

From 'Nobody' to 'Bod': The Identity Formation in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*

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Abstract: *This study aims to show the identity formation in Neil Gaiman's The Graveyard Book. One of the most important and coveted children's writers is Neil Gaiman. His works for children are widely read, and his novels that are particularly written for children are fantasy based. Children naturally gravitate towards fantastic elements, and Neil Gaiman not only writes wonderful works of fantasy, but he also understands the type of fantasy that children love.*

In this paper, the protagonist journey of finding his identity is examined. From his time in the graveyard to the time of his departure to the real world forms his identity. The change of his name from 'Nobody' to 'Bod' and what are the factors that aided in this change is examined in this paper.

Key Words: *Neil Gaiman, Identity Formation, Children Literature.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Fantasy literature has been around for a long time. In fact, it has been around even before the printed literature. The mythologies of Homer have been sung all around Europe in an oral manner. Many supernatural elements were introduced through these mythologies. In reality, such a world is not possible. The characters will possess supernatural abilities that one cannot have in the real world. In the modern and the postmodern era, however, this genre has certainly become popular. The popular culture is filled with such reference on mythology and ancient supernatural stories. *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia* series have all gained international significance because of their respective movies. Modern day culture is filled with such references.

It is to be noted that in recent years modern fantasy works are closer to reality. A blend of reality and fantasy is now the norm of imaginative literature. In the past, however, writers wrote fantasy and readers believed them easily, but now it is not easy. This is because of the modern age and the intellectual readers who are not so easily convinced of the supernatural. Thus, the writers have changed their approach. The research deals with one such brilliant fantasy literature for children which is certainly a blend of the supernatural and reality. The novel under consideration is Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*. The novel makes it clear that no matter how much fantasy is involved one cannot neglect reality. The notion of binary opposition that fantasy and reality are totally opposite is executed well in the novel.

2. MAJOR WORKS OF NEIL GAIMAN

Neil Gaiman is an English writer whose Fantasy writings are very well known around the world. He writes for children as well as adults. He is popular mostly for the books he has written for children. Some of his famous books include, *The Graveyard Book*, *Coraline*, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* for children. His works such as *Anansi Boys*, and *American Gods* are aimed at adults. He has won numerous awards, including the Hugo Awards, and he is also the first author to win both Newbery and the Carnegie medals for the same work. He is also a prolific comic writer. His comics include famous *Sandman Series*.

3. IDENTITY FORMATION:

The novel is definitely a coming of age novel. It is a literary genre that focuses on the growth of the protagonist from birth until they are older and in turn it also helps with the formation of the identity. The growth of the protagonist in terms of psychological and physical is brought out in the novel. The literary novel usually will be narrated by first-person and the person will be a teenager. But when the novel is narrated in the third person there is a great responsibility of the author to cover childhood to adulthood.

The protagonist of the novel is called Nobody Owens. Even the name suggests that he has no particular identity. It is interesting to note that Nobody when he was a baby was found in the graveyard. Nobody's parents were brutally murdered on that day. From that day the ghost of the graveyard has taken care of the baby. The baby, in the beginning, doesn't have an identity. But staying in the graveyard for a prolonged time Nobody develops an identity of his own.

The graveyard is not only a place for the dead but it is also a place for various creatures. Nobody is usually called as Bod. He is also taught by Silas and Miss Lupescu. And Miss Lupescu teaches him about various creatures: "Repeat after me, there are the living and the dead, there are day-folk and night-folk, there are ghouls and mist-walkers, there are the Hugh hunters and the Hounds of God"(63).

The graveyard inhabitants have given Bod the freedom of the graveyard. That means he can see all the dead there and also walk through walls and hide in shadows. Nevertheless, the more he comes to know about the place he feels lonelier. He also slowly loses his freedom of the graveyard as he is growing up. The innocence of his childhood is slowly taken and he feels he is different from the people of the graveyard. In fact, some of the folks in the graveyard insist that he is different from them. The growth of the protagonist is very dramatic. The life Bod starts in the graveyard comes to an end, and his end turns out to be the beginning in the real world. The Gothic novels usually showcase scenes of death and graveyard in a bad light, but the Graveyard Book certainly valorizes these things and in doing so it shows a neutral perspective. The interesting facet of the novel is that Gaiman shows the calm and peaceful attributes of death but at the same time he shows the irrelevance of fantasy.

This journey of Bod through the graveyard and back to reality shapes his reality and identity. He is in the approval of all kinds of creatures and things in the graveyard. He learns to be considerate of others and not to have a prejudice against anyone. At the same time, he comes to understand that everyone will not be good. The critic Noru observes about Bod and identity:

From his early childhood, Bod is aware of his safety, for he merely survives a murder and leaves home in search of a safer place by deploying the third person point of view in the narrative, Gaiman might be trying to give justice to his argument of the social identity of human beings. It is because a character cannot be defined solely by itself, rather it needs other associations. Hence, he is pairing to give as much objectivity to human identity as possible by multiple perspectives. (nepal.com)

According to Erikson's psychoanalytic theory, there are around eight stages a person usually goes through. It means psychological development and also a socializing process. As one knows changes don't take part all of a sudden, it is a gradual growth. First, according to the theory, there is trust and mistrust. This is in regard to infancy. As a baby he begins to trust the ghosts, thus his world view is different than that of a normal baby. Then it is autonomy vs shame and this happens in early childhood. Bod is not happy when he is shamed. He wants to know everything about the graveyard. During this time, he is also sent to the school. Silas, his care taker thinks that he should have some real-world experience to truly understand life. The students in the real-world abuse and shame him. He is distraught by such actions, and he uses his power of the graveyard to punish them.

Then there is intimacy and isolation. As a small kid, he is close to Silas then when he grows up his intimacy with his care taker wanes, and this is common in children. In their early adolescent period, they will suddenly start isolating themselves from their peers, but on the other will spend more time with some people alone. As time goes by his identity in the graveyard becomes a question, and he feels alone and the graveyard doesn't feel like home.

4. CONCLUSION:

The growth of the boy from being a nobody to somebody is his journey of his identity formation. The identity formation begins with the ghost in the graveyard, then through his learning days, and finally when he is ready to embark on his journey into the real world. He comes to a point in life when he thinks he no more belongs to in the graveyard, at that precise moment he begins to choose an identity for himself. Even though his name is nobody, he can no longer be a nobody to the real world. Perhaps going with the name like 'Bod' would be his future course in life.

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