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Growing Up with (Ir)Replaceable Parents: Neil Gaiman's *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*, *Coraline*, and *The Graveyard Book*

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KEY WORDS:

Neil Gaiman, parent-child relationship, child development, identity formation, vicarious literary experience, desire, *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish*, *Coraline*, *The Graveyard Book*.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

Neil Gaiman, vztah mezi rodiči a dětmi, vývoj dítěte, formování identity, zprostředkovaný literární prožitek, touha, *Den, kdy jsem vyměnil tátu za dvě zlaté rybky*, *Koralína*, *Kniha hřbitova*.

ABSTRACT:

One of the most popular fantasy authors today, Neil Gaiman has been notorious for representing children's ambivalent perceptions of parents and creating stories based on a child's fantasies of replacing parents with better or kinder ones. This essay offers a reading of *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish* (1998/2004), *Coraline* (2002), and *The Graveyard Book* (2008) as narratives in which this desire is sublimated, allowing the young reader to vicariously experience the empowerment and the danger that accrue from replacing, getting rid of, or exchanging one's parents. I demonstrate that in each of the three books Gaiman confirms the child's perception of parents as potentially replaceable, but suggests that this awareness serves a vital developmental purpose. First, it helps the child protagonist outgrow dependence on the parents and, often in rebellion to them, begin to move toward emotional and psychological independence. Second, it leaves the protagonists with a more mature understanding of the parent-child relationship – a realization that the agency they seek is spurious when achieved by finding parents who would cater to all of one's desires. In struggling to come to terms with their parents' limited availability and imperfections, Gaiman's protagonists learn that lasting human relationships are built not in the absence of but despite our own and other people's shortcomings.

ABSTRAKT:**Dospívání s (ne)nahraditelnými rodiči: *Den, kdy jsem vyměnil tátu za dvě zlaté rybky, Korálina a Kniha hřbitova* Neila Gaimana**

Neil Gaiman, jeden z nejpopulárnějších fantasy autorů současnosti, proslul zobrazováním rozporného vnímání rodičů dětmi a vytvářením příběhů založených na představě dítěte o výměně vlastních rodičů za nějaké lepší nebo laskavější.

Tato studie nabízí čtení textů *Den, kdy jsem vyměnil tátu za dvě zlaté rybky* (1998/2004), *Korálina* (2002, první vydání česky 2003) a *Kniha hřbitova* (2008, česky 2008) jako vyprávění, v nichž je tato touha vyplněna, takže mladý čtenář zprostředkovaně zažívá pocity moci a zároveň nebezpečí, které vzešly z nahrazení, zbavení se nebo výměny rodičů.

Ukazuji, že v každé ze tří knih Gaiman potvrzuje dětské vnímání rodičů jako potenciálně nahraditelných, ale naznačuje, že toto povědomí hraje důležitou roli ve vývoji dítěte. Za prvé, pomáhá dětským protagonistům přerůst závislost na svých rodičích a, často prostřednictvím vzpoury proti nim, je vede směrem k emoční a psychologické nezávislosti. Za druhé, opouští protagonisty s vyspělejšími pochopením vztahu rodičů a dětí a s poznáním, že cíl, jehož se snaží dosáhnout, se ukazuje jako falešný v okamžiku, kdy uspějí a naleznou rodiče, kteří jim splní všechna přání. Ve snaze vyrovnat se s omezenými možnostmi a nedostatky svých rodičů Gaimanovi hrdinové poznávají, že trvalé lidské vztahy fungují navzdory našim i cizím nedostatkům, nikoli díky jejich absenci.

“You are almost never cool to your children” (GAIMAN 2010: 315).

In the “Afterword” of the 2004 edition, Neil Gaiman recalled an episode that led to the creation of *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish*. After he’d said “one of those things that parents say, like ‘isn’t it time you were in bed?’” his son Mikey looked at him crossly and declared he wished he didn’t have a dad. “I wish I had ...’ and then he stopped and thought, trying to think what one could have instead of a father. Finally he said, ‘I wish I had goldfish!’” (GAIMAN 2004: 54). The idea of replacing a parent may not be peculiar to Mikey Gaiman alone. A child’s anger at having been denied something or at having to comply with an adult’s commands is familiar to any parent. It is also a ubiquitous feature of any child’s experience. Despite the importance of parent–child attachment in early and middle childhood – or perhaps because of it – the fantasy of replacing one’s parents with kinder, better, more accomplished or “true” ones is a common desire in childhood. It is so common, in fact, that it was recognized by Freud as a type of belief he called “family romance” and was identified by Brian Attebery to be fundamental to “the Romance of Hidden Identity” pattern that informs much of children’s literature (ATTEBERY 2014: 100). Of course, daydreaming about replacing one’s parents is likely to be felt as shameful and is

almost never discussed openly. In psychoanalytical terms, a child's resentment toward parents, as well as its attendant self-guilt, becomes suppressed.

One way to release this tension is to sublimate it through stories through which the young reader can vicariously experience the empowerment and the danger that accrue from replacing, getting rid of, or exchanging one's parents. My focus in this essay is on three works by Neil Gaiman that engage this desire: *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish* (1998/2004), *Coraline* (2002), and *The Graveyard Book* (2008). Each of these books can be approached from many angles and lends itself to a reading as a postmodern subversion that plays with the reader's normative expectations about genres and literary representations of authority or interpersonal relations. However, some of the most thought-provoking interpretations of Gaiman's work have focused on their psychological dimension. David Rudd, for example, notes Gaiman's notoriety for exploring "areas seen by many as inappropriate for children" (RUDD 2008: 159), and interprets *Coraline* as "a quite overt fictional representation of the Freudian uncanny" (RUDD 2008: 161). Gaiman's works have been discussed as instances of children's Gothic, whose motifs "operate rather obviously as metaphors for unconscious depths" (COATS 2008: 77–8); they have been applauded for being "riddled with disturbing psychological dilemmas" related to the formation of a child's identity (PARSONS, SAWERS, AND MCINALLY 2008: 371). These and other critics – including Richard Gooding, Mike Ashley, and others – have affirmed that Gaiman's works offer clues to the psychological costs of a young person's negotiation of identity with their parents. For all of their unsettling elements, Gaiman's tales "may provide the kind of preparation for adult life that Bruno Bettelheim once imagined for the fairy tale genre" (GOODING 2008: 405): namely, that growing up is rife with threats, but they must be faced and can be overcome.

This, too, is my argument in this essay. Specifically, I demonstrate that by creating fantastic thought-experiments about achieving greater independence through replacing one's parents, Gaiman confirms the child's perception of parents as potentially replaceable, but suggests that this awareness serves a vital developmental purpose. First, it helps the child protagonist outgrow her or his dependence on the parents and, often in rebellion to them, begin to move toward emotional and psychological independence. Second, it leaves the protagonists with a more mature understanding of the parent-child relationship – a realization that the agency they seek is spurious when achieved by finding parents who would cater to all of one's desires. In struggling to come to terms with their

parents' limited availability and imperfections, Gaiman's protagonists learn that lasting human relationships are built not in the absence of, but despite our own and other people's shortcomings.

It is stating the obvious that parents are a problem, especially in children's literature. Traditional fairy tales – while “never really meant for children's ears alone” (TATAR 2005: xiv) – teem with parents who abandon children in the wilderness, kill or eat them, exchange them for desirable objects, or tolerate their abuse by stepmothers and strangers. The graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest to be found in the Grimms' tales have been famously dubbed by Tatar as “the hard facts” of the fairy tale genre (TATAR 2005: 190). The presence of these facts is explained by the recognition that the folk and fairy tales are in large part “historical documents” (DARNTON 1984: 13) that have been ontologically concerned “with exploitation, hunger, and injustice familiar to the lower classes in pre-capitalist [and early-capitalist] societies” (ZIPES 1979: 6). When children's literature came of age in the 19th century, its debt to the fairy tale subsequently included a strong tendency to focus on orphan characters. The elimination of parents was assumed to create a better space for a child character's growth and accounts for the ubiquity of orphan protagonists in fiction for the young. According to Jerry Griswold, over the course of the 19th century orphanhood was elevated to a quintessential narrative pattern in children's literature that precedes the hero's triumph in the coming of age story. In this plot pattern

the child's parents die, or the child is separated from its parents and effectively orphaned. Without their protection the child suffers from poverty and neglect and (if nobly born) is dispossessed. The hero then makes a journey to another place and is adopted into a second family. In these new circumstances the child is treated harshly by an adult guardian of the same sex but sometimes has help from an adult of the opposite sex. Eventually, however, the child triumphs over its antagonist and is acknowledged. Finally, some accommodation is reached between the two discordant phases of the child's past: life in the original or biological family and life in the second or adoptive family (GRISWOLD 1992: 4).

The model Griswold describes is interesting not just because it privileges orphanhood as a developmental booster but because it simultaneously affirms adoption into a new family – with new adult parental figures – as the measure of the protagonist's success in reaching maturity. In other words, orphan stories paradoxically affirm the need for parents to be at the same time eliminated and

rediscovered. This perception, I suggest, may derive from the basic duality of parents in a child's life: parents are both primary caretakers and, at least potentially, the most immediate threat to a child's development. In a very real sense even non-abusive, loved parents are the source of commands, prohibitions, and threats that constitute a child's everyday reality. Parents represent ambiguity and paradox: they provide what Attachment Theory scholars define as a child's secure base (WATERS AND CUMMINGS 2000: 3), but they also embody that which threatens and disempowers. Seeing parents as a threat may also derive from what Bettelheim identifies as a feature of a child's perception of life. Even when it proceeds in quite favourable circumstances, Bettelheim argues in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976),

to the child it seems that his life is a sequence of periods of smooth living which are suddenly and incomprehensibly interrupted as he is projected into immense danger. He has felt secure, with hardly a worry in the world, but in an instant everything changes, and the friendly world turns into a nightmare of dangers. This happens when a loving parent suddenly makes what seem like utterly unreasonable demands and terrifying threats. A child is convinced that there is no reasonable cause for these things; they just occur; it is his inexorable fate that it should happen. Then the child either gives in to his despair ... or else attempts to run away from it all, trying to escape a horrid fate ... (BETTELHEIM 1982: 145).

Informed by this element, the flickering perception of parents as threatening and benign is compounded by the child's complete dependence on them. In fact, studies show that while "the frequency and intensity of attachment behaviors declines from early to middle childhood," attachment to parents in this period of roughly between the age of 7 and 12 remains very strong (KERNS ET AL. 2001: 69). Attachment to parents can be seen, among other things, in children's "expectations for parental availability" (KERNS ET AL. 2001: 70) and remains foundational to the development of "children's self-esteem, cooperation with peers, and self-control" (KERNS ET AL. 2001: 69). Middle childhood, according to Hugh Crago, is also a developmental stage characterized by creative daydreaming connected with the child's emergent "ability to control his or her world" (CRAGO 2014: 91). This daydreaming incorporates the child's anxieties and is often played out between the rebellion against and the need for parents. To eliminate one's parents, removes the threat of their control but introduces another – that of being left on one's own or at the mercy of strangers. And if Bettelheim is right that for a child "there is no greater threat in life than that

[it] will be deserted, left all alone" (BETTELHEIM 1982: 145), then getting rid of one's parents is a solution that courts disaster.

Although literature is not the same as daydreaming, "releasing one's inhibitions and exploring apparently remote, fantastic scenarios [through fiction] may be the best way to discover what choices of direction we actually have" (SANDERS 1997: 31). If literature offers meaning-making experiences that allow a vicarious contemplation of alternatives that may be too emotionally taxing for a young reader to face head on, one of these issues is the ambivalence of parents in young person's life, especially when parents are seen as limiting one's growth. As Joe Sanders has demonstrated in "Of Parents and Children and Dreams in Neil Gaiman's *Mr. Punch* and *The Sandman*," this theme has been Gaiman's long-time preoccupation at least since the early 1990s. It has also been taken up by other authors. While the theme of parental ambivalence has been treated differently by different authors, it seems to me that two perspectives have enjoyed wider currency. One, by drawing attention to aspects of the child's wildness, has sought to erase the child's perception of parents as insensitive, inattentive or "unloving." Another, by acknowledging the parents' failures and shortcomings as unacceptable, has encouraged dreams of finding alternative parent figures. A good example of the first strategy is Maurice Sendak's much-treasured picture-book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). This phenomenally simple yet complex story begins with Max's wild behaviour that gets him punished. His mother calls Max "a wild thing" (SENDAK 1988: 13) and sends him to his room without supper. There, sulking, Max indulges in his primal fantasies by retreating to the imaginary island of the wild things, whom he triumphantly tames. By the time Max gets homesick and returns to his primary world, Sendak has asserted that children have an inherent wildness to them, which they cannot always channel out in socially acceptable forms. Although Sendak thus "departs from his predecessors in owning the wild as a healthy part of the domestic order that demands accommodation from within that order" (SHADDOCK 1997: 159), he also affirms children's developmental wildness that requires parental monitoring and prohibitions.

The other popular strategy of children's literature authors to deal with parental oppressiveness has been to exaggerate and challenge it, as happens, for example, in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988). A very child-centred book, *Matilda* deals with the frustrating helplessness a child feels when threatened by oppressive and, in this case, stupid adults. Matilda "knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this, but she was finding it very hard not to do so. The anger inside her went

on boiling and boiling, and ... she made a decision ... that every time her father or her mother were beastly to her, she would get her own back in some way or another” (DAHL 1988: 28–9). The focus on punishing insensitive adults – first Matilda’s father, and then Miss Trunchbull – culminates when Dahl replaces parents with a parental figure of much idealized Miss Honey. Since the replacement of oppressive parents happens largely due to Matilda’s initiative, the novel may be read as an emotionally empowering, if somewhat naïve, daydreaming about getting rid of one’s parents.

In the three works I propose to examine, Gaiman’s approach is different. Unlike Sendak, Gaiman does not deny a child’s perception of parents as occasionally oppressive or “threatening creatures” (Gaiman, *Mr. Punch* qtd. in SANDERS 1997: 31); unlike Dahl, he does not replace such parents with idealized parent-equivalents. Instead, he implies that coming to terms with one’s parents’ imperfections and ambivalence may never be fully resolved. Gaiman’s protagonists learn that there is more to love and caring than catering to a child’s every whim. They also realize the falsity of the equation some children tend to make: if you do not want to buy me stuff or do not want to play with me, you do not love me. With wry humour, postmodernist twist, and uncompromising honesty, Gaiman shows that parents may be unavailable at times or unable to help the child in some situations, but that does not necessarily make them bad parents. *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish* (1998/2004) and *Coraline* (2002) share the focus on the protagonists’ attempt to replace parents who are seen as useless or uncaring. *The Graveyard Book* plays on a version of this desire only in one chapter, “The Ghoul Gate”; throughout, however, it raises broader questions about, literally, monster parents and what it means for the protagonist’s developing sense of identity.

In *The Day* an unnamed pre-teen protagonist swaps his dad with his friend Nathan for a pair of goldfish. The fun offered by watching the fish ends, however, when mom get home and tells the boy to swap the father back. This turns out to be a complicated task inasmuch as Nathan already traded the father for an electric guitar with someone who then traded him yet for something else. As they follow the swapping trail, the protagonist and his sister eventually retrieve the father and bring him back home. Through its evocative illustrations and somewhat bizarre story, *The Day* explores three important and interrelated themes: the power of a child’s desire, the child protagonist’s perception of the role of parents in his life, and the ultimate acknowledgment of the need for parents. In the first of these, Gaiman provocatively examines the consequences of

acting on an almost Faustian urge that most people know first-hand from their childhood: wanting something so much that one is ready to trade anything for it, one's soul or, even better, family members. As the story opens, the protagonist covets Nathan's goldfish more than anything in the world, but whatever he offers does not seem a satisfying bargain. Desperate and frustrated, the boy eventually offers his dad, arguing – with a bizarre logic Gaiman clearly relishes – that although it is one dad, he is bigger than the two goldfish and he can swim too. Intrigued, Nathan agrees to the unusual exchange. The rest of the story develops on what could have happened if one's primal childhood urge to trade away loved ones for merchandise was realized, but it does so in the context of a larger issue: the question why one needs parents in the first place.

Although *The Day* replaces the child's anger at parental control with the apparent uselessness of a father as the reason for the swap, it builds on the image of parents as distant beings with no immediate value. With a touch of self-irony, Gaiman plays with the child's perception of a useless father. Throughout *The Day* the father is described as a man reading his paper who demurely passes from hand to hand, as he is exchanged for goldfish, a gorilla mask, a rabbit and other fun things. When returned home, the father is sent to wash off his rabbit hutch smell – yet another thing he quietly accepts. The father is defined by his passivity and sole interest in reading the newspaper, which, obviously, is Gaiman's jab at stereotypes about fatherhood but also a mocking exaggeration of the child character's perception of father as mysteriously irrelevant. At the beginning of the story, the boy enjoys the company of goldfish more than that of his dad, and even though the father seems to be a hot swapping item, every child in the neighbourhood discovers, as Nathan puts it, that “[h]e wasn't very exciting ... All he did was read the paper” (GAIMAN 2004: 23). By the time the protagonist brings the father back, his perception of the father changes. Although he is still puzzled as to the father's specific uses, he realizes that the mere act of reading the paper does not make a parent worthless. In a larger sense, parents are not toys to be enjoyed or exchanged when one does not find them fun anymore, nor are they solely defined by their capacity to grant their children's wishes. They have their own lives too and while their role in their children's upbringing is not always clear, parents' worlds include but do not revolve around their children.

This theme is even more pronounced in *Coraline*. In this novel, a 12-year-old Coraline Jones moves with her parents into a flat in an old house. Coraline's parents work at home, but she feels neglected by them. It is the last week of the summer and the girl is staying at home. When she complains to her mother

that she is bored, she is told to draw something. When she goes to her father, he does not even raise his head from the desk, but sends her away to learn how to tap-dance. “Why don’t you play with me?” Coraline asks (GAIMAN 2002: 18). The answer she gets is one that every child hates and one most children have heard countless times in all imaginable combinations of the hatefully incomprehensible words “busy” and “working.” When not much later Coraline discovers a magical passage to a mirror world, she is welcomed there by her “other” parents. The other mother offers Coraline full attention and entertains the protagonist in ways her real mother never did. She then tempts Coraline to remain in the other world, the price of this permanent move being the girl’s consent to have her eyes replaced by buttons.

Much has been written about the novel’s use of the Gothic convention (COATS 2008), of the uncanny or the *unheimlich* (GOODING 2008), and of “the fear of the all-powerful maternal” (PARSONS, SAWERS, MCINALLY 2008: 371) that inform its disturbing psychological dilemmas. On all its levels, however, the book both departs and revolves around the child’s relationship with her parents who are first seen as insensitive to Coraline’s needs, and then appreciated when compared with the “other” parents that exist supposedly only to fulfil her every whim. “Stay with us,” the other parents plead with Coraline,

“We will listen to you and play with you and laugh with you. Your other mother will build whole worlds for you to explore, and tear them down every night when you are done. Every day will be better and brighter than the one that went before ... a world ... built just for you ...”

“And will there be grey, wet days ...?” asked Coraline.

... “Never.”

“And would there be awful meals ...?” asked Coraline.

“Every meal will be a thing of joy ... Nothing will pass your lips that does not entirely delight you.”

“And could I have Day-Glo green gloves to wear, and yellow Wellington boots in the shape of frogs?” asked Coraline.

“Frogs, ducks, rhinos, octopuses – whatever you desire. The world will be built new for you every morning. If you stay here, you can have whatever you want” (GAIMAN 2002: 119–20).

Surprisingly, Coraline rejects this tempting offer. In a curious twist on the theme of a child’s overpowering desire to swap one’s inattentive parents explored in *The Day*, Coraline realizes that the price for living in the world of dreams would be her individuality. Faced with the dark underside of her childish expectations about her parent’s world revolving only around her needs and whims, Coraline makes

the ultimate self-discovery. “You really don’t understand, do you?” she replies to the other mother. “I don’t *want* whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted? Just like that, and it didn’t *mean* anything. What then?” (GAIMAN 2002: 120, italics in the original). In rejecting the other parents who exist only to cater to her desires, Coraline embraces the liberating unpredictability of her real parents. Like many children, Coraline has felt shunned by them and has struggled with the anger at their apparent lack of love or interest in her. Even though she has been “vulnerable to the benign neglect” on their part (GOODING 2008: 396), Coraline realizes that to demand full attention from her parents at all times is infantile. If pressed for, it can only lead to the abuse of possessive love represented by the “other” mother and to being forever trapped, like the ghosts of the three children, in an aporetic stasis. In this sense, as Rudd has demonstrated, “*Coraline* is centrally concerned with how one negotiates one’s place in the world; how one is recognised in one’s own right rather than being either ignored on the one hand, or stifled on the other” (RUDD 2008: 160). Like *The Day*, this novel weaves together the themes of a child’s desire for being entertained and a child’s evolving perception of the role of parents. It concludes with Coraline’s recognition that her parents’ love is not tantamount to their living for her needs alone.

While Coraline does not go as far as exchanging her parents for their wish-fulfilling equivalents, she is tempted by the idea and realizes the horror it would bring. In the contrast between the two mothers created in the novel, *Coraline* also illustrates the psychological mechanism through which young children cope with mother’s occasional refusals to satisfy their immediate needs. According to child psychologist Sheldon Cashdan, young children split the mother into two mental images, the good one and the bad one, which are then “psychologically ‘metabolized’ and become transformed into good and bad parts of the child’s developing sense of self” (CASHDAN 1999: 27). According to Cashdan, the development of an autonomous self and the sense of I cannot proceed unless, at some point in preadolescence, the monster mother mental image is overcome or exorcised. This, according to Cashdan, is the function of “the witch must die” motif prevalent in fairy tales. “Whether she appears in the guise of an evil queen, a malevolent stepmother, or a cannibalistic mother-in-law, the witch is the obstacle the child must overcome if the journey is to succeed” (CASHDAN 1999: 33–4). *Coraline* appears to illustrate this mechanism well: first the monster aspect of mother is split and disassociated from the good mother as the other mother; then, the other mother is faced, outwitted, shut out in her world,

and tricked again, as her severed right hand tumbles down into an old well with the key to the door that locked her away forever (CASHDAN 1999: 159).

In *The Day* and *Coraline* the protagonists attempt to replace their parents. This experience helps them realize the danger of infantile demands for love misunderstood as getting the parents' full attention at all times, and to embrace their parents' limited availability as an important prerequisite to their own independence. This realization, although with a slightly different twist, informs the rebellion against parental figures in *The Graveyard Book*. A bildungsroman story about an infant-through-teenager orphan who is adopted by the ghosts at an English cemetery, *The Graveyard Book* follows the education of a live child whose real parents are murdered, whose foster parents are a ghost couple, and whose teacher-guardians – secondary mother and father figures – are a vampire and a werewolf. The infant adopted by the dead is given the name Nobody, or Bod. He is granted “the Freedom of the Graveyard” (GAIMAN 2008: 31) that enables him to master some of the skills the ghosts possess such as the ability to fade, slide, dreamwalk, see in the dark, and remain invisible to the living (GAIMAN 2008: 38). Throughout the story Bod is educated by the dead and the undead, particularly Silas and Miss Lupescu. Similar to characters in *The Day* and *Coraline*, Bod gives in to the temptation to turn away from his parent figures in exchange for the promise of unlimited fun. “What you need is to go somewhere the people would appreciate you,” he hears from the ghoul who claims to be the Duke of Westminster (GAIMAN 2008: 76–7); this is echoed by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who lures Bod with a vision of “an ‘ole world of friends and playfellows ... [a] city of delights, of fun and magic, where you would be appreciated, not ignored” (GAIMAN 2008: 77). This promise is not fulfilled: although Bod enters the ghoul gate willingly, he soon realizes his mistake and survives the adventure only because he is saved by his otherwise stern and restrictive parent-figure, Miss Lupescu.

Other than in this single chapter, however, *The Graveyard Book* does not so much explore a child's need to replace seemingly oppressive parents as it raises larger questions about parental monstrosity. When the Owens ghost couple adopts Bod, when Silas agrees to become his guardian, and when later Miss Lupescu joins him as Bod's unofficial godmother, Bod acquires, literally, monster parents. For all the negative connotations ghosts, a vampire, and a werewolf may evoke in a reader, they are shown as caring parents to Bod throughout – neither better nor worse than average human parents. As a result, Bod enjoys what Gaiman, in his Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech, identified as

“a childhood like any other” (GAIMAN 2010: 324). Like an average six-year old, Bod is angry and not understanding when Silas must leave him and go away for a while (GAIMAN 2008: 65). Like some children, he hates soups and other healthy foods Miss Lupescu cooks for him (GAIMAN 2008: 71). And like all children, he gets cross when no one plays with him. On those occasions Bod would “stomp... off into the graveyard, feeling unloved and underappreciated. ... [He] brooded on the injustice of it all, and wandered through the graveyard kicking at stones” (GAIMAN 2008: 73). In all these ups and downs, monster parents are depicted as ordinary parents, a norm for Bod and certainly not an obstacle to his development.

In collapsing category boundaries, Gaiman domesticates the monstrous and suggests that a difference between monstrous and non-monstrous is relative. For the living, Silas, Miss Lupescu and most other supernatural creatures featured in the novel are all monsters. For the dead, the monstrous or the untouchable other are those buried on the unconsecrated ground of Potter's Fields. However, as Silas tells Bod, none of them was a bad person (GAIMAN 2008: 104), and Bod discovers it for himself when he befriends the ghost of a witch. For Bod the only monster in the story is the man called Jack who had murdered his parents, but even that assessment is questioned when Silas tells him that in his youth he had done far worse things than any of the Jack had done. “I was the monster, then, Bod, and worse than any monster,” Silas admits, concluding with an enigmatic “People can change” (GAIMAN 2008: 303). In these and other episodes *The Graveyard Book* effectively challenges stereotypes about monstrosity, including stereotypes about bad parents. One thing Bod learns is that the monster is merely a tag for what is misunderstood, denied, or resisted – a perception not infrequently projected on one's parents.

The other way in which Bod's unusual monster parents are ordinary after all is their limitations. From the very start it is clear that no matter how loving the parents may be, what they can do for their child is always limited. The Owens' cannot leave the graveyard and cannot provide Bod with clothes, food, and the other things he will need as a living person. This can be done by Silas and only at night: Silas is asleep during the day and is unable to care for the boy during daylight as, for example, Miss Lupescu is. But she, in turn, cannot live in the graveyard. Admittedly, in some situations – as when Miss Lupescu rescues Bod from the ghouls or when Silas rescues him from the police – monster parents are suggested as more capable than ordinary human ones. Yet, they all have serious limitations, perhaps the most important of those being that they are all

dead. And as Silas explains it to Bod at one time, being dead or alive makes all the difference:

“Yes.” Silas hesitated. “[All of your friends and family] are [dead]. And they are, for the most part, done with the world. You are not. You’re alive, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you change the world, the world will change. Potential. Once you’re dead, it’s gone. Over. You’ve made what you’ve made, dreamed your dream, written your name. You may be buried here, you may even walk. But that potential is finished” (GAIMAN 2008: 179).

Parental limitations are also explored in *The Graveyard Book* through a reflection on how far parental protection should go. Like any ordinary child, Bod expects to be protected by his parents. At some point, for example, he resents the fact that Silas did not kill his parents’ murderer when he could. If Silas had killed Jack then, Bod would now be safe and could leave the graveyard without endangering his life. Mrs. Owen’s reply that Silas “knows more than you do ... about life and death” (GAIMAN 2008: 216) does not satisfy Bod. He feels underprotected. However, when not much later he gets in trouble with the bullies at school and Silas forbids him to go back, Bod feels overprotected and his rebellious return to town that evening ends with a disaster. When saved by Silas, Bod apologizes to the guardian for ignoring his advice, but Silas apologizes for trying to hold Bod back from school and interaction with the living. “I wanted to keep you perfectly safe,” he admits, “[b]ut there’s only one perfectly safe place for your kind and you will not reach it until all your adventures are over and none of them matter any longer” (GAIMAN 2008: 209). Unlike the mindless Sleer, Silas realizes that parental protection cannot be done at the expense of a child’s freedom to learn new things. Bod appreciates it too. He learns not to blame his parent figures for their inability to protect him from everything at all costs. Such upbringing is validated at the end of the book, when Bod leaves his monster parents and sets out to “[s]ee the world, ... Get into trouble. Get out of trouble again” (GAIMAN 2008: 306).

The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish (1998/2004), *Coraline* (2002), and *The Graveyard Book* (2008) all play with a child’s occasional desire to replace parents who are seen as inattentive, inadequate, unavailable, or even monstrous. In each book this theme builds from the parents’ perplexing doubleness in a child’s life as those who provide safety and protection but also impose limitations. This ambivalence is unavoidable, but if fantasy indeed speaks “*from the unconscious to the unconscious, in the language of the unconscious*” (LE GUIN 1992: 57,

italics in the original) it is on this level that Gaiman's books engage with the scary yet thrilling dream of getting rid of parents to achieve greater independence. If traditional folk and fairy tales can be seen as records of "psychological defence [mechanisms] and means of emotional survival" (HAASE 2000: 362), so too, perhaps, can be Gaiman's modern fantasies. Without denying the child's perception of parents as potentially a threat, Gaiman's stories project parental oppressiveness as a formative insight that serves important developmental functions. It may be that Gaiman's theme evokes a necessary stage of child development, the slow severance initiated by the young subconscious mind that satisfies a child's imperative to outgrow dependence on the parents and move toward emotional actualization. If this be so, the books also offer a developmental deconstruction of the infantile notion that the world must change to suit a child's expectations and suggest that the parents' limited availability and imperfections are ultimately necessary for one's growth. As Gaiman noted in his "Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech," it is always difficult to impress one's children. Yet, the "fundamental [and] most comical tragedy of parenthood," he said, is that "if you do your job properly ... your children ... won't need you anymore" (GAIMAN 2010: 313).

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