how Gaiman claimed a double readership for his novel: adults who are scared because they recognize that Coraline is in big trouble, and children who are not scared because they see her story only as an adventure. Regardless of whether this assumption is true or not, Gaiman’s description of children’s reactions to the book seems to concur with Gooding’s belief that children cannot be as sensitive as adults are to “that class of the uncanny which proceeds from forms of thought that have been surmounted” (Freud, 1988a: 374), precisely because they have not yet surmounted these old forms of thought. It is therefore possible that this assumption underlies the representation of Coraline as immune to uncanniness. In my view, however, Gooding is trying to make Gaiman’s child character reproduce a schemata of child psychology that may be more reductive than enlightening when it comes to analyzing a fictional character. Furthermore, this purported immunity children have to uncanniness may not even be true. No one in real life—child or adult—would be merely ‘confused’ by the sight of a woman who looks like one’s mother but has buttons for eyes. Thus, from a mimetic approach, Coraline’s reactions are definitely not plausible. Yet, Gaiman’s plot requires that the little girl feels enough curiosity about the other home and the other mother in order to return there and keep the plot going.

All in all, Gaiman’s transformation of the ‘home/away’ dichotomy into ‘real home/other home’, using the Gothic doubling motif, emphasizes the idea underlying all

quests in fairy tales and children's literature that, while being away, the character is in fact reevaluating the meaning of home. The uncanny atmosphere of the beginning that made Coraline feel curious but also uneasy will soon turn into terror when she realizes that the price to pay to stay in order to stay in the other home is her self. As the next subsection will show, the other home is the territory where Coraline's assumptions about home, family and herself are put to the test.

The Other Home

In what I find one of the most revealing lines in the book, the narrator explicitly states that *Coraline* is a story about how the child's identity is linked to home: "it is astonishing just how much of what we are can be tied to the beds we wake up in in the morning, and it is astonishing how fragile that can be" (81). Gaiman's narrator thus acknowledges that a person is not a coherent whole and that our sense of who we are can be easily disrupted by changes in our domestic environment. I find it significant that Gaiman uses the pronoun 'we' in the quotation above, for this 'we' includes the child character, the adult narrator and the child or adult narratee. This implies that Coraline does not only represent a child, but can actually represent anyone who faces the problem of self-definition in an unfamiliar environment.

The other home is initially portrayed as neat and cozy, with food that "smelled wonderful" (39), and a mother that devotes all her time and energy to the household and the family, like an angel in the house. The other father, on the other hand, is absent most of the time, and Coraline interacts mainly with the other mother. In fact, the other father is just a puppet in the world the other mother has created to lure Coraline. The other home is, in short, the antithesis of Coraline's real home; it is a place where everything

revolves around the child's needs, or rather, what adults assume to be the child's needs. Nevertheless, there is one disturbing detail: the inhabitants in the other home have buttons for eyes, which "liken them to inanimate dolls" (Rudd, 2008: 5). Once again, Coraline's feelings when she sees the button-eyes are not expressed, and there is nothing in the text that suggests that she is overcome by uncanniness, even though most critics see in the other mother an embodiment of one of the sources of uncanniness: the idea of losing one's eyes described in Freud's essay (a theme I will return to in section 2.4.).

Like Alice's Wonderland, the other home is initially a new space for exploration and discovery, where the child's assumptions are challenged. Coraline meets characters that defy the importance of names, categories and certain cultural markers. First, there is the cat, which undermines names claiming that "Cats don't have names (...). Now, *you* people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names" (48, original emphasis). Rudd states that "Similar to the Cheshire Cat in Carroll's *Alice*, it [the cat] acts like a Lacanian therapist, refusing to support anyone's fantasies" (2008: 15). According to Rudd's Lacanian reading, the cat is highlighting the limitations of language, and the idea that the Symbolic cannot fully capture the Real; the letter actually kills the Real (Fink, 1995: 24). The cat also tells Coraline that "you people are spread all over the place. Cats, on the other hand, keep ourselves together" (47). In other words, the cat affirms that, no matter how hard human beings try to organize the world into a coherent whole; they are fragmented, and this fragmentation is evidenced by the very existence of categories. The cat's ideas are a challenge to Coraline's more essentialist views of reality, and she rejects them without even giving them much thought, dismissing them as arrogant: "There was something

irritatingly self-centred about the cat, Coraline decided. As if it were, in its opinion, the only thing in any world or place that could possibly be of any importance” (48).

The importance of names is also undermined by Coraline’s other neighbors, two eccentric old ladies, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible, who had been successful actresses in the past. In the other home, the old ladies’ flat is a theatre in which they stage a never-ending show for an audience of dogs:

‘How long does this go on for?’ asked Coraline. ‘The theatre?’
‘All the time,’ said the dog. ‘For ever and always.’ (56)

I read the fact that the old ladies’ show never ends in the other world as a reference to the Shakespearean view of humanity merely acting out the seven stages of life, recalling the line in *As You Like It* (1600) “All the world’s a stage” (Act II Scene VII). Thus, in Misses Spink and Forcible’s domain the world is divided into those who perform (them), and the homogeneous masses who observe (the dogs). The Shakespearean reference in this passage is further emphasized by Misses Spink and Forcible’s use of other Shakespearean quotations: “‘What’s in a name?’ asked Miss Forcible. ‘That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’” (55). This line from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), again, brings up the subject of the arbitrariness of language, an anxiety which permeates the atmosphere in the other home.

So far, it seems that the author favours these post-structuralist views of language and reality over more essentialist notions. The child character, however, does not seem to be at all impressed by such views. She finds them interesting, but they never seem to alter her own convictions that names are important. As the story progresses, undermining names and other cultural markers that remind individuals of who they are starts to be presented in a sinister light when the other home begins to reveal itself for what it is: a place where individuality is effaced, names are forgotten, and children are

turned into ghosts. Thus, Gaiman acknowledges that identity is a construct and a very fragile one, at the same time that he seems to defend that human beings—unlike cats—need such a construct. Gaiman indicates this by Gothicizing the space where identities fall apart, i.e., the other home.

To represent the effacement of one's identity and individuality, Gaiman introduces the figure of the ghost, which also functions as a warning of what might happen to the child if she falters and stays. Coraline meets the ghost children when the other mother locks her in a dark room behind a mirror, as a punishment for her refusal to stay and accept her as her own mother. Coraline learns that the three ghosts were children who were lured by the other mother in the past and let her sew the buttons replacing their own eyes. From Coraline's point of view, these ghosts do not represent the past returning to haunt the living, as in most adult Gothic. In fact, in children's fiction, children are hardly ever haunted by ghosts—with some exceptions, like Margaret Mahy's *The Haunting* (1982)⁵³—probably because children are often portrayed as victims, not as villains, and cannot therefore be haunted by their past mistakes. Instead, in children's fiction we often find what Cavallaro calls “the pathetic ghost”, such as Moaning Myrtle in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002: 82). Ghost children are almost always victims of adults and, while they return to haunt their victimizers in adult Gothic, in children's fiction they have the mission of warning the child protagonist of potential dangers and elicit the reader's sympathy. According to Cavallaro,

⁵³ *The Haunting* is about eight-year-old Barney Palmer, a boy who thinks he is being haunted by the ghost of his great-uncle Cole, who ran away from home and everybody believes to be dead. Barney in the end finds out that his great-uncle is not dead after all and that he is haunting him through magic powers, a gift that Cole believes Barney has inherited. Thus, although the child *is* haunted in Mahy's novel, it is not a ghost that haunts him, but a magician.

The representation of spectral forms (...) as deserving of the reader's compassion can also be seen to proceed from the desire to set exemplary standards of conduct by encouraging children to grow out of amoral, or even aggressive, dispositions and hence develop a sense of respect for the weak and the unhappy. (2002: 83)

In Gaiman's novel, thanks to the ghosts, Coraline knows what happened to the children who gave in to the other mother's desires: the ghost children no longer remember who they are. Again, the ghosts expose the fragility of language, telling *Coraline* that "names are the first things to go" (97). Likewise, the ghosts have also forgotten about their sex:

'Are you a girl?' asked Coraline. 'Or a boy?'
There was a pause. 'When I was small I wore skirts and my hair was long and curled,' it said doubtfully. '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.'
'Tain't something we give a mind to,' said the first of the voices.
'A boy, perhaps, then,' continued the one whose hand she was holding. 'I believe I was once a boy.' And it glowed a little more brightly in the darkness of the room behind the mirror. (99)

Whereas the ghosts puzzle over their forgotten sex, this is important for Coraline in order to know who she is talking to. Curiously, they have not forgotten about gender. The ghost is finally able to remember that he used to be a boy only by recalling the gender stereotypes of his period (probably the Victorian Age) linked to being a boy. And this remembrance makes him glow a little more brightly, suggesting that bringing back the memory of who he once was makes him less ghostly and more alive. It is also remarkable that the door that leads to this dark room is a mirror, suggesting that what Coraline will find in there is a mirror-image of herself—a reflection of what she may become.

In my view, her encounter with the ghosts confirms Coraline's views that names and cultural markers, including gender, are important, even if they are arbitrary. Coraline learns from experience that, without them, people become ghosts, and the

world turns into nothingness. The ghosts are what she may become if she gives in; they represent, for Coraline, the haunting of the future that I have already discussed in the previous chapter on *Harry Potter*. As one of the ghosts foretells,

‘She will take your life and all you are and all you care’st for, and she will leave you with nothing but mist and fog. She’ll take your joy. And one day you’ll awake and your heart and soul will have gone. A husk you’ll be, a wisp you’ll be, and a thing no more than a dream on waking, or a memory of something forgotten.’ (102)

This passage connects with the symbolism of the mist. The ghost warns Coraline that if she spends too much time in the other home, she might find herself caught up in a misty world again, in a mist that is worse than the mist she was trying to escape from.

The last term to analyze in the home-away-home pattern as depicted in *Coraline* is the second ‘home’ in the sequence. Nodelman states that “The repetition of the first term in the third structural position implies something paradoxical about the latter occurrence [the return home]: home is now both the same place it once was and at the same time a different place” (2008: 68). In her ‘journey’ Coraline has to decide which of the two homes she would rather live in. Since there are no indications in the text that the other home is only a nightmare or an illusion, both homes are presented as real to the child protagonist. It is up to her to decide which reality she prefers. Eventually, she dismisses the other home and its inhabitants as a mere “bad copy” (139) of the real ones, and the ‘ideal’ that the other home represents is completely demonized and rejected, with no nostalgia attached to it. Coraline’s wish to return to her real home should not be read, in my view, as the child giving in to conformity, for her home is now a different place in her eyes: “The sky had never seemed so *sky*; the world had never seemed so *world*” (158, original emphasis). In her return, Coraline is struck by the authenticity of everything; suddenly the words ‘sky’ and ‘world’ are more meaningful

than ever. Thus, the value of language is reassessed, and so is the value of forming one's own reality through names and categories. This is further emphasized by the fact that Coraline is finally named correctly by her neighbors. Furthermore, she also realizes that, in her previous egotism, she herself had been guilty of undermining the importance of names: "It had never occurred to Coraline that the crazy old man upstairs actually had a name, she realised" (178). The importance of names is, actually, a recurrent theme in Gaiman's fiction. Most of his child characters have meaningful names: 'Nobody' in *The Graveyard Book*, 'Odd' in *Odd and the Frost Giants* (2008) and, in his short story "October in the Chair", there is a little boy whom everybody calls 'the Runt'. As the narrator explicitly states in this short story, "names have power" (Gaiman, 2007: 79).

After her return home, Coraline is also able to appreciate things she did not notice before: "the leaves on the trees", "the patterns of light and shadow on the cracked bark of the trunk of the beech tree", "the way that the rich sunlight brushed every hair on the cat's head, turning each white whisker to gold" (158). As Coraline's interest in the world around her has grown, descriptions also seem to have become more elaborate. This contrasts sharply with her perception of her new home at the beginning of the novel, when the emphasis was laid on the oldness of the house, the mist and the mud in the garden. After her nightmarish experience in the other home, Coraline is "caught up in the interestingness of the world" (158) and is more able to appreciate its beauty. In *Coraline* the little girl's appreciation of beauty comes, not so much from her initial innocence, but from the experience she has acquired. With this, Gaiman turns the home into a place of self-discovery and child empowerment. In *Coraline*, the home is not a place of confinement as in *Harry Potter*. Gaiman takes the setting of the domestic

stories typically aimed at girls and turns it into a space for adventure, imitating the circular pattern of adventure stories for boys while never actually leaving home.

Thus, the home in *Coraline* is a symbolic space, and different sets of ideas are attached to both versions of Coraline's home. In the other home, Coraline meets views of the world that she had never encountered before, views that are attached to a Gothic setting because they are unfamiliar, and end up becoming profoundly disturbing, as the house itself is. The notions of identity that Coraline encounters in the other home are therefore finally discarded in favour of a re-examined vision of Coraline's real home. Coraline's initial 'been there, done that' attitude is replaced by a more acute appreciation of her surroundings. This does not mean, however, that non-essentialist views of the self and the world are completely dismissed as untrue. On the contrary, Gaiman's novel acknowledges the fragility of essentialist conceptions of the self, at the same time that he celebrates them. After all, Coraline's experience in the other home consists of realizing how fragile her conceptions are and how dependent her own self is on the concept of home. It is precisely because of this newly discovered fragility that she decides to stick to names and to anything that reminds her of who she is. In fact, the narrator himself admits that our notion of who we are is tied to arbitrary factors that are subject to change, such as the bed we sleep in. Although Gaiman's narrator knows that humans are fragmented, in the end he endorses Coraline's choice, inviting the narratee to share her final celebration of wholeness, or rather, of the *illusion* of wholeness. This newly discovered fragility of the child's self is further emphasized by Coraline's confrontation with her double, the other mother, to which I will devote the next section.

2.4. Stripping off the Wallpaper: The Other Mother as Coraline's Double

Through the murk and mist and gloam
To our quiet, cozy home,
Where to singing, sweet and low,
Rocks a cradle to and fro;
Where the clock's dull monotone
Telleth of the day that's done;
Where the moonbeams hover o'er
Playthings sleeping on the floor -
Where my weary wee one lies
Cometh Lady Button-Eyes.
Eugene Field, "Lady Button-Eyes"⁵⁴

As the previous section has shown, one of the most prominent Gothic tropes in Gaiman's *Coraline* is doubling, and the child character defines herself by choosing one ideal of 'home' over another. In this section, I propose that something similar happens with the figure of the villainess. On the one hand, the relationship between Coraline and the other mother can be read as a literary representation of the child's fantasy of the wicked stepmother, i.e. the need to split the mother figure into its benevolent and its threatening manifestations, studied by Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*. On the other hand, I also consider the figure of the other mother, not as the evil counterpart of the child's real mother, but as the child's double. This implies that facing and rejecting the other mother also means discarding the possibility of *becoming* like her in the future, just like Harry defines himself in opposition to what Voldemort stands for. Gaiman's use of the doppelgänger motif, however, challenges the positive view of development that is firmly established in *Harry Potter*. In *Coraline*, there are several indications in the text that the other mother is an internal double, rather than an external one, and that evil may not be completely exterior to the child.

⁵⁴ Eugene Field (1850-1895) was an American writer author of poems for children. "Lady Button-Eyes" was published in his collection of children's poetry *Love-Songs of Childhood* in 1894. The poem also appears in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

Splitting Up the Mother Figure

One of the features that distinguishes Coraline's other mother from the other three villains analyzed in this dissertation is that Gaiman never specifies what kind of creature she is. When she first appears, she introduces herself as Coraline's other mother and says that everybody has one (39-40), leaving the child—and the reader—to work this out by herself. This seems to suggest that, like Lucy's wolves in *The Wolves in the Walls*⁵⁵ or Max's wild creatures in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), the other mother might be a creature of the child's imagination lurking behind the walls of the child's mind, which is also reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Gothic short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Maybe for this reason no character in the story is able to explain who or what she is, not even the narrator, who, as I discussed in section 2.2., does not pretend to know more about Coraline's mind than she knows herself. As for other characters—like the cat or the ghost children—who know things about the other home Coraline is unaware of, they only make vague references to what sort of creature the other mother might be. The cat, for instance, only says that "her kind of thing loves games and challenges" (79), which implies that there is something childish about her. Yet, every time Coraline asks "What *is* she?" (89, original emphasis), the cat gets all evasive. The text hints at vampirism when the ghost children tell Coraline that "she fed on us" (101) and that "Now we belong to the dark and to the empty places. The light would shrivel us, and burn" (103). The other mother, however, possesses her victims by removing their eyes, not by biting them. The ghost children

⁵⁵ Gaiman's picture book *The Wolves in the Walls* is about a little girl called Lucy who is convinced that she can hear wolves behind the walls. When she tells her father, her mother and her brother, they do not take her seriously. Yet, when the wolves finally come out of the walls, the family is forced to leave the house. Lucy, however, is not willing to let the wolves live in their home, and encourages the whole family to go back and face them. Apart from Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", this story also recalls Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves", a postmodern Gothic rewriting of "Little Red Riding Hood" published in Carter's short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

also call her “beldam” (101 and 115), which suggests that she might be a wicked witch. Like the other home, the other mother’s appearance is at first familiar; she resembles Coraline’s real mother, but there are a series of eerie differences. The dark-red fingernails “curved and sharp” (38), for instance, indicate that there is something fierce about her femininity. In addition, her being tall and thin and “white as paper” (38) also brings to mind images of female vampires. And most uncanny of all, her button eyes liken her to a living doll. The mystery that surrounds this figure and the author’s insistence on concealing what she is implies that she could be many different things. Examining some fairy-tale and Gothic fiction precedents should help shed some light on this character.

The other mother is, unmistakably, a literary descendent and a variation of the fairy-tale wicked witch or stepmother found in tales like the Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel” or “Snow White”. Tatar identifies three types of ogres in the Brothers Grimm’s *Nursery and Household Tales*: beasts, social deviants and women. According to Tatar, “[the third] easily outnumbers the members of both other categories (...). These are the various cooks, stepmothers, witches, and mothers-in-law with voracious appetites for human fare” (2003: 139). All these characters are embodiments of maternal evil in fairy tales, inversions of the mother figure as nurturer and protector. As Tatar explains,

The many faces of maternal evil in fairy tales represent the obverse of all the positive qualities associated with mothers. Instead of functioning as nurturers and providers, cannibalistic female villains withhold food and threaten to turn children into their own source of nourishment (...). These figures work hard to earn the trust of their victims with magnanimous maternal behaviour, then reveal their true colors as cannibalistic monsters. (2003: 140)

Tatar further explains that real cannibalism which “was not unknown in times of famine” might have been a source of inspiration for these fairy tales (2003: 140).⁵⁶ However, she also points out how these cannibalistic motherly figures are hardly ever the actual mother of the protagonist in the Grimms’ versions of the tales, as a result of their impulse to act as censors and “shift the burden of evil from a mother to a stepmother” (2003: 142). This allows for an exploration of maternal evil, while keeping the figure of the good biological mother intact.

The other mother in *Coraline* fulfills a similar role. She tempts Coraline with food and “remarkable things (...) she’d never seen before” (41), “a world that will be built new for you every morning” (139). In short, she offers everything Coraline does not have in her own home and which, she wrongly assumes, Coraline most desires. As in the previously mentioned fairy tales, this turns out to be a trap to take Coraline’s life. All the negative aspects of motherhood are projected on the other mother, thus preserving a reassuring image of Coraline’s real mother. As Bettelheim argues, “all young children sometimes need to split the image of their parent into its benevolent and threatening aspects to feel fully sheltered by the first” (1991: 68). I argue that Bettelheim’s ideas about childhood could have influenced Gaiman’s *Coraline*. In fact, Gaiman himself explained that he wrote *Coraline* for his four-year-old daughter, who “would come home from kindergarten, crawl up on my lap and dictate nightmarish stories where her mother would be replaced by an evil witch and tied up in a basement. Well, I couldn’t find any stories like this for her on the shelves, so I thought I’d write one for her” (in Ouzounian, 2009).

⁵⁶ One of the tales in the Brothers Grimm’s first edition of *Nursery and Household Tales*, entitled “Starving Children”, is said to be based on an actual fact: a seventeenth-century mother who threatened to devour her daughters to survive a famine (Tatar, 2003: 140).

Apart from its fairy-tale precedents, Coraline's other mother is also related to Gothic villains that, in turn, were also inspired by folklore characters; namely, E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1816) and Lucy Lane Clifford's "The New Mother" (1885). Gaiman admitted in an interview that *Coraline* was partly influenced by Clifford's story about a mother who tells her children that she will be replaced by a new mother with glass eyes if they do not behave (in Ouzounian, 2009). On the other hand, Eugene Field's poem "Lady Button-Eyes" (1894), about a mysterious ghostly lady with buttons for eyes, who soothes a baby to sleep, also seems to be an obvious precedent, even though Gaiman has never acknowledged it, and therefore I have no evidence of his awareness of the poem.

Contrary to fairy-tale witches and stepmothers, the other mother does not threaten to literally devour Coraline, even if the cat tells her that "She wants something to love, I think (...). Something that isn't her. She might want something to eat as well. It's hard to tell with creatures like that" (79). Here, the other mother's 'hunger' for children is metaphorical: she takes their eyes and feeds on their souls, leaving them like "snakeskins and spider-husks" (101). This unequivocally recalls Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman", referenced by Freud as an example of uncanniness in literature (1988a: 348), and which Gaiman probably knows very well, as proven by his eponymous graphic novel series (1989-1996). Hoffmann's story is a sinister variation of the folklore character that sprinkles children's eyes with magical sand to give them good dreams. In Hoffman's version, the Sandman is turned into a malevolent figure who steals the eyes of children who will not go to sleep, very much like the Corinthian in Gaiman's *Sandman*.⁵⁷ Like Hoffman's Sandman, Coraline's other mother is also an inversion of a

⁵⁷ In Gaiman's series of graphic novels, *The Sandman*, the Corinthian is a nightmare created by Sandman. He has two mouths full of sharp teeth where his eyes should be, and he steals other people's eyes.

typically sympathetic character: a devoted mother who strives to turn the home into an agreeable space for her daughter, to build a world the child can enjoy. In Gaiman's novel, this kind of motherly devotion is pictured in a very sinister light: it is stifling, "narcissistic love" (Midgley, 2008: 136), and the price to pay for living in her wish-fulfilling world is one's eyes, which some critics agree stands for a loss of individuality and independence (Rudd, 2008: 2; Midgley, 2008: 136). I adhere to this reading, for losing one's eyes means losing the capacity to see the world for oneself. Like the mist, this hinders Coraline's ambition to be an explorer. Likewise, in his interpretation of "Hansel and Gretel", Bettelheim claims that

as the story tells, such unrestrained giving in to gluttony threatens destruction. Regression to the earliest 'heavenly' state of being—when on the mother's breast one lived symbiotically off her—does away with all individuation and independence. It even endangers one's very existence, as cannibalistic inclinations are given body in the figure of the witch. (1991: 161)

I believe that the other mother in *Coraline* also represents this regression to a state of dependence on the mother that effaces individuality. This is further emphasized by the narrator's emphasis on the doll-like quality and the artificiality of the other mother and the whole world she has created: "Her parents stood in the kitchen doorway (...), smiling *identical* smiles" (44, my emphasis); and "there was no expression at all in her black-button eyes" (95). In fact, the other father does not even have a personality. He is the other mother's puppet, created by her and existing only to do her bidding.

By contrast, Coraline's real parents represent a very different type of parenthood, more in line with late twentieth-century paradigms. In Coraline's real home, there seems to be gender equality. Both her parents work and they are equally in charge of household tasks, which means that they must demand a certain degree of independence from their daughter. Gaiman's representation of the late twentieth and

early twenty-first century family is ambivalent. On one hand, Gaiman highlights how the child is not satisfied by this family situation at the beginning and implies that her parents' jobs are to blame for her boredom and her neglect. On the other hand, the alternative that Gaiman provides, embodied by the other mother, is not only far from satisfying, it is also highly destructive. In the end, the presence of the evil mother and the puppet father serves as a reaffirmation of the family paradigm embodied by Coraline's real parents. By the end of the novel, her real parents have not changed at all—they are still busy and her father's cooking is still terrible, but Coraline has learnt to value them after learning what the alternative is like. Thus, what seems to be a critique of the modern family finally turns into an appreciation of working parents and a recognition that the child cannot ask her parents to give up everything for her. This is not to say that Gaiman eventually presents this as an ideal situation, but that he reaffirms the value of this family paradigm which, at least, leaves some space for individuality.

Thus, although the figure of the double is culturally a bad omen and usually leads to the destruction of both the protagonist and his or her double in adult Gothic, doubling in *Coraline* entails both disturbance and reassurance. On the one hand, the appearance of the other mother is disturbing because it is a reminder that motherhood and family life can be destructive if certain borders are not respected. Yet, on the other hand, the very existence of this double counters the Gothic effect: desirable and undesirable qualities are clearly set apart by being associated to two different characters. As I argued in section 2.3., splitting Coraline's home into two is a way of separating the ideal of the safe home from the dangerous home, thus preserving the former uncontaminated by the latter. Likewise, splitting the mother figure into two also allows

for the preservation of the good mother figure. Gaiman's narrative, however, is far more intricate. The author acknowledges the child's necessity to split the home and the mother into their benevolent and threatening manifestations; however, the fragility of this split is also recognized. Boundaries in Gaiman's novel are not so clear-cut, as the next sub-section discusses. Towards the end of the novel, the other mother threatens to invade Coraline's real home. When Coraline struggles to close the door of the other home forever, one of the other mother's hands gets trapped and severed by the door. When it seems that the whole nightmare is over, Coraline realizes that the other mother's hand is still wandering free and it has managed to cross the passage and enter her real world.

Splitting Up the Child's Self and Burying the Other

According to Rudd, "rather than seeing Coraline as threatened by this other mother, it is also plausible to read her *as* the other mother" (2008: 15, original emphasis). This reading has interesting implications when it comes to child characterization, for it suggests that evil in *Coraline* is not as exterior and alien to the child protagonist as it is in *Harry Potter*. That the other mother could be a personification of Coraline's unconscious is a plausible reading but only hinted at in Gaiman's text. There is one moment early on in the novel which is especially revealing about the identification between Coraline and the other mother: "The room was dark. The only light came from the hall, and Coraline, who was standing in the doorway cast a huge and distorted shadow on to the drawing-room carpet: *she looked like a thin giant woman*" (20, my emphasis). It is complicated to discern if it is Coraline thinking 'my shadow looks like a thin giant woman', or if it is the narrator's remark to transmit something about Coraline

that she is not aware of. In fact, it is significant that in this moment Coraline's shadow looks very much like the other mother, which calls to mind the Jungian concept of 'shadow' as the unconscious.

Another hint that the other mother might be a product of Coraline's mind, or even an unconscious aspect of her self, is that, while at the beginning Coraline thinks the other mother looks like her own mother, this resemblance gradually fades away when the villainess reveals her true colours: "It was funny, Coraline thought. The other mother did not look anything at all like her own mother. She wondered how she had ever been deceived into imagining a resemblance" (148). When the other mother's appearance changes as perceived by the girl, this implies that what is at stake is not the meaning of motherhood anymore, but something else. Coraline now notices certain things about her that she had not seen before, such as the other mother's huge head that "almost brushed the ceiling of the room", and her hair that "writhed and twined about her head, and her teeth sharp as knives" (149). At this point, the other mother moves from being a fairy-tale wicked mother figure to becoming a female monster, reminiscent of mythological Gorgons. In fact, her hair is also described as "wriggling like lazy snakes", an unequivocal reference to Medusa (105).

As I mentioned in the introduction, Parsons et al. read the other mother as a monstrous rendering of female power, and by extension, Coraline's rejection of the other mother means that she discards her empowerment as a woman: "Coraline's ability to accept her own gendered and sexed position allows her to see the 'proper' cultural position for girls as predicated on her recognition that power and female is not only a threatening combination but one that will never make a girl happy" (Parsons, Sawers and McInally, 2008: 373). As I already stated, I find Parsons et al.'s views too reductive. For one thing, I reject the idea that feminine power should be equated to

having power over people, which is what, in my view, the other mother stands for. Therefore, Coraline's rejection of such a model of femininity should not be seen as a rejection of female empowerment but a move towards it. According to Trites, describing feminist protagonists as 'empowered' means

that within the text they are able to do what they want to do, what they need to do. I most emphatically do not mean that by having power, the feminist protagonist enacts the age-old paradigms of power that have shaped too many societies. I use the term 'power,' then, to refer to positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness. (1997: 8)

Autonomy, self-expression and self-awareness are precisely the qualities that Gaiman's text praises, and the fact that they are embodied by a little girl, in my view, turns *Coraline* into a feminist children's novel, which Trites defines as "a novel in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender. (...) in a feminist children's novel, the child's sex does not provide a permanent obstacle to her development" (1997: 4). In this sense, I would say Coraline is more empowered than Harry Potter. By the end of her adventure, Coraline learns to care for other people, but this does not mean that she does not care for herself. Harry's proneness to help other people, on the other hand, is sometimes self-effacing, especially when he accepts to die to fulfill Dumbledore's plan.

On the other hand, the fact that the obstacle to Coraline's development is personified by another woman should not be ignored. This aligns *Coraline* with what Trites calls "the Freudian rebellious-daughter novels", which "portray mothers as evil beings whose stifling presence must be escaped in order for the misunderstood daughter to develop fully" (1997: 103). However, I must highlight again the relevance of the double motif. The little girl in Gaiman's novel never actually breaks away from her own mother. What Coraline rejects is a monstrous impostor who has kidnapped her own real parents and claims to be her mother, just as she claimed to be the mother of the ghost children. In the end, the Gothic double has been invoked only to celebrate the familiar,

i.e., “[Coraline’s] own mother, her real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother” (155). Gaiman puts the Freudian mother/daughter plot at the service of what Trites calls the anti-Freudian plot that “allow[s] the daughter to mature without necessarily breaking from her mother” (1997: 103).

Apart from reading Gaiman’s villainess as a present unconscious aspect of the little girl’s self, it is also possible to read her as the future that haunts her, i.e., what Coraline may become if she does not leave her childishness behind. Like Harry and Voldemort, Coraline and the other mother have more traits in common than it may seem. Although described as a grown-up woman, the other mother is like an exaggerated embodiment of Coraline’s initial childishness when she constantly demanded her parents’ attention. As in the case of Voldemort, we see once more how an adult villain—villainess, in this case—possesses qualities that are more typically associated with childhood than with adulthood. The other mother is utterly self-centred, she likes games, she lives off and ‘feeds’ on other people, her desires are irrepressible (though sexual desire is, again, absent) and, although she is capable of loving, her love is purely narcissistic and she soon loses interest in the people she ‘loves’, like the ghost children. Like Rowling, Gaiman vilifies childishness at the same time that he appraises childlikeness.

Another trait that Gaiman’s characterization of the villainess has in common with Rowling’s is the fact that the other mother is never sentimentalized. There is nothing in the text that humanizes her; she is an embodiment of evil and everything that is undesirable. As Coats states, “Gaiman maintains a clearer ethical stance in his fiction than many Gothic writers for children; his villains are truly nasty, and his heroines are steadfast in their work to defeat them” (2008: 91). Unlike other child heroes and

heroines, like Lyra in Pullman's trilogy or Harvey Swick in *The Thief of Always*, Coraline is never really tempted by the other mother to stay in the other home forever. In Barker's novel, Harvey enjoys the Holiday House at the beginning, and in Pullman's trilogy, Lyra is initially dazzled by Mrs Coulter's beauty and sensuous femininity. This attraction between heroine and villainess does not take place in Gaiman's novel. Although Coraline is not initially as repulsed by the other mother as she is later on, her physical nearness always makes her feel uncomfortable: for example, Coraline replies "Don't do that" (56) when her other mother strokes her hair, and she backs away when the other mother touches her (58). After discovering the other mother's real intentions, though, Coraline's feelings of unease become pure loathing and abjection: "'You're sick', said Coraline. 'Sick and evil and weird'" (93). Coraline's rejection of the perennial immaturity that the other mother promises is immediately followed by her determination to escape from the other home, save her kidnapped parents and recover the souls of the ghost children. Coraline thus rejects the childish world the other mother promised her, and embraces maturity and responsibility.

In this sense, the figure of the double in *Coraline* has a very similar function to Voldemort in *Harry Potter*, but there is one essential difference: in Gaiman's novel, we are not so sure anymore if evil comes from within or without the child. Although the other mother seems to be an external double, the sense that she may actually come from within pervades Gaiman's narrative. This challenges the pattern of many children's and adolescent novels in which "doubles and ghosts provide potentially plural selfhoods", though these possibilities tend "to be shut down by a shift towards rational individualism at the novel's closure" (Waller, 2009: 72). Gaiman's *Coraline* does not end with the reassurance that a fragmentation of one's identity is a temporary phase, or

a condition that can be overcome with love, as in *Harry Potter*. In *Coraline*, the double is never destroyed; she is only locked away. The other mother is left trapped in the other world, banging the door, while her severed hand and the key to the other home are trapped inside a well in the real world. Although the novel ends with Coraline feeling relieved and renewed by her triumph, this ending is not as reassuring as those in which evil is completely destroyed. It leaves the reader with the feeling that everything has got back to normal, but only for the time being. As the other mother tells Coraline, “I put her [my mother] in there [the grave] myself. And when I found her trying to crawl out, I put her back” (109). Ironically, Coraline ends up doing what the other mother did: she buries her other mother alive. Yet, the fact that she is not dead and that a part of her (her hand) has managed to enter Coraline’s real world suggests that she may find a way to crawl out of the well and unleash the terrors of the other home again.

This ending implies that fragmentation of the self can be temporary, but also that it is recurrent. As Cavallaro states, “Precluding the plot from reaching completion is also a means of eroding the characters’ possible plenitude. Splintered narratives go hand in hand with fragmented subjectivities” (2002: 113). Childhood in *Coraline* is not a period of confusion that can be overcome forever, and maturity does not necessarily imply permanent stability. Instead, Gaiman deploys the Gothic trope of the unfinished narrative to transmit a sense that fear will return in the future under a different disguise. This is the ambiguity of the double: it is rejected, but it cannot be completely eradicated, for it is necessary for the subject—in this case, Coraline—to define herself. All in all, the Gothic double motif is used in *Coraline* to destabilize essentialist notions of identity. Gaiman’s novel acknowledges that the self is fragmented, that identity is a fragile concept and that fear is an ongoing condition in life. At the same time, however,

essentialist concepts of the self are embraced by the child character, and they are offered as the antidote to the fragmentation of the self. This recalls the works that McCallum analyzes in which “there is a more positive evaluation of essentialist concepts of the self, in that there is a recognition of the necessity and value of such concepts, in the context of severe loss and fragmentation of self within time, space and social institutions” (1999: 68). The child character eventually overcomes her fears because she literally keeps herself together, and sticks to her own convictions: “(Was there an other Coraline? No, she decided, there wasn’t. There was just her.)” (83). This final point, the role of fear in the child’s development, will be dealt with in the subsequent section.

2.5. The Girl Who Went Forth to Learn Fear: Shifting the Voice of Experience from Adult do Child

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*

The quotation above is the epigraph at the beginning of *Coraline*, a variation on G. K. Chesterton’s statement that “The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon” (2007: 49). Choosing this epigraph, Gaiman aligns himself with Chesterton’s idea that the child who reads fairy tales will be better equipped to deal with fears in real life, a belief that underpins the texts analyzed in this dissertation and influences the way childhood is represented in these novels. This also implies that Gothic elements in *Coraline* fulfill the function that dragons have in fairy tales, and that the emphasis will be, not so much on the terrible consequences of the child’s desire, but on how things can be righted again and knowledge can be gained from Gothic experiences. In this

section I focus on how desire and knowledge are represented in *Coraline*, analyzing which facets of desire and knowledge are Gothicized and which ones are celebrated. I argue that, contrary to more conservative beliefs that children should be protected from fear, *Coraline* is a modern fairy tale about terror and horror's empowering effects; a story about being in great trouble and doing something about it even if you are afraid to death, strange as this may sound for a children's story.

Fear and Desire

Nodelman identifies "A concern with desire, knowledge and the ways they affect each other" as central to texts written for children (2008: 33). Children's texts traditionally encourage readers to move from childish desire to adult knowledge, by showing them the disastrous consequences of getting what they want. At the same time, children's literature "acts on the faith that learning occurs best when it sneaks up on the learner in the context of events with the ostensible purpose of providing pleasure" (Nodelman, 2008: 36). Gothic elements play an important, albeit contradictory, role in children's fiction when it comes to both entertaining and instructing, as I have discussed in the introductory chapter. Whereas Gothic elements are introduced to make the learning more exciting, many texts simultaneously aim to teach readers that Gothic thrills are not to be sought after, showing them the horrific experiences that can result from them. In other words, danger and fear are represented in a negative light, but at the same time the texts implicitly acknowledge that they are necessary for the child to learn. We can see

this in older texts like Heinrich Hoffman's *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845),⁵⁸ but also in fairy tales and fables that are still read to and by children in the twenty-first century.

Children's novels like *Marianne Dreams*, *The Thief of Always* and *Coraline* present a less self-contradictory discourse: the child learns from Gothic experiences and, precisely for this reason, they should not be avoided. The texts acknowledge, in fact, that fear is unavoidable and that it can actually have positive outcomes if faced with bravery. Therefore, child protagonists in these novels are often represented as determined to surmount it. In *Marianne Dreams*, for instance, Storr shows us the horrors that the child can create with her imagination and her drawings, but this eventually has a healthy outcome, for exorcising and facing these monsters is what leads Marianne to start recovering from her sickness. Similarly, in *The Thief of Always*, Harvey is punished for having let himself be persuaded by the Holiday House: when he manages to escape and go back to his home, he realizes that for every day spent in the Holiday House, one year has gone by in the real world, and his parents are now old people whose life was shattered by the disappearance of their son. In the end, however, Harvey goes back to recover the years that were stolen from him and from other children, and he is eventually celebrated as a hero. I therefore read this as a more positive evaluation of the child's desire for adventure, entertainment and even danger, even though adult knowledge takes over in the end.

Gaiman's discourse on fear and desire in *Coraline* is similar to the one in *Marianne Dreams* and *The Thief of Always*, but Gaiman complicates matters further. First, the other home is not overtly presented as the product of the child's imagination.

⁵⁸ This is a German children's book, translated into English as *Shockheaded Peter* or *Slovenly Peter*. It is a collection of ten rhyme stories about the disastrous consequences of children's bad behavior and slovenliness.

On the contrary, it is the creation of a monstrous grown-up woman. However, if we assume that the other mother is Coraline's double, then the other home could be Coraline's creation as well. Second, contrary to what it may seem, the other home in Gaiman's novel, is not a wish-fulfillment space for the child protagonist, but for the adult villainess. Since the other home recalls the gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel", we might be tempted to read it as the realization of Coraline's desires. What is more, this interpretation is emphasized in Selick's film adaptation. Yet, in Gaiman's novel, the child protagonist is never tempted for one moment to stay in the other home, as I have previously stated. Even before realizing that it is a trap devised by the other mother, Coraline has already decided that that place could never be her home: "Coraline went down the hall to her other bedroom. (...) Coraline decided that she wouldn't want to have to sleep in there; but that the colour scheme was an awful lot more interesting than the one in her own bedroom" (41). The other home seems to be, for the late-twentieth-century child, one more source of temporary entertainment, which contrasts with the ghost children from the past who fell into the trap. On the other hand, the other world is a place where everything is designed to satisfy the other mother's desire for Coraline, and for giving her what she assumes a young girl might want. This contrasts with Coraline's real world where adults seem to have lost the capacity to desire.

With the exception of the other mother, adult figures in *Coraline*—and in most of Gaiman's books for children and young adults—represent stagnation and a lack of desire. The worlds of children and adults are clearly differentiated. As in the novels by Charles Dickens or Roald Dahl, adults are absurd, uninteresting and nonsensical when seen from the child's perspective, and their lives dull and repetitive. Coraline's parents appear to do nothing but work on their computers and cook boring meals, as other

parents in Gaiman's works of fiction for children do: the father in *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* does nothing but read the newspaper, and Lucy's parents in *The Wolves in the Walls* are too absent-minded to listen to Lucy's worries. This contrasts with Coraline's thirst for exploration and her desire for interestingness, which are threatened by the blandness of the adult world, metaphorically represented by the mist that might end up engulfing Coraline. This shows how some Romantic and Victorian ideas about childhood still influence today's children's fiction to a certain extent. Just as civilization was perceived as corrupting innocence in the Romantic period, the superficiality of modernity is depicted in *Coraline* as a threat against the child's desire and imagination. Although Coraline seems to take little pleasure in things at the beginning of the novel, it is acknowledged that she still has the potential to break with this routine and become a unique individual, and this is indeed what happens in the end when she learns to appreciate the interestingness of her world. Adults, on the other hand, are already trapped in their stagnant lives. This brings to mind romantic ideas of childhood that "growing up involves the loss of special qualities that may never be recovered" (Reynolds, 1994: 4), even though the meaning of these special qualities has changed in time since the early nineteenth century.

On the other hand, Gaiman's novel presents the same contradiction found in *Harry Potter*: the child's desire is appraised as long as it is not too strong to disrupt order, or in this case, family life. Uncontrolled desire is Gothicized, and it has to be contained. Again, the novel seems to establish a distinction between Coraline's childlike and innocent desire, and the other mother's childish and highly destructive desire. Both forms of desire are represented as antithetical, and the latter even threatens to destroy the former. If the misty atmosphere of the real home seemed to flatten its inhabitants'

capacity to imagine and wish for something beyond their ordinary lives, the threat to lose one's capacity to desire becomes imminent in the other home. Losing one's eyes can be read, not only as a loss of one's individuality, but also as a loss of one's capacity to want, for it is through the eyes that objects of desire are perceived. In fact, the verb 'to want' appears frequently in the text. In her real world, Coraline claims "I want to explore" (14), suggesting that, although the real home is a place where the child does not always get what she wants, it is at least a place where she is allowed to want things. In the other home, on the other hand, everything is restricted to the other mother's desires: "We want you to stay" (57), she tells Coraline, or "We only want what's best for you" (58). The second quotation makes it especially clear that the other mother embodies the adult conviction that the child wants what she has to offer, depriving her of her own will. As Coats states, "she [Coraline] will never be allowed to be bored in this world; she will never be allowed to want", and "She is confined to her other mother's desire" (2008: 87). In Gaiman's novel, however, the child protagonist is depicted as strong-willed, and Coraline makes her wishes heard even in the other world: "I don't want to play with you,' (...). 'I want to go home and be with my real parents. I want you to let them go" (92).

Like *Harry Potter*, Gaiman's *Coraline* presents a very ambiguous discourse on desire. By the end of the novel, when Coraline is told that "If you stay here, you can have whatever you want" (139), she replies: "I don't *want* whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn't mean anything. What then?" (139, original emphasis). This line uttered by the child protagonist herself sums up the didacticism of the novel: desire can easily disappear if one always gets what one wants, or if all possible choices are

available, which is the kind of world that the other home represents. Thus, Gaiman's novel has explored the childlike openness to possibility, and the different manifestations of desire, only to shift towards a more rational discourse in the end. As in *Harry Potter*, adult knowledge finally takes over. By the end of the novel, Coraline is no longer a whiny child, but she is finally able to speak sensibly and rationally. She has become an adult voice, very much like Harry learning to speak like Dumbledore by the end of the series. Once Coraline has gained experience, she is also granted the voice of experience, that is, the voice that transmits knowledge to the implied reader.

Fear and Knowledge

As I have already discussed, those authors and writers that defend the presence of fear in children's books tend to emphasize the strong connection between fear and knowledge. Contrary to popular ideas that fear is a foolish feeling, authors like Lewis or Bettelheim stress that facing one's fears ultimately leads to experience. What is more, the reverse is also true: fear is an inevitable consequence of knowledge. Learning about death, war, crime, sickness and other 'ugly' facts causes fear. This highlights another contradiction that underlies some texts for children: they encourage readers to grow up and move from childish desire to adult knowledge, while they also try to shield the child from knowing about certain things that may scare them. Yet, if growing up means acquiring knowledge, and knowledge brings about fear, the latter seems an unavoidable aspect of maturation. In his essay "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien also states that "it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories (if we can speak of the lessons of things that do not lecture) that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom" (2008: 58). That Gaiman is

familiar with and influenced by Lewis's and Tolkien's ideas is most probable since, in his speech "On Lewis, Tolkien and Chesterton" (2012), he himself expresses his admiration for these authors. Furthermore, the epigraph at the beginning of *Coraline* indicates that Gaiman consciously wrote this children's book to teach the implied reader how to beat dragons, that is, how to deal with the knowledge that is tormenting.

In many contemporary works of children's fiction, fear and knowledge are two sides of the same coin. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, for instance, articulate stories of how young people should not be protected from the knowledge of such issues as death or awakening sexuality. Harry and Lyra's stories, however, are finite journeys in which the eradication of evil and fear leads to stable maturity: in the end, both Voldemort and Mrs Coulter are destroyed, Harry's soul is clean, and Lyra's daemon will stop changing (see Chapter 3). The ending in *Coraline* is, as I have argued, less reassuring because it does not rule out the possibility that fear will return, a theme that is recurrent in Gaiman's books for children and young adults. In *The Wolves in the Walls*, after defeating the wolves, anxieties reappear in a different shape when, in the end, Lucy suspects that there are elephants behind the walls. Significantly, elephants are not as threatening as wolves, suggesting that, after facing danger once, new terrors will seem less terrifying. In *MirrorMask*, on the other hand, the conflict between Helena and her family is similar to the situation depicted in *Coraline*, only that it takes place later in adolescence. In fact, some critics read Helena as an older Coraline that feels once more at odds with her family (Parsons, Sawers and McNally, 2008; Midgley, 2008). Thus, in Gaiman's works, maturity is an ongoing process, not a finite journey, and fear is part of this process. Like *The Wolves in the Walls*, *Coraline* also ends with an acknowledgement that future 'monsters' will not

seem so terrifying, as the closing passage in the novel implies: “Normally, on the night before the first day of term, Coraline was apprehensive and nervous. But, she realised, there was nothing left about school that could scare her any more” (184-5).

Significantly, it is terror rather than horror that predominates in *Coraline*. Cavallaro regards terror and horror as fear’s interdependent affects (2002: vii), and according to Devendra P. Varma, “The difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse” (1988: 16). Terror is linked to uncertainty, and in *Coraline*, it takes the shape of the other home where everything is uncertain, identities are unstable, and the other mother appears and disappears unpredictably. In fact, the whole world created by the other mother is based on terror; it has been created precisely for her to feed on Coraline’s terror of being neglected. We see this in a passage in which the other mother makes Coraline look into a mirror, and shows her her real parents saying: “How nice it is, not to have Coraline any more. (...) Now we can do all the things we always wanted to do, like go abroad, but were prevented from doing by having a little daughter” (76). That Coraline is afraid of this being true is acknowledged some lines below: “She hoped that what she had just seen was not real, but she was not as certain as she sounded. There was a tiny doubt inside her, like a maggot in an apple core” (76).

Gaiman’s concentration on terror, rather than horror, ensures two things: on the one hand, many things remain unsaid, which keeps the novel within middle-class standards of good taste. For example, we are told that the other mother sews buttons into children’s eyes, but the narrator never describes this deed in gory detail. What matters is not so much the physical act itself, but the symbolic power of such an image;

what it means to have one's eyes replaced by buttons (the loss of one's identity and desire), rather than the actual physical pain it entails. On the other hand, and most importantly, terror is also there to elicit a rational response from the protagonist, who uses her intelligence to overcome it, whereas horror is more commonly linked to irrationality.

There are, however, some passages in which Gaiman graphically describes visions that could allow for moments of horror to take place. Yet, the potential impact of these images on the reader is countered by Coraline's mastering horror. When Coraline succeeds in challenging the other mother, the other home starts to fall apart, and the remains of its inhabitants are described thus:

Inside the sac was something that looked like a person, but a person with two heads, with twice as many arms and legs as it should have.

The creature in the sac seemed horribly unformed and unfinished, as if two Plasticine people had been warmed and rolled together, squashed and pressed into one thing. (118)

As the adverb 'horribly' indicates, this moment is more horrifying than terrifying, a much more physical kind of fear than terror. Everything the other mother has created decomposes like a corpse, the reference to Plasticine highlighting the fakery of it all. Yet, not even when facing horrific sights is the child character ever portrayed as being intensely affected or paralyzed by horror. After describing this scene, the narrator states right away that "She had never been so scared, but still she walked forward until she reached the sac" (119). As this quotation shows, the emphasis is on the response that the horrific scene elicits from the child protagonist, rather than on the horror itself. Terror and horror are not meant to be just thrilling; they are also there for a didactic purpose.

Fear in *Coraline* is, hence, not represented as irrational and foolish, but as the feeling that puts the heroine's mind at work, as this other passage also exemplifies:

Coraline had a single heartbeat in which to react. She could only think of two things to do. Either she could scream, and try to run away, and be chased around a badly lit cellar by the huge grub-thing – be chased until it caught her. Or she could do something else. So she did something else. (131)

“Scream, and try to run away” is certainly what many Gothic victims do, and it would probably be a more realistic reaction to horror. In Gaiman’s novel, however, the main function of this passage is to highlight that fear has to be experienced to understand what it is to be brave, and that individuals can choose bravery over cowardice. As Coraline herself states, quoting her own father, “when you’re scared but you still do it anyway, *that’s* brave” (72). When Coraline utters this didactic statement, it becomes clear that her Gothic experience is taking her to a more mature understanding of the world. It is only by experiencing real fear that her father’s lesson sinks in and knowledge is successfully passed on from father to daughter.

Nodelman distinguishes between two different types of knowledge in children’s literature: the childish and the adult ways of understanding the world. The former involves “the state of being in uncertainty, of not knowing a world that keeps changing and not understanding a self that keeps changing”, whereas the latter is based on assertion (2008: 40). Nodelman adds that when “children accept the certainty of the assertion—adopt the knowledge commonly accepted by most adults as true—is the point at which their fantasy worlds of desire must and do end” (2008: 40). Nodelman illustrates this by referring to Carroll’s *Alice: Wonderland*, the world where anything can happen, disappears the moment Alice exclaims “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (Carroll, 1998: 108), choosing mature certainty over childish uncertainty. Likewise, Coraline’s other world starts to disintegrate as Coraline gradually adopts adult knowledge, and it collapses when she decides that the other home is not real:

There was nothing here that frightened her. These things (...) were illusions, things made by the other mother in a ghastly parody of the real people and real things on the other end of the corridor. She couldn't truly make anything, decided Coraline. She could only twist and copy and distort things that already existed. (137)

As in Carroll's *Alice* books, Coraline's other world is the world of uncertainty. However, while Carroll's novels depict "the wonderfully frightening and frighteningly wonderful state of being in flux, uncertain, not finished yet" (Nodelman, 2008: 40), this world of uncertainty is dark and menacing in *Coraline*, and being 'unfinished' acquires negative connotations. According to Nodelman, Carroll's *Alice* "mak[es] the uncertainty of not knowing everything for sure a utopian state" and "confirms a desire for a world in which anything might be possible" (Nodelman, 2008: 40). By contrast, Gaiman's *Coraline* is more in line with the works of teenage fiction that, according to Waller, "[are] most likely to portray adult impressions of adolescence that are shaped by prevailing discourses and which perhaps dictate that power and agency reside in experience and wisdom rather than youthful instability" (2009: 99). Thus, adult experience and wisdom are mocked in the early stages of the novel, only to be celebrated in the end.

At the beginning, adults seem to have lost their role as mentors: "Coraline wondered why so few of the adults she had met made any sense" (30). The child is arrogant at the beginning, unable to appreciate adult advice, and prone to disobeying:

On the first day Coraline's family moved in, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible made a point of telling Coraline how dangerous the well was, and they warned her to be sure she kept away from it. So Coraline set off to explore for it, so that she knew where it was, to keep away from it properly. (13)

In this passage, the narrator seems to support implicitly the child's disobedience, by highlighting how logically absurd it is to try to keep away from something if one does not know where it is. This can also be read as a mockery of cautionary tales and other

forms of literature that aim to teach child readers to avoid danger, stifling thus their desire for adventure. What is more, knowing about the well comes in very handy in the end, when Coraline decides to trap the other mother's hand and the key to the other home in there. Nevertheless, as I have stated in the preceding paragraphs, adult knowledge is eventually reevaluated, and the advice of parents and neighbors ends up playing an important part in Coraline's escape from the other home. Gaiman's discourse on childhood and adulthood is therefore ambivalent, as is the discourse on desire: adult knowledge has to be undermined sometimes in order to seek adventure, but it is also the ultimate goal. The fact that Coraline has moved away from childishness is further emphasized when she sets a trap to lure the other mother's severed hand into the well, while she pretends to be playing with her dolls. It is not innocence, but the pretence of innocence that saves her in the end.

The fact that Coraline is more mature at the end of the novel is acknowledged by the author's lending her the voice of adult values. Although the book lacks the presence of an intrusive narrator that provides moral guidance to the reader, the author still finds a more subtle way to infuse the novel with advice and lessons for younger readers. Gaiman's didacticism either relies on literary organization or is often explicitly uttered by the child heroine herself, which may be regarded as empowering for the child protagonist or as a final imposition of adult normativity. As Trites argues,

The power dynamic also shifts if the ideological voice is stated by an adult voice rather than an adolescent voice. Some narratives that rely exclusively on adult voices to articulate direct ideologies may offer fewer affirmations of adolescents than texts that allow adolescents to have the power/knowledge necessary to engage with ideological statements. (2000: 70)

In this sense, it can be affirmed that Gaiman's *Coraline* offers an empowering representation of the child, but then again the discourse is highly ambivalent. In her

analysis of Margaret Mahy's Gothic children's novel *The Haunting* (1982), Anna Jackson proposes a very interesting reading that I suggest applies to *Coraline* as well: "In the end, the book has raised the spectre of the uncanny only to resolve the complicated plot with a celebration of canniness, and an alignment of canniness with maturity, with growing up" (Jackson, 2008: 163). By the end of *Coraline*, the child protagonist represents the childlike qualities that should be preserved: desire for adventure, imaginativeness, and individuality. Yet, she has also acquired mature qualities, like bravery, determination and the knowledge that being independent does not necessarily mean being left out.

2.6. Conclusions: "It's Coraline, not Caroline"

Adults follow paths. Children explore. Adults are content to walk the same way, hundreds of times, or thousands; perhaps it never occurs to adults to step off the paths, to creep beneath rhododendrons, to find the spaces between fences.

Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how the ideals that are so firmly established in certain works of children's Gothic, such as Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, begin to crack in Gaiman's Gothic fairy tale, *Coraline*. Gaiman's novel is highly ambivalent in that it acknowledges the flimsiness of the very ideals it endorses, resulting in a narrative that is reassuring and disturbing at the same time, especially regarding the representation of the child's self. Whereas Rowling represents the self as essentially whole and fragmentation as the result of evil and suffering, the self in *Coraline* is ultimately a construction. The novel emphasizes the arbitrariness of names and categories, and the fragility of ideals like home, family and a stable identity, by

means of the Gothic motif of the double which disrupts all these ideals. However, in Gaiman's novel, these constructs are the only viable option we have to 'overcome' our state of fragmentation. The conflict that Gaiman's heroine faces in the other home is precisely how to understand one's self and the world when one's preconceived ideas fall to pieces. Therefore, Gaiman's novel acknowledges the arbitrariness of language and cultural markers, but it poses the challenge of finding an alternative way to define ourselves. In Gaiman's other world, the alternative is mist and nothingness—a ghost world. *Coraline* can thus be read as a modern fairy tale about the child facing present-day preoccupations, some of which are clearly childish, like the fear of losing one's family. The child protagonist, however, also engages in more 'grown-up' philosophical anxieties over questions of identity, and reality versus artifice.

Gaiman's novel, therefore, still adheres to children's literature conventions by turning Coraline's adventure into a quest for individuality in a world of dullness, artificiality and skepticism. The text acknowledges views of the self as socially constructed and vulnerable to fragmentation, yet these are Gothicized and relegated to the terrain of the disturbing, of that which creates anxiety. What the novel finally celebrates are more essentialist views. After all, Coraline eventually does achieve a more stable and mature identity: she overcomes her initial boredom and becomes braver, smarter and more perceptive. Once again, the child figure serves as a repository of the qualities that, according to the adult author, should be preserved: the thirst for knowledge, strong will, determination, bravery, self-reliance, imagination, and attraction for discovery and exploration. As this list of qualities suggests, Gaiman's fictional child in the end possesses both childlike and mature qualities, which so far seems to be the optimum combination that most British children's authors encourage.

Ultimately, the presence of Gothic elements highlights the goodness of the child figure and the comfort of the late-twentieth-century middle-class family, by opposing Coraline to the other mother, and the real home to the other home.

This is not to say that Gaiman eventually endorses a utopian view of childhood. The text makes it quite clear that childhood is not idyllic; it is not a beautiful garden where the child can safely play. Gaiman takes many of the preoccupations that have pervaded adult Gothic since its inception and makes them part of the child's life. What is more, the novel does not even seem to express nostalgia for a more utopian childhood. In the end, nothing has really changed at Coraline's home, and yet she is finally quite content with it. In Gaiman's world there is no Hogwarts, no childlike world, and it is her real world that the little girl has to learn to appreciate, a discussion I will continue in the next chapter dealing with Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. I find Pullman's trilogy the logical continuation to my discussion of *Coraline* not just because it is also a fantasy that teaches to appreciate one's real world instead of longing for an ideal, but also because, as regards the representation of the self, Pullman goes one step further: in *His Dark Materials*, individuals are ultimately divided, and yet this division is never Gothicized. On the contrary, what is Gothicized is precisely the attempt to do away with inner duality. Both works of fiction show a clear preoccupation with identity and with what it means to be 'whole', and they use Gothic imagery to explore these meanings. In *Coraline*, childhood is not utopian—unless we understand uncertainty as utopian—but the figure of the child is still idealized, and the childlike is extolled and even equated to uniqueness. Being called 'Caroline' instead of 'Coraline' might not seem to be a big deal, but Gaiman shows how a simple slip of the tongue can undermine individuality.

CHAPTER 3 – CHILDREN AND D(A)EMONS: GOTHICIZING PERPETUAL INNOCENCE IN PHILIP PULLMAN’S *HIS DARK MATERIALS*

3.1. Introducing the Materials: Gothic Elements in Pullman’s Trilogy

Lyra and Pantalaimon nestled down deep in the bed and tried to get warm, knowing that for hundreds of miles all around her little bed there was nothing but fear.

Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*

Philip Pullman (born 1946) is one of the most popular and prolific British authors for children and young adults of the last two decades.⁵⁹ Apart from *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), Pullman is also the author of many other novels for children and young adults, such as the *Sally Lockhart* quartet (1985-1994), *The Broken Bridge* (1990), *The New-Cut Gang* novels (1994-1995), *The Firework-Maker’s Daughter* (1995), *Clockwork* (1995), *I Was a Rat! or the Scarlett Slippers* (1999), *The Scarecrow and His Servant* (2004) and *Grimm Tales: For Young and Old* (2012), a retelling of fifty classic fairy tales by the Grimm Brothers, to name a few. Pullman is also the author of a novel for adults entitled *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010). Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy is, so far, his most celebrated work, but also the one that has sparked more controversy due to Pullman’s explicit criticism of religion. Peter Hitchens, for example, has labeled Pullman “the most dangerous author in Britain”

⁵⁹ Pullman has won several awards, such as the 1995 Carnegie Medal from the Library Association and the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize for *Northern Lights*, which was later named the all-time ‘Carnegie of Carnegies’ in 2007. In 2005, Pullman won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, an acknowledgement of his contribution to children’s and young adult fiction. He has also been named one of the ‘50 greatest British writers since 1945’ by *The Times*, and he has been nominated twice for the Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 2006 and 2012 (see Wikipedia article “Philip Pullman”). Other prizes for his fiction include the American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults for both *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, and the latter was also the first children’s book to win the Whitbread Book of the Year (see Wikipedia articles “The Subtle Knife” and “The Amber Spyglass”).

(2014). The three novels comprised are *Northern Lights* (1995)—published in the US as *The Golden Compass*, which is also the title of Chris Weitz’s 2007 film adaptation—*The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000).

Northern Lights is “set in a universe just like ours, but different in many ways” (Pullman, *Northern Lights*, 2007: n.p.),⁶⁰ where people’s souls are external animal-shaped entities named ‘dæmons’, which shape-shift during childhood and adopt a particular form when the person becomes an adult. The story begins when Lyra Belacqua, an eleven-year-old girl raised as an orphan in Jordan College (Oxford), and her dæmon Pantalaimon hide inside a wardrobe and eavesdrop on a lecture given by Lord Asriel, Lyra’s uncle. Asriel, who has just returned from an expedition in the North, shows the Oxford scholars a picture of the northern lights, through which a city skyline can be seen. This image proves “the existence of numerous other worlds like this one, neither heaven nor hell” (*Northern Lights*, 31), and Asriel tries to convince the scholars to fund his research. This discovery, however, challenges the teachings of the Holy Church, which holds absolute power in Lyra’s Britain—spelt ‘Brytain’ in this alternate reality—and triggers the Church’s animosity against Asriel. During the lecture, Lyra also hears about ‘Dust’ for the first time, the name given to some mysterious particles, which are invisible to the human eye, but which Asriel has been able to photograph by using a special emulsion.⁶¹ Asriel’s images reveal that, for some reason, the particles only ‘settle’ on adults and that they do so through their dæmons. After the lecture, the Master of Jordan College foretells, by means of an ‘alethiometer’, an instrument that

⁶⁰ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the title and the page number(s) will be provided.

⁶¹ Asriel later explains to Lyra that the name ‘Dust’ was taken from a passage from the Bible in Lyra’s world (a slightly different version of the actual Bible): “*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return...*” (Genesis 3:19 in *Northern Lights*, 371, original italics).

looks like a golden compass and tells the truth to those who know how to read it, that Lord Asriel's findings will lead to disastrous consequences and that Lyra will play an important part in this downfall. Meanwhile, another mystery begins to disrupt families all over England: children are disappearing, allegedly kidnapped by an organization popularly known as 'Gobblers', which performs dubious experiments on them somewhere in the North. Shortly after her friend Roger's disappearance, Lyra is sent to live with the charming and well-connected Mrs Coulter, presumably to pursue her education under "Female guidance", as the Master of Jordan tells Lyra (*Northern Lights*, 71). Right before leaving, the Master gives Lyra the alethiometer, and she wrongly assumes that he wants her to take it to Lord Asriel. After a few days with Mrs Coulter, Lyra learns that her hostess is actually the head of the General Oblation Board (the Gobblers). Scared, Lyra escapes from Mrs Coulter's flat and sets off for the North to rescue Roger and the other children with the help of gyptians,⁶² witches and other characters. Throughout her journey, the gyptians tell Lyra the real story of her own past. They tell her that she is the illegitimate daughter of Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, and that her origin was concealed from her because, at the time she was conceived, Mrs Coulter was married to another man. For this reason, Lyra was left with a gyptian woman and later taken to Jordan College by Lord Asriel, who pretended to be her uncle. Lyra's journey with the gyptians culminates when they arrive in the North and Lyra is captured by Gobblers and taken to Bolvangar, the research station where the latter keep the kidnapped children. There, Lyra is reunited with Roger, and she discovers what the Oblation Board is up to: they are severing the connection between children and their daemons in order to prevent Dust from settling on them as they grow up, an operation

⁶² 'Gyptian' means 'gypsy' in Lyra's world. They are nomadic people who live on boats and travel through rivers and canals.

that leaves children powerless and ghostly. Horrified, Lyra devises a plan to escape and free the other children, and she succeeds. Having trained herself to read the alethiometer purely by intuition, she uses the device to learn what her next mission is: she has to get to Lord Asriel and bring him something he really needs. Assuming that what Lord Asriel most needs is the alethiometer itself, Lyra sets out to join him accompanied by Roger, only to find out that what Asriel needs is not the alethiometer, but Roger himself. Asriel wants to create a bridge between their universe and the universe beyond the northern lights to find the source of Dust, and for this he needs the burst of energy that is released when body and dæmon are separated. For this, he chooses Roger, who dies after the cut. Once a window to the other universe is open, Asriel walks through it and disappears. Lyra, blaming herself for Roger's death, and Pantalaimon decide to walk through the window, too, to find the source of Dust before Asriel does. They are convinced that, if adults are afraid of Dust, it must be a good thing.

The Subtle Knife opens with twelve-year-old Will Parry, the other young protagonist, running away from government agents who are after him and his emotionally frail mother for reasons he does not know. Will is also from Oxford but from “the universe we know” (Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, 2005: n.p.),⁶³ and he is the son of an explorer who disappeared on an expedition when Will was only a baby. After leaving his troubled mother in a safe place, Will, who has always wanted to find his father, goes back to his home to try to find a collection of letters his father wrote to his mother, in the hope that they will shed some light on his father's disappearance. Shortly after, the agents break into his house, and from what they say, Will deduces that they are after the letters too. As he tries to escape, he accidentally kills one of the men.

⁶³ Philip Pullman. *The Subtle Knife*. London: Scholastic, 2005 [1997]. Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition and only the abbreviated title and the page number will be provided.

Panic-stricken, Will leaves the house and runs away. As he stops to rest, he suddenly sees a small window in the air, and he inexplicably feels that it must lead to a parallel universe. Will walks through the window, and he finds himself in Cittàgazze, a city inhabited only by children because adults have left in fear of Spectres—creatures that only adults can see. In this universe, Will meets Lyra, who had also left her world by the end of *Northern Lights*. As Lyra's alethiometer tells her that she has to help Will find his father, the two children set out to search for him. Meanwhile, Mrs Coulter and the Magisterium—the religious authority in Lyra's world—are trying to find out about a prophecy surrounding Lyra that the witches know about. According to this prophecy, Lyra will be the second Eve, and she will bring about the end of destiny. In one of their visits to Will's Oxford, the alethiometer takes Lyra to Mary Malone, a physicist and former nun who is studying Dark Matter, the equivalent to Dust in Lyra's universe. With her help, Lyra learns that Dust is actually particles of conscience which are responsible for intelligent forms of life, and that Dust is also what makes the alethiometer work. When Mary sees Lyra use the alethiometer, she realizes that it is possible for people to communicate with Dust, or 'Shadows', as she calls them. As Mary manages to communicate with Dust through a computer, it tells her that she must find Will and Lyra and "play the serpent" (*The Subtle Knife*, 249). After her visit to Mary Malone, Lyra's alethiometer gets stolen by Sir Charles, a smartly-dressed man who offers to give Lyra a lift when she is persecuted by policemen that saw her with Will. Sir Charles tells Will and Lyra that he will only give them back the alethiometer if they bring him the subtle knife, a blade that has the power to cut the air and open gateways to other worlds. Will and Lyra find the knife in Cittàgazze, and Will becomes its rightful owner after fighting the young man who had stolen it and after receiving the wound that marks one as the knife's owner, namely, losing two fingers. Afterwards,

Will and Lyra use the knife to retrieve the alethiometer from Sir Charles's house, and they discover that the latter is actually Lord Boreal, a friend—and lover—of Mrs Coulter's. The two children are finally rescued by Serafina Pekkala, one of the witches, and they continue their search for Will's father. At one point, Will leaves the camp where he and Lyra are staying with the witches, and he meets a man who calls himself 'Stanislaus Grumman' and who instructs Will to join Lord Asriel in his fight against the Authority, an angel who pretends to be God. The moment Will and Grumman, whose real name is John Parry, realize that they are father and son, Grumman is killed by a resentful witch who was in love with him and whom he did not love back. Will returns to camp to find that all the witches have been killed and Lyra is missing. She has been taken captive by Mrs Coulter and the Magisterium in order to prevent a second Fall.

Finally, in *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra is hidden in a cave by Mrs Coulter, who keeps her asleep by giving her drugs, thus preventing her from running away. As her 'love' for her daughter has become her main priority, Mrs Coulter's allegiance has changed, and she holds Lyra captive, not to destroy her, but to protect her from the Magisterium, whose members intend to kill her and Will before they commit original sin. While she is asleep, Lyra dreams of her dead friend Roger calling for help from a strange land, which is later revealed to be the land of the dead. In her dreams, Lyra promises to help him. Meanwhile, the Magisterium also plans to murder Mary Malone to prevent her from being the tempter, but Mary steps through a window into another parallel world and escapes. In this other world, Mary constructs an instrument that allows her to see Dust, an amber spyglass. With it, Mary realizes that Dust is increasingly leaving the worlds. As for Will, he manages to reach Mrs Coulter's cave at the same time as Lord Asriel's army. Will wakes Lyra, and the two children escape through a window Will cuts with the subtle knife, accompanied by two spies from

Asriel's army. Since Lyra had promised to help Roger in dreams, the children and the two spies set out for the world of the dead. Once there, Will and Lyra make a deal with the harpies guarding the door: the harpies will allow them to open a window and set the spirits free, and the spirits will have to tell the harpies their life stories in return. After freeing the dead, whose spirits dissolve and blend with nature again, Will and Lyra join Lord Asriel's army in their fight against the Authority. It turns out that Asriel wanted to find the source of Dust to preserve it, not to destroy it as Lyra had assumed. Surprisingly, Mrs Coulter finally ends up joining Asriel as well, not only out of her love for Lyra, but also because she has finally realized that Dust is to be cherished, not to be destroyed. Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel finally unite to save Lyra, and they die to kill Regent Metatron. The Authority, on the other hand, is destroyed by Will and Lyra when the children open the cage where it is kept and it dissolves due to its own frailty. With the Authority's destruction, human beings will no longer be subject to destiny, and free will will prevail. After this, Will and Lyra escape from the battle and step into another world where they encounter Mary Malone. As the three of them exchange stories, Mary tells the two children—at this point Lyra is thirteen and Will is fourteen—about her first romantic experience with a man. This tale makes such an impression on Lyra that she begins to desire experiencing a romantic encounter herself. Shortly after this, she and Will realize they love each other, and they kiss for the first time, an action that slows down the flow of Dust that was escaping. In the end, however, they sadly realize that the only way to stop Dust from flowing away is by closing all the windows connecting worlds. Thus, Will and Lyra finally go back to their respective worlds, parting from each other forever. When Lyra returns to her Oxford, she finds that she is not able to read the alethiometer anymore, as reading by intuition is something that only a child can do, and she is not a child anymore. Now that Pantalaimon has settled into the form of a

pine marten, which marks the end of Lyra's childhood, she will only be able to read the alethiometer again after years and years of study.

Pullman has also written two other short books about the universe and characters of *His Dark Materials: Lyra's Oxford* (2003) and *Once Upon a Time in the North* (2008). *Lyra's Oxford* mostly consists of a short story entitled "Lyra and the Birds" and a collection of fictional documents from Lyra's world, such as a map of Lyra's Oxford and a fragment of a travel guide. "Lyra and the Birds" relates an incident that takes place when Lyra is fifteen years old, and therefore the story functions as a sequel to *The Amber Spyglass*. *Once Upon a Time in the North*, on the other hand, is a novella that revolves around two secondary characters from *His Dark Materials*: Lee Scoresby, a Texan balloonist, and Iorek Byrnison, an armoured polar bear.⁶⁴ The events narrated take place before *Northern Lights*, thus functioning as a prequel to the trilogy. Finally, Pullman announced in 2003 that a companion novel expanding on *His Dark Materials* would be published with the title *The Book of Dust*, but the release date remains unspecified (see Wikipedia article "*The Book of Dust*").

Theology and Intertextuality

Academic readings of *His Dark Materials* have mostly focused on the trilogy's theological content as well as on Pullman's implicit and explicit allusions to other works of Western literature, most notably those by William Blake and John Milton, and the Bible. As several scholars have pointed out, the trilogy is incredibly rich in intertextual references. Claire Squires, for example, affirms that "Pullman uses

⁶⁴ In *His Dark Materials*, armoured bears or 'panserbjørne' are sentient polar bears that are known for their knowledge of metallurgy. For them, their armour is like their soul.

intertextuality as a method, as a form of literary engagement and as a way of expressing his own artistic ambition” (2009: 276). The fact that *Northern Lights* begins with an epigraph, a passage from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* from which Pullman borrows his title ‘His Dark Materials’,⁶⁵ already establishes Milton’s poem as a major influence on Pullman’s work. A former school teacher, Pullman explains how he became used to adapting and retelling classic stories for his students, which helped him develop his own storytelling skills. When he started writing *His Dark materials*, he states, “I set out to do *Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes” (in Sharkey, 1998).

According to Burton Hatlen, Pullman retells *Paradise Lost* aligning himself, not with the ‘orthodox’ reading of Milton’s poem and the biblical creation story, but with the Romantic reading inspired by Blake that “regarded Milton’s God as an unjust and arbitrary tyrant, and (...) saw Satan the ‘true hero’ of *Paradise Lost*, a gallant Promethean rebel fighting on in a cause that he knows is doomed but still insists is just” (2005: 86). For Hatlen, Lord Asriel is Pullman’s Satan, because he is the character whose discoveries challenge the Church. However, as Hatlen remarks, Pullman’s true hero is not Lord Asriel but Lyra. As Anne-Marie Bird states, the trilogy is “an exploration of the fundamental themes of the Fall: initiation and the passage from innocence to experience, the nature of good and evil, the consequences of knowledge, and the notion of free will or individual responsibility” (2009: 259). Pullman, however, subverts this biblical passage. In *His Dark Materials*, original sin is reenacted by Will

⁶⁵ Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend
Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while,
Pondering his voyage... (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, lines 910-9)

and Lyra when they kiss for the first time; it does not represent the fall of humanity, but rather the moment in which human beings first gain knowledge and develop consciousness and are thus freed from the Church's influence. As Pullman himself puts it, he understands the Fall "as the point where human beings decided to become fully themselves instead of being the pets or creatures of another power" (in Fried, n.d.). For this reason, Hatlen believes that, for Pullman, the true hero in *Paradise Lost* is actually Eve, to whom Milton attaches great importance, and "By making the incorrigibly curious Lyra the center of his narrative, Pullman acknowledges the dynamic and creative role of Eve in Milton's poem" (2005: 90-1).

Another aspect of Pullman's fiction that has not gone unnoticed by critics is its similarity to the works by C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, despite Pullman's overt dislike for Lewis (Pullman, 1998)⁶⁶ and his disagreement with Tolkien's Platonic views (Pullman, 2002c).⁶⁷ Naomi Wood claims that both Lewis and Pullman "re-create the story of humanity's Fall from grace through disobedience as found in Genesis and Milton's *Paradise Lost*" (2009: 267). What is more, Hatlen remarks on how Pullman's *Northern Lights* begins with a girl hiding inside a wardrobe, just like Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005: 82-3). Hatlen, in addition, affirms that, like Lewis and Tolkien, Pullman brings his knowledge of English Literature to his fantasy writings, and argues that the works of the three authors "offer a tacit argument about how we should read the English literary tradition itself" (2005: 76). As Both Wood and Hatlen

⁶⁶ In his article "The dark side of Narnia", Pullman expresses his disbelief in the "devoted (and growing) attention" that Lewis's life and works have attracted, and openly declares that he detests "the supernaturalism, the reactionary sneering, the misogyny, the racism, and the sheer dishonesty of his [Lewis's] narrative method" (1998).

⁶⁷ About Tolkien, Pullman has affirmed that "He was like Lewis a sort of thoroughgoing Platonist in that he saw this world, this physical universe as a fallen state created no doubt by God but marked and weakened and spoiled by sin and his imagined world was so much more truthful and full of beauty and what have you. Well I passionately disagree with this" (Pullman, 2002c).

concur, despite Pullman's rejection of Tolkien and Lewis's fantasies, he adheres to this genre and offers an alternative to his predecessors' Christian subtexts. According to Hatlen, "Pullman rejects their [Lewis and Tolkien's] Christian worldview as essentially life-denying" (2005: 76). Furthermore, Pullman rejects the idea that it is possible to "justify the ways of God to men" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 26). As he himself has affirmed, "God is either responsible for this world, or he's not. If he is, then he's responsible for plagues, tapeworms, earthquakes, all kinds of hideous things. In which case he's wicked, not worth worshipping" (in Sharkey, 1998).

Last but not least, the trilogy has also been read as science fiction and dystopian literature dealing with theological themes. Andrew Leet, for example, reads *His Dark Materials* as a work of "religious science fiction" (2005: 174). According to Leet, Pullman uses science fiction to deal with his concern about "a potential future scenario where organized religion may someday regain its former powerful standing as the opposed moral regulator of society" (2005: 176). The nova in Pullman's trilogy are, of course, the capacity to travel to parallel worlds, and the devices used to communicate with Dark Matter, among other things. Vanessa Crosby, on the other hand, compares *His Dark Materials* to the first three novels of the *Time Quintet*, a series of science fiction and fantasy children's novels by American author Madeleine L'Engle's.⁶⁸ According to Crosby, "Strong parallels between the two series exist in their exploration of the interface between science and religion, and in their rejection of institutionalized religion" (2005: 260). Whereas, as we can see, fantasy and science fiction elements in

⁶⁸ L'Engle's *Time Quintet* comprises the novels *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), *A Wind in the Door* (1973), *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (1978), *Many Waters* (1986) and *An Acceptable Time* (1989). The first novel, from which the series originates, is about how two siblings, Meg and Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin travel through time and space to rescue Meg and Charles's father, a scientist who mysteriously disappeared while working on the concept of the tesseract, a phenomenon that allows travelling through time by 'wrinkling' it. In their journey, the three children discover the Black Thing, an evil force which is spreading throughout the universe. They eventually find out that their father was taken prisoner while trying to fight it.

His Dark Materials have already been studied, the point that I find missing in this discussion about good and evil, and innocence and experience in the trilogy is Pullman's use of Gothic elements, on which I will focus my own reading.

The Unexplored Darkness of *His Dark Materials*

The Gothic in Pullman's trilogy has not received much critical attention, and yet, the presence of specters, ghostly children, and the figure of the femme fatale blended with the fairy-tale wicked stepmother is worth analyzing. In fact, the opening chapter of *Northern Lights* is decidedly Gothic in theme and atmosphere, and reminiscent of a murder mystery. The novel starts with Lyra and Pantalaimon "mov[ing] through the darkening Hall" (*Northern Lights*, 3), trying to sneak into the Retiring Room, where only male scholars are allowed.⁶⁹ Like Rowling's Hogwarts, the Hall in Jordan College recalls the castles and big houses of traditional Gothic with "Portraits of former Masters hung high up in the gloom along the walls" (*Northern Lights*, 3). In this gloomy atmosphere, Pullman introduces the first conflict in the novel: Lyra saves Lord Asriel from drinking poisoned wine after she has seen the Master putting the poison in the decanter while she was hiding inside the wardrobe. This is just one of several Gothic episodes in *His Dark Materials*, which I will analyze in this chapter. Throughout the trilogy, Lyra experiences other Gothic moments: she is constantly persecuted by her villainous mother, Mrs Coulter; she is tortured by members of the Oblation Board, who try to cut Pantalaimon away from her; and she sees a 'severed' child, i.e., a child that

⁶⁹ No explicit reason is given to account for this, but we can infer that it is a consequence of women's inferior status in Lyra's Brytain due to the masculinist tradition of the Magisterium. As Pullman tells us, there *are* female scholars, but no one takes them seriously (*Northern Lights*, 67).

has been separated from his *dæmon*, which in Lyra's universe is a sight as revolting as that of a mutilated body.

Before I move on, however, it should be noted that Pullman's use of Gothic devices is apparently quite different from other writers'. Pullman is a fantasy author who has explicitly dismissed fantasy as an inferior mode, and I would say that, by Pullman's standards, this may apply to the Gothic as well. As he himself has stated, "I believe passionately that (...) books that satisfy us and feed us and nourish us have to have this substratum of genuine truth in them. And I don't see much of that in most fantasy" (in Fried, n.d.). On the other hand, Pullman has also admitted that "I have long felt that realism is a higher mode than fantasy; but when I try to write realistically, I move in boots of lead" (2002a). I find Pullman's criticism of fantasy deeply confusing, mostly because it is not clear what he means by 'genuine truth'. From his criticism of Lewis and Tolkien's works, it can be inferred that what Pullman dislikes about fantasy is the tendency some authors have to use it as a medium to idealize imaginative worlds and condemn 'reality'. In other words, Pullman seems to dislike escapism in the negative sense of the word. In my view, however, this shows enormous confusion on Pullman's part about what fantasy is; he seems to confuse 'content' with 'mode', i.e., *what* is told with *how* it is told. Just as not all fantasy is merely escapist and life-denying, not all realistic texts provide complex portrayals of the 'real' human condition either—whatever that is. In fact, realism and escapism are not mutually exclusive, as evinced by romantic comedy, for instance, which is set in a realistic environment and yet it often shows idealized versions of human beings. What is more, Pullman's own tendency to write fantasy despite his preference for realism shows that fantasy and the Gothic actually offer endless possibilities to represent the different aspects of the self, as I have already discussed in the previous chapters. As he himself states about his

invention of dæmons, “It was the richest idea I’ve ever had. (...) it’s actually saying something about the business of being human—it’s not just decorative” (in Fried, n.d.). Again, for some reason, Pullman is assuming that fantasy elements are merely ornamental, and I wonder if such a definition of ‘fantasy’ actually applies to any fantasy author.

It is true, though, that there is an effort on Pullman’s part to detach himself from that type of fantasy that idealizes unnatural states, such as immortality or the possession of magical powers, while unavoidable aspects of the real life of humans, such as mortality, desire or despair are condemned and Gothicized. For example, the fear of a fragmented self that is so present in *Harry Potter* and *Coraline* is dealt with very differently by Pullman. In Lyra’s universe, inner dualism is accepted as the natural condition of human beings: everybody has a dæmon, which is part of one’s self, but visible as a separate entity at the same time. It is actually the attempt of doing away with this dualism by separating children from their dæmons that has a disastrous outcome. As regards desire, which is represented as potentially dangerous by both Rowling and Gaiman, Pullman does not demonize it, but he celebrates it. In fact, Pullman is probably the most outspoken of the four authors I deal with when it comes to desire and sexuality.

What, then, is Gothic in Pullman’s trilogy? The underlying thesis in this chapter is that Pullman uses Gothic imagery to depict the adult’s attempt to protect and prolong the child’s innocence as a form of child abuse. Nevertheless, I also argue that Pullman himself also adheres to romanticized views of childhood as a time for adventure, imagination, truth and goodness. After all, in spite of his intentions, Pullman *is* providing child readers with a childlike world of adventure and exploration with talking bears and magical devices like the alethiometer, the subtle knife and the amber spyglass.

As the other works of fiction analyzed in this dissertation, I argue that Pullman's trilogy and his representation of childhood are far from being free of idealism. For this purpose, I examine how, once again, the child's goodness is emphasized, and Lyra overcomes the limitations imposed by the Gothic spaces she inhabits and by her villainous parents. I argue that Lyra stands as the antithesis of the repressed childhood imagined by adult characters, and she functions as a symbol of hope. Although I will also comment on Will's role in the trilogy, my reading focuses mainly on Lyra, whom I regard as the true protagonist of *His Dark Materials*, since most events are focalized through her. As in the previous chapters, the first section will look into Pullman's narrative technique in order to determine how, despite Pullman's dark portrayal of adult and child relationships, an appropriate complicity between the two age groups is preserved in the narrative form.

3.2. Don't Fear the Storyteller: Narrative Form and Pullman's 'Democracy of Reading'

'Everything means something,' Lyra said severely. 'We just have to find out how to read it.'

Philip Pullman, *Lyra's Oxford*

In keeping with my argument that, when it comes to children's Gothic, it is not only *what* is presented to the child reader that matters, but also *how* it is presented, this section will analyze two main narrative features of the trilogy before looking into its main Gothic elements: first, Pullman's narrative voice, and second, his representation of textuality. I argue that what Pullman's narrative advocates—in form and content—is not the child's need for consolation but the child's need for 'true' stories, even if they are about unsettling issues. Accordingly, Pullman's narrator is less prone to sound

reassuring than, for example, Rowling's. Paradoxically, however, Pullman uses children's fiction as a medium to criticize the adult assumption that children need to be protected from the ugliest aspects of life, and yet children's fiction is extremely exclusionary itself, as I have already discussed. Therefore, apart from examining how he challenges the widespread idea that the child needs to be protected from certain kinds of knowledge, I also discuss to what extent Pullman's own narrative constitutes a real challenge to the genre, considering that his novels are, after all, aimed at young readers. For this purpose, I look into, not only the explicit ideology that Pullman's narrator puts forth, but also the implicit, underlying assumptions it carries. Finally, I also consider how, despite Pullman's idea that what children need is not escapist fantasy but 'real' stories, he is using fantasy and Gothic as a medium.

Pullman's Authority

Pullman himself has stated that, "As a passionate believer in the democracy of reading, I don't think it's the task of the author of a book to tell the reader what it means" (official website, n.d.). In her article on Pullman and Lewis's representations of obedience, disobedience and storytelling, Wood compares both writers' narrative voices, and argues that "As 'creator-god' of their respective tales, Lewis and Pullman employ narrators that capture structurally the qualities of their ultimate authority figures – narrators that mirror and implicitly comment on their respective visions of authority" (2009: 269). Thus, according to Wood, "The conservative Lewis advocates obedience, and the progressive Pullman questions it" (2009: 267). I would like to begin this section by challenging the idea that there is such an exact correlation between the vision of authority endorsed by the text and the way the narrative voice is constructed, especially

in a genre like children's literature that is built on so many contradictions. As Peter Hollindale claims, we should consider that "In the case of children's literature, our thinking may be affected by an over-simplified stereotype of possible authority and influence" (2006: 112).

Wood herself acknowledges that direct moralizing is not the only way to transmit ideology when she claims that "Pullman's narrator does not tell us what to think about moral decision making – at least not in the direct and regulated manner of Lewis' narrator" (2009: 272). As this statement implies, Pullman does offer moral guidance in his novels, but didactic statements are hardly ever uttered by the narrator. Instead, Pullman conveys them to the reader through characters, especially through the child protagonist, as also happens in Gaiman's *Coraline*. Wood hence establishes a parallel between Pullman's narrator, who "is godlike in knowledge perhaps, but not omnipotent" (2009: 273), and the disdain for authority that the trilogy professes. However, she does not examine the assumptions that are present in Pullman's narrative voice which contradict this reading. This is not to say that I disagree with Wood completely, for it is true that, on a surface level, there seems to be a conscious effort to create a narrator who does not lecture to child readers. Yet, as Hollindale argues, surface ideology—i.e., "the explicit social, political or moral beliefs of the individual writer" (2006: 108)—is not the only way in which ideology is present in a children's book, and he suggests looking into passive ideology, i.e., "the individual writer's unexamined assumptions" as well (2006: 110). Thus, I believe that Pullman's narrator is predicated on a series of assumptions about children and adults which are worth exploring. As Hollindale further states, "Sometimes, (...) the conscious surface ideology and the passive ideology of a novel are at odds with each other, and 'official' ideas contradicted by unconscious assumptions" (2006: 111).

Authority in Pullman's trilogy is indeed portrayed in its most negative aspects. The Church and its deity—the impostor Pullman calls 'the Authority'—are tyrannical and repressive, and the trilogy revolves around Lyra and Will's quest to overthrow them and build a Republic of Heaven. In accordance with Pullman's disdain for authority, the narrator is not an authoritarian figure that imposes his view on the story. The narrator in *His Dark Materials* is, as in Rowling's and Gaiman's novels, a third-person omniscient narrator, but his view is much less limited. Pullman's narrator has the ability to tell the story from the point of view of different characters. For instance, whereas *Northern Lights* is mostly told from Lyra's perspective, Will's viewpoint prevails in the opening chapters of *The Subtle Knife*. What is more, there are several chapters in the three novels that deal with events in which the main characters are not involved. In addition, as Wood affirms, "Pullman's [narration] is more like a documentary with very little voice-over: he shows us vignettes that enable us to see more than individual characters see" (2009: 272). Therefore, the reader also knows more than the characters, which further emphasizes the fact that Lyra and Will are kept in the dark by the adults around them. In fact, Pullman himself has stated that "I function like a camera in a sense" (in Sharkey, 1998). This suggests objectivity and neutrality, though this is just the surface of Pullman's narrative ploys.

According to Nikolajeva, there are two main strategies that authors can use to write stories for children: on the one hand, "They can write from their superior power position, using a didactic narrative agency and primarily authorial discourse", or they can "'lend out their voices' to children" (2002b: 186). Although Pullman's narrator is not explicitly didactic, his use of language reveals that he has much more in common with the first type of narrator than with the second. Let us consider the following passage: "Lyra reached the dais and looked back at the open kitchen door and, seeing no

one, stepped up beside the high table. The places here were laid with gold, not silver, and the fourteen seats were not oak benches but mahogany chairs with velvet cushions” (*Northern Lights*, 2007: 3). Whereas the first sentence focuses on Lyra and what she is doing and seeing—similar to Gaiman’s constant focus on Coraline, the second sentence has clearly nothing to do with the child. It is unlikely that Lyra would know—or care—what type of wood the seats are made of. In this second sentence, the narrator is indeed functioning like a movie camera, focusing on the child, but also giving us a more complete view of the whole scene. Unlike Gaiman, Pullman pays attention to every detail, not just to what the child sees and cares about. Pullman describes more than the child protagonist perceives. Pullman, therefore, is not ‘lending out’ his voice to the child, but, instead, writes from a superior power position.

Pullman’s narrator is markedly an adult voice, even more so than Gaiman’s and Rowling’s narrative voices. Whereas Gaiman and Rowling sometimes try to get closer to the child by imitating the way children think and speak, there is no such attempt on Pullman’s part. Although Pullman has stated that he does not have a twelve or thirteen-year-old audience in mind while he writes, he explains that

Of course, a young audience doesn’t know quite as much about the way the world works as adults do. But I don’t compromise with difficult language, complex ideas, powerful emotions, or whatever. I just hit the story as hard as I can while trying to remember that one or two things might need a bit of explanation. (in Sharkey, 1998)

Apparently, the author himself is not aware of the fact that his prose is more complex than that of other authors who write for readers of more or less the same age. In fact, I believe that this may be one of the reasons why Pullman’s fiction is sometimes classified as young adult fiction, even though his works feature preadolescent protagonists and are thematically similar to other children’s books like *The Chronicles of Narnia* or the *Harry Potter* series. In Eccleshare’s *1001 Children’s Books* (2009), for

instance, *His Dark Materials* is listed as a book for children aged twelve and up, whereas most of Rowling's *Harry Potter* books fall under the 8+ section.

The paradox here is that Pullman's effort—conscious or unconscious—not to condescend to child readers results in his narrative voice being more markedly an adult voice they might not follow. As Wall explains, “Current critical attitudes insist that they [children's authors] must not (...) talk or write *down*; on the other hand, they may find themselves so constrained not to write *down* that they do not in fact write to children at all” (1991: 13, original emphasis). Indeed, there are very few indications in *His Dark Materials* that the narrator is addressing a young audience. Apart from the complexity of style and content, humor is also completely absent. As Pullman himself has recognized, “I can't do funny stuff. When I try to tell a joke it falls flat” (in Sharkey, 1998). This is not to say that all children's books should contain humor, but it is certainly a common ploy authors use to build up complicity between narrator and implied reader, or to deal with certain taboo issues. In *His Dark Materials*, even references to child abuse are stated matter-of-factly without humour or sugarcoating, as this passage shows: “Lyra was afraid of the Steward, who had twice beaten her” (*Northern Lights*, 7). Thus, although Pullman's narrator does not show his superiority by explicitly telling the reader how to think, the fact that he tells the story from a superior position is implied in his complex use of language.

Pullman's use of language and the fact that the narrator functions like a camera has yet another implication: Pullman's narrator is more detached, both from the child protagonist and the child narratee, and less likely to provide comfort than Rowling's and Gaiman's narrators. As I mentioned earlier, not only does the narrator see details that Lyra is not aware of, but he also describes scenes in which Lyra is not even present.

For example, at the beginning of *Northern Lights*, we witness a conversation between the Master and the Librarian about Lyra's destiny. As the Master says, "*she* will be the betrayer, and the experience will be terrible" (*Northern Lights*, 33, original emphasis). This shifting from scenes in which Lyra is directly involved to scenes where she is absent goes on for the whole first part of the first novel. Apart from showing that the narrator is omniscient and that his view is not limited to that of the child protagonist, these passages also suggest that Pullman's narrator is more concerned with building up an atmosphere of suspense than with providing comfort. As Wood states, "Our narrator is not a comforting uncle, for it is uncomfortable, indeed, not to know who will prevail and suspect as well that we might encounter another (...) episode in which the future has already been decided against our heroes" (2009: 272).

I would like to point out, however, that it is not completely true that Pullman's narrator never gives his opinion on events and characters. In the previous chapters, I have discussed how Gaiman provides virtually no external description of Coraline, and there are very few indications that he observes her from the outside. As for *Harry Potter*, the reader becomes acquainted with Harry's personality through his thoughts, words and actions, more than through the narrator's assessments. By contrast, in *His Dark Materials*, we find assessments of Lyra's personality, as Pullman's narrator explicitly tells us that "In many ways, Lyra was a barbarian" (*Northern Lights*, 35) and "She was a coarse and greedy little savage" (*Northern Lights*, 37). These comments influence the reader's perception of Lyra, subverting the ideal child, as well as the respectful and caring manner in which most narrators treat child protagonists. This, of course, does not mean that Pullman's narrator is disrespectful towards Lyra, but he simply does not idealize her—a point to which I will return in due course.

Pullman's narrator can therefore be described as a detached, cultivated adult voice, very much like Lord Asriel himself. He is not there to be friendly, didactic or reassuring; he is there to tell a story, even though this story might not be pleasing for some. As Pullman himself has stated, "I'm not in the message business; I'm in the 'Once upon a time' business" (official website, n.d.). This is important as regards the use of Gothic elements, because it suggests that Pullman does not envisage his readers as innocent children in need of a consoling and preaching adult voice, but as adventurous little barbarians in need of stories, like Lyra. Yet, as Montgomery states, "His [Pullman's] denial of an explicit and moral agenda is disingenuous" (*Children's Literature*, 2009b: 257). As I will argue in the subsequent sections, Pullman also uses Gothic elements to articulate his own didactic message. What changes, however, is *what* is Gothicized. In Pullman's world, depriving children of stories is what may turn the world into a Gothic place, and this is apparent in Pullman's representation of textuality.

A Universe of Stories

His Dark Materials is a universe of stories, not only because of its explicit and implicit intertextual references to Milton, Blake and the Bible, among many others, but also because of the presence of embedded narratives and character-narrators in the novels. Pullman creates a universe made of multiple universes, and his text is structurally similar; it is a metanarrative. What is more, this representation of textuality is inextricably linked to Pullman's representation of good and evil, and it puts forth the idea that stories are not evil per se. It is the absence of stories, on the other hand, that leads to ignorance and evil. Like Rowling, Pullman envisages a world made up of texts, and he highlights the importance of literacy to build a free world. Yet, Pullman does not

differentiate, as Rowling does, between ‘official’ narratives that may be deceitful and Gothic, and fictional narratives that transmit ‘truth’ without intending to. In fact, unlike Rowling, Pullman privileges “true stories” (Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, 2005: 434)⁷⁰ over “Lies and fantasies!” (*The Amber Spyglass*, 317), which seems to be contradictory as Pullman himself is using fantasy to articulate these ideas, as I have pointed out in section 3.1.. The alethiometer, a fictional object that functions like a text, or Mary Malone’s story about her sexual awakening reinforce Pullman’s didactic message: the idea that it is the adult’s responsibility to tell children the truth, and that it is highly unfair, and even wicked, to conceal knowledge from them. In other words, storytelling is tightly linked to growing up, and what Pullman demonizes is the adult’s voluntary exclusion of information to keep children innocent. This leads to another paradox: exclusion is, as Nodelman affirms, intrinsic to children’s fiction (2008: 110), and yet Pullman is using this genre to put forth his ethical claims against any form of censorship.

Pullman’s conflicting views on fantasy (discussed in section 3.1.) and his preoccupation with ‘truth’—whatever he means by ‘truth’—influence the way in which Pullman represents fictional narratives in *His Dark Materials*. This is best exemplified by a passage in *The Amber Spyglass* in which Will and Lyra need to get past the harpies to enter the world of the dead. Lyra offers to tell them a story if they allow Will and her to walk through the door. Lyra, “settling in to her story-telling frame of mind” (*The Amber Spgylass*, 293), starts to make up a story with the conventional ingredients of fantasy: “*parents dead; family treasure; shipwreck; escape...*” (*The Amber Spgylass*, 292, original italics). Enraged, one of the harpies starts to yell “*Liar! Liar! Liar!*” at her (*The Amber Spgylass*, 293, original emphasis). On the contrary, when “Lyra began to

⁷⁰ Subsequent quotations are all from the same edition, and only the abbreviated title and the page number(s) will be provided between parentheses.

talk about the world she knew” (*The Amber Spgyllass*, 314)—that is, she started telling a ‘true’ story—all the harpies listened. When asked why they behaved so differently after each story, the harpies replied, “Because she spoke the truth. (...) Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain” (*The Amber Spgyllass*, 317). This illustrates, in a nutshell, Pullman’s own conception of storytelling: fantasy stories should not be ‘trivial’, but they should be at the service of knowledge and say something about the ‘real’ world, and I believe the same would apply to Gothic fiction in Pullman’s view.

On the other hand, Pullman highlights the importance of literacy by giving his heroine, Lyra, the gift of being able to read the alethiometer, a truth-teller that is “very like a clock, or a compass, for there were hands pointing to places around the dials, but instead of the hours or the points of the compass there were several little pictures” (*Northern Lights*, 79). Although, strictly speaking, the alethiometer is not a text, it functions very much like one: it provides knowledge through combinations of symbols, which can have “down to ten, twelve, maybe a never-ending series of meanings” (*Northern Lights*, 127). As Lyra learns, alethiometers were made in the seventeenth century, when “Symbols and emblems were everywhere. Buildings and pictures were designed to be read like books. Everything stood for something else; if you had the right dictionary you could read Nature itself” (*Northern Lights*, 173). Although Pullman’s representation of the alethiometer acknowledges the arbitrariness of symbols, it also seems to imply that an objective ‘truth’ can be extracted from them if one knows how to read them properly, which, applied to textuality, suggests a fairly conservative view of how texts work.

Furthermore, ‘truth’ is tightly linked to the child figure in Pullman’s trilogy. Despite the narrator’s description of Lyra as a barbarian, her innate ability to read the

alethiometer seems to point to a neo-Romantic view of the child, reminiscent of how “Children came to be thought to have keener perceptions of beauty and truth than adults” in the eighteenth century (Cunningham, 2005: 68). Pullman, however, uses this idea to portray the child protagonist ambivalently: Lyra has an innate ability to extract truth from the alethiometer, but she also has an innate ability to manipulate it. Actually, it is explicitly said that Lyra’s name sounds phonetically similar to ‘Liar’ (*The Amber Spyglass*, 293). Surprisingly, in *His Dark Materials*, the child’s lies are not condemned by the narrator, but they are described as an art:

And now that she [Lyra] was doing something difficult and familiar and never quite predictable, namely lying, she felt a sort of mastery again, the same sense of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her. She had to be careful not to say anything obviously impossible; she had to be vague in some places and invent plausible details in others; she had to be an artist, in short. (*Northern Lights*, 281)

This comparison between lying and making art seems to contradict Pullman’s own defense of ‘true stories’, assuming that he uses the word ‘artist’ as a compliment to Lyra, of course. It could be that being an artist is not necessarily a good thing for Pullman, or that he approves of lying when it is used by children to defy adults, which is what Lyra usually does. In any case, with the above-quoted passage, Pullman defies conventional morality, which dictates that children must not lie to their elders. Pullman’s heroine feels empowered when she masters the art of lying, and the narrator does not express his disapproval. Rather, he seems to secretly admire his young heroine’s rebelliousness.

Another convention that the above-quoted passage challenges is the idea of the child as reader/consumer and the adult as author/producer. Lyra is both reader and author. She is able to read the alethiometer better than anyone else and, throughout the trilogy, she listens to the stories adults tell her, but she also has the ability to make up

stories—or lies, which in Pullman’s schema are very much the same. Still, I regard this as a ‘mild’ sort of challenge to conventional ideas that children do not create stories. After all, Lyra does not invent any important story, and as I discussed earlier, Pullman seems to present fantasy and lies as a minor kind of art. The highest form of art in the trilogy is the ability to tell ‘true’ stories about the world and human nature, which is what Pullman purports to be doing. Furthermore, the idea that adults tell stories and children listen to them is further reinforced in *The Amber Spyglass* with Mary Malone’s storytelling.

After Will and Lyra have freed the dead, the ghost of an old woman asks Mary Malone to “Tell them [children] stories. That’s what we didn’t know. All this time, and we never knew! But they need the truth. That’s what nourishes them. You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well, everything. Just tell them stories” (*The Amber Spyglass*, 433-4). By “they need the truth” the ghost means that children need to know about the so-called ‘dangerous’ knowledge adults have concealed from them in the name of protection. Shortly after this passage, Mary tells Will and Lyra the story of her own sexual awakening, a kind of story which is generally absent from most children’s books, at least explicitly. I shall return to Pullman’s treatment of sexuality in due course, but for now, suffice it to say that Pullman’s inclusion of this passage in a book aimed at older children reflects very well his own view that stories should inform rather than conceal.

This inevitably raises the question of to what extent it is possible to denounce this censorship using children’s literature as a medium, when this genre is highly exclusionary itself precisely because it is written and published by adults who may not share Pullman’s views. As Pullman himself has stated,

High on any list of the storyteller's responsibilities must come a responsibility to the audience. Those of us whose books are read by children are not in danger of forgetting it, actually. Some commentators – not very well-informed ones, but they have loud voices – say that children's books shouldn't deal with matters such as sex and drugs, or violence, or homosexuality, or abortion, or child abuse. (...) Against the keep-them-safe argument, I've heard it said that young readers should be able to find in a children's book anything they might realistically encounter in life. Children do know about these things; they talk about them, they ask questions about them, they meet some of them, sometimes, at home; shouldn't they be able to read about them in stories? (2002a)

Although I agree with Pullman's claims, and I believe there is certainly an effort on his part to stay true to his own beliefs, it must be emphasized that Pullman hardly ever deals with such issues realistically, but he resorts to fantasy, instead. I suspect that Pullman's professed difficulty to write realism might have something to do with the fact that it is currently problematic to include certain themes in a children's book without recurring to metaphors. As Wood explains, "Even the author-creators confess their dependence on their form; if they insist on the real and true aspects of their stories, they also must submit to the ways their stories intractably unsettle their stated goals" (2009: 274).

Thus, Pullman articulates his vision that the real, tangible world is the most important place—much more important than ideal places humans have invented for their consolation, but he does so by means of fantasy and Gothic writing. In fact, Pullman highlights the fakery of the mode he is using by resorting to another device commonly found in fantasy and the Gothic: the fragmentary narrative. At the end of the three novels, Pullman attaches papers from the Library of Jordan College, "discovered among the effects of an anonymous scholar after his death in Oxford", which provide 'evidence' for the existence of "wormholes, or doorways, opening from one universe into another" (*Northern Lights*, 399). Like Walpole pretending that *The Castle of Otranto* is a translation of a real Italian manuscript discovered in an old library, Pullman's story pretends to be based on these mysterious papers found in a library in

Oxford. Yet, of course, this device has been used so many times that it no longer tricks the audience (as happened with *Otranto* when the first edition came out),⁷¹ but rather it highlights the obvious lack of realism in Gothic and fantasy literature. It is curious that Pullman, who defends the truthfulness of stories, uses this device which actually mocks the idea that fiction should represent reality. I believe that, once again, this shows how form and content are often at odds in Pullman's trilogy and in children's Gothic in general.

In light of the above, since Pullman considers it the storyteller's responsibility to acquaint children with the 'ugly' facts of life, we might presume that the Gothic will play an important role in Pullman's trilogy, useful as it is to deal with topics that create discomfort. It could also be argued, however, that Pullman's claim that such 'ugly' facts should be accepted as part of our reality makes it unnecessary to Gothicize them. In accordance with Pullman's protest against adults' deliberate concealment of information from children, what is Gothicized in Pullman's narrative is not the existence of suffering, but rather the adult attempt to overprotect children from it, which is portrayed as stifling in *His Dark Materials*. The next section examines how Pullman articulates this message by mocking the adult concern about children playing in forbidden spaces and by Gothicizing 'safe' places for children.

⁷¹ According to David Stuart Davies, "The first edition [of Walpole's novel] was disguised as an actual medieval romance from Italy, supposedly discovered and republished by a fictitious translator. When Walpole admitted to his authorship in the second edition, its originally favourable reception by literary reviewers changed into rejection and abuse" (*The Castle of Otranto, Vathek & Nightmare Abbey*, 2009: vii). Yet, since then, the fragmentary text became a staple of Gothic fiction (see Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*).

3.3. Lyra, the Wanderer: Celebrating Adventure and Gothicizing ‘Safe’ Places

It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.
James Thurber, “The Little Girl and the Wolf”

Pullman’s idea that children should have access to ‘true’ stories without adults withholding knowledge from them is reflected, not only in his narrative form, but also in his depiction of the spaces the child occupies. In this section, I examine how Pullman includes some passages set in traditional Gothic spaces like the crypts and vaults of Jordan College, where Lyra likes to play. I argue that these passages function as a mockery of adult Gothic and of adult fears and concerns about childish games. Furthermore, Pullman’s descriptions of Lyra’s reactions to these Gothic environments present the child character as attracted by the gruesome and the macabre, an aspect of childhood which is not reflected in the other child characters I analyze and which deserves more attention. The second part of this section, on the other hand, looks into those spaces that represent what, for Pullman, is truly Gothic: adult institutions that oppress the child—and, consequently, the adult the child will become—in the name of the protection of the innocent.

Playing in the Gothic Space

As Jones states, “As adults we spend so much time taking deft steps away from our most powerful fantasies and emotions that getting whacked by the raw, visceral imagination of a child can be unsettling. Sometimes we’re most disturbed by our children’s appetite for the disturbing” (2002: 57). I have already discussed how the children I study in this dissertation are not real children or realistic child characters; they

are textual constructions, highly influenced by the fairy tale tradition, the fantasy and the Gothic genres, and idealized conceptions of childhood that are preserved in children's literature. As such, although Harry Potter and *Coraline* are curious enough to seek danger, the authors stress that, when confronted with villainy, child protagonists are utterly repelled by it. Therefore, the appetite for the disturbing that Jones mentions—referring to real children—is not part of the psyche of Rowling and Gaiman's protagonists (unless we read *Coraline's* other home as created by the child's imagination, which, as I have argued, is a very plausible interpretation). In *His Dark Materials*, by contrast, not only does Pullman portray Lyra as a tomboyish girl with a taste for disturbing entertainment, but he also sides with her and mocks adult anxieties about childish play. Considering that Pullman is very much concerned with the underlying realism of his fantasy, I think it is safe to read this as an attempt to do away with romanticized views of children and their games and thus attain a more realistic and psychologically plausible portrayal of children. At the same time, this aligns *His Dark Materials* with other works of children's Gothic and fantasy which depict the child as initially constrained and in need of transgression.

Pullman emphasizes that Lyra has been raised in a men's world and that she is not meek and girly. There seems to be a conscious effort on Pullman's part to do away with stereotypes of girlhood (a topic I will further discuss in the next section when I deal with Mrs Coulter) and mock idealized visions of charming children playing harmless games. As the narrator sarcastically exclaims:

Children playing together: how pleasant to see! What could be more innocent and charming?

In fact, of course, Lyra and her peers were engaged in deadly warfare.
(*Northern Lights*, 36)

Lyra plays with working-class and ‘gyptian’ children; she explores forbidden places like the Retiring Room and the “Tunnels, shafts, vaults, cellars, [and] staircases (...) below Jordan” (*Northern Lights*, 48); and most astonishingly of all for a work of children’s fiction, she gets drunk.

Like Rowling and Gaiman, Pullman starts off imagining childhood as constrained by the environment. For Lyra, however, home is not the domestic sphere of the conventional family, but the academic and masculine world of Jordan College, a location that, once again, emphasizes the link between home and England. Lyra’s whole ‘family’ are Lord Asriel and the Scholars who “had more important things to do than attend to the affections of a half-wild, half-civilized girl, left among them by chance” (*Northern Lights*, 19). Like Coraline and Harry, Lyra is neglected by the adults around her, and she compensates for this by befriending and bossing around the children of the College servants, among whom she tries to be the centre of attention. Yet, Lyra’s feelings about her home are ambivalent. On the one hand, she likes to feel that she belongs to an important place: “She was proud of her College’s eminence” (*Northern Lights*, 25). When the Master announces to her that she will be sent somewhere else to be educated, she replies, “no, I don’t want to leave Jordan. I like it here. I want to stay here for ever” (*Northern Lights*, 70). On the other hand, the little girl needs to defy the conventionality of her home by undermining its restrictions through childish play. For instance, the Scholars are described as “men who had been around her all her life, taught her, chastised her, consoled her, given her little presents, chased her away from the fruit trees in the Garden” (*Northern Lights*, 19). As this passage suggests, Pullman portrays adult authority as deeply concerned with ‘civilizing’ the child, and chasing her away from forbidden knowledge—hence the biblical reference to fruit trees. Yet,

despite adult efforts to keep her under control, Lyra engages in mischief and violent games with her peers:

What she liked best was clambering over the College roofs with Roger, (...) to spit plum-stones on the heads of passing Scholars or to hoot like owls outside a window where a tutorial was going on; or racing through the narrow streets, or stealing apples from the market, or waging war. (*Northern Lights*, 36)

Once more, the child's desire is equated to a need to defy the conventions and restrictions of home, and the adult's attempt to protect childhood is presented as an obstacle to her empowerment.

Pullman further emphasizes the child's attraction to violent or gruesome games and associates childhood with transgression by turning traditional settings of adult Gothic into the child's playground. In the *Harry Potter* chapter I have already discussed how old castles and graveyards sometimes become the child's home in children's fiction. Something similar happens in *His Dark Materials*: Pullman depicts the child's need for transgression by having Lyra play in Gothic spaces. For example, in an early passage of *Northern Lights*, Lyra and Roger explore the crypt of Jordan College "where generations of Masters had been buried, each in his lead-lined oak coffin in niches along the stone walls" (*Northern Lights*, 48-9). Far from being scared, Lyra and Roger feel attracted to the macabre:

'These coffins've got skeletons in 'em!' whispered Roger.
'Mouldering flesh,' whispered Lyra. 'And worms and maggots all twisting about in their eye sockets.'
'Must be ghosts down here,' said Roger, shivering *pleasantly*. (*Northern Lights*, 49, my emphasis)

In adult Gothic fiction, crypts and other burial grounds may be read as symbolically representing the fear of—and, at the same time, the morbid interest in—aging, decay and death, "everything, indeed, that was excluded by rational culture" (Botting, 1996:

32). In Pullman's novel, however, this setting acquires a different meaning: it is a place for exploration in which the child displays her curiosity about forbidden spaces and the forbidden knowledge they bear—like an Alice in a Bluebeard setting.

That one of Lyra's most prominent qualities is curiosity is already clear from the opening chapter when she sneaks into the Retiring Room, where she is not allowed. She is also represented as showing curiosity for 'forbidden knowledge', such as what it feels like to drink alcohol: "the two children [Lyra and Roger] tiptoed from end to end holding a candle in trembling fingers, peering into every dark corner, with a single question growing more urgent in Lyra's mind every moment: what did the wine taste like?" (*Northern Lights*, 47). And Pullman offers us a very unusual passage in children's fiction: "Finally, and almost simultaneously, the children discovered what it was like to be drunk" (*Northern Lights*, 48). What is particularly interesting about this passage is that it stresses that the children feel curious about getting drunk precisely because adults do it:

'Do they [grown-ups] *like* doing this?' gasped Roger, after vomiting copiously.

'Yes,' said Lyra, in the same condition. 'And so do I,' she added stubbornly. (*Northern Lights*, 48, original emphasis)

I cannot help seeing this as an implicit criticism of real adult hypocrisy, of asking children not to feel intrigued by issues that we ourselves enjoy, an attitude that Jones criticizes in his study of children's attraction for violent entertainment: "If young people grew up in a society less preoccupied with violence and horror, they might crave less entertainment gore. They might be better off, too. But it's unreasonable to ask them to be satisfied with make-believe that is more sanitized than their reality" (2002: 103). Along the same lines, McGillis affirms that "Gothic appeals to the young for the same reason it appeals to the less young: it delivers characters who transgress" (2008: 231).

And this applies to other ‘inappropriate’ forms of entertainment, such as drinking in the above-quoted passage.

Another example of how Pullman’s child characters play in the Gothic space is Lyra and Roger’s “kids and Gobblers” game, which also provides a commentary on ‘real’ violence versus make-believe violence (*Northern Lights*, 46). The children’s violent games are paralleled by a case of real violence: children are being kidnapped by a mysterious organization commonly known as ‘Gobblers’. Pullman satirizes the most morbid side of human nature by stating that “talking about them – especially if you were safe and snug at home, or in Jordan College – was delicious” (*Northern Lights*, 46). What is more, the Gobblers become a kind of bogeyman in the popular imagination, and adults use it to scare children into good behavior: “Don’t stay out late, or the Gobblers’ll get you!” (*Northern Lights*, 46). Pullman reproduces how real Gothic horrors often become part of the popular imagination and spark the creation of stories and childish games, as Lyra and Roger do:

‘Let’s play kids and Gobblers!’

(...)

‘How d’you play that?’ [Roger asked]

‘You hide and I find you and slice you open, right, like the Gobblers do.’

(*Northern Lights*, 46)

Again, this is reminiscent of current theories about play and child psychology which affirm that playing helps children come to terms with their fears. As Jones states, “they [children] need to fantasize, and play, and lose themselves in stories. That’s how they reorganize the world into forms they can manipulate. That’s how they explore and take some control over their own thoughts and emotions. That’s how they kill their monsters” (2002: 60). Thus, playing in the Gothic space not only presents childhood as transgressive as compared with adults who follow rules and impose rules on others

(represented by the Scholars of Jordan College), but also reproduces plausible psychological patterns that challenge conservative views on children and their games.

Nevertheless, Lyra's childish interest in the gruesome is linked to her desire for knowledge, and whereas the former is gradually forgotten as the trilogy advances, the latter is emphasized. Lyra soon leaves her childish games behind as she becomes involved in a terrifying adventure that will require maturity, responsibility and moral integrity. Whereas Harry's and Coraline's desires to escape the restraints of their respective homes are equated to their desires to find a proper home and to lead a more exciting life, respectively, Lyra's wish to leave Jordan College is related to her desire for knowledge, which is what going to the North represents. When Lyra learns that Lord Asriel will travel to the North, she immediately feels attracted to the idea, and when Asriel tells her that her place is in Jordan College, she protests, "But why? Why is my place here? Why can't I come to the North with you? I want to see the Northern Lights and bears and icebergs and everything. I want to know about Dust. And that city in the air" (*Northern Lights*, 29). Like Harry's confinement at the Dursleys', Lyra is kept in Jordan College because, as the Master of Jordan states, "The alethiometer warns of appalling consequences if Lord Asriel pursues his research. Apart from anything else, the child will be drawn in, and I want to keep her safe as long as possible" (*Northern Lights*, 30). Yet, Pullman highlights how child protection ends up thwarting empowerment and development, and the child protagonist finally 'chooses'—let us not forget that Pullman's characters are subject to destiny—the quest for knowledge over safety. As the opening chapter in the Retiring Room suggests, Lyra is not afraid of being punished: "if he [Lord Asriel] caught her in here she'd be severely punished, but she could put up with that" (*Northern Lights*, 6). It is throughout her adventure that Lyra will find herself in places that are truly Gothic, places that do not stand for irrational

fears like the crypt of Jordan College but for a very real evil. I will now turn to analyze the significance of Gothic settings that represent how the adult attempt to keep children innocent forever creates monsters.

Paradise Gothicized

When they realize that they cannot keep Lyra safe forever, the Librarian of Jordan College tells the Master, “That’s the duty of the old, (...) to be anxious on behalf of the young. And the duty of the young is to scorn the anxiety of the old” (*Northern Lights*, 33). It is precisely this “anxiety of the old” over the young that brings about horrific events in *His Dark Materials*. Accordingly, Pullman deploys Gothic imagery to represent those places that stand for adult oppression and fear. The subsequent paragraphs will be devoted to examining two of these Gothic settings: Bolvangar, an experimental station where adults perform experiments on children, and Cittàgazze, a city inhabited only by children. I argue that both spaces are dystopian representations of a world dominated by adult fears.

In Bolvangar, adults separate children from their dæmons as a means to prevent Dust from settling on them. Since Dust, for the Church, is the physical manifestation of Original Sin, the members of the Oblation Board think that they can get rid of Original Sin and all the pain it entails by detaching a person from his or her dæmon, which in Pullman’s world is a person’s soul. In a way, and in line with theological readings of the trilogy, adult characters are depicted as trying to regain paradise. Bolvangar, however, is far from being described as a paradisaal place:

(...) there is an air of hatred and fear over the place and for miles around.
(...) Animals keep away too. No birds fly there; lemmings and foxes have fled. Hence the name Bolvangar: fields of evil. They don’t call it that. They

call it The Station. But to everyone else it is Bolvangar. (*Northern Lights*, 186)

Bolvangar represents the members of the Oblation Board's idea of paradise, a place where people are unaffected by emotions and, by implication, suffering. For Pullman, however, this means not being human at all. Accordingly, Bolvangar is described as the radical opposite of a beautiful garden. As Crosby states, "Imaginative literature has been analysed as reflecting people's longing for the lost paradise and the restoration of the Garden" (2005: 266). In *His Dark Materials*, however, such longing is demonized. As such, Bolvangar is not a garden where human beings are in harmony with nature, but a desolate place from which animals flee.

According to Crosby, Bolvangar represents "Mrs Coulter's vision of a world where children are detached" and this vision "draw[s] heavily upon the western tradition of dystopian fiction" (2005: 262). Crosby compares Bolvangar to Camazotz in L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, a planet where people are controlled by a brain called 'IT' that deprives them of emotions and makes them act like robots. Likewise, in Bolvangar, "all the men looked similar in their white coats and with their clipboards and pencils" (*Northern Lights*, 253). Pullman highlights the lack of imagination and individuality of the place and the people in it, who "would be able to stitch a wound or change a bandage, but never to tell a story" (*Northern Lights*, 238). Similar to the Dursleys' in *Harry Potter* and Coraline's other home, Bolvangar is the place that stands for adulthood in its most negative sense: adulthood as characterized by a loss of special qualities like curiosity and imagination. Bolvangar is also described as functioning like a school, not a school like Hogwarts where children are both protected and empowered, but an oppressive school, more like what Hogwarts becomes when Dolores Umbridge

arrives: “a school, with timetabled activities such as gymnastics and ‘art’. Boys and girls were kept separate except for breaks and mealtimes” (*Northern Lights*, 248-9).

Another meaning that can be ascribed to Bolvangar is that it is a site of adult hypocrisy. For one thing, the members of the Oblation Board euphemistically refer to it as ‘the Station’, a neutral name that suggests neither good nor evil, when children are actually being killed there. For another, when Lyra is taken there by force, one of the doctors tells her, “you’re a lucky little girl. Those huntsmen who found you brought you to the best place you could be” (*Northern Lights*, 242). Even when Lyra protests that she was not found but kidnapped, the doctor says “Well, you’re quite safe here” (*Northern Lights*, 242). As Crosby puts it, “conformity and detachment from all emotions are presented as a diabolical solution to the existence of suffering” (2005: 262). In my view, Bolvangar offers a commentary on all those institutions adults have created for the protection of children for the children’s own good, privileging safety over empowerment. Pullman demonizes this by depicting such adult institutions as a place where children are controlled and disempowered for the adult’s own benefit. Once more, this seems to be at odds with the medium he has chosen, for children’s literature is also created by adults for the child’s own good. Yet, in *His Dark Materials*, Pullman pushes the limits of children’s literature and suggests that evil may not stem from the child’s desire, but from adult fears of it—a fear which is actually implicit in all the works of children’s fiction that attempt to teach the child to keep its desires under control.

At this point, it is relevant to discuss Pullman’s use of the ghost motif, since this is what children become when they are taken to Bolvangar. Like Gaiman, Pullman uses the figure of the pathetic ghost to represent those children who have fallen prey to the villainess, Mrs Coulter, and the Oblation Board she commands. A child without a

dæmon—without a soul—is described as a ghastly and uncanny vision: “A human being with no dæmon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense” (*Northern Lights*, 214). As I have mentioned, dualism in Pullman’s novels is the natural condition of human beings, hence it is not Gothicized as in *Harry Potter* and *Coraline*. In spite of Pullman’s criticism of Christian religion, his characters’ selves are made up of body, mind and soul, which affirms rather than challenge Christian values. This seems to be a contradiction, but I believe that what Pullman attacks is not Christianity per se, from which he draws heavily in his writings, but organized religion. Thus, the inner double—the soul—is benign in Pullman’s trilogy; dæmons are people’s most intimate companions and guardians, very much like Patronuses in *Harry Potter*. On the other hand, Pullman Gothicizes the attempt to do away with duplicity. Severing the connection between person and dæmon is what turns children into ghostly creatures with “no fear and no imagination and no free will” (*The Subtle Knife*, 199). Severed children are even compared to zombies “who fear nothing, because they’re mindless” (*The Subtle Knife*, 42). Gothic imagery is used, thus, to depict how the adult utopian view of a world without suffering, a regression to a permanent state of innocence, becomes dystopian.

Moving back to the meanings of Gothic settings in *His Dark Materials*, there is also Cittàgazze, which Matthews compares to the “*Lord of the Flies* world of children who roam in packs” (2005: 128). In *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra and Will end up in a world inhabited by children only, from which adults have escaped in fear of Spectres. As the Cittàgazze children tell Will and Lyra, “when a Spectre catch a grown-up, that’s bad to see. They eat the life out of them” (*The Subtle Knife*, 60). This is reminiscent of Dementors in *Harry Potter*, or Coraline’s other mother sucking the life out of children,

or vampires, but in *His Dark Materials* this sort of disturbing creatures affect adults only: “When we grow up we see Spectres”, says one of the Cittàgazze girls (*The Subtle Knife*, 60). Spectres, however, cannot touch children, for “In the innocence of children there’s some power that repels the Spectres” (*The Subtle Knife*, 136). Before I move on, I would like to clarify that Pullman never denies that children are innocent. What he criticizes is the idealization of innocence as something that should not be lost, as well as the attempt to thwart the child’s passage from innocence to experience—to put it in Blakean terms. Moving back to Spectres, they also seem to be connected to Original Sin, like Dust in Lyra’s universe:

Three hundred years ago, it all went wrong. (...) Others say it was a judgement on us for some great sin, though I never heard any agreement about what that sin was. But suddenly out of nowhere there came the Spectres, and we’ve been haunted ever since. (...) All the trust and all the virtue fell out of our world when the Spectres came. (*The Subtle Knife*, 135)

The belief that Spectres are a punishment for some sin, however, is later discarded when it is revealed that they come from Will’s world—our world—and they arrived in Cittàgazze through the windows in the air that were left open by explorers who studied the existence of parallel universes. Still, what interests me is how the presence of these creatures turns Cittàgazze into another place marked by adult fears of disturbing thoughts.

In contrast to Bolvangar, though, adults in Cittàgazze have not attempted to destroy Spectres to prevent their children from being affected by them when they grow up, but they have fled and left the children alone. On the one hand, this absence of adult authority is presented as liberating for the children, who “like it when the Spectres come, ’cause we can run about in the city, do what we like” (*The Subtle Knife*, 60). Yet, on the other hand, this reality is very much reminiscent of dystopian and horror fiction stories about societies of children, such as William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954)

or Stephen King's short story "Children of the Corn" (1977). As in these works of horror fiction, children in Cittàgazze behave wildly. After seeing them torture a cat, Lyra expresses her astonishment at the children's behavior: "I never seen kids being like that" (*The Subtle Knife*, 111). I believe that, with Cittàgazze, Pullman is not simply showing what happens when children are free from adult supervision, but also dismantling common conceptions of childhood innocence, and the equation of 'innocence' and 'goodness'. Speaking about *Lord of the Flies*, Büssing affirms that "the children's running wild does not simply mean a regression to chaos because of the adult's absence". As she adds, "When in the end the dashing officer asks the surviving boys why they have not continued the British tradition like good English boys, he is not aware how well they have succeeded in doing so" (1987: 21). What Cittàgazze children do to the cat is the same adults do to children and to other adults. Thus, Pullman seems to be suggesting that children are no better (or, for this matter, no worse) than adults, and that the potential for evil is as present in children as it is in adults. Speaking about another adult horror novel, Rohan O'Grady's *Let's Kill Uncle* (1963), Büssing states that "the small couple shares Man's homicidal heritage" (1987: 25).⁷² I argue that this is also the case in Pullman's trilogy; in fact, Will, the other main child character in *His Dark Materials*, has killed a man. The cruelty of children is further stressed when Will explains to Lyra how his mother was attacked by some boys from his school. What is more, it is implied that they abused her sexually: "And she went out and she wasn't wearing very much, only she didn't know. And some boys from my school, they found her, and they started..." (*The Subtle Knife*, 260). After this, Will adds: "I never trusted

⁷² *Let's Kill Uncle* is about a young orphan, Barnaby Gaunt, who is sent to live with his uncle on an island. Soon, Barnaby discovers that his uncle is trying to kill him to steal the fortune he has inherited. Nobody believes him, until he befriends Christie, a little girl who suggests that the only way to stop his uncle is killing him before he kills Barnaby.

children any more than grown-ups. They're just as keen to do bad things" (*The Subtle Knife*, 261).

Whereas, in *Northern Lights*, children are presented as victims of adults as depicted in Bolvangar, *The Subtle Knife* starts to complicate this victim/abuser status and we see this in Cittàgazze. As in the previously mentioned works of adult horror fiction, children are depicted as monsters when they function as a group. Significantly, Pullman describes the Cittàgazze children thus: "They weren't individual children: they were a single mass, like a tide", and also "like ants" (*The Subtle Knife*, 230-1). I find Pullman's specification that these children are not individuals quite significant for my discussion. On the one hand, this depiction of children seems to give psychological complexity to the figure of the child inasmuch as it challenges "clichés that prevail in civilized society, and which present children as sweet, delightful, and harmless, because this view neither troubles adult man nor disturbs his sense of security" (Büssing, 1987: 37). Yet, on the other hand, Pullman deprives these children of psychological complexity by describing them as a mere mass with no individuality. This establishes a clear contrast between these murderous children and the heroes, Will and Lyra, who *are* individuals. I would say Pullman is much more daring, in this sense, than other children's Gothic authors, for he explicitly portrays children as capable of being as vicious as adults. Yet, as the next section will explore, the child's goodness ultimately predominates as exemplified by Lyra's rejection of what her villainous parents, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, stand for.

3.4. Young Heroine vs. Femme Fatale: Family, Villainy and Heroism in Pullman's Trilogy

They knew in what they called their hearts that one can get on quite well without a mother, and that it is only the mothers who think you can't.

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

After looking into how Pullman uses Gothic and dystopian settings to portray adult and child relationships and complicate the victim/abuser status, this section goes back to my thesis that none of the works of children's Gothic I analyze actually provide a permanent questioning of the child's inherent goodness. In the case of Pullman's trilogy, this goodness is jeopardized through secondary characters, but this does not seem to apply to the young heroes, Will and Lyra. Surely, Lyra engages in violent games, but when it comes to the real violence perpetrated by Mrs Coulter and the Oblation Board, she utterly rejects it and sets out to rescue the other children. As for Will, he has indeed killed a man, but it was accidentally and in self-defense. With Will and Lyra, the romantic child hero(ine) prevails, and the young heroes attain this status by making the right decision and rejecting the influence of villainous adults.

This section will focus on the relationship between Pullman's heroine, Lyra, and her villainous mother, Mrs Coulter. Lyra's relationship with her father, Lord Asriel, and Pullman's overall portrayal of the family will also be taken into account, but the main conflict here is definitely between mother and daughter. The main argument underlying this section is that Pullman initially portrays Lyra as a 'half-civilized' tomboy, who is later seduced by Mrs Coulter's glamour, only to elevate her to proper heroine status in the end. I will discuss how, struggling against Mrs Coulter, Lyra refuses both to be

squeezed into stereotypical femininity, on the one hand, and to be disempowered as a child, on the other.

Villainous Parents

In keeping with Pullman's criticism of those institutions adults have created to promote an illusion of safety, the family in *His Dark Materials* is also an ideal that cannot be attained. Comparing *His Dark Materials* to Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Alston states that "Pullman seems to offer something quite different [from Rowling]. His two main protagonists, Will and Lyra, do not have conventional families" (2008: 136). Indeed, Will is a twelve-year-old boy who, after his father's disappearance, has had to grow up very fast to take care of his psychologically disturbed mother—we later learn that Will's mother was affected by Spectres, which are invisible to the human eye in Will's world, but their presence can be felt. As for Lyra, she is initially presented as an orphan whose only family is the Jordan Scholars. Unlike other orphans in children's fiction, however, Lyra eventually finds out that she has two living relatives and they are none others than the two main villains, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, who happen to be her biological parents.

Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter are not paternal figures at all, but they rather seem to belong to a Gothic romance. They are described as two passionate people who had an affair when Mrs Coulter was already married to someone else and decided to hide Lyra away so that Mrs Coulter's husband would not find out (*Northern Lights*, 122-3). As Alston affirms, "The text's violence is stark, as children are abused and murdered, and it is the parents who are unreliable and destructive. But alongside this lies a desire for the safety of the domestic" (2008: 136). Whereas I agree with the first part of Alston's

quotation, I am not entirely convinced by the second part. The nostalgia for a proper family that is so present in *Harry Potter* and, to a certain extent, in *Coraline*, does not seem to be the centre of Pullman's commentary on the child and the family. As I discussed, nostalgia for lost ideals is what ends up creating monsters in Pullman's trilogy. Accordingly, Lyra does not crave for a conventional family. On the contrary, she is quite content with her situation in Jordan, and she enjoys the company of gyptians and armored polar bears. According to Alston, by the end of *The Amber Spyglass*,

The parents join together to save their child, and the family ideal is seemingly reinstated. But this idealized concept of family, though it might be desired, is unachievable for Lyra and Will. Both have reached puberty and are in love and yet they must return to their own worlds; they are forced to sacrifice their future as a family. (2008: 137)

I do not wholeheartedly agree with Alston's reading of the trilogy's ending, because she appears to assume that two young people having a relationship should necessarily lead to starting a family in the future. In fact, nowhere is it said that Lyra or Will have such a thing in mind; the reader only knows that they would like to be together as a couple. Therefore, I do not share Alston's idea that they eventually have to sacrifice their future as a family; in my view, what they sacrifice is their chance to have more time together.

On the other hand, I agree with Alston when she states that Pullman's trilogy "seem[s] to conclude that although the desire for domesticity still exists, the culturally constructed family we know and love is no longer a viable proposition. But he offers no easy solution" (Alston, 2008: 137). Yet, Pullman associates this desire for domesticity with parents, not with children. As Mrs Coulter tells Lord Asriel right before she dies, "We should have married, (...) and brought her up ourselves" (*The Amber Spyglass*, 381). However, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter's change from villains to loving parents happens too late when it is no longer possible for them to start afresh as a 'proper' family. As regards Lyra, nowhere is it said that she wants them to become her family in

the first place. In fact, she never really gets over her fear and her strong dislike of Mrs Coulter. I would say that what distinguishes Pullman's rendering of the family from that of other children's fiction authors is that the happy ending is still possible even though the family ideal is not recovered. Rather than saying that the family ideal is reinstated in the end, I prefer to say that parental figures are finally redeemed in keeping with the children's literature prevailing trend of depicting biological parents as loving and caring.⁷³

Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter are not just incarnations of evil incapable of any good feeling as are Lord Voldemort or the other mother, but there is an attempt on Pullman's part to give them psychological complexity and subvert the good biological parents/wicked stepparents dichotomy that is so common in fairy tales and children's fantasy literature. In the *Coraline* chapter, I discussed how the figure of the double is often used to explore maternal evil without giving child readers a negative portrayal of the mother figure. This preoccupation with preserving a good image of, not only the mother, but adults in general is not a mere outdated Victorian concern, but it is still very much prevalent in the twenty-first century, as is apparent in the positive characterization of Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*, Harry's dead parents and Coraline's real parents. Another example of this preoccupation with the representation of adults in children's fiction is the fact that Disney movies have been criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes of the elderly as "evil or sinister or helpless or hapless" (McRae, 2007), and that cartoons like *The Simpsons* or *The Flintstones* that represent dads and husbands as

⁷³ Biological parents are frequently the 'good' parents in the fairy tale tradition and in children's novels that imitate the fairy tale pattern, as opposed to the figure of the wicked stepmother and other *in loco parentis* figures. We see this in most of the novels discussed in this dissertation such as *Harry Potter*, *Coraline*, *The Thief of Always* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. This is, of course, not always the case. In Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic *The Secret Garden*, for instance, young Mary Lennox is the victim of her parents' utter neglect. Other more recent children's books also construct parent-child relationships along these lines, such as Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, in which the little girl is ill-treated by her own parents until she is adopted by her teacher, Miss Honey, who becomes Matilda's proper family.

incompetent and goofy have been credited—unfairly, in my opinion—with “a decrease in men wanting to assume those roles in society” (Petersen, 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that children’s literature authors employ literary devices that allow them to tackle parental malevolence projecting this onto surrogate parents, while preserving an appropriate image of the child protagonist’s actual parents.⁷⁴ In Pullman’s trilogy, on the other hand, this doubling technique is not used. Instead, the figure of the biological mother who loves her daughter and would sacrifice herself for her blends with the wicked stepmother in the figure of Mrs Coulter.

Marisa Coulter is described as “a beautiful lady whose dark hair falls shining delicately under the shadow of her fur-lined hood” (*Northern Lights*, 42). Like Lyra, she is also a woman in a men’s world, in this case the Magisterium, and she is ambitious and manipulative. As Lord Asriel tells Lyra, “your mother’s always been ambitious for power. At first she tried to get it in the normal way, through marriage, but that didn’t work, (...). So she had to turn to the Church.” (*Northern Lights*, 371-2). Mrs Coulter is, in fact, not so different from the femme fatales of adult Gothic, strange as it may sound for a children’s book. Mary Harris Russell also compares her to Lilith: “Like Lilith, Marisa Coulter is sexual, assertive, and independent” (2005: 215). Pullman emphasizes her external sensuality and her femininity whereas her inner ugliness is represented by her dæmon, a repulsive golden monkey. Yet, not only does Mrs Coulter dominate men—“Her power over them [clergymen] was visible” (*The Subtle Knife*, 36)—but she also lures children with her beauty and sweetness, which strongly recalls Lucy, the

⁷⁴ As was to be expected, however, this has been criticized by foster parents who do not feel adequately represented by the media. As stated in The National Center for Youth Law’s website: “Hollywood movies and popular literature, too, consistently pit an abusive or uncaring foster parent against child protagonists. (...) Given how powerfully some of the abusive images are conveyed, it is no wonder that a substantial number of people view foster parents as self-interested and uncaring” (Grimm and Darwall, 2005).

‘bloofer lady’ that stalks children in *Dracula*.⁷⁵ As I will argue in the next section, Mrs Coulter also manages to exercise her power over Lyra, who feels initially attracted to the powerful femininity Mrs Coulter represents. This is in sharp contrast with Coraline’s rejection of the other mother that I discussed in Chapter 2.

By the end of the trilogy, Mrs Coulter is still corrupt and wicked, but she reveals that she has come to love her daughter, which sets her apart from other villains of children’s Gothic like Voldemort and the other mother: “There is none [no good in me]. But I love Lyra. Where did this love come from? I don’t know; it came to me like a thief in the night, and now I love her so much my heart is bursting with it” (*The Amber Spyglass*, 406). Moreover, in the end, Mrs Coulter sacrifices herself to save Lyra. She joins Lord Asriel’s battle against the Authority and the Magisterium, which intends to destroy Lyra. Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel finally die while they are fighting Regent Metatron and the three of them fall into the Abyss, a sort of nothingness between worlds. The Gothic villainess is, thus, ultimately sentimentalized in accordance with the late twentieth-century tendency to turn Gothic horror into sentimental romance that Botting discusses (1996: 178). Although Mrs Coulter never actually comes close to becoming a good mother for Lyra—by ‘good’ I mean dedicated but respectful with the child’s personal space—the trilogy does not go as far as suggesting that it is possible for a mother not to love her child. Even if we learn that, when Lyra was born, she wanted nothing to do with her and that “She turned her back” (*Northern Lights*, 123), Mrs Coulter’s final sacrifice for her daughter may elicit the reader’s sympathy. I read Mrs Coulter’s final redemption as a reflection of the postmodern tendency to challenge indisputable truths and embrace relativism. Mrs Coulter does not embody an objective evil, as Voldemort does, but she is presented in shades of grey. As Russell affirms,

⁷⁵ This is how children call Lucy in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and it means ‘beautiful lady’, which is the same phrase Pullman uses to describe Mrs Coulter.

“Marisa embodies qualities of both Eve and Lilith” (2005: 215). On the other hand, the objective evil that must be destroyed in Pullman’s trilogy is the Authority and its representative on Earth (in Lyra’s world), the Magisterium.

Before moving on to discuss how Lyra’s refusal to abide by her villainous parents’ orders elevates her to heroine status, I would like to briefly discuss the figure of Lord Asriel, who is also a highly unconventional father. According to Hatlen, “From the beginning Asriel has a distinctly Byronic aura of injured merit and defiance in the face of his enemies—and this Byronic role, historically, owes much to Milton’s Satan” (2005: 87). Hatlen further explains that “Like Milton’s Satan in Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*, Lord Asriel builds his own kingdom apart from and in defiance of God, and like the Satan of Books V and VI he leads a rebel army in a battle against God’s army” (2005: 87). I agree with Hatlen’s reading of Lord Asriel as a Byronic hero, and particularly in connection with Milton’s Satan. Lord Asriel, whose name sounds “phonetically identical with ‘Azrael’, the angel of death in many mythological traditions” (Hatlen, 2005: 88), is a man with a dark past who inspires both fear and admiration to everyone, including Lyra and Mrs Coulter. What is more, he is “willing to go beyond good and evil in quest of his goals, yet we respond not with sympathy but with horror” (Hatlen, 2005: 88). For instance, Asriel kills Lyra’s friend Roger by the end of *Northern Lights* because he is convinced that this will release the burst of energy he needs to bridge the gap between two worlds. Like Voldemort in *Harry Potter*, Asriel is the character who attempts to defy the laws of nature and is willing to kill to do so, but like Mrs Coulter, he is finally redeemed in the end, not only because he dies to destroy Metatron, but also because it is revealed that he was not trying to destroy Dust, but to preserve it. Like Mrs Coulter, Asriel is also presented in shades of grey. Speaking about Mrs Coulter, Lisa Hopkins states that “it is still perfectly possible (...) to admire

the audacity of Mrs Coulter even as one loathes her. She is, in short, a creation of great complexity, a world away from the schematized division into good/bad mother that is the staple fare of children's fiction" (2005: 54). As Hopkins adds, and I adhere to her reading, "So too is Lord Asriel—heroic, inspirational and murderous" (2005: 54). Yet, as I will discuss in the following subsection, although both parental figures are ambiguous, seen from Lyra's perspective the true villain is Mrs Coulter, not Lord Asriel, maybe as a consequence of the misogynistic Oxford environment where Lyra has been raised.

The Child Heroine

As I stated in the previous chapters, the presence of the villain or villainess is instrumental in children's Gothic, because he or she embodies the qualities that the child has to reject in order to grow up to be a socially 'acceptable' adult. Although Mrs Coulter eventually transcends her villainess status and becomes much more than just a one-dimensional embodiment of evil, it is in great part her oppressive presence that thwarts Lyra's development. In my view, *His Dark Materials* clearly contains the Freudian mother-daughter plot (discussed in section 2.4.) in which the mother's presence is stifling and must be done away with for the daughter to grow up and succeed. Indeed, Lyra's quest to defeat the Gobblers, Mrs Coulter and the Authority is paralleled by the girl's passage from ordinary girl to what Nikolajeva calls a romantic and high mimetic heroine (2002a).

As Nikolajeva very well points out, "in children's fiction, girls are doubly oppressed: as women and as children" (2002a: 47). This double oppression is reflected in Lyra's relationship with Mrs Coulter, who not only wants to keep children innocent

forever by preventing Dust from settling on them, but also attempts to feminize tomboyish Lyra. Like other tomboyish heroines in children's and young adult fiction, such as Jo March and Anne Shirley, before meeting Mrs Coulter, Lyra rejects anything that has to do with femininity and prefers to identify with masculinity, playing with boys and getting her dresses dirty. Furthermore, having been raised in Jordan College, Lyra has learnt not to take women seriously: "She regarded female Scholars with a proper Jordan disdain: there *were* such people but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play" (*Northern Lights*, 67, original emphasis). I am not implying here that Pullman is intentionally celebrating misogyny by giving readers a misogynistic heroine, but that in his novels, "childhood innocence is imbued with adult prejudices" (Pugh, 2011: 65). Lyra only learns to take women seriously when she meets Mrs Coulter, and even then, this admiration soon turns into dread. As Russell puts it, "Before meeting Marisa Coulter, Lyra has never seen knowledge and beauty combined" (2005: 215). As the following passage shows, Lyra is used to masculine beauty, but she has never seen prettiness before: "She had seen a great deal of beauty in her short life, but it was Jordan College beauty, Oxford beauty – grand and stony and masculine. In Jordan College, much was magnificent, but nothing was pretty. In Mrs Coulter's flat, everything was pretty" (*Northern Lights*, 76). The fact that a woman has to be beautiful to earn Lyra's respect shows how much conditioned she is by her misogynistic environment. This is further emphasized by the fact that Mrs Coulter and the women she socializes with strike Lyra as "women so unlike female scholars or gyptian boat-mothers or college servants as almost to be a new sex altogether; one with dangerous powers and qualities such as elegance, charm, and grace" (*Northern Lights*, 82). Yet, this glamour that initially entrances Lyra

gradually becomes repressive, as Mrs Coulter attempts to feminize Lyra and get her on her side.

According to Nodelman, many “texts for children tend to view the feminine as a force of repressive conservatism, something to be subverted rather than celebrated” (2008: 175-6). Indeed, in Pullman’s trilogy, femininity *is* a repressive force. When Lyra moves in with Mrs Coulter, the latter attempts to ‘reform’ the young girl by teaching her how to “say no in such a charming way that no offence was given; how to put on lipstick, powder, scent” (*Northern Lights*, 84). Yet, these ‘lessons’, which initially fascinated Lyra, soon become a form of oppression. Mrs Coulter manages to keep Lyra under control by pampering her and turning her into a smaller version of herself. As Pantalaimon, acting very much like the voice of Lyra’s conscience, tells her, “She’s just making a pet out of you” (*Northern Lights*, 86). Femininity becomes even more sinister when Mrs Coulter’s ugly monkey dæmon grabs Lyra’s Pantalaimon by the throat, showing that her charm and sensuality were just a façade to hide her wickedness (*Northern Lights*, 87). Of course, Pullman offers other more positive models of femininity for Lyra to emulate, such as brave Serafina Pekkala and wise Mary Malone.⁷⁶ I do not have room here to analyze in detail the different types of womanhood Pullman portrays, but suffice it to say that it is mostly *stereotypical* femininity that is repressive. Curiously, there is no corresponding commentary on stereotypical masculinity in the trilogy; Will is a fairly conventional male character, and this is not

⁷⁶ Serafina Pekkala is a witch, and she rules over several witch clans, which are organized as matriarchal societies. As for Mary Malone, she is a scientist, and her findings about Dust play an important part in the trilogy’s denouement. Although Mary is not described as a beautiful woman, her knowledge and determination are enough to impress Lyra.

presented as repressive but heroic.⁷⁷ While Pullman insists on Lyra's necessity to define herself in opposition to her villainous mother, Will's wish to emulate his father is a source of pride to everyone.

As in fairy tales in which the children's separation from their parents is necessary for their adventures to start, only when Lyra decides to run away from Mrs Coulter's does her latent heroism begin to show. At Mrs Coulter's flat, "She [Lyra] had been feeling confined and cramped by this polite life, however luxurious it was" (*Northern Lights*, 86). Not only does this signify a rejection of the shallow, materialistic femininity that Mrs Coulter embodies, but once again we see how the child protagonist rejects power if this means exercising it over others. Although Lyra is the only child character analyzed in this dissertation that actually feels attracted to the villain at first, neither fear nor attraction can prevent the young protagonist from utterly despising Mrs Coulter the moment she finds out about her true nature. With this decision, Lyra proves her moral and intellectual superiority, just like Harry and Coraline.

Although Pullman does away with idealized views of children by describing Lyra as coarse and half-civilized, he still idealizes the child by attributing characteristics of the romantic hero to it. As Nikolajeva explains,

The romantic hero, superior to ordinary human beings, is one of the most common character types in children's fiction. We meet this type primarily in fairy tales and fantasy, in which the child is empowered by being able to travel through space and time, by possessing magical objects or by being assisted by magical helpers. (2002a: 30)

⁷⁷ Will is described as quite strong-built for his age, and his mother constantly remarks that he will follow his father's steps. Indeed, just like his father, Will is the brave and adventurous hero who is willing to sacrifice the safety of the domestic to pursue his goals. Moreover, the fact that his weapon is the subtle knife, a blade that 'chooses' its owner—very much like the Elder Wand in *Harry Potter*, aligns Will with other arthurian heroes.

Both Lyra and Will possess all these traits. They travel across several parallel universes; they possess ‘magical’ objects—the alethiometer and the subtle knife;⁷⁸ and they are assisted by witches and bear warriors. Nevertheless, Pullman’s efforts to depict Will and Lyra as more down-to-earth and complex characters should not be undermined. Like Harry and Coraline, Pullman’s young heroes do share some traits with fairy-tale characters, but they are definitely not type characters. For this reason, I argue that Pullman’s child protagonists, especially Lyra, possess qualities of both the romantic and the high mimetic hero, who is superior to other humans but not a hundred percent heroic.

According to Nikolajeva, high mimetic characters are portrayed as superior to other human beings, including the reader, and, therefore, they are often used as ideological vehicles: “This implies that high mimetic characters are supposed to serve as models not only for the other characters in the story but for the readers as well. In children’s fiction, such characters are used for educational and didactic purposes” (2002a: 33). Like Harry and Coraline, Lyra—and, to a lesser extent, Will—serves as a model both for other characters in the story and for the reader. I have already commented on how Pullman’s narrator does not generally make didactic remarks. Instead, as in most works of contemporary children’s fiction, other characters fulfill this function. Lord Asriel, for example, teaches Lyra that “Human beings can’t see anything without wanting to destroy it” (*Northern Lights*, 375). Although Lord Asriel is not always a sympathetic character, the fact that he is against the Church’s teachings and that he wants to preserve Dust turns him into a figure through whom the (implied)

⁷⁸ Strictly speaking, they are not magical, because Pullman tries to give them a scientific base.

author can transmit his ideology. Yet, since Pullman's truly heroic character is Lyra, it is she who utters the main lessons at the end of each novel.

Very much like Harry Potter, Lyra moves from being the innocent but curious child who asks questions to being the character who articulates the didactic messages in the book—which are clearly there despite Pullman's denying that he is concerned with giving lessons. Let us consider the following passage—an excerpt from a conversation between Lyra and Pantalaimon—from the end of *Northern Lights*, after Lyra has witnessed Lord Asriel murdering Roger:

We've heard them all talk about Dust, and they're so afraid of it, and you know what? We believed them, even though we could see that what they were doing was wicked and evil and wrong... We thought Dust must be bad too, because they were grown-up and they said so. But what if it isn't?
(*Northern Lights*, 395-6)

In my view, this passage encapsulates two main moral lessons: on the one hand, it shows that the child protagonist's adventure has taught her the difference between good and evil, and on the other hand, Lyra has learnt about the importance of questioning assumptions. Thus, Pullman eventually adheres to the children's literature convention that “a child character cannot be allowed to be evil and depraved; the misdeeds only affect the child himself and teach him a lesson” (Nikolajeva, 2002a: 42).

As the above-quoted passage suggests, forms of knowledge that are conventionally associated with adulthood—critical thinking and reasoning—are privileged in the end and portrayed as the best tools to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong, and thus challenge authority. Lyra has not learnt this by ‘magical means’; it is not the alethiometer that has told her who her enemies are. On the contrary, she has learnt it by herself, by observing and questioning the behavior of adults. Another idea that can be inferred from this passage is that being a grown-up does

not necessarily mean being right, as Lyra realizes that she has been misled by her trust in grown-ups. Thus, once again, the author establishes a difference between being an adult and being mature, and maturity is finally attributed to the child protagonist.

Nevertheless, what Nodelman calls “certain knowledge”, i.e., “the knowledge commonly accepted by most adults as true” (2008: 40), is rejected in Pullman’s novels. According to Nodelman, many texts for children end with the child’s final acceptance of this adult certainty, and this is when “their fantasy worlds of desire must end” (2008: 40). By contrast, in Pullman’s trilogy, it is precisely the adult’s conviction that Dust is bad that brings about chaos, and it is Lyra’s belief in this conviction that misleads her throughout the first volume. By the end of *Northern Lights*, Lyra finds out that she has been used by adults—like Harry Potter—and that, while she thought she was helping Lord Asriel by bringing him the alethiometer, she was actually bringing him Roger and therefore betraying the latter. Therefore, *Northern Lights* does not end with Lyra accepting adult certainty but questioning it: “if *they* all think Dust is bad, it must be good” (*Northern Lights*, 395, original emphasis).

Rebelling against adults and choosing to go on her own quest to find Dust, Lyra seemingly challenges authority. Of course, in a work of children’s fiction, adult authority is hardly ever questioned permanently, as I have argued in the previous chapters. In *His Dark Materials*, adult authority is preserved through narrative technique (see section 3.2.), and Lyra is not a child who acts of her own free will, but “a child (...) who has a great destiny” (*Northern Lights*, 175). Like Harry Potter carrying out Dumbledore’s plan, what Lyra does not know is that she is subject to destiny and that she is unknowingly fulfilling a prophecy. As the Consul of the gyptians explains, “she must fulfil this destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, because only in her

ignorance can we be saved”; in other words, “she must be free to make mistakes” (*Northern Lights*, 175). Like Harry, Lyra is kept in the dark by adults who take advantage of her innocence and her good intentions to get her to do what they want her to do. For this reason, not everybody sees Pullman’s child figure as truly defying authority if she is not even in charge of her own destiny. Kristine Moruzi, for example, states that “Pullman fails to offer any genuinely new ideas of the world with respect to adult-child relationships and the roles that children play in society” (2005: 55-6). Although I agree that *His Dark Materials* does not completely free the child figure from adult control, I do not think that children’s authors should be responsible for offering “genuinely new ideas of the world” in the first place. Moruzi is asking Pullman’s fiction to show her the world as she would like it to be, and her very own claim implies that children’s fiction has to satisfy adults’ wishes, which in turn reinforces current ideas of adult-child relationships and of what children’s literature has to be like.

Portraying children as romantic and high mimetic heroes already reflects adult nostalgia for childhood and utopian views of children who develop their potential to the full and thus redeem the world. Yet, getting rid of adult control completely is complicated in a genre like children’s literature, whose very existence depends on adults. In fact, whenever a writer leaves adult authority in the background and gives child characters a world built exclusively for them to explore, this tends to be criticized—unfairly, in my opinion—as implausible, poor-quality children’s literature, as happens with Blyton’s *Famous Five* series, for instance. As Wall affirms, referring to Blyton’s works, “That they [fictional parents and other adults] give children unrealistic and unbelievable freedom of action annoys many critics” (1991: 189). As Hollindale explains,

The writer faces a dilemma: it is very difficult in contemporary Britain to write an anti-sexist, anti-racist or anti-classist novel without revealing that these are still objectives, principles and ideals rather than the realities of predictable everyday behavior. If you present as natural and commonplace the behaviour you would like to be natural and commonplace, you risk muting the social effectiveness of your story. (2006: 109)

And, in my opinion, this applies even more to adult-child relationships, as a world where children are not subordinated is far from being a reality. It must be noted, however, that Lyra's destiny—like Eve's—is actually defying the Authority, thus bringing about the end of Destiny and replacing it with free will. Thus, Pullman's child protagonist *is* subordinated but so are all the other characters in the text, and her quest consists precisely of putting an end to this subordination.

In conclusion, like the previously discussed texts, *His Dark Materials* shows the tendency of children's Gothic to deploy the child's confrontation with villainy as a narrative device to elevate the child to hero or heroine status. Yet, such status is not equated to their childishness but to their reaching maturity, thus preserving adult control in children's fiction rather than challenging it. Furthermore, as in *Coraline* and *Harry Potter*, Gothic experiences are tightly linked to the novels' didactic dimension, for it is from these Gothic experiences that lessons are learned and experience celebrated. There is, however, a remarkable difference between *His Dark Materials* and the works by Rowling and Gaiman. In the previous chapters, I have discussed how Rowling and Gaiman tend to Gothicize desire—even if their narratives simultaneously appeal to it—and celebrate knowledge. In the next section, I will look into how Pullman's celebration of knowledge is not incompatible with a celebration of desire.

3.5. 'Dark Intentions': De-Gothicizing Desire in Pullman's Rewriting of the Fall

Experience is the only thing that brings knowledge, and the longer you are on earth the more experience you are sure to get.

Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

As I argued in the *Harry Potter* chapter, many books for children try to create an artificial separation between knowledge and desire, but in the very structure of the books there is an implicit acknowledgement that one cannot exist without the other. In *His Dark Materials*, there is no such attempt to separate these two concepts, but rather Pullman conflates them in his fictional concept of Dust, which is revealed to be particles of conscience that settle on people as they enter adolescence. Not only does Dust make dæmons acquire a fixed shape, symbolizing the entrance to maturity and the attainment of a stable identity, but Dust also brings about sexual awakening. As such, Dust is central to Pullman's representation of adulthood and childhood, as Mrs Coulter's words suggest: "This is at the heart of everything, this difference between children and adults! It contains the whole mystery of Dust!" (*The Subtle Knife*, 199). And it is also central to Pullman's representation of fear. As I will discuss in this last section, Pullman focuses not so much on childhood fears, but on the fears of adults. Adults in the trilogy—especially those connected to the Church—are afraid of Dust and, by implication, of knowledge and desire. As the witch Serafina Pekkala tells Lyra, "where there are priests, there is fear of Dust" (*Northern Lights*, 316). Thus, Pullman's trilogy de-Gothicizes desire, and it is rather the adult's fear of it that creates the monstrous dystopias of which child characters are victims.

Conflating Knowledge and Desire

According to Warner, “As psychoanalytical understanding of children’s sexuality has deepened, so have attempts to contain it” (1994: 45). Not surprisingly, the child hero’s or heroine’s initiation into sexuality is, as Nikolajeva affirms, usually not represented in children’s fiction as “censorial filters may be imposed on the narrative” (2002a: 29). Along the same lines, as Nikolajeva adds, despite the omission of the child’s sexual awakening in children’s books, “Many child characters do indeed meet either a friend or an opponent of the opposite sex who initiates a turning point in the protagonist’s life” (2002a: 29). This is the case, for example, of Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*, Storr’s *Marianne Dreams*, Pearce’s *Tom’s Midnight Garden*, Barker’s *The Thief of Always*, Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*. Yet, when it comes to the representation of desire, children’s Gothic tends to associate it with villainy. As for *sexual* desire, it is often absent, merely insinuated or tackled allegorically. The works of children’s fiction I have discussed so far corroborate this. As Nodelman argues, children’s literature is marked by

(...) its construction of childhood as asexual. In children’s literature gender is at least theoretically divorced from sexuality, and boys must be boyish and girls must be girlish for reasons that have nothing to do with the underlying reasons that there are gender categories at all. The focus on gender implies a hidden awareness of children as at least potentially sexual beings and suggests the possibility that sexuality is at least part of the sublimated, hidden adult content of children’s literature. (2008: 176)

In this aspect, Pullman’s trilogy differs from other works of children’s Gothic. Although censorial filters are not completely rid of, *His Dark Materials* deals with and celebrates the preadolescent child’s sexual awakening explicitly and dissociates desire from villainy.

As Montgomery affirms, “Children’s sexuality is one of the great concerns of early 21st-century Western societies” (2009a: 181). Freud’s idea that “germs of sexual impulses are already present in the new-born child” (1991: 92) still meets plenty of resistance, as Montgomery discusses: “There is also still unease about whether children really are sexual beings from such a young age, or, if they do act in ways that adults might interpret as sexual, whether they are aware of this, or understand it as such” (2009a: 186). As a consequence, it is not surprising that children’s literature authors adopt a cautious attitude when dealing with the child’s sexuality. In many cases, authors obliterate any traces of sexual desire from their texts, and as I have argued in the previous chapters, they extol ‘controlled’ desire while demonizing the relentless passion of villains. In *His Dark Materials*, by contrast, preadolescent sexual desire is dissociated from evil and dealt with overtly. Still, when it comes to representing adult forms of sexuality, such as intercourse or sexual abuse, Pullman resorts to metaphors and symbolism.

Like the other works of children’s Gothic analyzed in this dissertation, childhood in Pullman’s trilogy is also a journey towards experience, maturity and a stable identity, as is metaphorically represented by children’s dæmons which shape-shift until they reach adulthood. Most protagonists of children’s Gothic, however, remain prepubescent children when it comes to sexuality; they grow up, but only in certain respects. What is interesting about the child’s journey in Pullman’s novels is the fact that sexual desire is not excluded from it. As Pugh affirms, “Although children’s literature often focuses thematically on a desire for stasis, on a child’s innocent desire to remain a child and thereby to escape sexuality and adulthood, *His Dark Materials* emphasizes the necessity for sexuality to shatter reigning ideological paradigms” (2011: 62). Accordingly, preadolescent sexual desire is dealt with naturally and openly. In fact,

the reader can find hints of Lyra's latent sexuality early on in the trilogy, *before* her sexual awakening and her onset of puberty. At the beginning of the trilogy, Lyra is a prepubescent girl; yet, Pullman offers clues suggesting that she is already a sexual being, even though she is not fully conscious of her own sexuality yet. Let us consider this passage: "She had seen enough of society now to understand when men and women were flirting, and she watched the process with fascination" (*Northern Lights*, 89). This excerpt challenges common assumptions that sexuality is either beyond the child's understanding or unlikely to interest or trouble children. On the contrary, Lyra wants to know everything about those issues that adults reserve for themselves, and this includes sexuality. Another example of Lyra's perception of sexuality is her awkwardness when her friend Roger is taking a bath and she decides to sit and wait outside: "They had swum naked together often enough, (...) but this was different" (*Northern Lights*, 363). Although Lyra is not fully aware of what this means, it implies that she perceives their bodies as sexual and this brings shame. This passage, reminiscent of Adam and Eve feeling ashamed of their naked bodies after tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, also indicates that Lyra will soon become conscious of her sexuality, and this will bring about the second fall that the Church fears so much.

Indeed, the young girl's journey culminates in her sexual awakening, triggered by Mary Malone's story about her first romantic encounter with a man. As Mary explains to Lyra and Will,

(...) we kissed each other for the first time. It was in a garden, (...) and I was *aching* – all my body was aching for him, and I could tell he felt the same – and we were both almost too shy to move. Almost. But one of us did and then without any interval between (...) we were kissing each other and oh, it was (...) paradise. (*The Amber Spyglass*, 445-6, original emphasis)

This is the moment when Mary plays the serpent and tempts Will and Lyra to taste the forbidden fruit by telling them a 'true' story. As this passage shows, Pullman deals with

sexuality naturally and even poetically, dissociating it from shame or evil. Pullman views this temptation, not as a curse, but as a turning point in Lyra's life. After listening to the story, Lyra feels "like a fragile vessel brim-full of new knowledge. (...) *Soon*, she thought, *soon I'll know. I'll know very soon*" (*The Amber Spyglass*, 449, original italics). With this passage, in which Mary, Will and Lyra reenact original sin, Pullman puts forth his own view on the Fall, his idea that tasting forbidden knowledge is not a disgrace, but an awakening of conscience.

Despite Pullman's effort to deal with sexuality as something to be cherished rather than feared or eluded, Pullman's language is sometimes vague, as in this description of Lyra's reaction to Mary's story: "Lyra felt something strange happen to her body. She felt a stirring at the roots of her hair: she found herself breathing faster. (...) The sensation continued, and deepened, and changed, as more parts of her body found themselves affected too" (*The Amber Spyglass*, 445). Pullman's use of the imprecise phrase "more parts of her body" is a clear example of how, despite his commitment with 'truth', the genre he has chosen imposes certain limitations. There are still some aspects of life and human nature that can hardly be represented in a children's text without resorting to ambiguous language or metaphors, as Pullman does. First and foremost, dæmons in Pullman's trilogy are not only a representation of the soul, but they also have sexual connotations. The fact that "it was the grossest breach of etiquette imaginable to touch another person's dæmon" (*Northern Lights*, 143) suggests a strong link between dæmons and genitals. As Pugh observes, "This affective and spiritual register of daemons should not eclipse their allegorical symbolism as genitals (...). Because Dust also symbolizes Original Sin, the nexus of Dust and daemons casts the latter as the physical incarnation of human sexuality" (2011: 76). A passage in which two doctors from Bolvangar grab Pantalaimon also reinforces this reading of dæmons:

“She *felt* those hands... It wasn’t *allowed*... Not *supposed* to touch... *Wrong*...” (*Northern Lights*, 275, original emphasis). The emphasis on the words ‘allowed’, ‘supposed’ and ‘wrong’ indicates that Lyra is aware that something forbidden is being done to her and the scene has strong connotations of sexual abuse. Whereas children’s Gothic often depicts several forms of child abuse—neglect, bullying and physical violence, among others—sexual abuse is generally omitted, as is any form of sexual deviancy. Pullman breaks with this taboo, but he does so with caution. On the one hand, he omits the realistic psychological aspect. After this Gothic experience, Lyra has no trauma whatsoever and the issue is forgotten altogether. And, on the other hand, he does not tackle this issue literally but metaphorically, with dæmons symbolizing children’s genitals.

Another aspect of sexuality that is dealt with metaphorically is intercourse and anything related to adult sexuality. Pullman, I would say, goes further than other authors and includes a passage in which Lyra sees his father and mother—Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter—“embracing so passionately” (*Northern Lights*, 392). Scenes in which a child witnesses a romantic exchange between its parents are—to my knowledge—hard to find in children’s fiction, as are any traces of adult sexuality, even in books aimed at older children. What is more, the scene is not only romantic, but it is clearly of a sexual nature: “His [Asriel’s] hands, still clasping her [Mrs Coulter’s] head, tensed suddenly and drew her towards him in a passionate kiss. Lyra thought it seemed more like cruelty than love” (*Northern Lights*, 393). As the scene is focalized through Lyra, her sexual inexperience makes her fail to realize that what Lord Asriel is expressing may not be cruelty, but sexual passion. For this reason, when she sees her parents’ dæmons, “the snow leopard [Asriel’s dæmon] tense, crouching with her claws just pressing in the golden monkey’s flesh, and the monkey relaxed, blissful”, it is described as a “strange

sight” from her point of view (*Northern Lights*, 393). Metaphorically, this scene is as if Lyra had caught her parents having sex and she could not understand what they are doing. Again, her lack of sexual experience prevents her from understanding why the monkey is relaxed and blissful when it looks as if the leopard was attacking it—its tenseness probably symbolizing an erection. In these cases in which adult sexuality is at stake, fantasy elements come in very handy to represent it without crossing the boundaries of acceptability and good taste.

Although it is not always possible for Pullman to tackle the child’s sexual experience openly, I believe Pullman succeeds not only in breaking with the silence that surrounds this topic in children’s fiction, but also in presenting knowledge and desire as interdependent. Speaking about Carroll’s *Alice* novels, Nodelman states that “Alice does not oppose knowledge and desire so much as conflate them: far from undermining or denying the desirability of what one desires, knowledge is what one desires” (2008: 38). In this sense, Pullman’s Lyra—who sometimes calls herself ‘Alice’ when she does not want to be recognized (*Northern Lights*, 101)—shares many traits with Carroll’s young heroine. Yet, Alice’s adventure culminates with the disappearance of Wonderland the moment she realizes that a pack of cards cannot hurt her. By contrast, Lyra’s adventure does not end in the dissipation of her desire but in its realization. Surprisingly for a work of children’s fiction, child characters learn in Pullman’s trilogy not that desire needs to be controlled, but rather that, as Will explains, “the best part is the body, (...). Angels wish they had bodies. They told me that angels can’t understand why we don’t enjoy the world more. It would be sort of ecstasy for them to have our flesh and our senses” (*The Amber Spyglass*, 440). In accordance with Pullman’s positive view of desire, what is Gothicized in *His Dark Materials* is the attempt to do away with it with the pretext that it brings about suffering.

“Just a little cut”

Pullman’s rewriting of the Fall breaks with the silence that surrounds sexuality in many children’s books. Yet, as I have argued in the previous subsection, when it comes to dealing with sexuality in its most deviant and socially unacceptable aspects, the author still resorts to metaphors and Gothic imagery. As Cavallaro affirms,

Children’s tales that hinge on pitiable victims of merciless systems do not transcend the strictures of the adult world but rather articulate them in symbolic forms that enable some harsh truths to appear in a subtly mediated fashion. Spooky narratives for children, in particular, deal with the same elemental themes that animate ghost stories for adults. (2002: 83)

This last subsection focuses on how Pullman Gothicizes the repression of children’s sexuality through his fictional concept of ‘intercision’—the separation of a child from its dæmon, which Pullman compares to castration. Since dæmons symbolize both the genitalia and the soul of human beings, intercision can be understood both as a physical and a spiritual mutilation. Therefore, Pullman’s text demonizes not only sexual repression, but also the attempt to do away with the inner double and, particularly, with the connection between body and soul that, in *His Dark Materials*, is responsible for desire, evil and suffering.

Mrs Coulter describes ‘intercision’ to Lyra as “a little cut, and then everything’s peaceful. For ever!” (*Northern Lights*, 283). Intercision is presented as an antidote to the ills of Dust, which for Mrs Coulter is “not something for children to worry about. (...) Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked” (*Northern Lights*, 281-2). Indeed, before learning what Dust is, Lyra also perceives it as something dark: “Lyra sensed the presence of the Dust, for the air seemed to be full of dark intentions, like the forms of thoughts not yet born” (*Northern Lights*, 388-9). Like Coraline’s other mother, Pullman’s villainess uses common expressions that adults use to reassure

children, such as “the doctors do it for the children’s own good, my love” and “some of what’s good has to hurt us a little” (*Northern Lights*, 282). Spoken by Mrs Coulter, however, these words sound false, controlling and sinister, forcing the reader to rethink about the language adults use to comfort children about things they are not even sure of themselves. Furthermore, the contrast between Mrs Coulter’s kind words and Lyra’s experience with intercision reinforces the manipulative nature of the system Pullman’s child characters are subject to. As I explained in section 3.3., Lyra has already seen the effects of intercision after witnessing the ghostly existence and tragic death of a severed child, not to mention her own narrow escape from the silver blade in Bolvangar. The brutality of intercision and its connection with death are emphasized by describing the instrument to carry it out as “a kind of guillotine” (*Northern Lights*, 272). This comparison already suggests that intercision is like a form of execution, albeit spiritual. What is more, Pullman openly compares it to castration, and, in my view, it could also be compared to ablation. As Lord Asriel tells Lyra:

There was a precedent. Something like it had happened before. Do you know what the word *castration* means? It means removing the sexual organs of a boy so that he never develops the characteristics of a man. (...) But the Church wouldn’t flinch at the idea of a little *cut*, you see. (*Northern Lights*, 372, original emphasis)

Thus, the concept of intercision links sexual repression and emotional detachment to immaturity and incompleteness, comparing severed children to castrati who “became fat spoiled half-men” (*Northern Lights*, 372)—incomplete people, in other words. And when it comes to denouncing “the perpetuation by new regimes of the infamies of the old”, the Gothic comes in very handy (Cavallaro, 2002: 142).

The child who will never grow up is a common motif in both Gothic fiction and children’s literature. In adult Gothic fiction, on the one hand, it functions as a narrative device to maintain the separation between the worlds of children and adults. As Büssing

explains, “The concept that children have to die as soon as their childhood is over is very common in horror fiction. It is one more means of emphasizing the gap between grown-ups and children” (1987: 40). As Büssing adds, this death of the child generally occurs right before the onset of puberty: “Usually the crucial age is puberty, which means that the sexual element is totally excluded; the child may not live long enough to experience anything of the kind” (1987: 40). Maintaining this separation in horror fiction for adults is crucial in order to convey the sense of alienation and estrangement between the two age groups, which is one of the main causes of anxiety. Perpetual innocence means stagnation in horror fiction, being trapped in a permanently prepubescent body. A great example of this is five-year-old vampire Claudia in Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), who develops the cognitive maturity of a grown-up woman but is trapped in an infantile body that bars her from sexual experience forever.

On the other hand, the child who will not grow up is also a recurrent motif in children’s literature, and its representation tends to be ambivalent. As I have stated on multiple occasions, children’s literature is torn between teaching and concealing, between letting the child character grow up and preserving some of its childlike qualities. Perpetual innocence in children’s books is both desired and feared; it conveys nostalgia, but it also creates anxiety. On the one hand, perpetual innocence as a fantasy appeases adult anxieties about the child’s potential, our fears “that children will grow up to be even more like us than they already are” (Warner, 1994: 48). Yet, on the other hand, innocence can also be threatening, as “The child holds up an image of origin, but origins are compounded of good and evil together” (Warner, 1994: 44). In other words, innocence is associated with purity and truth, but also with primitivism, and irrationality. In children’s Gothic, the separation between adults and children is

generally temporary as most child characters reach intellectual and moral maturity, whereas they keep their innocence of adult power and sexuality. Thus, there is nostalgia for the qualities that we traditionally associate with children—the positive aspects of innocence—such as the imagination, the lack of prejudices, and the fascination of not being complete yet. However, most novels eventually express a need to grow up and a recognition that eternal youth goes against the laws of nature and is therefore undesirable. Of course, it would not be possible for me to continue discussing this theme without referring to James Matthew Barrie’s classic *Peter Pan* (1911).⁷⁹ Peter is the incarnation of eternal childhood, and contrary to popular belief, he is probably one of the most disturbing—and disturbed—child characters that children’s literature in English has ever produced. Peter’s aversion to the world of adults leads him to create his own community of children in Neverland, and whenever the boys grow up, Peter “thins them out” (Barrie, 1995: 52). Although it is not specified what it is exactly that Peter does to the boys, the expression suggests some kind of mutilation or even murder.

Moving back to *His Dark Materials*, the connection with *Peter Pan* is apparent inasmuch as the Church is trying to create a society of forever-innocent individuals. As Mrs Coulter explains to Lyra, “You see, your dæmon’s a wonderful friend and companion when you’re young, but at the age we call puberty, the age you’re coming to very soon, darling, dæmons bring all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that’s what lets Dust in” (*Northern Lights*, 283). The whole idea of intercision consists, therefore, of keeping individuals in a prepubertal stage, unaffected by the worries and fears of adulthood. The method to attain this is reminiscent of Peter’s thinning out his boys. Significantly, the chapter in which Lyra finds the severed child is entitled “The

⁷⁹ The play was first performed in 1904, and Barrie later wrote the novel version, which was published in 1911.

Lost Boy” (*Northern Lights*, 2004), which seems to be an allusion to Peter Pan’s “lost boys”—children Peter takes with him to Neverland after they have been neglected by their parents (Barrie, 1995: 31). Pullman, however, turns Neverland into an oppressive system that stifles the child’s potential to become a sexually and intellectually mature person, not for the child’s own good, but for the adult’s sake. Whereas many works of children’s Gothic simultaneously celebrate and demonize desire, Pullman’s trilogy takes a less ambivalent stance. Villainy in *His Dark Materials* is not so much connected to desire but to the adult’s attempts to repress it in the child and in themselves.

In light of the above, I believe Pullman’s ultimate preoccupation in *His Dark Materials* is not so much children, but adults. According to Nodelman, “adult writers wish to be free from and attack the conventions of other adults. It is a rebellion by some adults against other adults under the banner of something here identified as childhood” (2008: 182). In my view, Pullman’s novels reflect anxieties about the way adults try to civilize children rather than about their failure to do so, a concern that has already been expressed by critics of children’s culture such as Marina Warner or Jack Zipes. According to Warner, “Grown ups want them [children] to stay like that for their sakes’, not the children’s, and they want children to be simple enough to believe in fairies, too, again, for humanity’s sake on the whole, to prove something against the evidence” (Warner, 1994: 42). Along the same lines, Zipes claims that “The more we invest in children, the more we destroy their future” (2001: ix). As Zipes further explains,

We seek to improve our children’s lives by getting rid of moral sewers and by constructing purification systems that confine them. We do not realize how much our purification systems actually produce the waste and turpitude that we complain about. (...) We desperately want to save our children from the future that we have planned for them. (2001: xii)

Pullman’s idea that children need true stories rather than protection from the ugly aspects of life (as argued in section 3.2.) also seems to respond to the same discontent

that Zipes expresses. Thus, intercision may be read as a fictional representation of these ‘purification systems’ that Zipes criticizes. Presented as an antidote to the ills of a fallen existence, Pullman uses the concept of intercision to represent how the attempt to do away with suffering and disturbing thoughts eventually creates ghosts and it means living a half-life.

Apart from sexual repression, intercision also stands for the attempt to get rid of the inner double, particularly the part that is responsible for emotions—though Pantalaimon often functions as the voice of Lyra’s consciousness as well. Contrary to Rowling and Gaiman’s worlds where doubles acquire negative connotations, in Pullman’s fictional world, inner division is the natural condition of human beings rather than an aberration or a temporary stage, and dæmons are people’s companions. As I have explained, dæmons have the capacity to shape-shift until children reach puberty and their dæmons ‘settle’ in a particular form. I read this as a metaphor for the child’s potential and childhood’s openness to possibility as opposed to adulthood as characterized by stability and completion. As Reynolds states,

Much of the symbolic potential of childhood in culture derives from the fact that children have most of their choices before them: they represent potential. As a group, the fictions of childhood emphasise this view of childhood because they tend to be narratives in which the future is still an unknown and the self is in formation. (2007: 2)

Although Pullman envisages human beings as essentially divided, Pullman’s concept of the dæmon does not contemplate the possibility that some adults may never reach a stable identity, as all the adults’ dæmons in the trilogy have fixed shapes. Thus, his representation of the self depends on an ideal adult, a complete and stable human being. Accordingly, the child is defined in opposition to this ‘standard adult’ and characterized by its instability. As regards sexuality and the representation of the self, Pullman is more subversive than Rowling and Gaiman, as his child characters are not asexual and

he portrays the human's inner double in a positive light. Yet, when it comes to the difference between adults and children, Pullman sticks to the 'childhood as a journey to stable adulthood' view, or, as Nick Lee puts it, the division between "adult 'human beings' and child 'human becomings'" (2003: 5).

As Lee explains, "as we enter the twenty-first century, the experience of adult life is a lot less stable than it used to be. With regard to being 'grown up', we have entered an age of uncertainty, an age in which adult life is newly unpredictable" due to economic and social changes (2003: 7). Lee accounts for this new 'flexible' adulthood referring to how "the stability in conditions of employment that allowed us to think of adults as intrinsically stable and to associate adulthood with stability and completeness, has been considerably eroded" as has happened with "changes in the intimate sphere of life that are placing long-term relationship stabilities in question" (2003: 14-5). And yet, in children's fiction, the stability typically associated with adulthood is the journey's end; it is the ideal that child characters seek to attain by defeating their monsters, and the ideal the texts promote. As Lee affirms,

The images of journey's end, and of the standard adults who are taken to have arrived at journey's end, are crucial in maintaining the authority that adults often have over children (...). Our convenient fictions about adulthood are of greatest use when we are exerting that authority or facing the responsibilities toward children that adulthood brings with it. (2003: 9)

The fact that Pullman does not break with this convention confirms, once more, how the adult world always has control over the child's world in the end. Pullman's concept of the *dæmon* offers great opportunities for questioning the ideal of stability and put forth the idea that, even for some adults, such ideal is unattainable. Yet, Pullman—consciously or unconsciously—misses this opportunity. Pullman's child protagonist is also on a journey towards a stable identity. What differentiates Lyra's journey from

Coraline's or Harry's, however, is the fact that sexuality is also a part of it, and desire is neither sublimated nor demonized. Thus, Pullman's child heroine is allowed to mature, not only intellectually and morally, but also sexually.

3.6. Conclusions: “Without this child we shall all die”

There is a curious prophecy about this child: she is destined to bring about the end of destiny.

Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*

As I hope this chapter has demonstrated, Pullman's representation of the child takes into account many aspects of childhood that other authors ignore, especially stressing the child's attraction to the Gothic. Pullman's child protagonist, Lyra, is not always good, in the everyday sense of the word. Lyra sometimes disobeys her elders, she lies and she enjoys playing inappropriate games in creepy places. I read this as an attempt on the author's part to mock romanticized views of childhood that are so prevalent in children's literature and take a step towards a more psychologically plausible portrayal of the child protagonist. Even more importantly, Pullman does not exclude sexuality from Lyra's journey, thus breaking with one of the great taboos in children's fiction—even though, in some cases, he resorts to metaphors instead of dealing with this topic openly.

Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that Pullman's Lyra moves from being a brat to emerging as a heroine with qualities of both the romantic and the high mimetic hero, and once more, Gothic elements come in very handy to trigger this change. As in the previously analyzed children's Gothic texts, the child protagonist may be mischievous, she may be forced to do something immoral against her will, or she may

cause harm without intending to, but there is no such thing as a permanent questioning of her inherent goodness. Gothic elements indeed put the child's moral stamina to the test, and while some child characters reject such temptations right away (Harry Potter), others feel temporarily attracted to them (Lyra). The result, however, is often the same: the child protagonist symbolizes potential, and this potential is always developed in a positive way. As in the *Harry Potter* series and *Coraline*, the end point of Lyra's journey is the moment when evil is destroyed, thus eliminating the obstacles to not only the heroine's maturation but also the maturation of the whole community she inhabits. As in the previously discussed works of children's Gothic, the possession of adult knowledge and a sense of a stable and complete identity also emerge as the defining qualities of an empowered individual in Pullman's trilogy. Gothic elements are thus employed to temporarily disrupt this stability only to reinstate it even more firmly in the end.

At this point, I believe it can already be affirmed that the child protagonists of children's Gothic represent hope. The more their worlds are Gothicized, the more necessary these child characters are, and this is another firmly established convention of children's literature: in the end, there has to be hope and there has to be justice. Speaking about the popularity of fairy tales among children, Pullman himself has stated that he believes it has to do with justice: "Children have a profound and unshakeable belief that things have got to be fair. They like stories in which the good people are rewarded, and the bad punished. And that's a characteristic certainly of the Grimm tales, and of many other folk tales too" (in Henley, 2013). Being aimed at older child readers, however, Pullman complicates the good and bad characters dichotomy. Still, even if Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter are finally given the chance to redeem themselves, all the

harm they have caused cannot be undone, and they die in accordance with genre conventions. Will and Lyra, on the other hand, go back to their respective worlds after having completed their mission, and, although it is not said, there is a sense that Lyra is not a half-civilized girl climbing the roofs of Jordan College anymore. The trilogy ends with Lyra's words, "We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient, and we've got to study and think, and work hard, all of us, in all our different worlds, and then we'll build... (...) The republic of heaven" (*The Amber Spyglass*, 522). I believe this is, in a nutshell, the didactic lesson of Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and by the end of the trilogy, Lyra embodies all these qualities.

In accordance with the idea that children's literature is mostly an adult activity based on adult assumptions on what children need, I argue that it is, of course, the hopes of adults that these child characters represent. On the one hand, the hope that innocence will be preserved is clearly an adult hope. As Nodelman puts it, one needs "to have enough adult knowledge to know why not knowing very much of it is a good thing, to be un-innocent enough to value innocence" (2008: 46). On the other hand, the hope that children will leave innocence behind and become empowered through learning, more in line with Pullman's discourse, is also a grown-up hope. As Zipes states,

I have always written with the hope that childhood might be redeemed, not innocent childhood, but a childhood rich in adventure and opportunities for self-exploration and self-determination. Instead, I witness a growing regulation and standardization of children's lives. (2001: x)

The hope that Pullman's child protagonist represents has much more to do with the hope expressed by Zipes, as I have argued in my examination of Pullman's depiction of systems that 'kill' self-determination.

It seems that, for Pullman, current notions of child protection are obstacles to the individual's empowerment. I have already stressed how children's Gothic tends to highlight the empowering effects of fear. Although child characters go through horrific experiences, the texts recognize the importance of such experiences for their development. *His Dark Materials* also articulates a message about how shielding children from the 'unpleasant' aspects of life ultimately creates detached human beings, like ghosts or zombies. Yet, in my view, Pullman stresses even more than Gaiman and Rowling the fact that adults are scared of the wrong things: they are scared of Dust, when it is intercision they should be most afraid of. In Pullman's novels, Gothic elements are deployed to depict a dystopian world where adults' fear of Original Sin leads them to devise a system to put an end to suffering at the expense of the child's individuality and maturity. Therefore, whereas fear is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition, it is fear of fear that the novels portray as evil.

Once again, I seem to have reached another underlying contradiction in children's Gothic: the novels articulate a message for and against fear. On the one hand, childhood fears are generally portrayed as a natural and even 'healthy' part of life that can actually trigger positive changes if handled with courage and intelligence. On the other hand, when it comes to adult fears, the novels only depict the terrible consequences such fears bring about. For example, Voldemort's fear of death ultimately leads to self-destruction, and in *His Dark Materials*, Mrs Coulter's fear of desire leads to the blunting of consciousness. Above all, the novels criticize the adults' fear of children and their potential, and this is clearly articulated in Pullman's trilogy. And yet, I believe that the adult fear of what children might be like in the future lies at the heart of children's Gothic. In the same way that children's literature aims to teach readers to

know and not know at the same time, I believe it also teaches to fear and not fear. Writers romanticize childhood even when they simultaneously attempt to represent it as a dark time; even when they are dealing with childhood fears, they are being romantic and nostalgic. The child's experience of fear is equated to excitement and adventure. Yet, when it is represented in connection with adult characters, fear brings stagnation and destruction.

While Pullman's trilogy represents, in a Gothic mood, the harm done to children by adults in the name of child protection, the last chapter in this dissertation will look into Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which portrays a world where child protection does not exist. As I have just concluded, the child protagonist is like a vessel of hope in the middle of a Gothic world, and this is also the case in Handler's series. Yet, as I will discuss, not only does Handler make use of all the Gothic and children's fiction conventions I have examined so far, but he also finds a way of subverting these conventions and yet stay within the appropriate limits of today's children's fiction.

CHAPTER 4 – IDEALIZING THE BAUDELAIRES: THE CHILD AS AN ADULT FANTASY IN DANIEL HANDLER’S GOTHIC *A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS*

4.1. The Intriguing Introduction: How to Handle Handler, Snicket and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

Lemony Snicket was born in a small town where the inhabitants were suspicious and prone to riot. He now lives in the city. During his spare time he gathers evidence and is considered something of an expert by leading authorities.

Lemony Snicket, *The Bad Beginning*

American author Daniel Handler (born 1970) is best known as ‘Lemony Snicket’, the pen name under which he writes his books for children. Handler, though, is also the author of novels for adults, such as *The Basic Eight* (1998), *Watch Your Mouth* (2000), his short story collection *Adverbs* (2006) and his most recent novel *Why We Broke Up* (2011).⁸⁰ Handler’s most popular work, however, is his series of children’s books *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), signed by his fictional alter ego, Lemony Snicket. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is composed by a long list of thirteen books: *The Bad Beginning* (1999), *The Reptile Room* (1999), *The Wide Window* (2000), *The Miserable Mill* (2000), *The Austere Academy* (2000), *The Ersatz Elevator* (2001), *The Vile Village* (2001), *The Hostile Hospital* (2001), *The Carnivorous Carnival* (2002), *The Slippery Slope* (2003), *The Grim Grotto* (2004), *The Penultimate Peril* (2005) and *The End* (2006).

⁸⁰ Handler’s adult novels are often characterized by his dark sense of humour and bizarre topics. His first novel *The Basic Eight* (1998), for instance, is a dark comedy about a high-school girl, and *Watch Your Mouth* (2000) has been described as “One of those . . . incest-comedy gothic Jewish porn opera novels” (Hannaham, 2000).

The series deals with the troubles and tribulations in the lives of three orphaned, but extremely resourceful and intelligent children named Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire. At the beginning of the series, Violet is fourteen years old, Klaus is twelve and Sunny is a baby whose exact age is not specified. After their parents die in the fire that consumes their home, the siblings are sent to live with Count Olaf, a scheming villain who claims to be their distant relative. After putting the children through different forms of ill-treatment, Count Olaf is revealed to be scheming to lay his hands on the large fortune the Baudelaires have inherited from their parents. When Olaf's true intentions are uncovered, he manages to run away, and the children are taken away by Mr Poe, the banker who is in charge of managing the Baudelaire fortune and of finding a new home for the orphans. Throughout the thirteen books, Mr Poe places the siblings in different homes, each as eccentric as the next. The Baudelaires end up living with a series of outlandish guardians, like Aunt Josephine, an old lady who suffers from the most irrational fears. They also enroll in a school whose grim motto is 'Memento Mori'; they are taken to Lucky Smells Lumbermill, where they are forced to work for no money; and they move into a village that hypocritically claims 'It takes a village to raise a child', among many other unhomey homes. Still, no matter how far they go, Count Olaf always reappears under some ridiculous disguise which nobody can see through except for the Baudelaires. As the series moves on, the children start to realize that there is a connection between their parents' death and the villains that persecute them. Eventually, they discover that they all used to belong to a mysterious organization called V.F.D. (Volunteer Fire Department). From this moment onwards, the Baudelaires concern themselves not only with escaping from Olaf and his troupe, but also with solving the mystery of their parents' death and their relation with V.F.D.. The whole story is narrated by Lemony Snicket, who turns out to be another V.F.D. member who

was in love with the Baudelaires' mother, Beatrice, to whom he dedicates the thirteen volumes. Snicket claims that it is his duty to make the Baudelaires' misfortunes known to the world and he presents his narrative as a reconstruction, a story he has put together by assembling different pieces of evidence.

Apart from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Lemony Snicket also appears as the author of two companions to the series; namely, *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography* (2002) and *The Beatrice Letters* (2006).⁸¹ Handler has also published other books for children—unconnected to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*—using Snicket's name, such as *Horseradish: Bitter Truths You Can't Avoid* (2007), *The Composer is Dead* (2009), and *The Dark* (2013),⁸² among others. He has also recently published *Who Could That Be at This Hour?* (2012) and *When Did You See Her Last?* (2013), the first two books of his new series, *All the Wrong Questions*, about Lemony Snicket's childhood.

Handler vs. Snicket

As Handler explains, “The pseudonym's been around since I did research for *The Basic Eight*, when I used it to contact right-wing organizations to get pamphlets and learn their dogma” (in Hogan, n.d.). More than a mere pseudonym, ‘Lemony Snicket’ is a fictional character created—and sometimes impersonated—by Handler himself. The writer sometimes appears as, or on behalf of, Lemony Snicket in interviews or author

⁸¹ The former is, as the title indicates, about Snicket's story, though it also contains some more information about V.F.D., the organization that plays a key role in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. *The Beatrice Letters*, on the other hand, contains letters exchanged between Snicket and two characters named ‘Beatrice’: one of them is the Baudelaires' mother and the other is Lemony Snicket's niece, who appears by the end of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

⁸² *The Dark* is a Gothic picture book illustrated by Jon Klassen about a little boy who is afraid of the dark.

appearances. Lemony Snicket and Daniel Handler have to be understood, therefore, as two different people. Handler is the real author behind the books, a man who lives in San Francisco with his family, whereas Snicket is Handler's fictional persona, a tormented and mysterious writer and researcher, who writes to expose the evils of the world. Since, on the covers of the thirteen *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books, Lemony Snicket appears as the author, whereas Handler's name is nowhere to be seen, this complicates the terminology that I use in this dissertation to differentiate between narrator, implied author and real author. In the other works of fiction I analyze, narrator and implied author practically merge, the implied author being the idea that the reader gets of the real author by reading the books. This smooth connection between the three figures does not occur in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. It is clear that the narrator is Lemony Snicket and that Daniel Handler is the real, albeit hidden, author. The problem has to do with the figure of the implied author. Just by reading the books, one cannot know about Daniel Handler's existence, and therefore cannot picture him as an implied author. At the same time, though, it is apparent that Lemony Snicket is a fictional character; he cannot be the real author and, therefore, this rules him out as implied author as well. As a consequence, in this chapter, I will refer to the real author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as 'Daniel Handler'; 'Lemony Snicket' will be used to refer to the character-narrator created by Handler; and I will refer to the implied author as 'Handler/Snicket'. It could also be argued that the category of 'implied author' is hardly applicable to such a work of fiction, or that it is applicable only when one finds out about Daniel Handler, but I will stick to it for lack of a better term.

The Challenges of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

I selected *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as one of the works to be analyzed in this dissertation because it is often categorized as Gothic fiction for older children and it shares certain thematic and generic similarities with the other books I examine. Like the works by Rowling, Gaiman and Pullman, the use of Gothic devices in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* allows for a representation of childhood as a time filled with Gothic anxieties, which children struggle to overcome. In Julia Eccleshare's *1001 Children's Books You Must Read Before You Grow Up*, for example, Snicket's series is classified as "Fantasy, Horror, Quirky" aimed at children aged 8 and up (2009: 673). Other reviewers have described it as "mock-Gothic" (Leopold, 2002), because it parodies conventional Gothic themes; or "black comedy" (Langford, 2002), because it deals with harsh issues in a comically detached way. Moira Redmond, for example, regards Snicket's series and its "neo-gothic shift" as a parody of what she calls "Dreadlit",⁸³ a type of realistic fiction for children and, especially, teenagers which Redmond compares to Victorian moral tales, in which "children never enjoy any kind of unsupervised life without dire results" (2002). As Redmond puts it, "the sublime satirizes Dreadlit—the Baudelaire orphans suffer from a hilariously gothic pileup of miseries" (2002). Another aspect of the series that has been highlighted in reviews is the series' potential to attract a double readership, as is also the case with *Coraline* and *Harry Potter*. As Leopold puts it, "behind the mysterious Snicket is one Daniel Handler, 32, a fiendishly clever author with a taste for Victorian gothic settings, dark comedy and literary references that helps his books appeal to adults as much as children" (2002). Once again,

⁸³ In her review, Redmond mentions several instances of this realistic fiction: David Patneau's *Framed in Fire* (1999), Beatrice Sparks's *It Happened to Nancy* (1994), and Julius Lester's *When Dad Killed Mom* (2001), among others. In these books, adolescent characters undergo horrific experiences like being taken to a mental hospital, getting raped or infected with the HIV virus.

Gothicism and intertextuality are highlighted as the qualities that make the books interesting for adults as well as children.

Despite having had a generally positive reception, having been made into a movie,⁸⁴ and having won several literary awards,⁸⁵ Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* has received little critical attention if we compare it to other contemporary works of children's fiction, such as the *Harry Potter* series or Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Surprisingly, even in Jackson, Coats and McGuillis's *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*, Snicket's series is only briefly mentioned, even though Gothic themes and devices are plentiful. In their "Introduction", the authors mention Lemony Snicket and Roald Dahl as children's authors who "while preserving the child's innocence and the utter externality of the evil that threatens, innovate by giving the child some clever weapon with which to fight their attackers" (Jackson, Coats and McGuillis, 2008: 7). Yet, the significance of representing children as innocent but mature, and the devices with which this is attained, have not been explored. Another aspect of Handler's work that has been pointed out is that it is both frightening and funny. In her chapter about humor in Gothic children's fiction, Julie Cross briefly mentions Snicket's series, stating that it has contributed to the increase in popularity of the comic Gothic genre within children's fiction (2008: 57). However, as her chapter focuses on other works and authors, Cross does not examine in what way *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is comic Gothic, or the

⁸⁴ Brad Silberling's 2004 movie *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* is based on the first three books in the series, and it stars Jim Carrey as Count Olaf and Meryl Streep as Aunt Josephine.

⁸⁵ *The Bad Beginning* won the Colorado Children's Book Award, the Nevada Young Readers Award and the Nene Award. *The Wide Window*, *The Vile Village* and *The Hostile Hospital* received the IRA/CBC Children's Choice Awards, and *The Penultimate Peril* was chosen best book at the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards, to name a few (see Wikipedia article "A Series of Unfortunate Events").

significance these humorous devices have in conjunction with the Gothic in Snicket's series.

Academic articles about *A Series of Unfortunate Events* are few, and I have only found one of them that looks at the series from a Gothic Studies perspective: Danel Olson's chapter "The Longest Gothic Goodbye in the World: Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*". According to Olson, Pullman's *His Dark Materials* "may have astonishing Gothic flashes" and *Harry Potter* "may have tingling moments of peril and fantasy (...), but it is *A Series of Unfortunate Events* that has all the Gothic rites" (2011: 506). As Olson adds, Snicket's books "offer all the iconic features of the old Gothic, but with a new-millennium twist" (2011: 507). Other articles examine Handler's series from other scholarly perspectives. Langbauer (2007), for example, looks into Handler/Snicket's vision of ethics and compares his series to Generation X novels, such as Douglas Coupland's 1991 eponymous novel. Bruce Butt, on the other hand, pays attention to the series's commercial success, asking whether "its 13-volume length is a reflection of the need to tell the story over the duration it demands, or the decision to exploit a lucrative publishing opportunity" (2003: 277). Finally, the only author I have found who focuses on child characterization is Tison Pugh, who does so from a Gender Studies perspective. Pugh remarks that Snicket's series undermines gender roles with its depiction of child characters who are not constrained by their gender (2008: 163).

I have found Langbauer and Pugh's articles relevant to my analysis of the representation of children and adults, and good and evil, and I will therefore refer back to them throughout my analysis. As for Butt's article, I find his approach to Snicket's series superficial, and some of his statements inaccurate. As the article was written before the series was over, some of Butt's claims about the series being repetitive and predictable have been debunked by the last few volumes. For example, Butt states that

“*Unfortunate Events* offers no new insights into characters and no changes to their conduct; character traits remain in place *despite* experience” (2003: 284, original emphasis). Although this is more or less true about the first few books in the series, when Butt wrote his article only the first seven books had been published and it is precisely at this point that characters start to undergo significant changes. Moreover, Butt views repetition and predictability only as marketing devices rather than literary devices, overlooking the fact that these formulas have been used in children’s literature before the genre became a commercial phenomenon.

This relative lack of academic material on the Gothic in Handler’s work has allowed me to approach *A Series of Unfortunate Events* almost from scratch. This has been an advantage, as well as a challenge, for I have found that, not only does Snicket’s series defy generic definition, but it also represents childhood in a way which eludes any possible generalization. What is particularly challenging about the series, and differentiates it from the other books I analyze, is that it parodies the genres it simultaneously aligns itself with. As evident from the summary I have provided, the series displays commonplace themes of traditional Gothic romances, recalling the works of early writers like Horace Walpole or Ann Radcliffe: death, inheritance, crimes, over-the-top violent episodes and persecuted minors as victims. Furthermore, Handler/Snicket makes use of narrative devices which give his work the ambiguity and the labyrinthine quality of Gothic novels; namely, unreliable narration, narrative fragmentation and intertextuality. Victorian novels, like Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, which denounce cruelty to children and portray the child as innately good are also evoked. At the same time, the series aligns itself with the other works of 1990s and early 2000s children’s Gothic analyzed in this dissertation, with which it shares the following traits: the series features child characters that are morally and intellectually mature, yet

sexually innocent; family, friendship and other bonds with other human beings are the protagonists' utmost preoccupation; and the children are depicted as learning moral lessons and developing their personality through their exposure to danger and fear. However, Handler/Snicket gives his work another turn of the screw, for he draws attention to the artifice of his story and, consequently, of the characters in it. What is more, his story is always so intentionally far-fetched that it seems to be mocking the very same trends and genres it draws on. Thus, in my analysis of the representation of childhood in Snicket's series, I take into account that, while the Baudelaire orphans are very much like Coraline, Lyra or Harry Potter in the sense that they serve as repositories for laudable qualities, Handler/Snicket's narrative devices highlight the fakery of these characters and other similar ones. Necessarily, this leads me to examine what—if anything—is to be taken seriously about the story and the characters.

If defining Snicket's series by genre is complicated enough, there is even more to be considered. Not only does *A Series of Unfortunate Events* fall under the paradigms of children's fiction, Gothic fiction and comic Gothic; it is also a postmodernist text in form and content. Snicket's series is experimental and metafictional, privileging the individual's personal interpretation of reality over a universal interpretation. In fact, Snicket's series is also definable as what Beville calls "Gothic-postmodernism" (2009), i.e., a work of fiction in which Gothic elements are used to represent the terrors of postmodernity. Beville defines Gothic-postmodernism "as a hybrid mode that emerges from the dialogic interaction of Gothic and postmodern characteristics in a given text" and claims that "'terror' (with all that it involves) remains a connecting and potent link between the Gothic and the postmodern" (2009: 8-9). Postmodern and Gothic devices intertwine in Snicket's series to represent, not only the fears of children, but also the fears of adults.

I have found it ineffective to try to confine *A Series of Unfortunate Events* to a specific genre. The series is not just a work of children's fiction, or a postmodern text, or a Gothic text, or a parody of previous novels about children; it is all these things together. The purpose of this chapter is, then, to pay attention to the interplay of all these different elements always in relation to the representation of childhood. The following sections will examine the significance of representing children as the bearers of extraordinary qualities, at the same time that Gothic, postmodern and comic devices constantly point out the artifice of their characterization.

4.2. Suffer the Baudelaires: Mistrusting Appearances in Snicket's Unreliable Narration

This is not a tale of Lemony Snicket. It is useless to tell the Snicket story, because it happened so very long ago, and because there is nothing anybody can do about the way it has turned out, so the only reason I could possibly have for jotting it down in the margins of these pages would be to make this book even more unpleasant, unnerving, and unbelievable than it already is. This is a story about Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire.

Lemony Snicket, *The Hostile Hospital*

With these words, the narrator Lemony Snicket tries to convince the narratee that his writing is genuinely devoted to the Baudelaire orphans, and that his marginal allusions to his own story are only there for dramatic effect. However, the question here is why he needs to justify himself. Only a very obtrusive narrator who knows he is being obtrusive would need to clarify this. In this section, I examine how Snicket's narrative voice affects the representation of children. The previous chapters have shown how J.K. Rowling, Neil Gaiman and, to a lesser extent, Philip Pullman employ third-person narrative techniques that consist of obliterating their narrators' personalities so that the

reader's attention is seldom distracted from the child protagonists. At the same time, while these authors make use of many Gothic devices to represent the child as vulnerable to fragmentation, the shadowy presence of an omniscient, coherent narrator suggests that a sense of completeness is ultimately possible. Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* works very differently. Handler's narrative persona, Lemony Snicket, is not only the first-person narrator of the Baudelaires' tales, but also a character with his own history and personality. Throughout the series, Snicket intertwines the story of the Baudelaires with his own personal story, which questions his veracity, and hints at a possible reading of Lemony Snicket as an unreliable narrator. In fact, previous criticism already interprets Snicket's narrative voice as unreliable (Langbauer, 2007: 503) and I adhere to this interpretation. The following subsections analyze the figure of the narrator and his relationship with the child characters, looking at what happens when the latter are overtly presented as the objects of an adult's writing. Despite Snicket's statement—quoted at the beginning of this section—that the books are not about him, his obtrusiveness raises the uncertainty of who is at the centre of the story: the child characters or the adult narrator, or both.

An Unreliable Narrator in Children's Fiction

Even in the postmodern era, unreliable narrators are remarkably absent in children's fiction in English, as are first-person narrators in general. There are, of course, exceptions that are worth mentioning. *Huckleberry Finn* can be read as an unreliable narrator, but then again, Mark Twain's novel (1884) was not originally intended for a child audience.⁸⁶ Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), on the other

⁸⁶ Barbara Wall states that "The greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* is essentially the result of the assumption of the implied author that his implied reader is an adult ironist like himself. Unfortunately, Clemens's

hand, could be considered an early example of narrative unreliability in a novel aimed at children. Nesbit's novel is about the six Bastable siblings, one of whom is the narrator, who playfully refuses to reveal his/her identity until the very end.⁸⁷ Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in The Rye* (1951) is also a young unreliable narrator, as his immaturity affects his vision of the world. However, we are here entering the domain of literature for adolescents, in which first-person narrative techniques are more common. In fact, Holden Caulfield's voice has been imitated by many young adult fiction authors. A recent example is the young-adult series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* (2005-2009) by American writer Rick Riordan, narrated by twelve-year-old Percy himself.⁸⁸

If unreliable child narrators are uncommon in contemporary children's fiction, it is even rarer to find an unreliable *adult* narrator like Lemony Snicket. Similar to Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Snicket is a narrator who observes other characters and writes about them in the third person, intertwining this with his own story, which he relates in the first person. The only other works of children's fiction which come to mind that use a similar narrative device are Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2003-2009) and Pseudonymous Bosch's *Secret Series* (2007-2013). In *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, the authors acknowledge at the beginning that it is their duty to write down and publish the story of the Grace

attitude to his material is ambivalent. The novel demonstrates that he could not decide, consciously or subconsciously, whom he was writing for" (1991: 115).

⁸⁷ "It is one of us that tells this story – but I shall not tell you which: only at the very end perhaps I will" (Nesbit, 2006: 2).

⁸⁸ Riordan's series is based on Greek mythology and its protagonist, Percy (short for 'Perseus') is a demigod who has to stop Kronos from rising again. The beginning of Riordan's novel *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* is reminiscent of Salinger's novel: "Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood. If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now. Believe whatever lie your mom or dad told you about your birth, and try to lead a normal life. (...) If you're a normal kid, reading this because you think it's fiction, great. Read on. I envy you for being able to believe that none of this ever happened." (Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, 2013: 1) Percy's cynical view of adults and his envy of the innocence of other 'normal' kids recall Caulfield's voice.

children who live in the Spiderwick estate. Unlike Lemony Snicket, however, DiTerlizzi and Black are not characters in the story, they do not observe the children—in fact, they have never met them in person—and they affirm that, if they are writing and publishing their story, it is because Simon, Jared and Mallory Grace have asked them to. As a ‘proof’, the authors attach the “letter from the Grace kids” to their narrative, as well as other pieces of ‘evidence’ like a map of the Spiderwick estate. Thus, the adult narrator(s) in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* remain at a safe distance from the children they are writing about, at the same time that they present themselves as mere catalysts between the Grace children and the implied reader. In fact, apart from the opening letter, the whole narration is in the third person and Black and DiTerlizzi do not interfere again. As for Pseudonymous Bosch’s series, the style is very similar to Snicket’s. It is also written by an author with a pen name, but, unlike Daniel Handler, the real person behind Pseudonymous Bosch remains anonymous.⁸⁹

In *The Narrator’s Voice*, Wall affirms that “adults demanded, in the books which they thought suitable for children to read, a narrating voice of which they could approve”, and which “reflected orthodox adult relationships with children” (1991: 41-2). Although Wall refers to nineteenth-century children’s books, I would say this could account for the relative lack of experimentation with narrative voices in children’s literature in general. Certainly, even today, an adult who is not reliable might not sound as the most appropriate guide to lead the child reader through the narrative. As Rose affirms in *The Case of Peter Pan*, one of the rules of children’s fiction is that it does not really matter if the narrator is an adult or a child, provided that “it knows, with absolutely no equivocation, *which* it is, and that it uses that knowledge to hold the two

⁸⁹ It is rumoured that Pseudonymous Bosch is actually the author Raphael Simon, but this has never been confirmed by the author (e.g., see Fernanda Moore’s 2011 interview “Don’t Read This”).

instances safely apart on the page” (1994: 69). Narrative unreliability does just the opposite: it blurs boundaries. According to Booth, unreliable narrators are not necessarily liars, “although deliberately deceptive narrators have been a major resource of some modern novelists (...). It is most often a matter of what James calls *inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him” (1983: 159, original emphasis). Narrative unreliability is often linked to immaturity or psychological disorders;⁹⁰ therefore, it is not surprising that unreliable adult narrators are a minority in a genre in which, in one way or another, adult figures traditionally play the part of mentors and protectors. As Rose adds,

(...) in the case of children’s fiction, the question of form turns into a question of limits, of irrationality and lost control, of how far the narrator can go before he or she loses his or her identity, and hence the right to speak, or write, for a child. (...) The demand for better and more cohesive writing in children’s fiction (...) carries with it a plea that certain psychic barriers should go undisturbed, the most important of which is the barrier between adult and child. When children’s fiction touches on that barrier, it becomes not experiment (the formal play of a modern adult novel which runs the gamut of its characters’ points of view), but *molestation*. Thus the writer for children must keep his or her narrative hands clean and stay in his or her proper place. (1994: 70, original emphasis)

Rose, however, wrote her book before Handler’s series was launched. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Handler actually disrupts some of the limits of children’s fiction, having an adult narrator who is grown-up and childish at the same time, and who identifies with the children he is writing about. Since we see the children through his eyes, I shall devote a few paragraphs to examine Snicket as a narrator and how he treats the child characters.

⁹⁰ For example, in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), the narrator is unreliable precisely because she is childish, gullible and liable to believe her own fancies. Other unreliable narrators like the governess in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* or Humbert Humbert in Nabokov’s *Lolita* show symptoms of psychological disorders like obsession, paranoia and hallucinations.

Snicket's narrative technique continuously highlights the fakery of the story, the narrator, and even the figure of the author. At the end of every book, Snicket encloses a letter to his editor where he states that his story is the result of an investigation he is conducting, checking out newspapers and visiting the scenes of the crimes. The implied reader knows, therefore, that he has not actually *witnessed* these events. Moreover, the fact that he is writing about the children of a woman he loves suggests that he might not be a very objective narrator, and that he is liable to idealize the children and oversentimentalize their story. Thus, Snicket certainly has the inconstancy that Booth points out as characteristic of unreliable narrators. The sentimentality he pours onto his narrative and his admitting that his story is made up of different bits and pieces make him less likely to be taken seriously.

However, Booth's definition of 'unreliable narrator' complicates the reading of Lemony Snicket as one: "For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (1983: 158-9, original italics). As I observed in the introduction to this chapter, the category of 'implied author' does not apply easily to this series. Handler evades—consciously or unconsciously—being perceived as the implied author of the thirteen novels by creating the fictitious writer Snicket, which is not just a pseudonym but a character. However, although it is not clear what the implied author's norms might be, it is just impossible to take Snicket seriously as a narrator. Even if the reader knows nothing about Daniel Handler, it is obvious that there must be someone else behind the writing. Lemony Snicket's name, for a start, is noticeably not a real name.⁹¹ Furthermore, Snicket's narrative technique is overtly and

⁹¹ Handler points out in an interview, however, that apparently not everybody got the joke: "For the most part, it seems that children are quite used to adults standing in front of them, calling for attention, and

shamelessly unconvincing, for, if his story has been reconstructed out of pieces of evidence—like newspaper cuttings or objects found in the scene of the crime—there is no way he can have access to the characters’ thoughts and feelings in every situation, and yet he seems to know the Baudelaires quite well. What is more, Lemony Snicket clearly shows that he does not even take himself seriously, just as he does not take any of his adult characters seriously, and he invites the implied reader to mock him by directing irony towards himself. For example, Snicket mocks Mr Poe, the banker who is in charge of providing a new home for the Baudelaire orphans and of managing their inheritance:

‘Your parents,’ Mr. Poe said, ‘have perished in a terrible fire.’
The children didn’t say anything.

(...)

‘“Perished”,’ Mr. Poe said, ‘means “killed.”’

‘We *know* what the word “perished” means,’ Klaus said, crossly.

(*The Bad Beginning*, 8, original emphasis)

Mr Poe stands for the pesky adult habit of using unnecessarily complicated words and assuming that children are intellectually inferior. Interestingly, this is precisely the attitude that Lemony Snicket often adopts towards the child narratee when he defines words he uses. This contradiction suggests that Snicket is, in some aspects, not so different from the adult figures he criticizes and ridicules. Apparently, Handler/Snicket is using narrative unreliability and mocking this technique at the same time, making fun of previous unreliable narrators. It may also be argued, however, that *all* unreliable narrators are a mockery of omniscient narrators and that none of them is to be taken seriously. Yet, what distinguishes Snicket is the fact that he intentionally makes a fool of himself, whereas most unreliable narrators take themselves very seriously. This raises

telling them a complete lie. So they usually have figured out what the gig is. The problem is actually more with adults. I was once almost forced off the stage at a large chain bookstore that shall remain nameless, because she [the bookstore manager] introduced me as Lemony Snicket, and I immediately interrupted her and said, ‘Oh no, Lemony Snicket isn’t here,’ and then she tried to cancel the event right then and there” (in Robinson, 2005).

interesting questions in regard to the representation of childhood in the series, for, if the story is overtly presented as the creation of a writer, who is not even real, and if most of what he says is tongue-in-cheek, it seems as though the Baudelaire orphans must also be understood as part of this whole burlesque.

Lemony Snicket is, then, omnipresent and intentionally obtrusive, unlike most narrators in contemporary children's fiction. His narrative oscillates between being detached from the child protagonists but close to the narratee, and getting closer to the characters, even getting inside their minds. The following passage, in which the orphans wish they were adopted by their neighbor (Justice Strauss) so that they can get away from Count Olaf, exemplifies these abrupt changes of focus:

‘Perhaps if we explained our situation to her, she would agree to adopt us,’ Klaus said hopefully, but when Violet looked at him she saw that he knew it was of no use. Adoption is an enormous decision, and not likely to happen impulsively. I’m sure you, in your life, have occasionally wished to be raised by different people than the ones who are raising you, but knew in your heart that the chances of this were very slim.

‘I think we should go see Mr. Poe,’ Violet said.

(The Bad Beginning, 60)

At the beginning, the focus is on Violet and Klaus's conversation and the narrator's mind is fused with theirs, as he even gets into Violet's thoughts. Yet, when he says "Adoption is an enormous decision", he is detaching himself from the children and directing his attention to the narratee, expressing his own thoughts on the subject of adoption and persuading the narratee to share these thoughts. Right after this digression, he focuses on the children's dialogue again.

Unlike Harry Potter, Coraline and Lyra, children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* often share their prominence with the narrator, Lemony Snicket. According to Wall, children's writers in the past "did not easily find a tone of voice which was free from the self-consciousness and the necessity to maintain their adult standing", and she

adds that this is less difficult for present-day writers, because they have access to many more models of how to address a child narratee (1991: 13). Yet, in contrast to present-day children's authors who try to make their adult narrative voices as little obtrusive as possible, Handler creates a narrator who intentionally maintains his self-consciousness and his adult standing. Snicket keeps commenting, lecturing and even defining certain words and expressions, to the extent that he comes across as obnoxious, as this passage reflects: "Also she [Violet] wanted to do something known in the crime industry as 'casing the joint'. 'Casing the joint' means observing a particular location in order to formulate a plan" (*The Bad Beginning*, 114). Snicket is, in many ways, similar to an early type of narrator that Wall describes as being *in loco parentis*, moving "from the friendly familiar stance adopted for 'telling a story' to the more distant and formal stance appropriate for 'teaching a lesson'" (1991: 44). Wall claims that this is often found in the work of early Victorian writers like Catherine Sinclair, who were "torn between entertaining and instructing, and between pleasing children and pleasing adults" (1991: 45). Snicket, however, does not take himself as seriously as his Victorian precedents did. Coming up with humorous (though accurate) definitions of words, the figure of Lemony Snicket parodies the obtrusive self-important narrators of early children's fiction.

In fact, Snicket is so prone to butting in that it is even possible to read his urge to write the story of the Baudelaires as an excuse to tell his own. That the story of the Baudelaires is a catalyst to talk about his own plight is hinted at when, at the beginning of every book in the series, there is a mournful dedication from Lemony Snicket to a mysterious woman: "To Beatrice—darling, dearest, dead" (*The Bad Beginning*, dedication page). It is revealed later on that Beatrice is the Baudelaire orphans' dead

mother, with whom Snicket was in love. Although this seems to be a secondary arc, Snicket is haunted by Beatrice's memory and a mournful atmosphere pervades the whole series.

A haunted narrator is not an innovation within children's fiction. In fact, Snicket's dedications are reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's nostalgic poems at the beginning and end of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, in which he acknowledges—referring to Alice Liddell—that “Still she haunts me, phantomwise” (Carroll, 1998: 241). However, Carroll previously affirms that

though the shadow of a sigh
May tremble through the story
For 'happy summer days' gone by,
And vanish'd summer glory—
It shall not touch, with breath of bale,
The pleasance⁹² of our fairy-tale. (Carroll, 1998: 118)

In other words, Carroll states that he will prevent his feelings from interfering with his story and that he will keep the child at the centre. And he keeps his promise, for, throughout his narrative, Carroll observes nothing but the child. Lemony Snicket, on the other hand, intentionally intertwines his story with the Baudelaires', since their plight has the same origin: Beatrice's death.

Snicket's dedications to Beatrice evoke and parody Dante's Beatrice and the long tradition of male writers who find their inspiration in dead women, who in turn function as written objects. As Pugh puts it, Snicket is “a mourner who writes” (2008: 180). Nevertheless, as Pugh points out, this dynamic is reversed in Snicket's series, because Beatrice is also a writer:

⁹² 'The pleasance' meaning both 'the pleasure' and 'the child', as Alice's full name was Alice Pleasance Liddell.

(...) I once loved a woman, who for various reasons could not marry me. If she had simply told me in person, I would have been very sad, of course, but eventually it might have passed. However, she chose instead to write a two-hundred-page book, explaining every single detail of the bad news at great length, and instead my sadness has been of impossible depth. (*The Miserable Mill*, 15-6)

Therefore, “he [Snicket] cannot assert control over Beatrice and capture her within an aestheticized vision of the past, because she controlled her decisions in love in the past” (Pugh, 2008: 180). Whereas Pugh sees this as an attempt to reverse gender roles, I also read it as a way to make Lemony Snicket’s figure even more hilariously miserable. I find Pugh’s idea that writing about someone means asserting control over this person relevant to this dissertation. Since she wrote down her story too, Beatrice is out of Snicket’s control. Snicket chooses to write, instead, the story of her children.

Putting Children First?

Unlike the Grace children in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, the Baudelaire orphans have certainly never asked Lemony Snicket to tell their story. In fact, they do not even know that they are being tracked down by a mysterious man, who has taken on the responsibility of making their story public. On the back cover of every book in the series, there is a blurb written and signed by Lemony Snicket, in which he affirms that “It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales” (*The Bad Beginning*, back cover) and “I have sworn to write down these tales of the Baudelaire orphans so the general public will know each terrible thing that has happened to them” (*The Ersatz Elevator*, back cover). Snicket is what Booth calls a “self-conscious narrator”, i.e., a narrator who is aware of himself as a writer (1983: 155). When it comes to child characterization, this device establishes Lemony Snicket as writing subject and the children as written objects. This dichotomy is mildly subverted at the very end of the

series, as I will discuss in section 4.4.; yet, for the most part, children are depicted as the victims of terrible things, while Snicket believes himself to be the paternal figure who gives them protection through his writing. Ironically, even though it might seem that writing invests Snicket with power, it also exposes his own limitations and vulnerabilities.

Like Lewis Carroll watching his little Alice, Snicket shows admiration for the children he writes about: “Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming, and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features” (*The Bad Beginning*, 1). He also shows compassion for them, like the Dickensian narrator sympathizing with Oliver Twist: “It is useless for me to describe to you how terrible Violet, Klaus, and even Sunny felt in the time that followed. If you have ever lost someone very important to you, then you already know how it feels, and if you haven’t, you cannot possibly imagine it” (*The Bad Beginning*, 11). This passage also suggests that there is identification between Snicket and the orphans, since they are all mourners. Although being the writing subject invests him with certain control over the children he is writing about, this also puts him in a vulnerable position. Talking about Stephen King’s works in which the protagonist is a writer, Cavallaro states that

(...) while the act of narrating may endow writers with a sense of authority and indeed with the illusion of an impregnable identity, it simultaneously exposes their limitations by highlighting their susceptibility to the raw reality of fear and to the troubling inevitability of irresolution in fiction and reality alike. (2002: 129)

The figure of Lemony Snicket represents this ambivalence. When Snicket talks about what it feels like to lose someone you love, his own feelings of loss for Beatrice’s death show through his words. This suggests that the Baudelaires are a projection of Snicket’s own emotions and desires. Revealingly, at the end of the series, Snicket writes these

words: “In many ways, the lives of the Baudelaire orphans that year is not unlike my own, now that I have concluded my investigation. Like Violet, like Klaus, and like Sunny, I visit certain graves, and often spend my mornings standing on a brae, staring out at the same sea” (*The End*, 324). With this identification between adult narrator and child characters, Handler disrupts the limit between child and adult which, as I have discussed, most children’s fiction aims to keep intact. Snicket is an adult, and yet he differs considerably from the standard adult—the stable and experienced individual—that most narrative voices in children’s fiction represent. As the above-quoted passage shows, Snicket’s life is far from stable.

Apart from being about the Baudelaires, the series is also about how Snicket appropriates the story of the Baudelaires for his own interests: exorcising his own ghosts and, at the same time, feeling that he is doing something noble for the children. This relationship between adult narrator and child characters inevitably evokes two other American novels with haunted narrators who write about the children that haunt them: the governess in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955).⁹³ Interestingly, like Lemony Snicket, all these narrators are unmarried and childless—at the beginning, at least—and they all somehow act as surrogate parents to the children they write about: Humbert Humbert marries *Lolita*’s mother, becoming a father figure for the girl that he secretly desires, and Henry James’s governess is the one in charge of taking care of the orphans, Miles and Flora, because their uncle does not want to take on this responsibility. Another similar relationship appears in J.M. Barrie’s *The Little White Bird* (1902), in which Captain W____ (the first-person, unreliable narrator) observes and writes about a little

⁹³ This might not be a coincidence, for Handler states in an interview that he loves *Lolita* (in Hogan, n.d.).

boy, David, whom he secretly wants to adopt. With his stories,⁹⁴ Captain W____ manages to lure the boy to him, and gets him to call him ‘father’. Snicket’s being in love with the orphans’ dead mother also recalls Snape in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, who turns out to have been in love with Harry’s mother. Like the Baudelaire orphans, Harry does not know that he is under Snape’s protection and, as in Snicket’s series, Snape’s love for the dead mother is what prompts him to watch over Harry.

Whereas the figure of the predator and the protector merge in Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, and love and hatred blend in the figure of Professor Snape in *Harry Potter*, in Lemony Snicket’s series, the figure of the surrogate father is split into the good father figure that casts a protective and loving look on children (Snicket) and the wicked father figure that sees them as both the obstacle and the means to get hold of a large fortune (Olaf). While Count Olaf keeps reappearing in the life of the Baudelaire orphans who feel constantly stalked and threatened by him, what they do not know is that there is someone else tracking them down for reasons that are very different from Count Olaf’s. The Baudelaires are children under surveillance. Significantly, the villain’s symbol is an eye, and this eye keeps reappearing everywhere the orphans go, making them feel constantly watched. Towards the end of the series, we learn that the eye is not only Count Olaf’s symbol, but also the emblem of V.F.D., which the Baudelaire parents and Lemony Snicket himself used to be part of. If what makes Coraline’s other home uncanny is the absence of eyes that have been replaced by buttons, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, it is the fact that eyes are everywhere that makes the protagonists uneasy:

⁹⁴ *The Little White Bird* is best-known for being the first book in which Peter Pan appears. Peter Pan is one of the characters that Captain W____ creates to entertain David, who is believed to have been inspired by George Lewellyn Davis, one of J.M. Barrie’s wards.

Count Olaf had an image of an eye tattooed on his ankle, matching the eye on his front door. They [the Baudelaires] wondered how many other eyes were in Count Olaf's house, and whether, for the rest of their lives, they would always feel as though Count Olaf were watching them even when he wasn't nearby. (*The Bad Beginning*, 25)

The fear of being constantly watched is at stake here; the fear of eyes that should not be there. Since children are constantly watched by parents and other adults, it is not surprising that this image should be recurrent in children's fiction. In *Marianne Dreams* (1958), for example, Marianne sees stones with eyes in her dreams that watch her threateningly; Coraline's other mother can see through her expressionless buttons; and, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry is under the vigilance of Mad-Eye Moody's eerie magical eye that can see through walls and invisibility cloaks. What is interesting about eyes in these works of children's fiction is that they do not cast protective gazes on children. Instead, eyes are threatening, as in fiction for adults like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), in which an eye is evil Sauron's symbol, or Edith Wharton's ghost story "The Eyes" (1910), in which the protagonist is haunted by a pair of eyes that watch him at night.

Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire are, thus, objectified by both father figures, albeit in very different ways and for different reasons. Since the relationship between children and villains in the series will be dealt with in section 4.3., here I focus on Snicket's relationship with the Baudelaires and how the narrative technique affects the representation of children, constructing the adult narrator as writing subject and the children as written objects. It would perhaps be too far-fetched to argue that, apart from the objects of his writing, the Baudelaire orphans are also the objects of Snicket's desire, but the similarities I have pointed out between Snicket and Nabokov and James's narrators inevitably raise this question. In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Rose states that

“Children’s fiction draws in the child, it secures, places and frames the child. (...) This is to describe children’s fiction, quite deliberately, as something of a soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction” (1994: 2). Rose deals with the adult and the child outside the text, i.e., the real author and the real reader. This is outside the scope of this dissertation, but I believe that Snicket can be read as a fictional representation of this adult desire that Rose talks about, ‘desire’ understood as “a form of investment by the adult in the child, and to the demand made by the adult on the child as the effect of that investment, a demand which fixes the child and then holds it in place” (Rose, 1994: 3-4).

In “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children”, Freud affirms that “It is undoubtedly nothing else but the customary prudishness and their own bad conscience over sexual matters that causes adults to adopt this attitude of ‘mystery-making’ in front of children” (1991: 175). Similarly, Rose draws on this idea to affirm that the writers’ glorification of the child “suggests not only a refusal to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood; it implies that we *use* the image of the child to deny those same difficulties in relation to ourselves” (1994: 8). As I will discuss in more detail in section 4.3., Snicket portrays children as morally and intellectually mature, but sexually innocent. The only reference to the children’s sexual awakening takes place in the tenth book, *The Slippery Slope*, in which Violet—the older Baudelaire—has a romantic moment with a boy, Quigley Quagmire. Even then, the narrator does not describe the encounter, because he wants to give them a moment of privacy:

I will tell you that the two young people resumed their climb, and that the afternoon slowly turned to evening and that both Violet and Quigley had small secret smiles on their faces (...), but there has been so little privacy in the life of Violet Baudelaire that I will allow her to keep a few important moments to herself, rather than sharing them with my distressed and weeping readers. (*The Slippery Slope*, 215)

The ambiguity in this passage revolves around whether Lemony Snicket is being honest in his declaration of intentions, or if he simply does not want to talk about Violet's sexual awakening because he wants to keep her innocent in his memory, or because he is embarrassed at his own voyeurism, or simply because, as Handler puts it, "children's literature as a genre has some restrictions, so certain things will never pop up in a Snicket book" (in Robinson, 2005).

It is significant that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* was not initially planned as a children's book. As Handler explains, "(...) I had an idea for a gothic novel, which had been falling apart as I was writing it, but I thought instead it could be the story of children growing up through all these terrible things" (in Robinson, 2005). This raises the question of how much of the original idea had to be 'repressed' in order for it to become an acceptable series of novels for children. As I mentioned when discussing narrators in children's fiction, a book that could suggest an unorthodox relationship between an adult and a child would be immediately ruled out as children's fiction. Consequently, the possibility that Snicket's gaze on the Baudelaire orphans might mean more than fatherly affection is camouflaged and made less likely by Snicket's reminders that he fell in love with a grown-up woman in the past whom he has not forgotten. Thus, his love for the children comes across as fatherly love, at the same time that any trace of sexual interest for the children is projected on Count Olaf, who tries to marry Violet in *The Bad Beginning*. Although he wants to marry her for economic reasons—to steal their fortune—his comments on Violet's beauty suggest that he may have something else in mind: "Would it be so terrible to be my bride, to live in my house for the rest of your life? You're such a lovely girl, after the marriage I wouldn't dispose of you like your brother and sister" (*The Bad Beginning*, 109).

A Freudian reading of Snicket's narrator, however, suggests a different interpretation of the narrator's intentions towards the young protagonists:

(...) cases in which sexually immature persons (children) are chosen as sexual objects are instantly judged as sporadic aberrations. It is only exceptionally that children are the exclusive sexual objects in such a case. They usually come to play that part when someone who is cowardly or has become impotent adopts them as a substitute, or when an urgent instinct (one which will not allow of postponement) cannot at the moment get possession of any more appropriate object. (Freud, 1991: 60)

Since Snicket cannot get hold of Beatrice, the children become his objects. There is not much in the text that suggests that Lemony Snicket sees the Baudelaires otherwise than sexless, innocent children, except the fact that he is, after all, the one who is writing Olaf's obscene words. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the text is intensified if we ask ourselves, as Rose (1994) does, what an adult gains from portraying children like this. I uphold that children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* are represented as the written objects of the adult writer, and as objects of his desire. This desire does not have to be understood necessarily as sexual desire for the children's bodies, but as the adult's longing for qualities he has lost, or is afraid of losing, such as innocence, moral integrity and hope for the future. These qualities are enshrined, as I argue in the next section, in the figure of the child.

There are some hints in the series, though, that there is something 'dark' in the way Lemony Snicket treats the Baudelaires. In *The Carnivorous Carnival*, the Baudelaires sneak into a tent and, among newspaper articles and other documents, they find a picture of themselves. They do not know who took it, but it is insinuated that it was Lemony Snicket. The children react uneasily to this: "It gives me the shivers to think someone took our picture when we didn't know it," Klaus said. "That means someone could be taking our photograph at any moment" (*The Carnivorous Carnival*,

141). From the children's point of view, Lemony Snicket is not a friend, or a protector, but a stalker. Moreover, that writing down the misfortunes of others is not necessarily a noble act is acknowledged by Lemony Snicket himself when he complains that Beatrice wrote a book about their failed relationship: "When somebody tells you bad news, you hear it once, and that's the end of it. But when bad news is written down, whether in a letter or a newspaper or on your arm in felt tip pen, each time you read it, you feel as if you are receiving the news again and again" (*The Miserable Mill*, 15). And yet, this is exactly what he does to the Baudelaire orphans. In her study on child abuse, Miller argues that "Adults experience their narcissistically cathected child as a part of themselves and therefore cannot imagine that what gives them pleasure could have a different effect upon the child" (1989: 6). I see much of this narcissistic adult Miller talks about in the figure of Lemony Snicket, for his claims that it is his mission to write the Baudelaires' story come across as ridiculously self-important. In this sense, Snicket is quite a disturbing figure for a narrator of children's books, not to mention the fact that it is also implied that he had something to do with the murder of Count Olaf's parents. However, what is Lemony Snicket if not a fictional and humorous representation of what real children's writers do? They write stories for and about children, assuming that children need those stories. Handler/Snicket seems to be poking fun at this.

In conclusion, the Baudelaires are the object of Snicket's writing and they function as a catalyst for him to talk about his own plight. Although this seems to turn Lemony Snicket into quite a dark figure, and the Baudelaires into less prominent child characters, Handler/Snicket's use of irony highlights the narrator's ludicrousness. Not only is he clearly unreliable, but he is also a parody of Victorian narrators of children's fiction and of writers who mourn dead women, like Dante or Edgar Allan Poe.

Moreover, I also read the figure of Lemony Snicket as a mockery of adult self-importance and the belief that children need what adults produce for them. In short, Daniel Handler seems to be making fun of the figure of the (British?) children's author. As often happens in contemporary children's fiction, this farcical representation of adults is contrasted with a more serious representation of children.

4.3. Nights of the Hunter: Snicket's 'Very Real World' of Persecuted Innocents

METHOUGHT I walked a dismal place
Dim horrors all around;
The air was thick with many a face
And black as night the ground.
Lewis Carroll, "Horrors"

As regards setting, this chapter's structure differs a little bit from those of the previous chapters. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the whole world is a Gothic landscape for the Baudelaire orphans, who meet hostility wherever they go. As the different Gothic spaces in the series all stand for the same idea—the fact that child characters are alone, helpless and abused while adult characters do not care—I have decided to deal with them as a group. The first part of this section examines the Gothic environment the Baudelaires inhabit, and the second part deals with how ideal visions of children are upheld even when childhood is represented as unhappy and unsafe. Since adult villains are responsible for making the world unsafe for child characters, I believe it is more appropriate to deal with both setting, and child and adult characterization, in the same section.

After examining how *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is narrated by a morally ambiguous adult, the question at this point is how *A Series of Unfortunate Events* can be acceptable as children's fiction when some of the genre's fundamental tenets are subverted by Gothic and postmodern devices. I believe Handler/Snicket finds another way to keep childhood and adulthood apart: he passes the responsibility to act as grown-ups onto the child characters. I have already discussed how Harry, Coraline and Lyra are represented as mature children in many ways. In Snicket's world, however, the Baudelaires' maturity is even more firmly stressed, because it is a world where there is no such thing as child protection. Handler/Snicket's child characters are repositories of intellectual maturity, moral integrity and other redeeming qualities, and although this view of the child is temporarily defied by Gothic elements, it is strengthened in the end. Whereas these child characters are portrayed as unbelievably mature, I will also examine how, once more, everything that is undesirable is linked to adult figures, the highest exponent of abjection being the villain, Count Olaf. It should be noted, though, that analyzing child characterization in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* has an additional difficulty: the characterization of children has to be understood all along as the result of Snicket's unreliable narration and, therefore, as a construct. Nevertheless, since this is still the vision of children that predominates, it deserves to be analyzed in detail.

Dark Visions of Childhood

A Series of Unfortunate Events presents a world where traditional conceptions of innocence and experience have been turned upside down: children are not allowed to be children because adults are just not interested in fulfilling their role as adults. Handler/Snicket's adult characters have their priorities and taking care of the weak and

dependent is not one of them, as this dialogue between Esmé (one of the villains) and Colette (a circus freak) exemplifies:

‘Sometimes a few people need to die in fires or get eaten by lions, if it’s all for the greater good.’
‘What’s the greater good?’ asked Colette.
‘Money!’ Esmé cried in greedy glee. ‘Money and personal satisfaction (...).’
(*The Slippery Slope*, 58)

At the same time, however, some of Handler/Snicket’s adult characters want to keep children away from ‘wrong’ sorts of knowledge, while they do nothing to prevent the children’s exposure to evil:

‘It was an emergency,’ Violet said calmly, ‘so I picked the lock.’
‘How did you do that?’ Mr. Poe asked. ‘Nice girls shouldn’t know how to do such things.’
‘My sister *is* a nice girl,’ Klaus said, ‘and she knows how to do all sorts of things.’ (*The Reptile Room*, 168, original emphasis).

This highlights a fundamental contradiction in prevailing conceptions of childhood and adulthood: adults want children to remain innocent, but they are not willing to actually do anything to protect this innocence, for they privilege individual achievements over cooperation and caring for others. On the other hand, children must present an innocent façade while being pragmatic, no matter to what this may lead.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, adults are immature and children are mature. In this sense, the series presents the artificial separation between children and adults that Reynolds points out as one of the main tenets of the cult of childhood (1994: 4), though their traditional roles are reversed. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that the story is narrated by an adult who identifies with the children and shows profound disgust towards the other adults, even though he is clearly not that different from them. This suggests that some grown-ups can also feel alienated from the adult world they inhabit, in which they feel like helpless children. Snicket describes the world of his

series thus: “The story of the Baudelaires takes place in a very real world, where some people are laughed at just because they have something wrong with them, and where children can find themselves all alone in the world, struggling to understand the sinister mystery that surrounds them” (*The Carnivorous Carnival*, 97). Like the Baudelaires, Snicket is also a loner who struggles to understand mysteries, and his identification with them is the only element in the series that bridges the gap between children and adults. Nonetheless, apart from this, the vision of children and adults as two different worlds completely alienated from each other is the one that predominates.

The characterization of children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* contradicts traditional ideas of children as weak and dependent. Snicket states that Violet and Klaus are fourteen and twelve years old respectively and that Sunny is a baby. From the very beginning, though, these children are not childish. This is not to say that they are not believable as child characters, but that they are represented as intellectually and morally mature for their age. Certainly, some aspects are completely—and intentionally—unrealistic. For instance, Sunny’s cognitive skills are as developed as her older siblings’, and Violet has enough engineering knowledge to come up with the strangest but most effective inventions. When it comes to sexuality, on the other hand, Snicket preserves their childish innocence, as I pointed out in the previous section. Violet and Klaus at some point feel attraction for other kids their age, but a romantic exchange between them is never described. Thus, except for sexuality, the Baudelaires are children whose unfortunate circumstances force them to become adults. What is more, at the beginning of the series we are told that they are used to being treated like grown-ups:

One of the things Violet, Klaus and Sunny really liked about their parents was that they didn’t send their children away when they had company over,

but allowed them to join the adults at the dinner table and participate in the conversation as long as they helped clear the table. (*The Bad Beginning*, 6)

As shown in this passage, adults who treat children as intellectual equals are praised, whereas adults who talk down to children and do not take them seriously are criticized and ridiculed. It is passages such as this one that show how political correctness is lurking beneath the Gothic atmosphere. In this case, what is politically incorrect is assuming that children are intellectually inferior even if, in a sense, they are. Thus, Snicket does the complete opposite: the Baudelaires are so intelligent and cultured that they make adult characters look stupid.

This sympathy mechanism is similar to Gaiman's in *Coraline*: adults are absent-minded, wrapped up in their own affairs and the child feels that she is not taken seriously. Thanks to the representation of adults as absurd figures and the child as mature and determined, the reader knows that the author approves of those qualities attributed to the child figure. However, at the end of *Coraline*, there is a final reevaluation of adults: Coraline knows that her parents love her even if they do not always have time for her. In contrast, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, there is no such thing as adults who care for children, and those who do care end up dead. Instead, the children have to learn to protect themselves, for theirs is a tough world.

In her study *American Childhood*, Anne Scott MacLeod argues that, in post-1960s American children's fiction, there is a shift in the relationship between child and adult, as adult figures start to lose their role as mentors and child characters are increasingly portrayed as mature (1994: 206). Certainly, British characters like Harry Potter, Coraline and Lyra also display very mature behaviors, but they all share a common 'childish' trait: at some point, they receive protection, either from adults or

from adult institutions like the home, the family or the school. Discussing the new globalized notion of childhood, Montgomery affirms that

The vision of childhood enshrined in the UNCRC is one where childhood is a separate space, protected from adulthood, in which children are entitled to special protection, provision, and rights of participation. (...) The idea of childhood reflected in the Convention privileges education over work, family over street life, and consumerism over productivity. (2009a: 6)

The view of childhood as a sphere that is, in one way or another, protected underlies most Western contemporary middle-class children's literature, even though, of course, this is not necessarily true. According to MacLeod, this was also the case in American children's fiction up until the first two thirds of the twentieth century:

(...) there was almost always assurance that somewhere in a child's life there was safety, security, and stability available from adults. And direction: the foundation of the relationship between children and adults was the conviction that adults had something to teach children. (1994: 199)

This is still visible in the other works of children's fiction analyzed in this dissertation. Rowling, Gaiman and Pullman do not break away completely from this romanticized vision of child and adult relations. In Handler's series, on the other hand, the Baudelaire parents are the only adult figures who are described in a positive light, but they are dead and therefore their protection is lost: "I wish they were here," Violet said. She did not have to explain she was talking about their parents. "They would never let us stay in this dreadful place" (*The Bad Beginning*, 31-2). Actually, it is possible that the Baudelaire parents are portrayed like this precisely *because* they are dead, and are therefore idealized by the children (and Snicket). In the end, however, one of the hard facts the children have to learn is that not everything their parents did in life was as admirable as they thought.

MacLeod's study on family stories in American children's fiction was published before *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Nevertheless, I believe that the pessimistic

tendency of today's American fiction for children that MacLeod describes applies to Handler's series:

Today's authors (...) presuppose an adult society so chaotic and untrustworthy that no child could move toward it with confidence. Its rules are unclear, its authorities corrupt or ineffectual, its values bankrupt. Most of all, it is a society inhabited by people who are manifestly unhappy. By the same token, closeness with another human being is as likely to end in disillusionment as understanding; love is more often a source of pain than of joy in these books.

(1994: 204)

As in other works of American fiction like Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming* (1981),⁹⁵ this is exactly what the adult world is like for Violet, Klaus and Sunny. Adult figures offer no protection and no knowledge whatsoever. They are all portrayed as incompetent, like Mr Poe, or cruel, like Count Olaf. Moreover, every time the orphans meet an adult who is kind to them, like Phil in *The Miserable Mill* or Hector in *The Vile Village*, they always end up deserting them out of cowardice. All in all, adults in the series refuse to be responsible for taking care of the children, and the Baudelaire orphans' relationships with adults always end up, at best, in disappointment: "It seemed to the Baudelaire that every creature in the world was being taken care of by others—every creature except for themselves" (*The Vile Village*, 256). The only successful bond that saves them from complete isolation is their friendship with three other orphan children they meet in *The Austere Academy*, the Quagmire siblings. Not even Lemony Snicket offers real protection to the children. His tone when he writes about them certainly sounds protective, but this is all he does: writing about them. He never really interferes with the terrible circumstances the orphans find themselves in, and as I have argued in the previous section, his writing sometimes sounds more like an excuse to talk about his own plight and his noble intentions are questionable. Like the characters that MacLeod

⁹⁵ *Homecoming* is the first of seven novels that comprise the Tillerman Cycle. It tells the story of four siblings, the Tillermans, abandoned by their mother and how they are forced to travel on their own hoping to find her.

talks about, the Baudelaires become increasingly concerned about themselves and their own survival in a hostile world. Their alienation from adults is symbolically represented by the meaning of the eye changing for the Baudelaires. At the beginning, the eye was threatening because it was related to Count Olaf, but when they find out that it is actually the emblem of V.F.D., an organization to which pretty much all the adults in the series belonged, the meaning of the eye changes:

It was almost as if this eye had replaced the eyes of their parents, but instead of keeping watch over the children and making sure that they were safe from harm, this eye merely gave them a blank stare, as if it did not care about the children's troubles, or could do nothing about them. (*The Slippery Slope*, 105)

The way the children perceive this eye is how they perceive adults around them: careless and indifferent.

With this deterioration of the relationship between child and adult, idealized fantasies of childhood as a protected space are undermined. Moreover, Snicket's series is actually quite "anti-child"—to use MacLeod's expression (1994: 209)—because it does not praise innocence and childlikeness, but experience and maturity. The Baudelaire orphans are extremely educated and well-read, they are capable of making mature decisions, and most importantly, they have a sense of responsibility:

‘Who will help us?’ [Violet] asked. ‘Who will take care of us?’
‘We’ll have to take care of ourselves,’ Klaus said.

(*The Carnivorous Carnival*, 22)

The Baudelaires become thus their own protectors. On the other hand, Lemony Snicket seems to despise adulthood, as this passage shows: “Violet tried to picture Count Olaf as a youngster, but couldn't. His shiny eyes, bony hands, and shadowy smile all seemed to be things only adults possess” (*The Bad Beginning*, 72). Nevertheless, if one analyzes the qualities that are attached to adult figures, they turn out to be childish qualities such

as selfishness, lack of sympathy, ignorance and dishonesty. As in the other works I have analyzed, immaturity in adulthood is not forgiven, whereas the objects of admiration are children who, strictly speaking, are not children at all. MacLeod states that “As a distinctive period of life lived under adult protection and sheltered in some degree from adult concerns, childhood exists if, and only if, adults are willing to accept the burden of responsibility such a system imposes upon them” (1994: 209). This is precisely what Handler/Snicket writes about: not the protected children of the UNCRC, but the children who cannot afford to be children, in the Western, middle-class sense of the word, because the adults surrounding them refuse to be responsible.

Apart from the assumption that children are protected, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* also challenges the idea that children ought to be happy—a remnant of the Romantic period. According to Cunningham, “Romanticism embedded in the European and American mind a sense of the importance of childhood, a belief that childhood should be happy, and a hope that the qualities of childhood, if they could be preserved in adulthood, might help redeem the adult world” (2005: 72). In *A Series of Unfortunate Events* childhood is far from being represented as a happy, comfortable period in life. Handler/Snicket shows that even children who belong to well-to-do families can be miserable, because everybody is subject to misfortune. This breaks with the assumption that middle-class childhood is, or will someday be, happy. Snicket starts his series of thirteen books with these words:

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming, and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features, but they were extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery, and despair. I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes. (*The Bad Beginning*, 1)

As this passage shows, pastoral visions of childhood are completely rejected from the very beginning of the series. Handler/Snicket also breaks with the liberal idea (the American dream?) that beautiful and hard-working people are on their way to happiness and that their efforts will be rewarded with a happy ending, which in children's fiction usually means a family. Yet, the Baudelaires do not find a family in the end; they *become* a family. By the end of the series, they meet a pregnant woman, Kit Snicket, who was friends with their parents and is Lemony Snicket's sister. They help her give birth, but, like all the few brave and honest adults in the series, she dies, and the Baudelaires adopt her baby daughter, whom they name 'Beatrice' after their own mother. The Baudelaires becoming parents is not a sad ending—Snicket states that it can actually be read as a new beginning (*The End*, 289)—but it is not exactly happy either, in the traditional sense of the word, for it implies that the Baudelaires have been forced to grow up way too soon.

Linked to happiness and protection are the ideals of home and family. As I have noted, Gaiman writes in *Coraline* that much of what we are is tied to the beds we wake up in in the morning (2002: 81). Similarly, Snicket remarks that “As I'm sure you know, to be in one's own room, in one's own bed, can often make a bleak situation a little better”, but, he adds, “the beds of the Baudelaire orphans had been reduced to charred rubble” (*The Bad Beginning*, 12). Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire do not have a home, and they are completely alone in the world. Unlike Harry Potter, Coraline and Lyra, who inhabit 'proper' protected spaces for children (Hogwarts, Coraline's home and Jordan College, respectively), the Baudelaires do not inhabit a protected space. Throughout the series, they live in different houses with different guardians and they even enroll in a school in *The Austere Academy*, but no new home and no school

can protect them from Count Olaf, who shows up everywhere. I have already analyzed how splitting up Coraline's home into 'real' and 'other' makes it possible to preserve the safety of the 'real' home and how, in the *Harry Potter* series, Harry is surrounded by the walls of Hogwarts with Dumbledore and Snape watching over him. Other contemporary child characters like the Grace children in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* also inhabit a protected home that wards off evil. In short, most fictional children have a home to return to or find a new one in the end. In Snicket's series, the Baudelaire children do not have that. As Alston states, "Family is the ideal, the epic end-point of the Odyssean journey of the fiction, at which home and family are recovered" (2008: 1). It would not be accurate, though, to say that Snicket's series contradicts this statement. It is true that the Baudelaires lose their parents' protection at the beginning and they never ever find a substitute. The "cosy, nuclear family ideal", which according to Alston "remains fundamentally intact" in English children's books (2008: 2), is lost forever for the Baudelaires. Yet, since in the end they decide to become Kit's daughter's parents, family is also the end-point of Snicket's series, even though it is not the ideal family most children's books endorse.

What distinguishes *A Series of Unfortunate Events* from the children's books

Alston analyzes has to do with the following:

The fact that the family is 'fractured' may drive plots, but it is not used to question the received ideals of family or to establish different social models in which children could be socialized and protected. Even where there is no family, a surrogate family is created. (...) Yet the relevance, function and significance of family are never brought under scrutiny. (2008: 2)

I believe that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* does question the family ideal, and offers a different social model. Although the family ideal haunts the narrative and the Baudelaires, this is all it is: an ideal, not a reality, and special emphasis is put on the fact

that this ideal was lost and consumed by the fire and it will never be recovered. The Baudelaires initially believe that the function of family is to give support and protection, as Violet says reproachfully to Esmé: “You’re our guardian! You’re supposed to be keeping us safe, not throwing us down elevator shafts and stealing our fortune!” (*The Ersatz Elevator*, 187). Reality, though, soon teaches her and her siblings that this is not necessarily so. The family ideal might seem to return in the end when the Baudelaires adopt the baby and stay to live on the island, sheltered from the dangerous world outside. However, at the very end, the Baudelaires find out that their parents wrote the following lines: “*We cannot truly shelter our children, here or anywhere else, and so it might be best for us and for the baby to immerse ourselves in the world*” (“Book the Last” in *The End*, 1-2, original italics). This sentence, I believe, summarizes one of the underlying premises of the series, regarding the relationship between children and adults: in a world that is not safe, there is no point in keeping children innocent; experience is required instead. And this is exactly what the Baudelaires do when they become parents: they realize that their function as parents is not to shelter the child, but to immerse her in the world. The ideal of family as safe, supportive and cosy is eventually abandoned—the island is abandoned—in a recognition that “there is more to life than safety” (“Book the Last” in *The End*, 3-4).

An Ideal Vision of Children

Although romantic fantasies of childhood are undermined in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, this does not mean that they are completely absent. MacLeod points out (always talking about American fiction) that “Even after Victorian sentimentality had passed out of fashion, a modest idealization of children persisted a long time in literature for the

young, but no romantic bloom seems to have survived the chill winds of recent history”—by ‘recent history’ MacLeod means the 1960s and 1970s (1994: 209). I do not agree wholeheartedly with this assertion, at least as far as Snicket’s series is concerned. A secondary character, Phil, makes what I consider is an important observation about the Baudelaire orphans: “All three of you have grown up so nicely, even though you’ve been constantly pursued by an evil villain and falsely accused of numerous crimes!” (*The Grim Grotto*, 95). Indeed, as Phil’s remark suggests, the ultimate effect of all the villainy in the story is, ironically, that it ends up emphasizing how nice the Baudelaires are. Of course, this quotation also highlights how unrealistic and idealized Handler/Snicket’s representation of the child is.

As in the previously discussed works of children’s Gothic, childhood is not idyllic in Handler’s novels in the sense that it is not presented as a period of life devoid of preoccupations. Quite the opposite, Handler/Snicket shows his child characters tossing and turning in their beds, worried about their future (*The Bad Beginning*, 17) or “crying quietly all night long” (*The Bad Beginning*, 55). At the same time, however, childhood *is* idyllic in the sense that it is used to represent a time when the individual is not yet corrupted. As Rose states, the figure of the child represents “an ultimate beginning where everything is perfect or can at least be made good” (1994: 138). The beginning in Snicket’s series is far from being perfect, as the title of the first book—*The Bad Beginning*—indicates. However, as far as the children are concerned, they do start out as morally impeccable, kind, intelligent, cultured and extremely polite, as in this passage:

‘I’m very busy today,’ he [Mr. Poe] said, finally. ‘So I don’t have too much time to chat. Next time you should call ahead of time when you plan on being in the neighborhood, and I will put some time aside to take you to lunch.’

‘That would be very pleasant,’ Violet said, ‘and we’re sorry we didn’t contact you before we stopped by, but we find ourselves in an urgent situation.’ (*The Bad Beginning*, 63)

As Violet’s response to Mr Poe shows, the Baudelaires never forget their good manners, not even when they are in terrible danger and adults are being neglectful. It is their contact with villainous adults that threatens this moral perfection.

In fact, as the series moves forward, the orphans start to be perceived as villains by many adults, as they are unfairly accused of crimes they did not commit, or crimes they committed in self-defense. Fortunately for them, it is not yet too late. Unlike adult characters who are already ‘trapped’ by the system, the Baudelaires are at a point when they can still make choices:

‘Everyone either thinks that we’re freaks or murderers,’ Klaus said.
‘Sometimes even I think so.’
‘If we join Count Olaf,’ Violet said, ‘we might become even more freakish and murderous.’
‘But if we don’t join him,’ Klaus asked, ‘where can we possibly go?’
‘I don’t know,’ Violet said sadly, ‘but this can’t be the right thing to do, can it?’ (*The Carnivorous Carnival*, 270)

In Snicket’s series, child characters do not always make the *right* choice, for, as Snicket himself puts it, “there are times in this harum-scarum world when figuring out the right thing to do is quite simple, but doing the right thing is simply impossible, and then you must do something else” (*The Carnivorous Carnival*, 238). In the end, however, the Baudelaires reject everything that the villains represent; they choose intelligence over violence, love over greed and responsibility over personal satisfaction. As Violet affirms, voicing one of the lessons the children learn: “If everyone fought fire with fire, the entire world would go up in smoke” (*The Slippery Slope*, 272). And Klaus shows that evil can be fought by making choices when he states that “We don’t want to be as villainous and monstrous as Count Olaf” (*The Slippery Slope*, 274).

Gothic elements are especially useful to put the child characters to the test, destabilizing their moral universe. Threatening their moral integrity is one of the main functions that Count Olaf has in the series. Since the Baudelaire orphans have to figure out how to escape from him, they have to start to think like him. Count Olaf is described thus:

He was very tall and very thin, dressed in a gray suit that had many dark stains on it. His face was unshaven, and rather than two eyebrows, like most human beings have, he had just one long one. His eyes were very, very shiny, which made him look both hungry and angry. (*The Bad Beginning*, 22)

But what makes him so frightening is not just his unpleasant, dirty appearance, but the fact that he keeps reappearing, the feeling that the children are never safe from him. Like Harry Powell in Davis Grubb's *The Night of the Hunter* (1953), Olaf goes on a hunt for the children to steal their money and, no matter how far the children go, they always feel his presence. Another interesting feature of the villain is that he calls himself 'Count', but he is actually an actor. This seems to be mocking classic Gothic romances in which crimes are linked to aristocrats, like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Moreover, the fact that being a 'Count' is only a disguise brings to mind Alexandre Dumas' Count of Montecristo, another classic villain who uses his disguising skills to commit his crimes; or Tom Riddle in *Harry Potter* calling himself 'Lord'. Although Olaf is a farcical character in comparison to all these other villains, he is still terrifying.

Olaf represents everything that the morally upright protagonists abhor, everything that threatens their moral values. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject is helpful to analyze the Baudelaires' relationship to Olaf, as well as the effect that such a villain might have on the implied reader. Kristeva defines abjection as

What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. (...) Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. (1982: 4)

More than uncanniness, Count Olaf provokes abjection. As Kristeva highlights, “Essentially different from ‘uncanniness’, more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin: nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (1982: 5). Count Olaf is a criminal with a good conscience, his crime is premeditated and, like abjection, he is “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles” (Kristeva, 1982: 4). In fact, Count Olaf is often portrayed as smiling while he is doing or saying terrible things, or smiling while his eyes shine with hatred: “His eyes had never gleamed as brightly, and his smile had never been as peccant, a word which here means ‘so hungry for evil deeds as to be unhealthy’” (*The Penultimate Peril*, 313). Moreover, the fact that he gets away with his crimes at the end of every book signals the fragility of the law that Kristeva discusses and contributes to making the world the Baudelaires inhabit even more hostile and unjust. Like the abject which “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 1982: 4), Olaf disturbs the Baudelaires’ moral world and their knowledge of themselves, to the extent that they start questioning their own goodness.

Olaf is portrayed throughout the whole series as a ruthless criminal, whose only motivation in life is money. Money in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is both connected to and disconnected from children. The children in the series *have* money—this is why they are persecuted by villains, but they are disconnected from the world of money in the sense that it is the last of their preoccupations. The negative connotations of money were already pointed out by Freud in his essay “Character and Anal Erotism”:

“wherever archaic modes of thought have predominated or persist (...) money is brought into the most intimate relationship with dirt” (1991: 214). These archaic modes of thought certainly prevail in contemporary children’s fiction and, in turn, the belief that children have to be protected from the world of money. As Montgomery states: “the ideal childhood, as conceptualized in much contemporary legislation and set out in the UNCRC, is seen as one where all children are shielded from the workplace and from the necessity to earn money to support a family” (2009a: 67). Most contemporary children’s fiction adheres to this construct, as money is hardly ever a preoccupation or a motivation for child characters. Harry Potter, for example, has also inherited plenty of money from his parents, but he does not make a big deal out of it and he spends it cautiously. Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* series (2001-2012) is an exception to this rule: Artemis Fowl is a scheming twelve-year-old kid, who plans to kidnap a fairy and hold her to ransom, in order to restore his family’s fortune. However, Colfer’s protagonist comes across as extremely implausible; rather than an exceptionally intelligent kid, he sounds more like a fully grown-up gangster.

As regards the Baudelaire orphans, it is not accurate to say that they are shielded from the workplace. In fact, throughout the series they get employed several times, but they are never paid with money or they are just not paid at all. In *the Miserable Mill*, for example, they get paid with coupons and chewing gum. In the series, adults know that children should not work, but they ignore this rule and do nothing to prevent it. When they arrive at Lucky Smells Lumbermill, they meet Phil, who tells them that “the majority of people who work in the lumber business are grown-ups. But if the owner says you’re working here, I guess you’re working here. You’d better come inside” (*The Miserable Mill*, 22). As I have noted, despite having gone from riches to rags, being alone in the world, and being forced to work for no salary, money is not something the

Baudelaires worry about. They are more preoccupied about surviving, caring for each other and reading books that shed light on the mysteries that surround them. Money in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is thus also linked to adults, villainy and abjection.

All adult figures are, in one way or another, connected to money and greed, especially Count Olaf and his girlfriend, Esmé Squalor. As I have pointed out, money tends to be associated with dirt and Olaf is, literally and metaphorically, an unclean character. This is best exemplified by a passage in which Violet sneaks into Olaf's room:

The room, as Violet suspected, was a dirty mess. The bed was unmade and had cracker crumbs and bits of hair all over it. Discarded newspapers and mail-order catalogs lay on the floor in untidy piles. On top of the dresser was a small assortment of half-empty wine bottles. The closet door was open, revealing a bunch of rusty wire coathangers that shivered in the drafty room. The curtains over the windows were all bunched up and encrusted with something flaky, and as Violet drew closer she realized with faint horror that Stephano⁹⁶ had blown his nose on them. (*The Reptile Room*, 131)

Olaf's room as described in this passage is referred to as his "inner sanctum" (*The Reptile Room*, 131), a private space which reflects his inner self. The references to "cracker crumbs", "bits of hair" and "half-empty wine bottles" also suggest gluttony, slovenliness and alcoholism. As for the flaky substance on the curtains, I doubt if it really is "hardened phlegm" (*The Reptile Room*, 131) as Violet thinks it is, or something else (but then again, this may just be the perception of a grown-up reader). It is certainly no coincidence that, of the three siblings, it is Violet who enters Olaf's 'inner sanctum'. Olaf's dirtiness is not only physical, for it is subtly insinuated that he has a sexual interest in Violet.

Only in *The End*, there is a hint that Count Olaf was not always that bad, and that in the past he might have been in love with Kit Snicket, since he kisses her before

⁹⁶ Count Olaf adopts a different identity in every book. In *The Reptile Room*, he calls himself Stephano.

she dies and they are buried side by side. In keeping with the late twentieth-century tendency to sentimentalize villains, which, as Botting discusses, “advocates a more humane approach (...), one based on love, tolerance and understanding” (1996: 178-9) something similar happens with Handler/Snicket’s final attempt to sentimentalize the villain. Olaf has been a one-dimensional character throughout the first twelve books, his nastiness and lack of humanity being emphasized all along. With this little demonstration of love, which in my view comes across as a bit out of character, Olaf suddenly appears as less ‘other’ and less abject, and political correctness again seeps into Snicket’s narrative. I believe, however, that this moment of humanity comes a little bit too late and it is easily forgettable. What stays with the implied reader is the repugnance Count Olaf arouses, and which predominates throughout the thirteen books.

Similarly, the child character’s goodness is complicated by the middle of the series. The confusion about what is right and what is wrong reaches its peak in *The Penultimate Peril* when all the characters in the series meet in Hotel Denouement and the Baudelaires are given the task of telling good people and bad people apart. They realize, however, that they cannot see any essential difference between right and wrong anymore, for they have learnt that it all depends on how you interpret people’s behavior. Whereas, at the beginning, good and evil seemed to be clearly differentiated and embodied by the Baudelaires and Count Olaf’s troupe respectively, universal views start to be dismissed by the middle of the series. Eventually, the only way of keeping right and wrong more or less safely apart is through one’s own personal interpretation of actions and situations. Although the Baudelaires have committed acts of villainy, Handler/Snicket depicts them constantly questioning and analyzing their actions, and this establishes a clear contrast with the villains, whose crimes are premeditated and who show no guilty conscience:

‘We had good reasons,’ Violet said, ‘but we still did bad things.’
‘We want to be noble,’ Klaus said, ‘but we’ve had to be treacherous.’
(*The Penultimate Peril*, 345)

The didactic dimension of the series rises to the surface when children feel compelled to use violence. The Baudelaires’ constant questioning of violent ways highlights what I discussed about child figures bearing the burden of responsibility. Adults no longer know the difference between right and wrong; the child characters are therefore responsible for disentangling them. Even if the Baudelaires and Count Olaf end up literally “in the same boat” (*The Penultimate Peril*, 353), there is no way the child protagonists ever get to be as repulsive as Count Olaf. This blurring of the boundaries between good and evil turns out to be—once more—temporary, for Handler/Snicket still finds a way of keeping them ultimately apart. Although his child characters end up lying, picking locks and committing arson, this ends up being only a phase. Rejecting what Olaf represents, the moral consistency of the Baudelaires is emphasized.

Thus, Lemony Snicket’s representation of children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is predicated upon one of the main tenets of the cult of childhood: the child figure is a shrine for the qualities that, according to the adult implied author and narrator, should be preserved. Yet, child characters are endowed with adult qualities, even more than in *Harry Potter*, *Coraline* and *His Dark Materials*. Handler/Snicket’s story is set in a tough world where innocence must be lost, and responsibility and experience are extolled. The Baudelaires are represented as morally upright, mature children, and Gothic elements are introduced to jeopardize their integrity. Nevertheless, as I analyzed in section 4.2., since the story of the Baudelaires is framed by Lemony Snicket’s unreliable narration, this view of incorruptible children who can take care of themselves is openly acknowledged to be an adult (male) fantasy. Other narrative and

plot devices that imitate and parody Gothic fiction complicate this depiction of childhood; namely, Snicket's fragmented narrative and his use of the comic register.

4.4. Snicket's Lot: Overcoming Fragmentation through the Collective Character

No matter how many misfortunes had befallen them and no matter how many ersatz things they would encounter in the future, the Baudelaire orphans knew they could rely on each other for the rest of their lives, and this, at least, felt like the one thing in the world that was true.

Lemony Snicket, *The Ersatz Elevator*

This section examines another aspect of characterization: what narrative fragmentation and intertextuality convey about the representation of the self in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. I argued in the previous section that maturity and moral integrity are the ideals that predominate in the series, but they are openly presented as the fantasy of a fictional male writer, and the child figure is used as a repository for this fantasy. Here I analyze how, doing away with visions of the self as complete and unified, intertextuality and narrative fragmentation emphasize that the characters in the story are a construct. In the fashion of classic Gothic texts, narrative fragmentation and intertextuality highlight the fakery and the composite nature of the story and, consequently, of its characters. In contrast to *Coraline*, *His Dark Materials* and the *Harry Potter* series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is not about the maturational process of one prepubescent child and how (s)he builds an individual personality and reaches a sense of completeness. Rather than stressing individual achievements, Snicket's series is about how three siblings complement each other and manage to survive in a hostile world. In fact, in what seems to be a criticism of neoliberal ideologies, the pursuit of personal satisfaction is

villainized and represented as the dominant belief system which leaves the orphans alone in the world. Adhering to the idea that the text mirrors the self, in this section I establish a relationship between the dependence of texts on other preexistent texts and the dependence of individuals on other individuals. Thus, I analyze how special emphasis is put on cooperation and community, both through textual form and through characterization. On the other hand, this section also explores how Handler/Snicket's use of what Nikolajeva calls "the collective character" (2002a: 67)—in this case, three individuals functioning as a whole—can be read as an alternative way of conveying a sense of unity and coherence.

Framged Text, Framged Childhood

In *The Gothic Vision*, Cavallaro refers to Gothic narratives like *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* or *Wuthering Heights* as "narratives of darkness which consist of multi-layered texts intent on flouting the ethos of authorial omniscience" (2002: 113). Handler/Snicket imitates these classic narratives, by presenting his own as the result of an investigation conducted by the fictional author, Lemony Snicket. At the end of every book, Snicket encloses a letter to his editor in which he explains that he is investigating so that he can write the next installment of the Baudelaires' story:

To My Kind Editor,
I am writing to you from the shores of Lake Lachrymose, where I am examining the remains of Aunt Josephine's house in order to completely understand everything that happened when the Baudelaire orphans found themselves here. (*The Reptile Room*, 193)

Like Horace Walpole claiming that *The Castle of Otranto* is the English translation of an old Italian manuscript, or Bram Stoker pretending that *Dracula* is the result of a series of documents selected and put together by the author, Lemony Snicket disrupts

the boundaries between fiction and reality. Doing away with notions of authorial omniscience, and textual unity and coherence, this device draws attention to the fakery of the narrative and, consequently, of the characters in it. I hereby examine these textual devices and to what extent they subvert traditional notions of childhood that endure in today's children's fiction.

As I have pointed out in the previous chapters, the vision of a unified psyche is always ultimately maintained in the works of Rowling, Gaiman and Pullman. No matter how fragmented Coraline and Harry's selves become, both texts eventually lead to a state of completeness, not only with the final rejection or eradication of the double, but also through the narrative technique which mirrors the indivisible subjectivity of the third-person narrator. This underlying sense of coherence is not possible in Handler/Snicket's narrative, for the implied reader is told from the very beginning that the narrative is fragmentary. Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire manage to keep themselves together despite all the villainy that surrounds them, but this representation of children is the product of Snicket's unreliable, fragmented narration. Thus, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, this unified and coherent psyche that the child characters represent is, first and foremost, a construct, the product of Snicket's fanciful vision of the world.

In the first place, Lemony Snicket's claim to the veracity of his story clashes with the total lack of realism in the description of characters, places and actions. Snicket affirms that "The story of the Baudelaires takes place in a very real world" (*The Carnivorous Carnival*, 97), and yet the most unlikely things happen. For instance, Sunny Baudelaire is a baby whose teeth are so sharp that she can bite her way up an elevator cage in *The Ersatz Elevator*. Descriptions of places, on the other hand, are just

as unrealistic. Aunt Josephine's house, for instance, "hung over the side, attached to the hill by long metal stilts that looked like spider legs. (...) it seemed as if the entire house were holding on to the hill for dear life" (*The Wide Window*, 12). Contrary to Pullman, Gaiman and Rowling, who create worlds in which magical or supernatural events are plausible, Handler/Snicket intentionally incorporates fanciful and absurd elements in a story which is set "in a very real world". As this shows, there is a clear insistence on highlighting the fakery of the narrative and everything in it. Since everything is subject to Snicket's unreliable, fragmented narration, it can be inferred that everything in the novels is unreliable and fragmented, including childhood and the ideal vision of children I analyzed in section 4.3..

According to Cavallaro, "It can be argued that there is an analogy between the fragmentary and open-ended forms of dark fiction and the split and decentred identities of its characters, and indeed of its readers, insofar as the readers' points of reference are constantly brought to trial and found deficient" (2002: 122). In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the fragmentary form of the novels mirrors the narrator's unreliability and, in turn, the way he portrays the Baudelaires' world. I find it significant that Handler/Snicket presents his narrative in fragmentary form, when his story deals with how ideals of family and love break into pieces, leaving the characters with a shattered reality. The story of the Baudelaires begins the moment their comfortable life falls apart when their parents die in a fire, which is also the moment Lemony Snicket's life is turned upside down with Beatrice's death. From this moment onwards, everything the Baudelaires find is a ghastly parody of family life, and all their guardians farcical substitutes of their parents, as if the whole world was mocking them. Discussing Gothic romances of the 1790s, Botting describes them as "narratives that are labyrinthine,

spinning their ‘web of deceit’ and leading protagonists to encounter the horrible absence, the death, of any familiar or proper order” (1996: 81). Although Snicket’s protagonists are not trapped in a Gothic castle or big house, they are trapped in Snicket’s labyrinthine narrative, which mirrors the chaotic world the Baudelaires inhabit, a world which is like a gigantic library.

According to Lerer, in America, the children’s literature experience is inseparable from the rise of the public lending library. Thus, America creates a cultural imagination of the library as a place for imaginative exploration (2008: 275). Other works of American children’s fiction which have major events happening in a library are Diane Duane’s novel *So You Want to Be a Wizard* (1983) or the 1994 movie *The Pagemaster*.⁹⁷ In Snicket’s series, reading is an important part of the Baudelaires’ lives, not only as escapism, but also as a source to unravel mysteries: “by immersing themselves in their favorite reading topics, they felt far away from their predicament, as if they had escaped” (*The Bad Beginning*, 69). Wherever the Baudelaires end up, there is almost always a library. Probably, the most important one is the one on the island in *The End*, where they find a book entitled *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which turns out to be the secret history of their family, written by their parents themselves. Significantly, this book within the book is also fragmented, since it is the product of more than one writer: “The entries in the book alternated between the handwriting of the Baudelaire father and the handwriting of the Baudelaire mother” (*The End*, 274). And,

⁹⁷ *So You Want to Be a Wizard* is the first book of Diane Duane’s *Young Wizards* series of nine books. This is the story about thirteen-year-old Nita Callahan, a girl who hides inside a library to escape from bullies, and she finds a book entitled *So You Want to Be a Wizard*, which, as the title indicates, teaches her how to become a wizard.

As regards *The Pagemaster*, directed by Pixote Hunt, Glenn Chaika and Joe Johnston, this is the story of Richard (Macaulay Culkin), a boy who enters a library looking for shelter from a storm. There, he slips and falls down on the floor, unconscious. As he awakens, he realizes that he has been transformed into an animated illustration by the Pagemaster (Christopher Lloyd), the Guardian of the Written World, who also transports him into classic stories like *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Treasure Island* and *Moby Dick*.

in the end, the Baudelaire children start writing down their own entries to record their story: “the Baudelaires would sit together in the two large reading chairs and take turns reading out loud from the book their parents had left behind, and sometimes they would flip to the back of the book, and add a few lines to the history themselves” (*The End*, 322).

A Series of Unfortunate Events is full of intertextual allusions. As I already pointed out, Snicket’s beloved is named after Dante’s Beatrice; the child protagonists are, of course, named after Charles Baudelaire; Edgar Allan Poe, George Orwell and J.D. Salinger’s short story “For Esme – with Love and Squalor” (1950) are also alluded to, among many others. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is indeed, as a good postmodernist text, “a mosaic of quotations”, “the absorption and transformation of another [text]” (Kristeva, 1980: 66). All these explicit intertextual references link the series to other works of art, recognizing that every text is dependent on other preexistent texts, at the same time that they infuse new meanings into it and the characters. Handler/Snicket’s highly intertextual narrative mirrors the world that it depicts: if the text is a mosaic of allusions to other texts, the story of the Baudelaires is a mosaic of other stories. These stories are, in turn, hidden in books, forming a big library that is the world the orphans live in. In Snicket’s series, the children’s life is a mosaic of mysteries (and miseries) that cannot be completely understood, which Handler/Snicket symbolically represents as a mysterious figure shaped like a question mark, and called “The Great Unknown” (*The End*, 304).

The fact that Snicket borrows the title of the book that the Baudelaire parents wrote raises the question of the dependence of one text on another preexistent text, and

also suggests that all the stories are actually parts of the same neverending story.

Snicket offers the following reflection:

One could say, in fact, that no story really has a beginning, and that no story really has an end, as all of the world's stories are as jumbled as the items in the arboretum, with their details and secrets all heaped together so that the whole story, from beginning to end, depends on how you look at it. We might even say that the world is always in medias res—a Latin phrase which means 'in the midst of things' or 'in the middle of a narrative'—and that it is impossible to solve any mystery, or find the root of any trouble, and so *The End* is really the middle of the story, as many people in this history will live long past the close of Chapter Thirteen, or even the beginning of the story, as a new child arrives in the world at the chapter's close. (*The End*, 289)

As in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (1979), in which Bastian becomes part of the book he is reading (also called *The Neverending Story*), the presence of books within Snicket's narrative also disrupts the boundaries between fact and fiction. As Do Rozario points out, "bibliophilia infuses Gothic novels, but in children's books, it also destabilizes the fundamental ontological distinctions between text and lived experience" (2008: 210). Significantly, the book that the Baudelaires read is not fiction, but the personal story of their parents. However, given the fragmentary nature of the text and the fact that each parent writes the story from his/her own point of view, this again raises the question of its reliability and the question of the impossibility of wholeness and unity when it comes to stories. As Snicket puts it, stories are "jumbled" and "heaped together"; the world of stories is a chaotic one. No story is finite and giving it a sense of closure is an aesthetic convention. The previous chapters analyzed how Rowling, Gaiman and Pullman play with this idea, but Handler is a lot more daring as he explicitly recognizes the artificiality of his narration when he says that the end of *The End* is just a convention—since the world is always in medias res—and that it could actually be read as a beginning. Thus, the fragmentary nature of Snicket's narration destabilizes notions of unity, essence and completeness. As Do Rozario claims, "The

Gothic intertext creates an endless possibility for narrative fragments to revolve between the secret and the exposed, always suggesting, but never completely revealing, the whole from which they originate” (2008: 215).

If texts are multi-layered and infinite, so are the characters’ psyches. As Cavallaro states, “we find that the composite nature of narratives and selves alike is frequently conveyed by recourse to the concept of intertextuality” (2002: 118). Curiously, intertextuality is mostly connected to Sunny, whose apparently nonsensical baby talk is full of allusions to other artists. What is more, Pugh points out that sometimes Sunny alludes to writers whose works of fiction are known for their sexual content, like “Sappho!” (*The Austere Academy*, 45), or Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (*The Hostile Hospital*, 76): “these allusions to adult sexuality in the mouths of babes, as it were, as well as in the mouth of their narrator Snicket, demand that readers recognize the limitations of a binary relationship between innocence and experience” (Pugh, 2008: 177). I would also add that ‘Sunny’ is the name of a prostitute in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and of an American woman, Sunny von Bülow, who was almost murdered by her husband, Claus von Bülow, perhaps the inspiration for her brother’s name, ‘Klaus’. Thus, the Baudelaires remain sexually innocent throughout the novels even if, by the end of the series, Violet is already sixteen and Klaus is fifteen; however, Snicket sneaks sexuality into his narrative through what Pugh calls “promiscuous allusions” (2008: 172). The Baudelaires are, therefore, not as unconnected to sexuality as it may seem. Portraying them as asexual beings is a convention; it is the socially acceptable way of writing about children, as I discussed in section 4.2.. Yet, in the world envisaged by Handler/Snicket, everything is ambiguous and whatever appears to be complete and finite is ultimately a construct.

Another effect of intertextuality on child characterization is that it mildly counters what I have argued in section 4.2. about the adult figure (Lemony Snicket) as writing subject and the Baudelaire children as written objects. By introducing a book called *A Series of Unfortunate Events* inside Snicket's narrative and having the Baudelaires add their own lines to it, Handler/Snicket gives his characters the chance to become writing subjects themselves. As I discussed in section 4.2., the figure of Lemony Snicket represents the ambiguity of writing about children, how by appropriating the right to tell the Baudelaires' story, Snicket deprives the children of the right to tell it themselves. However, this is subverted when, at the end of the series, the Baudelaires start writing their own entries in their parents' book. This suggests that the book Snicket is writing depends on this other book written by the Baudelaire family. Creating child characters who write, Handler/Snicket subverts textually the prevalent idea that children do not write stories, and that they are consumers rather than producers. Children are very often represented as readers in children's books—Bastian in *The Neverending Story*, Roald Dahl's Matilda or Hermione in the *Harry Potter* series—but hardly ever do they appear as writers as well. Yet, it could be argued that the Baudelaires only become writers at the very end, when they are no longer children in the ideological sense of the word. As writing is still linked to experience in the series, I regard Handler/Snicket's subversion as a very mild one. Furthermore, it is Snicket's version of the events that ultimately prevails, for the reader never really gets to know what the Baudelaires write down. What matters, however, is that even though certain visions prevail over others, these other alternative visions are also there, overshadowed and hidden between the lines. Their existence is, at least, intimated.

All in all, acknowledging that the text is a composite means that the characters in it are also made up of different bits and pieces. I argued in the previous chapters that essentialist conceptions of the individual are still prevalent in children's fiction and that challenges to these ideas tend to be only temporary. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is probably, out of the four works of children's fiction that I analyze here, the one which gets closer to a permanent questioning of individuality. The Baudelaire children are, indeed, as idealized as Harry, Coraline and Lyra, who, no matter how much trouble they are in, always make the right decision. The Baudelaires are always brave, kind and intelligent and they never forget their manners, not even in front of the nastiest enemies. This is certainly the vision that prevails, but narrative fragmentation and intertextuality suggest alternative meanings and remind the reader that, in fiction, everything is irrevocably made-up.

The Collective Character

In the previous chapters, I have discussed how a stable and separate identity is the end point of most child characters' journeys in children's Gothic, no matter how traumatic their experiences would be if they were translated to real life. As in the fantastic realist texts that Waller examines, in children's Gothic there is also a conceptual focus on "the protagonist as individual, rather than member of a family, group of friends or institution, or part of a romantic couple" (2009: 61). By contrast, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* emphasizes teamwork, rather than individual achievements. As I will argue in the subsequent paragraphs, the Baudelaries are not individual characters, but a collective character, more in line with Enid Blyton's Famous Five, C.S. Lewis's Pevensie siblings or P.L. Travers's Banks siblings. This is marked by the fact that they

are often referred to collectively as ‘the Baudelaires’. According to Nikolajeva, a collective character is “a group of characters who seem to be equally important in the narrative and who (...) can equally lay claim to being sole protagonist” (2002a: 67). As Nikolajeva further explains, the collective character can be regarded as “one of the specific narrative features of children’s fiction”, because it is hardly ever used in adult literature, and the first children’s writer “to make the collective character her primary aesthetic principle” was Edith Nesbit with novels like the *Treasure Seeker* series (1899-1904), the *Five Children* series (1902-1906) and *The Railway Children* (1906), among other works (2002a: 67-8). I will also take into account, however, what happens if we read Snicket’s three Baudelaire orphans as one character. If the three characters can be said to function coherently as one individual, Handler/Snicket’s challenge to individualism is, therefore, a moderate one. Yet, I will begin by examining how individuality and independence are not an option for Handler/Snicket’s child protagonists.

Apart from enriching their minds with books, children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* do not get many chances to worry about self-fulfillment. Snicket depicts the Baudelaires as children who cannot afford an independent existence: “For the first time, having individual bedrooms seemed like a hardship rather than a luxury, for without one another’s company the orphans felt even more lonely and helpless” (*The Reptile Room*, 63). Being together is what makes them (relatively) strong in the hostile world they live in. The orphans’ main concern is to survive and take care of each other, especially Violet, the oldest Baudelaire, who promised her parents she would look after her younger siblings. According to Trites,

(...) postmodernism, cynical about the transformative power of maturity, marks growth largely in terms of the individual’s increased participation in

capitalism. The narrative of growth in postmodernism thus becomes constituted as an acceptance of one's cultural habitat rather than serving as a narrative about transcendence or separation. The postmodern awareness of the subject's inevitable construction as a product of language renders the construct of self-determination virtually obsolete. (...) Growth is possible in a postmodern world, especially if growth is defined as an increasing awareness of the institutions constructing the individual. (2000: 19)

I already examined how the Baudelaires are represented as a product of language, particularly, as the object of Snicket's narration. As a consequence of this narrative device, self-determination is ultimately impossible for these characters, because they are overtly represented as the product of someone else's subjectivity in the first place. Although this could also be affirmed of all the other child characters in my study—and, for this matter, of *all* literary characters—I believe that the fact that Handler/Snicket highlights this via narrative technique makes an important difference. When we read *Harry Potter*, *Coraline* and *His Dark Materials*, we are expected to forget about the adult narrator's presence most of the time and think of Harry, Coraline and Lyra as individuals whom we are observing directly. On the other hand, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* constantly reminds us of the adult narrator's presence and forces us to think of the child characters as textual constructions. The Baudelaires' maturation process cannot, therefore, lead to separation and the building up of an individual personality for each of the siblings.

This lack of individuality is further stressed by the fact that the Baudelaires always function as a team. The series ends with the Baudelaires becoming adoptive parents to Kit Snicket's daughter, and there is a sense that they will always be together as a family, albeit a very isolated one. The idea that Trites mentions about growth being defined by the child or adolescent's awareness of the institutions that construct him/her is also present in Snicket's series, together with an acknowledgement that there is no safe place and individuals cannot be shielded from the system. This is reflected in the

end when the Baudelaires decide to leave the island and immerse themselves into the world. As every text is part of other texts and every story is a small part of a larger one, individuals are also represented as parts of social constellations. Although every Baudelaire has his/her particular qualities and they are all different in age and gender, what makes them strong in front of their enemies is how they complement each other. This contrasts with earlier representations of siblings in which, if there are a brother and a sister, it is generally the brother's duty to protect his helpless sister. Within the Gothic genre, Büssing mentions Davis Grubb's *The Night of the Hunter* (1953) and Rohan O'Grady's *Let's Kill Uncle* (1963) as novels in which

(...) the diminutive couple [brother and sister] is to represent 'typical' attributes of the adult married couple. (...) Authors generally depict the girl as perfectly helpless and vulnerable (and not very bright), whereas the boy appears as a tiny knight in shining armor who protects his little sister with all his might. (1987: 23)

The relationship between brothers and sisters is also represented thus in children's novels, like *The Chronicles of Narnia*. More recent representations of siblings, like the Grace children in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, subvert these gender roles, as does Snicket's series.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, none of the children has a more prominent role than the others, not even age and gender make a difference. Sometimes Violet's inventing skills save the day, but some other times the orphans escape thanks to Klaus' research or Sunny's biting. What is more, the fact that the girl is an engineer and the boy a reader seems to be a mere reversal of traditional gender roles, though, as Pugh points out, it is actually a *subversion* of the idea that certain skills are associated with a particular gender. Violet and Klaus show that they are also capable of being good at what the other does: "Violet may be coded as somewhat masculine due to her inventing

skills, and Klaus may be coded as somewhat feminine due to his inveterate reading, but their respective tendencies in regard to gendered activities do not limit their potential to act in new ways” (Pugh, 2008: 163-4). Sunny, on the other hand, is not as clearly gendered as Violet and Klaus; instead, Handler/Snicket highlights her closeness to beasts by making biting her best skill. When, later on in the series, Sunny develops an interest in cooking, she is not limited to either home cooking, traditionally associated with women, or haute cuisine, traditionally associated with men, but she is good at both. As regards age, although Violet and Klaus are older children and, therefore, in charge of taking care of Sunny, on many occasions Sunny shows that she is just as capable of taking care of herself as she is of saving her older siblings. Thus, in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the child is part of a group, rather than an individual. Although each child has its own skills, emphasis is put on how that particular skill is necessary for the group to function. In fact, there is one point in which Violet and Klaus literally become one. When, in *The Carnivorous Carnival*, the Baudelaires disguise themselves to go unnoticed by Count Olaf and his followers, Violet and Klaus dress up as a two-headed freak. For a while, brother and sister pretend to be one person.

Since the Baudelaire orphans’ team spirit and responsibility towards each other is what empowers them, it is also what makes them threatening in front of adults. As the story moves on, the Baudelaires start to be seen as villains by almost everyone, because their actions to survive and defend themselves are misunderstood for ruthless crimes: “‘They look like three innocent children,’ the shopkeeper said, ‘but they’re really vicious criminals. Be careful’” (*The Hostile Hospital*, 27). The way the Baudelaires are perceived by adults is reminiscent of how children are demonized in Gothic fiction for adults. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, two visions of children blend for a while. Whereas the narrator shows the Baudelaires as three resourceful children and admires

the way they cooperate, most of the other characters in the story think they are a criminal gang. Snicket, however, makes it quite clear that the children are only thought to be vicious criminals by prejudiced adults who read a very unreliable newspaper, *The Daily Punctilio*—even though Snicket’s story and his vision of the Baudelaires may be just as unreliable.

Although building up an individual personality that is complete and indivisible is not the main focus in Snicket’s series, which pays attention to the parts rather than the whole, having three individuals that function harmoniously as a team is another way of conveying a sense of completeness. As Nikolajeva states, “Collective characters may be used to represent more palpably different aspects of human nature” (2002a: 68). Take, for example, this excerpt: “all three children turned the handle together, and opened the hatch together, and together they climbed out of the passageway” (*The Grim Grotto*, 314). Sometimes, it is as though the three Baudelaires were, indeed, one. The harmony conveyed by such passages counters the chaotic nature of the narrative and the events in it. Characters who only seek personal satisfaction are villainized and ridiculed, and portrayed as the instigators of chaos, contrasting drastically with the way the children complement each other. As Snicket’s world is governed by the Great Unknown, i.e., the impossibility to know everything and solve all the mysteries of life, the bond that unites the three Baudelaires is probably the only thing that is reassuring about *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Despite Snicket’s promise that there will be no happy ending, for what was lost will never be recovered, catharsis is possible in Snicket’s books every time the orphans’ successful teamwork allows them to escape from villains.

4.5. Flowers of Evil: Conquering Childhood Fears through Comic Gothic

‘You see, the thing that really finishes a Boggart is *laughter*.’
J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

The previous sections have analyzed the effects of Gothic and postmodern devices like narrative unreliability, textual fragmentation and the depiction of villainy on child characterization. I have argued that placing child characters in a hostile world eventually accentuates the children’s moral stamina. Although Handler/Snicket puts his child characters in the most dangerous situations, the emphasis is not on the aberrations that result from it, but on how they overcome every situation and the moral lessons that can be inferred. What complicates this reading, however, is the fact that this representation of children and the predominant vision of morality are framed by an unreliable and profoundly ironic narration. This casts doubt on the seriousness of these child characters: are they meant to be taken seriously or are they parodies of the other (mainly British) child characters—like Harry, Coraline and Lyra—who always do the right thing no matter how much trouble they are in? In fact, the narrator describes the Baudelaires’ story as a terrible one, but the effect produced by the language he uses tends to be more humorous than terrifying. I have already discussed how Snicket directs irony towards himself and towards most adult figures in the narrative, but I have not examined the effect that humor has on the representation of child characters and their experience of fear. This section examines Handler/Snicket’s use of humor in conjunction with terror and horror, in order to determine what—if anything—can be taken seriously about children and fear in the series.

Child Abuse and Comic Gothic

The irruption of the comic Gothic in children's fiction has been acknowledged by most critics dealing with the interaction between the Gothic and children's literature, Roald Dahl being generally considered its most prominent exponent. According to Spooner, "The revival of Gothic in children's fiction, too, from Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) to Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999 -), tends to make extensive use of the comic register" (2006: 37). Similarly, Cross claims that "Within children's fiction, the comic Gothic can no longer be ignored, so prevalent has it become in the last 15 years or so" (2008: 57). Cross mentions *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as the best known example, and admits that comic Gothic in children's fiction is not altogether new, for Roald Dahl's children's novels already had this mix of humor and horror. However, Cross adds, "it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that the comic Gothic as a genre took off for junior readers" (2008: 57). Spooner mentions some pioneering examples of comic Gothic—or mock Gothic—for junior audiences, like the TV shows *The Munsters* (1964-1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964-1966), which both feature families of harmless monsters that parody the typical, perfect American family. Spooner also points out the *Scary Movie* films (2000-), which parody American teenage horror movies, and Tim Burton's movie *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), which "acknowledges the (often unintentionally funny) 1960s horror films of Roger Corman and the Hammer Studios in its deliberately hammy acting, over-exaggerated sets and slightly crumby special effects" (2006: 36). Julie Cross, as I have already pointed out (see Chapter 1), privileges "the subtlety, sophistication and complexities of higher forms of humor, such as parody and irony, which rely on children's cognitive and interpretative abilities" over Dahl's scatological humor and slapstick (2008: 58)—a preference which I do not share

for I believe each form of humor has its own function and its own complexities. For Cross, Henrietta Branford's *Dimanche Diller* trilogy (1994-1996)⁹⁸ and Lemony Snicket's series are examples of this higher form of humor.

According to Spooner, "Gothic and parody have always been close companions", for, not only does Gothic writing often elicit parodies, but Gothic texts often include comic episodes (2006: 35-6). Spooner highlights how "The first phase of Gothic writing quickly elicited overt parodies, including Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (both 1818), but early texts like *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Monk* appear to have a strong sense of their own ludicrousness, and deliberately incorporate comic episodes in imitation of Shakespearean tragedy" (2006: 35-6). As I stated in the Introduction, Horner and Zlosnik also view 'serious' and 'comic' Gothic as two ends of the same spectrum (2012: 323). Within this spectrum, I suggest that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is closer to the comic end, except that Snicket's series does contain a certain degree of seriousness. There are indeed many things that are either not to be taken seriously, or to be taken tongue in cheek: the narrator, the villains, the grown-ups, the adult institutions, and so on. Nevertheless, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is a work of children's fiction and seldom do we find works of mainstream middle-class children's literature that do not serve some useful, didactic purpose. Handler/Snicket uses humor, not only to parody Gothic and children's literature conventions, but also to deal with serious issues, more along the lines of those "Gothic-postmodernist works which playfully approach terror through defamiliarisation and carnival" (Beville, 2009: 169). Beville, however,

⁹⁸ Branford's trilogy comprises the books *Dimanche Diller* (1994), *Dimanche Diller in Danger* (1994) and *Dimanche Diller at Sea* (1996). The trilogy is thematically similar to Snicket's series. It is about an orphaned girl, Dimanche Diller, who has inherited a large fortune and has been sent to live with the horrible Valpurga Vilemle, an imposter who pretends to be Dimanche's aunt to steal the girl's money.

focuses on literature for adults, like Salman Rushdie, Kurt Vonnegut or Bret Easton Ellis. Snicket's series is marketed as children's fiction and, therefore, its comic approach to terror serves children's literature purposes, though it is not clear how much of this sophisticated humor children actually get.

Snicket's story is fundamentally about child abuse. The unfortunate events that he narrates and denounces, however, take place in a very surrealist world with very unreal characters. The villains that inflict this abuse are as frightening as they are ludicrous and child characters manage to survive by carrying out very implausible plans. All these unrealistic elements have a comic distancing effect. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental premises of the series is that some children cannot afford to be happy and innocent and this is no laughing matter. According to Montgomery, with the emergence of a child rights perspective, in the twentieth century, "child abuse has become a particular concern for Western societies" (2009a: 156). As she goes on to explain, "imagining children as rights-bearing citizens means allowing them the same rights of protection as adults, as well as acknowledging their special vulnerabilities" (2009: 158). As the welfare of children has gained political importance, an obsession with it has also become apparent in contemporary fiction, especially since the 1980s. On the other hand, Monica Hughes explains how children today can hardly be shielded from adult problems:

After the Second World War, television's global village plunged children in the adult world. They can no longer help being aware of the emotional, financial and social worries of their parents, as well as of the world around them. Three generations after Edith Nesbit the adults are back, but they are no longer Olympian; they are frequently emotionally frail and have to be coped with. (1994: 155-6)

Hughes adds that "Coping with such adult problems, or at least learning to live with them, often constitutes an integral part of the structure of today's novels" (1994: 156).

The Gothic is probably one of the most adequate modes to deal with these anxieties, as both Büssing (1987) and Skal (2001) have noted: “horror entertainment’s fixation on child abuse, child murder, and related themes in the eighties paralleled a swelling hysteria in the courts and the media over sexual molestation and incest” (2001: 361). Children’s fiction authors, on the other hand, also make extensive use of Gothic imagery to tackle this issue and they put their child characters in very extreme situations. At this point, though, it is important to remember Handler’s words about children’s literature having certain restrictions and how, as a consequence, there are certain things which could never appear in a Snicket book. Here is where comic Gothic—the Gothic that depicts terrible things while emphasizing its own ludicrousness—comes in very handy, for it allows children’s fiction authors to deal with themes that would otherwise be considered unsuitable.

Actually, humor is an indispensable ingredient in children’s fiction. In reference to Roald Dahl’s books, West states that “children enjoy jokes and stories that poke fun at the moral authority of adults” and that “By using humor and fantasy to mitigate the aggressive elements of the story, Dahl employs essentially the same technique that children learn to use when expressing feelings of hostility” (1990: 115-6), i.e., humor. In his essay on “Humour”, Freud already talks about this liberating effect:

The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (1988b: 429)

As these texts are aimed at children and they must satisfy the child’s needs, children’s authors make use of humor and they direct it at disturbing topics and at antipathetic adult characters. This appeals to the child’s egotism and gives him/her a feeling of

empowerment. The suffering that topics such as child abuse, fear or death could provoke is thus replaced by “the (temporary) pleasure of seeing the weak overcoming the powerful” (Cross, 2008: 62). That child characters in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* actually *overcome* the powerful is a dubious interpretation. It is true that the Baudelaires survive and Count Olaf eventually dies, harpooned by the island’s facilitator in *The End*, but the final recognition that the orphans have to immerse themselves into the world and that they cannot eternally run away from it is not precisely a victory of good over evil, or common sense over stupidity. What is true, on the other hand, is that the orphans constantly *outwit* authoritative figures.

Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* shows the Baudelaires suffering at the hands of villains, but not without having ridiculed these villains in front of the reader first. Count Olaf, especially, says truly terrifying things to the children, which, taken out of context, would seem to belong to the most disturbing adult Gothic novel: “This is my knife. It is very sharp and very eager to hurt you—almost as eager as I am. If you don’t do what I say, you will suffer bodily harm” (*The Reptile Room*, 94). What is more, Olaf is portrayed as someone who likes to abuse his power at the expense of the weak, and who believes in scaring children into docile behavior:

Klaus could still feel the bruise on his face from the time Count Olaf had struck him, when they were living in his house. Sunny still ached from being stuffed into a birdcage and dangled from the tower where he made his evil plans. And while Violet had not been the victim of any physical violence from this terrible man, she had almost been forced to marry him. (*The Reptile Room*, 47)

Whenever Count Olaf’s disciplining methods are questioned, he replies “I’m just disciplining these orphans” or “You can’t go easy on children. (...) They must be taught to obey their elders” (*The Bad Beginning*, 48). At this point, however, the reader already knows that, though ruthless and frightening, Count Olaf is also a ridiculous figure, that

the Baudelaires are smarter than he is, and that they will manage to get away from him. In fact, the ludicrousness of the villain is emphasized right from the very first moment he appears in the story. When the Baudelaires are taken to Olaf's house in *The Bad Beginning*, Snicket mentions his dirty appearance, saying that he is unshaven and has stains on his suit. Right after this description, Olaf welcomes the children with these words: "Hello, my children. Please step into your new home, and wipe your feet outside so no mud gets indoors" (*The Bad Beginning*, 22). Juxtaposing Count Olaf's filthiness to his request that children wipe their feet creates an ironic effect that, right from his first appearance, tells the implied reader that the villain is not to be taken too seriously.

This mechanism applies to pretty much all the disturbing elements in the series, including all the unfortunate events the orphans have to endure. Langbauer observes that "Part of the series's comedy derives from how relentlessly Snicket laments the orphans' desolation, how outrageously he insists on it" (2007: 502). On the back cover of every novel, a blurb written and signed by Snicket parodies melodramatic language, and displays the irony that characterizes all the books:

Dear Reader,

I'm sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant. It tells an unhappy tale about three very unlucky children. Even though they are charming and clever, the Baudelaire siblings lead lives filled with misery and woe. (*The Bad Beginning*, back cover)

After going on and on about how awfully miserable his characters are, Snicket reminds the reader that the book is not for the faint-hearted: "If you have picked up this book with the hope of finding a simple and cheery tale, I'm afraid you have picked up the wrong book altogether" (*The Reptile Room*, back cover). Handler states that he came up with this anti-marketing device thus:

I was so convinced that the books were going to fail that I couldn't imagine how I could write something on the back that would drive people to them. Then I was in a pharmacy and I saw the warnings on the backs of poisonous substances, and I thought, 'Well, *that's* what I can do.' So I wrote a list of ingredients in the book, and warnings that they shouldn't consume those ingredients. (in Robinson, 2005, original emphasis)

Handler's editor and publisher, on the other hand, saw its marketing potential in terms of reverse psychology (in Robinson, 2005). Therefore, this device does several things: first, it appeals to the children's desire of doing what adults tell them not to do and it gives the implied reader an active role. As Langbauer affirms, "The books insist that readers have chosen to read them (against the book's advice) to make readers acknowledge that they do make choices" (2007: 515). Second, it emphasizes the ironic level of the books; i.e., whereas a blurb is supposed to attract readers to the book, Snicket uses his to repel readers. What is humorous about the blurbs is that they all use the same formula; Snicket keeps insisting on how woeful the books are. Phrases like 'extremely unpleasant' may give an unpleasant feeling when you hear them once; but, when all of Snicket's lines are crammed with words like 'unpleasant', 'unhappy', 'unlucky' and so on, it starts to become a joke. As Handler himself states, "The way that the stories go in the Snicket books is just the way stories naturally go to me. They're full of misery, and yet the misery ends up being slightly hilarious" (in Robinson, 2005). This is achieved through the narrator's repetition of and insistence on this misery. Thus, Handler/Snicket creates a world in which events that would be terrible in real life can become funny, for repetition ends up highlighting their absurdity.

Nevertheless, as I stated earlier, it must not be assumed that Handler/Snicket does not pursue a more 'serious' purpose by representing three children alone in a farcical, carnivalesque version of reality. Cross explains that comic Gothic "despite slapstick and farcical episodes, often contains elements of more serious, normally less

palatable undertones of life's unfairness, offering a bitter-sweet experience" (2008: 71). As I discussed in the previous chapters, didacticism is hardly ever absent from children's texts. It is precisely Handler/Snicket's use of humor that indicates what is meant to be taken seriously and what is not and, from this, an obvious didactic element emerges to the surface. We know that nothing said by Count Olaf, Esmé Squalor or Mr Poe is to be taken seriously, for the narrator has discredited them from the beginning. Adult institutions are also humorously downplayed with sentences like: "The most important thing we do at the hospital is paperwork" (*The Hostile Hospital*, 58). The one thing that is not downplayed by humor is the child, or rather the qualities it represents.

Taking Children Seriously

The presentation of Snicket's characters draws attention to their fictionality, especially in the case of Sunny who has very little to do with a real baby. The children's actions and the way they defeat their enemies are also outrageously implausible and humorous. It is evident that many child characters in children's fiction, especially in texts that contain Gothic and fantasy elements, are not meant to be understood as realistic representations of children. However, with books like *Harry Potter*, for example, the reader temporarily 'believes' that (s)he is reading about a real child, because, for the narrator, Harry is real. J.K. Rowling creates a world in which it is plausible that a twelve-year-old fights and defeats a basilisk. Snicket, on the other hand, constantly highlights the absurdity and the fakery of the world and the characters he creates. In the following passage, for instance, Snicket ironically highlights the impossibility of the adventures he is narrating, at the same time that he pokes fun at adult concerns over what children read:

The good people who are publishing this book have a concern that they have expressed to me. The concern is that readers like yourself will read my history of the Baudelaire orphans and attempt to imitate some of the things they do. So at this point in the story, in order to mollify the publishers (...) please allow me to give you a piece of advice, even though I don't know anything about you. The piece of advice is as follows: If you ever need to get to Curdled Cave in a hurry, do not, under any circumstances, steal a boat and attempt to sail across Lake Lachrymose during a hurricane, because it is very dangerous and the chances of your survival are practically zero. (*The Wide Window*, 146)

In this passage, the narrator reminds the narratee that (s)he is reading a book and that, therefore, everything in it is obviously fiction. Poking fun at the common adult concern about children imitating what they read, this excerpt is reminiscent of C.S. Lewis's narrator in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* advising the child narratee against locking him or herself up inside a wardrobe (2001: 13). The irony in Snicket's advice is that Curdled Cave and Lake Lachrymose obviously do not exist and the possibilities that a child might steal and sail a boat are very unlikely, which highlights both the fictionality of the characters and the absurdity of the publishers' concern.

Although the fancifulness of the characters and the fakery of the story are emphasized, the qualities that the Baudelaires represent are very real, or rather the adult narrator's longing for these qualities. I argue that the Baudelaires embody Snicket's vision of ethics and this is not supposed to be laughed at. That the Baudelaires are meant to be respected by the reader is acknowledged by the respect the narrator professes for them and his approving or, at least, his understanding of everything they do. This does not mean, however, that the Baudelaires always do the 'right' thing, for traditional notions of morality are subverted in Snicket's series, and replaced by the uncertainty of what is good and what is evil. As Langbauer states, "By setting its orphans adrift in a world bereft of stable guidelines, Snicket's series also recasts ethics—from fixed code to something more fluid, knowable ultimately only in action" (2007: 503).

I already discussed in section 4.3. how the orphans' coming into contact with villains eventually forces the siblings to do things they never thought they would do. They realize that, if they want to escape from villains, they sometimes have to act like them:

'It worked,' Violet said. 'We fooled them. We're as good at tricking people as Olaf is.'
'And at disguises,' Klaus said.
'Anagrams,' Sunny said.
'And lying to people,' Violet said (...). 'Maybe we're becoming villains after all.'
'Don't say that,' Klaus said. 'We're not villains. We're good people. We had to do tricky things in order to save our lives.'
'Olaf has to do tricky things,' Violet said, 'to save his life.'
'Different,' Sunny said.
'Maybe it's not different,' Violet said sadly. 'Maybe—' (*The Hostile Hospital*, 242)

They even end up committing the same crime that brought about their misfortunes in the first place: in *The Penultimate Peril*, the Baudelaires set a building—the Hotel Denouement—on fire. Even on these occasions, though, Snicket supports the Baudelaires' deeds, at the same time that he ridiculizes the inflexible moral lessons of traditional cautionary tales. For example, in reference to the tale "The Boy Who Cried 'Wolf!'", Snicket tells the narratee that "This [not telling lies] is an absurd moral, for you and I both know that sometimes not only is it good to lie, it is necessary to lie" (*The Reptile Room*, 142). As shown by the dialogue above, Handler/Snicket presents a more flexible view of ethics and morality.

Children committing treacherous acts with the narrator's approval is a relatively recent development in American children's fiction (maybe with the exceptions of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, but then again Mark Twain's novels were not originally intended for a child audience).⁹⁹ MacLeod explains that Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the*

⁹⁹ According to Barbara Wall, "Clemens [Twain] attempted to show how real children thought, felt and acted, the Sunday-school stereotype was still there in his mind, to be attacked. (...) During the time he

Spy (1964) is the first American novel for children in which an adult tells a child “You have to lie” (Fitzhugh, 2003: 259). According to MacLeod, this is a turning point in American children’s literature:

She [Louise Fitzhugh] was doing two things unprecedented in mainstream children’s literature: First, she was repudiating a long-observed adult responsibility to be a role model and a keeper of the moral universe for children. And second, she was letting a child, an unambiguous, preadolescent, eleven-year-old child in one of the untidy realities of the adult world, with no moral judgment attached. (1994: 199)

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the adults’ responsibility to be role models is undermined through humor and irony, as I already mentioned. Thus, the Baudelaires are left with no adult mentors (apart from their memories of their parents). The children, however, have their own moral compass. Snicket articulates his own vision of ethics through his own remarks, but mostly through the Baudelaires. In fact, the most important lessons in the series are generally uttered by the child characters, as in this passage when Violet scolds Ishmael, the island facilitator: “You need a *moral* compass. (...) You’re not keeping anyone safe. You’re endangering the whole world, just to keep a few of your secrets. That’s not parenting! That’s horrid and wrong!” (*The End*, 295, original emphasis). Snicket, on the other hand, also participates in this whole debate about good and evil. He functions more as a commentator, an observer who sympathizes with the children and justifies their actions: “It is very difficult to make one’s way in this world without being wicked at one time or another, when the world’s way is so wicked to begin with” (*The Penultimate Peril*, 316).

On the other hand, simplistic and prejudiced statements against the child characters’ behavior are attributed to unsympathetic adult characters: “There are people

was writing the episodes of *Tom Sawyer*, over a period of several years, Clemens believed he was writing for adults. (...) Given the story-book ending, with the finding of Injun Joe’s ‘treasure’, which makes the boys rich for life, it is perhaps surprising that he should have rejected so decidedly the idea that he had written a boy’s book; and he was in fact easily persuaded by his wife and [his friend] Howells that the language should be purged of profanity, and the book published as a juvenile” (1991: 113).

who say that criminal behavior is the destiny of children from a broken home,' he [Mr Poe] said. 'Perhaps such people are right'" (*The Penultimate Peril*, 249). As I mentioned earlier, Snicket takes into account several ways of interpreting situations, but there are clearly some which predominate over others through his use of humor and his attribution of sympathy. In this case, Mr Poe's interpretation is downplayed because it is uttered by a character who has been previously ridiculed; at this point there is very little chance that the reader might take him seriously. The vision of the Baudelaires that predominates is unavoidably the one that the narrator endorses: despite all the misfortunes they have endured, the children have turned out exceptionally nice and their bad deeds have to be judged in context.

Violence in the series is, therefore, not merely thrilling or humorous. It is also there for intellectual purposes and it is supposed to elicit a rational response, and a reflection on what it means to be wicked and violent. I believe that this is one of the features that keeps *A Series of Unfortunate Events* within the acceptable limits of children's fiction; the fact that moral values are ultimately preserved in the figure of the child, even if these values have become much more flexible, so that they can be adapted to different situations. In Julia Eccleshare's children's fiction selection, Snicket's series is described thus:

Violence and a cynical, rather sophisticated humor dominate but always stays in the right side of a delicate line. The books have even been credited with helping to ease American children through post-9/11 anxieties by offering up the stark, rather adult truth that, no matter what dreadful things life throws at us, we must step up and deal with them. (2009: 673)

What I believe this quotation means by violence and humor staying "the right side of a delicate line" is that these elements eventually serve a useful purpose which most children's books are expected to fulfill. And the sentence that follows, I believe,

confirms this, by pointing out how the series has actually had a positive, in this case, therapeutic effect on child readers—or, at least, this is what adults believe.

Mitigating frightening elements through humor and, at the same time, showing how characters face up to them is a twofold way of undermining fear and putting pleasure forth, focusing thus on the beauty that springs from the world's ugliness. The fact that these frightening elements are perceived as humorous by the reader is just a comic distancing device, but it does not mean that the protagonists' fears are not serious. Take, for instance, this excerpt: "And the only thing they felt was sheer terror, as deep and dark as the passageway itself, a terror so profound that I have slept with four night-lights ever since I visited 667 Dark Avenue" (*The Ersatz Elevator*, 137). What is comic about the passage is not, of course, the fact that the Baudelaires felt sheer terror, but Snicket's acknowledgement that he sleeps with his light on. Thus, the grimness of imagining three terrified children is countered by the subsequent humorous picture of a grown-up who is scared like a child. On the other hand, the narrator makes sure he points out that the Baudelaires' fears are perfectly rational:

There are two kinds of fears: rational and irrational—or, in simpler terms, fears that make sense and fears that don't. For instance, the Baudelaire orphans have a fear of Count Olaf, which makes perfect sense, because he is an evil man who wants to destroy them. But if they were afraid of lemon meringue pie, this would be an irrational fear, because lemon meringue pie is delicious and has never hurt a soul. (*The Wide Window*, 34)

Like Gaiman's *Coraline*, Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Pullman's *Lyra*, Handler/Snicket's protagonists stand for facing up to lives' fears and trials. As Violet says, "We're all afraid, (...) But that didn't stop us" (*The Wide Window*, 160).

In *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*, Alison Lurie points out that books in which children are damaged or corrupted are generally not classified as children's books, even if they have obvious children's fiction features, such as child protagonists or easy

diction (1990: xiii). In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, children come really close to villainy—they even commit acts of villainy—but strong will, knowledge and reason triumph in the end. I do not mean to say that evil is eradicated in Snicket’s series, for it is certainly not. Yet, the Baudelaires’ contact with villainy leads them to learning lessons, to acquiring experience and Snicket’s focus is very much on these ‘flowers’ that emerge from evil. This is one of the things that distinguish *A Series of Unfortunate Events* from adult Gothic novels. Adult Gothic novels do contain moral messages and ideological speculation, but their emphasis tends to be on aberrations. In Snicket’s series the aberrations that result from the world’s wickedness are downplayed by humor and the series asks the reader to take a close look at the good things that can arise from it. The Baudelaires are, as their family name suggests, the ‘flowers’ of this text; the phoenixes that have been reborn from the ashes of their family home and the beauty that has emerged from the evil world and from Snicket’s sorrow.

4.6. Conclusions: “We’re not villains. We’re good people”

[T]his is how all our stories begin, in darkness with our eyes closed, and all our stories end the same way, too, with all of us uttering some last words—or perhaps someone else’s—before slipping back into darkness as our series of unfortunate events comes to an end.

Lemony Snicket, *The End*

Out of the four works of children’s fiction I analyze in this dissertation, Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is probably the one in which Gothic and children’s literature conventions are more inextricably linked. Far from being temporary, evil in the shape of fragmentation and schisms is never eradicated; the series ends with an acknowledgement that it will always be there and that there is no point in

trying to run away. Despite this pessimistic turn, the positive effects of the Gothic are emphasized, as in most works of children's Gothic. The presence of Gothic elements allows for representing children as brave characters who defy evil, learn lessons for life, and thus become empowered. The ultimate effect of the Gothic environment is that it highlights the goodness of the child protagonists.

The other authors I deal with stick to more traditional narrative techniques that ultimately provide a more coherent view of reality, as well as emphasize essentialist representations of the individual. By contrast, Handler/Snicket's Gothic and postmodern narrative devices result in a highly ambiguous text, in which characters are just as ambiguous. The Baudelaire orphans are agents, but they are ultimately subject to Snicket's storytelling and to the watchful eyes of adults; they are utterly unrealistic characters, but they are not meant to be laughed at like mere caricatures; they are at the centre of Snicket's narrative, but they are also a catalyst for him to tell his story; they are children but they are not childish; they are both disempowered and empowered; and so on. Probably, the only thing that is ultimately unambiguous about child characters in the series is that they are an adult's fantasy, a vision which is seldom overtly acknowledged in children's texts.

Nevertheless, children's fiction conventions are not completely undermined. Although the Baudelaire orphans are ambiguous characters because they are subject to a very ambiguous narration, I argue that the reading that predominates is that they are morally and intellectually mature children that represent the narrator's hopes for the future, like *Coraline*, *Harry Potter* or *Lyra*. Although through the Baudelaires' adventures Handler/Snicket depicts a more flexible view of morality that highly depends on interpretation, it still follows the children's literature convention of

attributing the favorable behavior to the child protagonist(s). Furthermore, in accordance with a recent trend in (especially American) children's fiction, role models in Snicket's books are not adults, but children. Yet this does not break with the convention that, in children's books, there has to be a role model.

Last but not least, Handler/Snicket's playful use of Gothic and children's literature conventions and the presence of humor in the series also suggest that the implied author is parodying all these conventions. In this sense, what Handler/Snicket is doing is not so different from what Lewis Carroll did in his *Alice* books; i.e., writing a book for children that both draws upon and pokes fun at previous ways of writing for children, especially the British children's literature tradition influenced by fairy tales. Yet, even if child characters find themselves in a world where nothing seems to make sense, the child figure is treated with seriousness and it serves as a shrine for the qualities that the implied author/narrator would like to preserve. The paradox about Snicket's children is that they represent adult qualities; it is not innocence that is desirable, but experience. Contradictory as it may seem, children in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* represent an ideal vision of maturity.

CONCLUSIONS: GOOD SEEDS AND DARK GARDENS

He was actually thinking tenderly how lovely it was and what wonders of blue its hundreds of little blossoms were. He did not know that just that simple thought was slowly filling his mind – filling and filling and filling it until other things were softly pushed aside. It was as if a sweet clear spring had begun to rise in a stagnant pool and had risen and risen until at last it swept the dark water away.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

The four works of children’s fiction I have analyzed illustrate what I regard as four main, interrelated conventions that prevail in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century children’s Gothic. I chose to conclude each of the four chapters highlighting the quotes “All was well”, “It’s Coraline, not Caroline”, “Without this child we shall die” and “We’re not villains, we’re good people” in the subtitle of the conclusions, because I believe they encapsulate these conventions: consolation, the child character’s attainment of a stable identity, hope and the child’s moral superiority. As I have argued, Gothic elements are used to jeopardize these ideals only to reestablish them even more forcefully in the end. Furthermore, all these conventions are the result of yet another overarching convention: the fact that children’s Gothic is inescapably didactic—as is most children’s fiction—and as a consequence, empowerment is equated to maturity, and adult knowledge is always the ultimate objective of the child characters’ journeys.

After my journey through the worlds created by Rowling, Gaiman, Pullman and Handler, I believe it is fitting to go back—like the child protagonists—to where I started, i.e., to Jackson, Coats and McGillis’s claim that children’s Gothic reflects our changing attitude towards the innocence of children. I have already expressed my reservations about this statement, because children’s literature engages, not only with our views—and fears—of what childhood is, but also with ideals of what it should, or

should not, be. And, as I have argued, these ideals often predominate in the texts I have analyzed. As MacLeod claims, and as I hope my dissertation has demonstrated,

Children's literature does, certainly, represent the society that produces it, but it does so partially and with many ambiguities and evasions. No metaphor as direct as 'reflection' can convey the subtleties of the connections between children's books and culture. Writing for children, adults bring to bear their own experience of childhood, their ideas of what childhood is or ought to be, their commitment to the conventions of their own time, and their concerns for their own society's problems and progress. (...) Indeed most writers for children practice some degree of self-censorship. They often tell children the truth, but it is seldom the whole truth. (1994: vii-viii)

As regards children's Gothic, rather than seeing it as a direct reflection of our recognition that children are not so innocent after all, I would say that authors use it as a means to reflect on what they assume to be childhood fears and anxieties, and the evils of our times in general. There seems to be a conscious didactic effort to teach child readers to cope with such evils, by giving them a moderate dose of terror and horror, and by providing them with child protagonists to whom they can relate. As I have argued, the child protagonists I have examined are not representations of what children are, but they are idealized human beings, characterized by their goodness and clearly meant to serve as role models for the reader. Although their child protagonists differ a little bit from one another, the authors I have dealt with very much coincide in their understanding of 'goodness' as the possession of precious qualities, such as bravery, a sense of duty, the capacity to love, mercy, and a predisposition to critical thinking. Harry, Coraline, Lyra and the Baudelaires have flaws and they are not always well-behaved, but what matters is that they are inherently 'good' by today's standards. Their goodness is not defined by their obedience and their submission to authority figures, but by their capacity to transcend their self-interest, make wise choices, and preserve their bonds with others.

Apart from being role models for the child reader, I would say that child protagonists also represent those ideal qualities that, according to the author, may help redeem society and free it from evil. These child characters are, first and foremost, adult fantasies, which may account for their immense popularity among adult readers. Therefore, the child figure is instrumental to represent these qualities not just because it satisfies the main target audience (children)—it might well be that an author does not have a particular audience in mind—but also because the child figure symbolizes potential. Since their selves are represented as still in formation, the many changes and improvements that fictional children undergo throughout the narrative come across as plausible. In other words, it is too late for adult villains, but not for the child heroes. Of course, political correctness also plays an important part, for it would be hardly acceptable to provide child readers with child protagonists that go astray and meet disastrous endings.

What I believe these texts reflect in a more or less straightforward way is not so much our present skepticism over the child's innocence, but rather a current obsession with clinging to this old ideal and constructing child protagonists that conform to it. As Warner states, "Children have never been so visible as points of identification, as warrants of virtue, as markers of humanity" (1994: 46). The child figure that predominates in the texts I have examined is a child who starts out as an innocent and, even after undergoing terrible experiences that would be traumatic if translated to real life, manages to retain some of this initial innocence by the end. In children's Gothic, homes and gardens have become darker, and the wonders of being in constant change (so present in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* novels) have turned into fear of the future and its uncertainties. The child, however, remains incorruptible no matter what happens to it, no matter how viciously it is treated. Thus, I would affirm that, if these texts 'reflect'

anything, it is how old ideals and adult fantasies of childhood are highly prevalent, albeit in conflict with the realities of many children and with other conceptions of childhood propagated by psychoanalysis. According to Cunningham,

(...) the peculiarity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and the root cause of much present confusion and angst about childhood is that a public discourse which argues that children are persons with rights to a degree of autonomy is at odds with the remnants of the romantic view that the right of a child is to be a child. The implication of the first is a fusing of the worlds of adult and child, and of the second the maintenance of separation. (2005: 205)

As I hope my discussion has demonstrated, on many occasions, the texts cannot decide whether children are, or should be, equal to or separate from adults. Whereas the novels advocate that childhood ignorance and instability should be replaced by experience and stability—standard adulthood, in other words—there are certain subjects of which child protagonists remain eternally innocent; namely, power in its most negative sense, and sexuality—perhaps with the exception of Pullman’s Lyra.

In contrast with adult Gothic, which tends to be both nostalgic and anti-nostalgic at the same time, the works of children’s Gothic I have discussed are pervaded by nostalgia. The following quotation by horror fiction author Stephen King summarizes the Gothic mood concerning childhood very well: “I write for that buried child in us, but I’m writing for the grown-up too. I want grown-ups to look at the child long enough to be able to give him up. The child should be buried” (1986). Children’s Gothic also asks us to look at the child for a long time, but in contrast to adult Gothic, it does not want us to give it up completely. The following quotation by Neil Gaiman contrasts sharply with King’s above quoted claim: “It’s good to be a child again, for a little while, and to fear—not governments, not regulations, not infidelities or accountants or distant wars, but ghosts and such things that don’t exist, and even if they do, can do nothing to hurt us” (in Popova, 2014). Children’s Gothic thus stresses that some of our early

childlikeness should be preserved in adulthood, and it shows how much the adult enjoys going back to childhood, and even revisit childhood fears, which do not seem so menacing when seen in retrospect.

The centrality of childhood fears is another key aspect that defines Gothic writing for older children. It could certainly be argued that what authors present as ‘childhood fears’ are actually either *adult* fears or adult assumptions on children’s fears, which may have little to do with what real children are actually afraid of. Yet, regardless of the psychological accuracy of these novels, this reveals an increasing interest in understanding the child’s mind and a bigger effort on the writers’ part to put themselves in its shoes, frequently as a means to oppose and criticize other adults. The fact that authors incorporate a vast range of Gothic tropes and devices that used to be reserved mostly to adult literature indicates that there is indeed an acknowledgement that certain preoccupations are not exclusive to adulthood. In this sense, I agree with the claim that “we begin, in a strange way, to dignify the child by granting him or her complex motivations that are not the results of a bland innocence” (Jackson, Coats and McGillis, 2008: 7). Contemporary children’s Gothic writers may not tell children the *whole* truth, because our culture insists that their innocence of certain topics should be preserved, but there is a greater attempt to blur the boundaries between the child and the adult. Children’s Gothic seems to acknowledge that the needs of the two age groups may not be so different from each other after all: the child needs narratives of fear just as the adult does.

This connects with my last point: the cultural function of children’s Gothic. In the texts I have examined, the Gothic is used both to attract and to instruct, but it is not clear which of the two objectives is most important. Is the Gothic a means to instruct? Or is didacticism a means to make the Gothic acceptable? Since the effectiveness of the

moral lessons in these books is doubtful, I lean more towards the second option. As I stated in the introductory chapter, children's literature seems to be predicated on the assumption that instruction will fail. Therefore, is it possible that moral lessons are only an excuse to feed child readers with Gothic without adults disapproving of it? This leads me to another question: does children's Gothic actually maintain the status quo while pretending to be subversive? Or does it challenge the status quo while pretending to maintain it? Either way, children's Gothic always generates controversy. Despite the authors' efforts to make it acceptable, there are still adult readers who find it inappropriate and try to ban it from school reading lists. At the same time, despite the authors' efforts to subvert the conventions of children's literature, some critics and scholars still find it too conservative. It is clear that didacticism and Gothic thrills are inextricably linked, but it is unclear which of the two—if any—predominates. Maybe the recent success of children's Gothic novels is due precisely to the fact that they attempt to fulfill these two apparently incompatible objectives, even if, in doing so, they fall into a number of contradictions.

In conclusion, I partly agree with Jackson, Coats and McGillis's claim. Children's Gothic does engage with our anxieties over children, but it does so on a different level and in a more subtle way. Reading the prevalent representation of the child as a product of a current obsession with preserving the child's innocence reveals that there *is* anxiety, not only about what real children will grow up to be like, but also about what they are like in the present and what we, adults, are doing to them. The didacticism of these children's texts insists on the necessity to teach children not to be self-interested, greedy and cruel to others, and this of course bears an implicit acknowledgement that children—and, for this matter, all human beings in general—have a tendency to be all these things and need to grow out of it. One of the obvious

'gaps' in children's Gothic is the absence of child protagonists who fail, or child protagonists who are villainous or grow up to be villainous. Certainly, novels feature naughty children and bullies, such as Draco Malfoy, Dudley Dursley or the Cittàgaze children. Yet, these characters are always secondary and the author often gives them the chance to show that they are not all bad, as in the case of Malfoy and Dudley. I do not mean, however, to undermine the importance of secondary characters. Their presence is indeed crucial to question dominant ideologies and show that alternatives exist. What I mean is that such characters hardly ever predominate. As Nikolajeva states, "we can perhaps still claim that certain types of character are highly unusual and will perhaps never become common in children's fiction, not as a result of taboos but perhaps because of the nature and aesthetics of children's literature" (2002a: 41). In my view, however, "the nature and aesthetics of children's literature" is very much related to taboos and ideas about what is appropriate and what is inappropriate for child readers, and these are subject to change. Now that children's authors have proved capable of devising a wide range of narrative strategies to incorporate Gothicity into their narratives, children's Gothic will probably keep surprising us with new characters, settings and narrative voices for a long time.

I hope this dissertation has contributed to the ongoing discussion about the dialectic interaction between the Gothic and children's fiction in the 1990s and early 2000s, and I would like to end by suggesting some further possibilities for research in this field. Throughout my discussion, I have referred to several matters which I have not been able to study in detail due to a lack of space, such as gender roles, narrative voice, questions of censorship and political correctness, and the representation of British and American identities in children's fiction. I would be interested in exploring all these topics in more depth, not only in the works by Rowling, Gaiman, Pullman and Handler,

but also in other works of children's fiction, classic and contemporary. As regards children's fiction and the Gothic, apart from exploring the function of Gothic elements in children's fiction, I would also like to study Gothic rewritings of fairy tales. Finally, working on this dissertation has also raised my curiosity about how actual child readers respond to children's Gothic texts. Examining readerly response would be, I believe, enriching and complementary to my own readings, and would shed further light on the cultural function of the Gothic in children's fiction.

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