Abstract

Centuries’ worth of tales about the forlorn exist. Being a familiar muse for authors and a favorite among readers, the Orphan’s position in literature is cemented. An endearing, relatable character, the Orphan tugs at the heartstrings, inspires, and makes for an effective protagonist, parentless, yet powerful. Orphanhood provides manifold possibilities of portrayals. Whether it is a pauper turned princess, a lovable underdog, or a boy wizard, orphans indefinitely continue to grace the pages of stories, and captivate readers with an easily distinguishable charm that is entirely their own. In this thesis, the Orphan, as a figure in literature and protagonist in modern fantasy, along with the character’s narrative, is explored, through the scope of the Orphan’s vast literary history, archetype, key themes, distinctive qualities, and examples in select modern fantasy novels. Thoroughly examining the Orphan’s background in the likes of folktales, Victorian literature, comics, and contemporary fantasy, the character’s journey is noted, in an effort to determine the allure of the cherished Orphan. Additionally, the Orphan’s personality and trope, as a whole, are analyzed to better define the character, and establish the reasons behind the figure’s multifarious appearances in literature, expressly in modern fantasy. Narrowing down to the orphan of modern fantasy, the character’s revival in fantasy is studied, alongside the Orphan’s general context. Furthermore, three novels within the fantasy genre, *The Witches* (1983) by Roald Dahl, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1998), and *The Graveyard Book* (2008) by Neil Gaiman, are applied to present certain themes and topics that are encountered in the majority of modern fantasy novels with orphaned protagonists. By exploring these three novels, each illustrating a modern fantasy orphan of their respective decades, the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, it can clearly be seen that many traits are passed on from literary orphan to literary orphan.
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Introduction

As Nina Auerbach points out, “[t]he figure of the wandering orphan, searching through an alien world for his home, has fascinated generations of novelists” (395). The plight of the Orphan is a tale as old as time. In mythology, folktales, novels, and comics, the Orphan has been a steady figure in storytelling for hundreds of years, going back to ancient civilization. A source of intrigue for authors and a hero beloved by readers, the forlorn in fiction have boldly dotted literary history, and become household names. The character’s popularity has gone through its share of highs and lows, but without fail, the Orphan resurfaces, revamped and ready for new adventures. Whether it be sneaking off to a ball, surviving on scraps, or defeating a magical threat to the world, when it comes to the Orphan, the opportunities are endless. Orphan stories shed light on social situations, teach lessons, baffle, spark joy, evoke tears, and, most importantly, inspire. An outcast not only finding a path in life, but triumphing, is a story that requires telling.

In fact, the Orphan’s story demands to be told, as the character’s pain is a sentiment to which every person can relate, despite being an intensified interpretation of it. At the same time, the Orphan’s suffering is strangely romantic, an escape from the confines of authority. Freedom, hardships, purpose, selfhood, sacrifice, love, and remarkable characters, orphan stories have it all, wrapped up in a convenient package.

As a result of the Orphan’s advantageous motif, literature is riddled with orphans. In many ways, the Orphan in literature is the norm, rather than the deviation. Orphan-mania is an ever-growing phenomenon that presents itself in various stages throughout literary history. To accurately look into the Orphan’s past, it is vital to begin with the character’s humble beginnings in folktales. From there, the Orphan slowly moves into the character’s period of dominance, the Victorian Era, a point in history that birthed numerous lovable literary orphans, such as Oliver Twist and Jane Eyre. Victorian literature propels the narrative of orphanhood forward, and highlights the social situations of orphans. Although Victorian fiction is largely credited for the Orphan gaining adoration from the masses, it is also responsible for labeling the Orphan as an over-sentimental persona. The Orphan’s successful revival in contemporary literature, mainly modern fantasy, serves as a redemption tale for the trope. With the literary orphan’s three leading phases in history, folktales, Victorian literature, and modern fantasy, it is clear that the Orphan has evolved in keeping with the times. An
archetype that endures, regardless of the character’s distinctive literary groups, the Orphan effortlessly moves between various orphan character classifications. Thus, the Orphan is the character type itself, that exists in a variety of literary eras, from the folktale orphan to the modern fantasy orphan. Nevertheless, there are central matters and traits that the Orphan carries with him or her to all stories the alluring character brings to life.

In an effort to capture the lure of the Orphan, and scrutinize the narrative, the aim of this thesis is three-fold: to examine the Orphan’s background in literature, define the character type, and explore recurring traits and topics in orphan stories, notably regarding modern fantasy orphans. Three contemporary fantasy novels that feature the Orphan, published over a twenty-five year span, from 1983 to 2008, Roald Dahl’s *The Witches* (1983), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1998) by J. K. Rowling, and Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* (2008), are studied to display the common topics orphan stories share. In magical worlds full of dangerous dragons, wicked witches and ghastly ghosts, the Orphan bursts through the pages, parentless, purposeful and equipped with exceptional prowess, demonstrating certain key characteristics and themes that prove to be a requisite for cementing his or her role as a beloved hero in modern fantasy literature. By, firstly, giving an overview of literary orphans in history, secondly, characterizing the Orphan, and, thirdly, analyzing modern fantasy novels concerning the Orphan, it is possible to express the efficacy of orphaned protagonists.
1. Origins of the Orphan

Childhood and adolescence are two periods in life, where a person is at their most impressionable and in dire need of guidance. During these vital stages in a child’s life, personality, character, and behavior are being drastically molded by events and the people in the child’s environment, mainly family and friends. In most cases, parents serve as the authority figures and advisers that children desperately require in their journeys toward shaping their selves. However, in the instance of roughly fifteen million children in the contemporary world, both parents are absent (“Orphans”). Though some sources classify a person who has lost one parent as an orphan, termed a single orphan, The Oxford Dictionary narrows the definition down to a child bereft of both parents, also called a double orphan (“Orphan”; “Orphans”). The word “orphan” is derived from the Greek orphanos, meaning bereaved (Seabrook 8).

Throughout the centuries, the bereaved, particularly orphans, have been a source of inspiration for writers, so much so that they have become their own separate character archetype, quite simply called the Orphan. One of twelve Jungian archetypes adapted to literary analysis, joined by the likes of the Warrior and the Innocent, the Orphan “seeks to regain the comfort of the womb and neonatal safety in the arms of loving parents,” achieved only by experiencing trials and tribulations that shape the character, perhaps in a way having a parent would have (Jonas). Being parentless makes the Orphan a favorable protagonist. Without a stable home life, the Orphan is free to embark on any adventure the author has in store, an advantage that fuels an endless amount of stories.

Prior to the twentieth century, orphans were a common sight, due to high maternal mortality and child abandonment being a societal norm, explaining the multitude of orphan stories, as art frequently imitates life. According to Melanie A. Kimball, in spite of the Orphan’s appearances in mythology, like the third century BC Roman legend of the orphaned twins, Romulus and Remus, most stories featuring the Orphan have their “roots in folktales” (558). Folktales ordinarily follow a set pattern, which is similar to the form found in folktales with orphaned protagonists. The story’s structure starts with the mistreatment of the Orphan, followed by the Orphan’s obstacle-filled quest, often in the form of other characters, such as a cruel stepmother or an evil sorcerer, and ending with the Orphan overcoming the obstacles, with the help of
supernatural means, and secondary characters, at pivotal moments (Kimball 561–565). Thereafter, the Orphan is rewarded, whereas those who opposed the character are punished (Kimball 565–566). Handed down for generations, mostly orally, yet sometimes penned, folktales convey messages that are intrinsically connected to the circumstances in which they are told, as well as the cultural background of the storyteller (Kimball 560–561). Thus, multiple versions of a folktale exist. Fairy tales, a subgenre of folktales, are teeming with orphans. The classic fairy tale “Cinderella” is a prime example of the Orphan in folktales, with more than 500 versions, initially dating back to China in the ninth century AD (Northup). Largely depicting a single orphan, famously by Charles Perrault in 1697 and the Brothers Grimm in 1812, “Cinderella” serves as the typical story outline for the folktale orphan. The kind, deceased mother is replaced by a wicked stepmother, who brings misery upon the Orphan, while the character’s father is reduced to ineffectiveness. Eventually, a surprising turn of events, usually magical, causes the Orphan to live happily ever after. Another example of the Orphan in fairy tales is “Snow White,” first published by the Brothers Grimm in their 1812 collection of fairy tales. “Snow White” and “Cinderella” share the evil stepmother trope. Additionally, folktales lend a hand to foundlings becoming a prevalent subtype of orphan stories, carrying on into subsequent literature. Foundlings are abandoned at a young age, and believe they are orphans. Often, foundlings reunite with their birth families, which, in many cases, are royalty or wealthy. Familial reunion is where the foundling differs from the Orphan. Although the Orphan originates in folktales, the popularity of the trope only grows with the passing of time, as the character is introduced to a larger readership, with children’s literature becoming standard in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century (Grenby).

The beginning of the Orphan’s rapid gain in traction is marked by the character’s surfacing in children’s literature. Regarded as the “father of children’s literature,” John Newbery is credited with the emanation of juvenile literature (Grenby). Newbery’s adaptation of “Cinderella,” the book, *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, published in 1765, is not only one of the first children’s novels, garnering commercial success, but also features a female orphan as the protagonist (Grenby). Kimball words the Orphan’s breakthrough into children’s literature in the following lines:

The reality of orphans in society and their function as a hero type explains their presence in folktales, but the continuing use of orphan characters in literature for
children indicates that they still hold great fascination for authors and have great meaning for readers. (567)

By the nineteenth century, the orphan heroine is established in English and American literature (Kimball 567). Orphan heroines are often subject to uncaring relatives, yet possess the ability to transform “the lives of those around them by the force of their spunky, but sweet, natures” (Kimball 567). Even though female orphans are initially more predominant in orphan novels, the strong emergence of male orphans, such as Dickens’ Oliver Twist and Pip Pirrip, coincides with the Victorian Era, a period between 1837 and 1901 (“Victorian Era”; Kimball 567).

If asked to think of an orphan, many people picture rags, run-down living conditions, and even chimney sweeps, mainly attributed to Victorian orphans, as they are continuously presented as “objects of pity” (Seabrook 8). Taking into account the thousands of orphans roaming reality during Queen Victoria’s reign, an abundance of orphans can be found in Victorian fiction, rendering it difficult to open a novel by renowned authors of this time period, from Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters to Wilkie Collins and Oscar Wilde, “without stumbling over at least one orphan” (Banerjee; Peters 1). Some of the best known novels focusing on orphaned characters, for instance all of Dickens’ orphan novels, as well as Les Misérables (1862) by Victor Hugo, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), Heidi (1880–1881) by Johanna Spyri, Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book (1894), and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) by L. Frank Baum, are published during the Victorian Era. Existing on the outskirts of society, “a threat to social stability,” the Victorian orphan is effective “in the development of individual narratives,” instrumental in evolving the orphan genre (Banerjee). The orphan figure lends “itself like no other to negotiating a range of different social problems and anxieties” (Gymnich et al. 3). Either “taken in by other branches of their family,” to varying levels of affection; sent to orphanages; or forced to live on the streets, and possibly turn to lives of crime, the Victorian orphan is considered to have lived rough, abandoned, disregarded, and mistreated (Banerjee). While both single orphans and double orphans fall under the term for orphans in the Victorian Era, broader than many definitions of the word in the present, the double orphan protagonist begins to pop up more regularly in Victorian fiction (Gymnich et al. 2). With a profusion of examples, such as Jane Eyre and David Copperfield, the double orphan is more recurrent in Victorian literature, as well as beyond, than the single orphan of folktales (Gymnich 14). Functional orphans, a term used to describe children with
neglectful parents, also start to make their mark in Victorian literature, specifically with H. C. Andersen’s 1845 short story “The Little Match Girl”. Without a doubt, the Victorian Era is the most prominent period for orphan stories, creating the classic orphan figure, with the Orphan’s resurgence in modern fantasy literature coming in as a close second (Gymnich et al. 1).

However, the Orphan’s return to popular culture, in fantastical fashion, is not without its issues. Even with Lucy Maud Montgomery’s best-selling children’s novel Anne of Green Gables, published in 1908, and J. M. Barrie’s famous 1911 novelization of his 1904 play, Peter Pan, orphan novels went through an approximate sixty year dry spell, following the Victorian Era (Besner et al.; “J. M. Barrie”; Puschmann-Nalenz 81). Despite the orphan narrative’s dwindling favor, these six decades feature, as Claudia Mills writes, “[t]hree great bursts of literary interest in orphans” (228). The three high points of the Orphan’s downturn are the “effervescent, exuberant” type, uncorrupted and innocent, akin to Pollyanna, during the beginning of the twentieth century; the “passive, polite orphans of the 1940s and early 1950s,” where characters seek childhood bliss, a theme directly affected by children’s exposure to war and the deprivation of this time period; and, lastly, the “angry, bitter” variety, more in tune with the image of foster children, of the late twentieth century (Mills 228). Undeterred by the dry spell, the twenties, thirties, and forties lay the foundation for orphan characters becoming widely recognized in comic books and graphic novels. The Orphan’s breakthrough into comic strips occurs in Harold Gray’s Little Orphan Annie, first launching in 1924. A little over a decade later, orphans find their way into comic books, with examples such as DC Comic’s Bruce Wayne, otherwise known as the masked hero, Batman, debuting in 1939, and Marvel’s 1941 Captain America Comics #1, only demonstrating the tip of the iceberg of the Orphan in comics and graphic novels of the coming decades (Reynolds 51; Krensky 20; 28). Even considering Mills’ three peaks of early to mid-twentieth century orphan literature, the Orphan is spiraling downward, with lesser known orphan novels being published during this period; the superhero slump in the aftermath of World War II; and the ceasing of the trope’s consistency in literature (Gymnich et al. 5; Booker 518; vol. 2). It is a strange phenomenon that “the interest in the narrativisation of the [O]rphan in mainstream fiction dramatically declined” in the first half of the twentieth century, as orphaned children are on the rise in light of the “historical reality” of the two World Wars and the Great Depression (Puschmann-Nalenz 81; Gymnich et al. 5). It is conceivable that this decrease is generated by the multitude, and perhaps
overuse, of the Orphan in Victorian fiction, conventionalizing the concept and leaving the Orphan a mere stock character. Alternatively, the Orphan’s fall in fiction can be linked to “the focus of literature” shifting “to other themes,” differing from realism and the societal critique of the nineteenth century social novel, home of the Victorian orphan (Puschmann-Nalenz 81). Focusing on other genres and themes, early twentieth century authors adamantly attempt to abstain from creating stereotypical orphan characters, despite writing about disconnected individuals (Puschmann-Nalenz 82). Following the progression of literary modernism and literature’s regular shifts and morphs “within the historical landscape in which it is situated,” the Orphan is put on the back burner, until the trope is reinvigorated and reinvented in fantasy literature (Mattix 17).

Bringing the folktale orphan and the Victorian orphan into the twentieth and twenty-first century, the contemporary orphan archetype is generally observed in modern fantasy literature, starting in the mid-twentieth century. Despite the beginning of modern fantasy often being contributed to George Macdonald, a Scottish author, and his novels Phantastes (1858) and The Princess and the Goblin (1872), as well as English author William Morris, modern fantasy novels start to gather steam almost a century later (“George Macdonald”; Gymnich et al. 4). Fantasy itself derives from ancient mythology, yet the “coalescence of fantasy—that contemporary literary category whose name most readily evokes notions of ‘epic trilogies’ with ‘mythic’ settings and characters—into a discrete genre” is said to correspond with the 1954–55 publications of the epic trilogy The Lord of the Rings by English author J. R. R. Tolkien (Williamson 1; Hammond). New life is breathed into the Orphan thanks to the trilogy. Introduced in The Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, after his own adventure has ended in the 1937 novel, takes in and raises his orphaned nephew, Frodo Baggins, the primary protagonist of the The Lord of the Rings trilogy (1954–1955) and a highly acclaimed representative of the Orphan in modern fantasy (Hammond). C. S. Lewis’ Prince Caspian (1951) is also a primary example of the Orphan’s introduction to modern fantasy (Schakel). Mixing the mythic elements of folktales and the coming-of-age theme in Victorian novels, the modern orphan trope centers around orphans growing up in a magical setting, where they must battle a Big Evil that threatens not only them but the entire world. To save the world, the Orphan receives help from their chosen family, typically friends, and must come to terms with themselves before the final showdown. This fresh take on the Orphan rekindles the archetype’s flame. Tolkien’s work changes the course of the modern fantasy genre, and influences future fantasy authors, in addition to rewriting the
Orphan. Nevertheless, the modern orphan trope is not fully popularized until the last two decades of the twentieth century. The nineties, in particular, are the leading decade for orphaned protagonists in the twentieth century. Among the most famous literary orphans to debut in the final years of the second millennium are Harry James Potter from the eponymous *Harry Potter* septology (1997–2007) by J. K. Rowling; the Stark siblings, as well as Jon Snow, from George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (1996–); the Baudelaire orphans of the collection *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999–2006) by Lemony Snicket; and Lyra Silvertongue, the main character of Philip Pullman’s trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000), all of which are deemed orphans of modern fantasy (Gymnich et al. 7). Though it is revealed that Lyra’s parents are actually alive—a popular plot twist in many orphan stories, forming a link between the Orphan and the foundling—Lyra is partly classified as an orphan character. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the subject of bereavement, either functional or true, among child protagonists is found in multiple modern fantasy bestsellers, and only continues to thrive, flowing into the twenty-first century.
2. The Multifaceted Features of the Forlorn in Modern Fantasy

Defining the Orphan, as well as the orphan narrative, and analyzing the character’s personality play crucial roles in determining the allure behind orphaned protagonists. As numerous and diverse as orphan narratives are, there are certain themes that are found in most stories featuring an orphaned protagonist (Kimball 558). These themes encompass what the Orphan uniquely offers the stories that the character tells, a special forlorn formula. In the beginning, the young orphan is oppressed and alienated, forced to face the world alone. A representative of the common person, as well as the lovable underdog, the Orphan inspires “sympathetic leanings from the reader” (Mattix 17). The Orphan embodies “the hope that whatever the present situation, it can change for the better” (Kimball 559). Leoutsakas eloquently summarizes the Orphan’s effects on readers: “Wretched orphans prevailing in fictional literature eases the mind and warms the soul” (10). As the story goes on, readers follow the Orphan’s adventure, as they rise from the murky depths and, ultimately, reach their triumphant peak, where riches and rewards await. Readers empathize with, and relate to, the Orphan’s struggles, and revel in the character’s victory. As readers join the Orphan’s quest, they share the experience with the character in which they have invested so much time. However, the possibility of the Orphan’s daring adventure comes down to the useful literary device of orphaning the character, removing the efforts of a parental relationship, in company with preventing eventual plot holes concerning children endangering themselves while parents sit idly by. Both the romanticism of freedom and the effectiveness of the Orphan as a role model, succeeding in sad and strange situations, originate the appeal of the Orphan and the power of parentless protagonists.

Naturally, the overall theme of all orphan tales is the one of not having parents. The substantial difference between the Orphan and a non-orphaned character is the complete lack of parental support, guidance, and affection, even if there appears to be somewhat of a family unit behind the Orphan. From the day a person is born, they begin to form attachments, first and foremost to their parents. Parental attachment “is a biological necessity and primary psychological condition for a child’s development” (Shipitsyna 15). When an attachment is severed, it has a profound impact on anyone, especially a child. Being deprived of a parent’s nurturing is detrimental to a child, negatively influencing their self-esteem, relationships with others, and self-image; an
internal void children carry for the rest of their lives (Shipitsyna 15). Experiencing loss, particularly in childhood and adolescence, distances a person from those who have not endured bereavement. Therefore, the Orphan is seen as “the eternal Other,” an eminently emotive figure branded with loss, yet the character is ever-prominent in literature as he or she “so deeply represents the feelings and pain” every person undergoes at some point in life, concerning neglect, loneliness, and abandonment (Kimball 559; 573).

Orphans are a tangible reflection of the fear of abandonment that all humans experience. Orphans are outcasts, separated because they have no connection to the familial structure which helps define the individual. [...] Orphans are a reminder that the possibility of utter undesired solitude exists for any human being. (Kimball 559)

The pain of parental loss is a large part of the Orphan’s backstory. Knowing tragedy firsthand, the Orphan is a realist, and does not see the world through rose-colored glasses. Furthermore, the loss fuels the Orphan’s desire and need for a connection with others, and allows the character to be more empathetic by nature than his or her non-orphan counterparts. Nonetheless, bereavement can be the basis for orphaned characters being led astray, as seen in the case of Harry Potter’s nemesis, Lord Voldemort. Consequently, being parentless is both the Orphan’s weakness and strength, forming their “dual personas,” akin to Harry the Orphan and Harry the Hero (Leoutsakas 8). The Orphan is two sides of the same coin, pity and nobility, as “[t]hey are a manifestation of loneliness, but they also represent the possibility for humans to reinvent themselves” (Kimball 559). Claudia Mills goes so far as to say this about the Orphan’s ability to discover themselves on their own terms: “At some level, every child envies the orphan. The orphan child represents pure possibility, freedom from family ties that chafe and bind” (228). Suffering, a want for self-discovery, a need for self-reliance, and the side effect of self-doubt all go into molding the Orphan, a character who, through peril and problems, makes the leap from zero to hero.

“Other than the gods, no single persona is more dominant as a hero symbol in literature than the orphan figure” (Leoutsakas 1). Carol S. Pearson splits heroes, and their goals, into twelve categories: the Creator on a quest towards self-discovery; the Warrior fighting to prove him-/herself and win; the Caregiver set on showing generosity and aspiring to help others; the Innocent in the pursuit of happiness, by remaining in safety; the Magician attempting to transform his or her life; the Seeker seeking after a
better life; the Lover’s acquisition of bliss; the metamorphosis of the Destroyer; the Ruler longing for order in the chaos; the Sage uncovering the truth; the Fool purely looking for a good time; and, lastly, the Orphan who strives to survive the difficult conditions in which he or she has been put, and regain safety (10). The Orphan’s task in overcoming adversity, notably the developmental stages they have missed out on, and coming to terms with their feelings, such as ceasing to view themselves as the victims of suffering, results in the gift of resilience; a trait that most, if not all, literary orphans possess (Villate 2). Observing the twelve hero archetypes, it is clear that the literary orphan, while consistently being a part of their own archetype, can, in addition, find common ground with the other hero types. In fact, this is what makes the Orphan such an ideal main character, especially in modern fantasy, where a hero who is capable of anything is necessary. As Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz states:

A special attraction of the orphan figure lies in the possibility to manipulate his/her (own) biography and circumstances; this opportunity generally turns him/her into a cipher to be filled by creative imagination—including the writer’s. The parentless individual, deprived of origins with the concomitant certainties and obligations, enjoys greater freedom than other characters and is supposed to be in a position—precarious though it often seems—to invent him-/herself. (83)

True to its motif, the orphan figure is a difficult concept to define definitively, as the very nature of the Orphan is to be open to interpretation, free to be whatever and whomever. A familiar archetype in literature, the Orphan’s portrayal throughout generations of storytelling shows how much the figure has evolved with the times, and the Orphan’s capacity for being a chameleon character. From Jane Eyre and Arya Stark’s determination to the courage of Oliver Twist and Sophie from The BFG, an array of characteristics go into forming the Orphan personality, and a lot of them are spotted in literary orphans of all kinds, whether Victorian or fantasy. Parental freedom, alongside learning to live with hardships, is the main contributing factor to the Orphan’s development, and a driving force in the character’s storyline, creating an archetype with its own unique set of traits, a parentless psyche. Growing up without parents means that the Orphan has to learn to get by on their own. As a result, independence and resourcefulness are guaranteed. At a young age, independence, in conjunction with a lack of direction, can lead orphaned characters to rebellion. Yet, the Orphan is on a continuous journey to belong and “search for a family” (Mills 228). This introduces a
more vulnerable side to the Orphan. The feeling of abandonment and misplacement can fuel the Orphan’s self-consciousness and doubt, but is likewise the source of the character’s compassion, selflessness, and understanding. To conquer the difficulties the character faces, the Orphan is naturally driven, devoted, and determined. With an arsenal of attributes, the modern Orphan has many sides, refusing to be pigeonholed as one clear-cut character, such as the angsty teenager, fighting for the greater good, even if it ends in death, and the bubbly child, whose wit and laughs hide the longing for a home. “Literature can capture not only action, but also the feelings of the characters,” rendering literary orphans “in a three dimensional manner” (Kimball 568). The one-dimensional representations of the Orphan in folktales and sentimentalized, rags to riches orphans of Victorian literature make room for the modern fantasy orphans. Instead of the necessary stereotypes of folktales, focusing on the story’s lesson rather than the inner-workings of a character, and the dramatized Victorian orphan, created to represent social problems and conjure up compassion, the modern fantasy orphan does not solely serve as a symbol. With the in-depth character development of orphan characters in novels of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the Orphan transforms into a genuine, multifaceted character, based in reality, though often a magical version of it.

Situating the Orphan in magical realms completely changes the trope, specifically differing the modern fantasy orphan’s circumstances from the stomping ground of the Victorian orphan. Mythic elements are added to the mix, similar to fairy tales, but instead of the shell characters of folktales, character development in contemporary fantasy is of matching importance to the story; sometimes, it can even be more significant. In modern fantasy, a novel is often part of a series, so readers get to know the Orphan intimately, which gives the character the opportunity to mature fully. Modern fantasy births epic stories that require equally epic heroes, both approachable and enigmatic. The modern fantasy orphan hero bridges the gap between the unattainable aspects of mythological champions and relatable, everyday heroes, as reality and fantasy merge effortlessly to produce the orphan of contemporary fantasy. In many ways, modern fantasy orphans have to be tougher than their predecessors because it is vital to their survival; they deal with entities and events that reality cannot even fathom. Orphans of modern fantasy have to find their inner Hercules or Atalanta, while staying true to their actual selves. The intoxicating concoction of magic and mundane solidifies the Orphan’s favor in modern fantasy.
3. Main Themes in Select Modern Fantasy Novels with Orphaned Protagonists

Having surveyed the Orphan in literature, the following three novels, Roald Dahl’s *The Witches* (1983), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1998) by J. K. Rowling, and Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* (2008), are pertinent in showcasing the characteristics of modern fantasy orphans, as well as the themes of their stories. In these three modern fantasy novels, the Orphan archetype is examined carefully, in order to lay out the Orphan’s principal properties, and offer an insight into the character’s success in storytelling.

3.1 The Fear of Abandonment and Sense of Family in Roald Dahl’s *The Witches*

Roald Dahl is no stranger to orphaned characters, even giving the orphan-obsessed Charles Dickens a run for his money. In novels such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) and *The BFG* (1982), an orphaned protagonist is a staple in Dahl’s literature. Dahl’s children’s fantasy book *The Witches* (1983) is no different. As the title of the book divulges, *The Witches* (1983) tells the tale of its unnamed narrator’s dealings with the vicious child-hating witches of England. After the demise of the narrator’s parents, the seven-year-old orphaned boy is taken in by his maternal grandmother, called Grandmamma, a bold, Norwegian, cigar smoking, retired witch expert who brings the narrator into the world of the witches, with her endless amount of stories. Witness to the abrupt loss of his parents and with the immense amount of love in the relationship between the narrator and his grandmother, the narrator of *The Witches* (1983) personifies two major themes in modern fantasy orphan novels, abandonment anxiety and the significance of family and home.

All through the novel, the bond between Grandmamma and the narrator proves stronger than the witches’ hatred. The narrator even admits to feeling closer to his grandmother than his own mother (Dahl 12). Following the deaths of the narrator’s parents in a car crash, the connection between him and Grandmamma only grows, as they are each other’s only living relatives (12). The narrator’s biggest supporter, Grandmamma helps him deal with surviving the accident that claimed his parents’ lives, most of the time through storytelling, while puffing away on her cigar. Displaying a
stereotypically masculine quality, smoking cigars, as well as resembling an “ancient queen on her throne,” Grandmamma takes on the roles of both mother and father for the narrator (15; 20). Filled with wonder and utterly fascinated by his grandmother’s stories, the narrator is especially enthralled with the ones concerning witches, since Grandmamma assures him that those stories are true. Due to growing up in Norway, the origins of the witches, in Dahl’s novel, and losing her thumb to a witch as a child, Grandmamma wants to protect her grandson from the witches (32). For that reason, Grandmamma teaches the narrator how to recognize witches, as they are evil, ugly creatures that are able to disguise themselves to resemble regular women. Despite the multitude of witches situated in Norway, Grandmamma is set on living in that country for the rest of her days. Because of the love the narrator has for his grandmother, he adopts this sentiment, even though he is born and raised in England (35). When the narrator’s parents’ will forces the grandmother-grandson duo to move back to England, the narrator is visibly upset on his grandmother’s behalf, showing how much he respects Grandmamma’s wishes (34–35). Yet, Grandmamma is prepared to leave Norway, owing to her dedication to her grandson (35). A deep trust exists between Grandmamma and the narrator, which is seen when the narrator encounters his first witch, and only Grandmamma, promising him safety, is able to calm him down (45). This faith goes both ways, with Grandmamma following through with, and accepting, the narrator’s plan to take down the Grand High Witch (134). Acting as both the narrator’s friend and guardian, Grandmamma is the only certainty in the vast sea of uncertainty encircling the narrator.

Being the sole survivor of the car accident that killed his parents, the narrator is prone to fearing life without his grandmother, the only family he has left. This abandonment anxiety is first seen when Grandmamma discusses the will with the narrator, and he panics at the thought of his grandmother possibly not being his legal guardian (34). In England, the narrator is further confronted with the inevitable loss of his grandmother, when Grandmamma falls sick with pneumonia, which can easily kill an elderly woman (48). While Grandmamma is ill, the narrator is not permitted to see her for ten days, and is cared for by their maid, Mrs. Spring, whom the narrator likes, but cannot replace his caring and creative grandmother (49). As soon as the narrator is allowed to visit Grandmamma, he rushes into her arms, a hug that is comparable to the embrace they share after the initial shock of the narrator’s parents’ passing (13; 49). Losing Grandmamma is the narrator’s biggest nightmare, as it places him back in the
past, in a way orphaning him again. The death of Grandmamma would have moved the narrator further from emotional security and the safety of home that the Orphan archetype seeks after bereavement, leaving him completely outcast. Grandmamma’s illness ruins their chances of taking a trip to Norway, so she and the narrator decide to stay at the English Hotel Magnificent instead (51). At the hotel, the narrator encounters the witches of England, having a meeting about the Grand High Witch’s new magic formula, created to transform children into mice (82–83). Due to this mouse-creating formula, the narrator watches Bruno Jenkins, a rich and gluttonous boy staying at the hotel, be turned into a mouse (103–104). Soon after, the witches administer this formula to the narrator, who also undergoes a mousy metamorphosis (114–116). In the face of his transformation into a “mouse-person,” the narrator is maturely calm and happy, applauding his shorter life span of about nine years, in a conversation with his grandmother:

“A mouse-person will almost certainly live for three times as long as an ordinary mouse,” my grandmother said. “About nine years.”

“Good!” I cried. “That’s great! It’s the best news I’ve ever had!”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, surprised.

“Because I would never want to live longer than you,” I said. “I couldn’t stand being looked after by anybody else.” (195–196)

Continuing his celebration, the narrator adds that Grandmamma will probably only live another nine years. After nine years, he will be “a very old mouse” and Grandmamma “a very old grandmother,” granting the potential for them to “die together” (196). Coming from a seven-year-old boy, it is unusual to look forward to dying at the tender age of sixteen, purely so that he does not have to brave life without his grandmother. This passage confirms the intensity of the Orphan’s fear of abandonment, and sheds a bit more light on the narrator’s easy acceptance of his fate. Remaining a mouse for the rest of his life, the narrator is welcomed by his grandmother with open arms, and they form a team to take down the remainder of the witches.

Originally saddened and terrified by the witches’ meddling in her grandson’s appearance, a terror born from the love and responsibility the grandmother feels for the narrator, Grandmamma is, ultimately, unfazed by her grandson’s new form, demonstrating the true meaning of home and family. However, this turns out to be a harder pill to swallow for Bruno Jenkins’ parents. Life for the grandmother-grandson duo, an atypical family unit, shaped by the orphaning of the narrator, carries on
peacefully, subsequent to the narrator’s new life as a mouse. On the other hand, upon discovering mouse-Bruno, the Jenkins family, a perfect family on paper, is in shambles. Grandmamma’s first attempt at breaking the news to Bruno’s parents ends in Bruno’s mother screaming at the sight of her son, because of her phobia of mice, dismissing the visual proof of mouse-Bruno (153). Although Bruno’s parents reluctantly come around, it is not as smooth sailing as Grandmamma’s approval of the narrator. Contrary to Grandmamma, Bruno’s father’s negatively approaches the situation, for example talking about having to give up their cat and Mrs. Jenkins’ musophobia (182). Grandmamma chooses to focus on the bright side:

“You are still yourself in everything except your appearance. You’ve still got your own mind and your own brain and your own voice, and thank goodness for that.” (132)

Grandmamma’s love and duty towards the narrator outweigh the disadvantages of her grandson’s mousy physicality. In like manner, this is an attitude the narrator expresses at the end of *The Witches* (1983): “It doesn’t matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you” (197). The ending of *The Witches* (1983) is the ideal happy ending of which all literary orphans dream, the aspiration of family and love, demonstrating the narrator as a figure of hope, a well-known depiction of the Orphan. Grandmamma and the narrator’s familial devotion to each other is shown in multiple ways, yet the deciding factor is found in their outlook on home not being a place, but a person, who evokes a feeling of family that eternally remains.

3.2 Self-Worth, Rebellion, Selflessness, and Sacrificial Tendencies in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

Adored worldwide, as well as being the principal character of a record-selling septology, Harry Potter is, arguably, the best known literary orphan of all-time. Harry’s story begins in the first novel of the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (US), which is the American edition of the book, first published in 1998; or *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (UK), originally published in 1997. The novel is J. K. Rowling’s debut, and began to come together when she was “orphaned,” having lost her mother and being estranged from her father since childhood. Rowling’s grief stemming from her mother’s passing is discernible in her book about the famous eleven-year-old
orphan, whose parents, Lily and James Potter, both highly skilled in magic, are murdered by the most powerful dark wizard ever to exist, Lord Voldemort. Harry, however, miraculously survives the killing curse cast by the Dark Lord. In the process, Lord Voldemort falls from power, presumed destroyed. A year old, at the time of his parents’ deaths, “The Boy Who Lived” has been labeled a savior of the wizarding world, and is shipped off to live with his non-magical, otherwise known as a Muggle, maternal aunt, Petunia, and her family, the Dursleys, in an effort to keep him out of harm’s way, and mentally ground him. Thus, Harry is unaware of his wizard nature, until he is whisked away from his abusive relatives, and the cupboard under the stairs, a decade later, to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a school of magical learning. Spells, friendships, and adventures await Harry at Hogwarts. Navigating fame, fate, and foes, Harry’s story evinces several notable topics observed in modern fantasy orphans, from self-worth to selflessness.

Regardless of his hero status in the wizarding world, Harry’s self-worth plummets during his years living under the Dursleys’ roof. A person’s sense of self is a delicate matter, prone to shattering in uncaring and cruel circumstances. Similar to countless literary orphans, Harry is forced to live with unkind guardians. The Dursleys’ treatment of Harry is harsh, as Harry has to sleep under the stairs with the spiders, and act as an impromptu slave to the Dursleys (Rowling 19–20). Harry is also tormented by Dudley, the Dursleys’ spoiled son (20). A decade of being treated like nothing has made Harry believe that he is of no true value. In fact, the only thing Harry really likes about himself is the lightning bolt-shaped scar on his forehead, which ironically is evidence of the event that landed him in the Dursleys’ care (20). It does not help that the sole thing Harry enjoys about his appearance is the exact feature Petunia finds “horrible” and tries to hide, when giving Harry a haircut (24). Suffering a life of hand-me-downs, snarky comments, and being left out, Harry is happy with the bare minimum, and expects little out of life. This is seen when Harry is, begrudgingly, brought along for Dudley’s birthday at the zoo. Even though Harry has to keep his distance from Dudley and his friend to avoid being bullied, and is given Dudley’s sloppy seconds ice cream, Harry considers the trip to the zoo one of his best mornings in a long time (26). Conversing with a boa constrictor at the zoo, Harry is faced with himself, caged in the Muggle world, homeless, and forced into obedience (27–28). Harry and the snake parallel each other, both orphans that escape lonely beginnings and find liberation in a world outside of the dismal circumstances they have always known. The rarity of good things in
Harry’s life contributes to his pessimism, as he trusts that happiness is fleeting (26). Even when Rubeus Hagrid bursts into Harry’s existence, a giant on a flying motorcycle with an umbrella wand, a guiding light out of the darkness of the Dursleys, Harry can scarcely believe that he has been given a ticket out of their care; it seems too good to be true, a dream (61). After his mistreatment at the Dursleys, Harry underestimates himself, and is shocked to find out that he, so seemingly ordinary, is a wizard (57–58). The fusion of ordinary and extraordinary is a repeated theme in the Orphan’s portrayal in modern fantasy. Harry’s low self-worth hinders his confidence in himself. In retrospect, Harry, soon, grasps that all of the strange situations in which he is placed, from his terrible haircut growing back overnight to escaping bullies at the blink of an eye, are proof of just how remarkable he is (58). Hagrid informs Harry about his true past, not the lies that the Dursleys have told him. This gives Harry the significance that he drastically needs to understand his identity, a large part of the Orphan’s journey. At Hogwarts, Harry is allowed to blossom, going from invisible to celebrated, becoming the youngest seeker in a century, and finding people who help him recognize his worth. Though Harry’s self-worth grows, he sometimes reverts back to his low self-esteem. Coupled with his inherent courage and righteousness, Harry’s lack of self-worth pushes him towards daring acts of proving his worthiness.

In his endeavors to prove his worthiness, along with taking on the hero role, Harry is intrinsically reckless and rebellious, true to his Hogwarts house, Gryffindor. To a certain extent, Gryffindor is the house of the Orphan, honoring traits like heroism, courage, and daring. Over the course of Harry’s first year at Hogwarts, he and his best friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, break the lion’s share of the school’s strict rules. It is not to cause trouble, but in pursuit of the greater good, and the end justifies the means. Sometimes, to do what is right, going against the grain is inescapable. The Orphan is naturally disposed to paving his or her own path, and choosing the honorable thing to do over following what is mandated. Normally, Harry’s dismissal of Hogwarts’ rules is rewarded, since he acts with a kind heart. For instance, when Harry disobeys the flying instructor’s orders, as he flies to retrieve the gift his classmate, Neville Longbottom, received from his grandmother, he lands a spot on Gryffindor’s Quidditch—a wizarding sport—team (148–151). Furthermore, Harry and Ron’s friendship with Hermione is built on a reckless, yet compassionate, premise, as Harry and Ron, instead of going to their dormitory as instructed, fight a Mountain Troll in the girls’ bathroom, and save Hermione’s life. Consistent with the Orphan, Harry puts his life on the line to
rescue someone else. Oftentimes, Harry is even encouraged to enact nonconformity, namely by Hogwarts’ Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, who gives Harry his father’s invisibility cloak. The cloak is key to granting Harry easy access to forbidden areas of the castle. Invisibility emboldens Harry’s reckless behavior. Invisible, Harry sneaks into the restricted section of the library to research Nicolas Flamel, the creator of the Sorcerer’s Stone, rumored to enable immortality. This is vindicated by the importance of protecting the Stone from greedy hands. After investigating Flamel, Harry finds the Mirror of Erised in an unused classroom, a mirror that reveals a person’s deepest desires. As with many literary orphans, Harry pines after his parents, and a reflection of Harry reunited with Lily and James is what stares back at him in the mirror. Completely overtaken by the image of a happy family, Harry obsessively visits the mirror, until Dumbledore catches him. Providing Harry with an essential parental figure, Dumbledore has an important talk with Harry, reminding him that dreaming can be dangerous, if a person forgets to live (214). Finally, the invisibility cloak is what Harry, together with Ron and Hermione, needs for a final act of recklessness. The trio ventures into the third floor corridor, off-limits to students, to stop Lord Voldemort’s return to power. Harry’s moral compass trumps the sanctity of Hogwarts’ regulations, empowering him to rebel, and he is willing to accept the consequences of his actions. Without Harry’s rule-breaking, Lord Voldemort is destined to make a comeback, guaranteeing a wizarding world full of destruction, which corroborates the validity of Harry’s rebellious choices.

Breaking school rules and putting his life on the line shows that Harry is prepared to sacrifice, a measure of selflessness, as he comprehends loss and wants to prevent it from happening to others. Selflessness and sacrifice are qualities that derive from love, one of the fundamental themes in the entirety of the *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007). Alive due to his mother’s unselfish love, Harry’s selflessness and sacrificial tendencies are deep-rooted, originating from his orphanhood. These traits shine through Harry’s humility, unaffected by his stardom and skills, his wish to substantiate the expectations people have of him, and his inborn inclination for risking his neck to save others. This is obvious in Harry helping one of the members of his chosen family, Rubeus Hagrid, to get rid of his pet dragon, so that Hagrid does not end up in trouble, even though it results in Harry landing himself in detention (241). In fact, Harry’s selflessness is what sets him apart from Lord Voldemort, and gives Harry the opportunity to best him. While Lord Voldemort seeks personal glory and gain, Harry
strives for the good of all. Willing to sacrifice himself in the name of virtue, Harry takes after his fellow modern fantasy orphans, repeatedly putting the lives of others above his own. For when Harry has death staring him straight in the face, Harry is selfless. The Mirror of Erised presents him with the Stone, as Harry’s desire is to ensure Lord Voldemort’s downfall, rather than seeing himself safe and sound (292). Although Harry only succeeds in slowing down Lord Voldemort’s revitalization, Dumbledore remarks that Harry’s victory is an essential stepping stone in the path to Lord Voldemort’s undoing:

“Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time—and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power.” (298)

A prediction that follows Harry over the span of seven novels, Dumbledore’s comment demonstrates the importance of selflessness and sacrifice, in the hope for a better world. It is a purpose that Harry has in common with other fantasy orphans, pushing him forward, separating him from the masses, and molding him into the modern fantasy hero readers hold dear.

### 3.3 Independence, Purpose, and Identity in Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book*

In many instances said to be Neil Gaiman’s most esteemed work, the novel *The Graveyard Book* (2008) is a story with an orphan character, cut from the same cloth as Mowgli and Harry Potter. *The Graveyard Book* (2008) introduces the mysterious and curious Nobody “Bod” Owens, a human boy raised in a graveyard. Adopted by a ghost couple, Mr. and Mrs. Owens, after his family is brutally massacred, Bod’s coming-of-age story is concurrently like and unlike most children’s. Ghouls, ghosts, dead witches, a snakelike creature, called the Sleer, and Bod’s undead guardian, Silas, are only a few of the creatures living in the graveyard Bod calls home. Yet, when the question of how a living person ended up stuck in a resting place for the dead is brought up, Bod is made aware of his orphanhood, gory details included. Armed with this new-found knowledge, a fourteen-year-old Bod vows revenge on his family’s killer, a plot that sends him straight into the arms of a bygone brotherhood, the Jacks of All Trades. With the group’s future on the line, the Jacks have one objective: to kill a child of an ancient prophecy, who blurs the lines of life and death, and will be the end of the Jacks—a child who
scarily resembles Bod himself. Through adventures and mishaps, Bod’s thirteen years in the graveyard teach him lessons of the living and lifeless, and set him on a path of purpose, endlessly contributing to his search for selfhood.

As in most cases of maturation, a large part of Bod’s ever-growing identity are his acts of independence. Eighteen months old and newly-orphaned, unbeknownst to him, Bod shows his first spurt of independent thinking by getting out of his crib and toddling over to the graveyard, saving himself from the murderous Jack Frost, the most evil of all the Jacks (Gaiman 5–8). In the graveyard, Bod finds a family in its many residents, mainly the Owens’ and Silas. For the most part, Bod is a “quiet child” and compliant (31). This changes when Bod learns to talk, and begins bombarding the graveyard’s inhabitants with questions about his situation, as well as the graveyard’s secrets, to which he never gets a straight answer, except from Silas (31). A frequent question of Bod’s concerns his confinement within the cemetery. Displeased with Silas’ reasoning for his house arrest, which is to keep Bod safe, Bod argues, instead of being of the same mind, that Silas is authorized to leave the graveyard (31–32). Bod’s unwillingness to back down from his curiosity and his ability to form his own opinions are signs of his increasing independence. This is evidence of the orphan archetype announcing itself in Bod, as the modern fantasy orphan refuses to yield; a required attribute, as the character has to overcome wicked forces. Another indication of Bod’s autonomy is his passion for knowledge. Surrounded by the deceased, with wondrous talents of their own, Bod longs to acquire their skills, and be able to do things himself. Going from ghost to ghost, Bod continuously seeks out knowledge on his own accord, in search of the information he desires. From the ghosts, Bod learns about Liza Hempstock, a good witch buried in an unmarked grave. A true maverick at the age of eight, Bod takes it upon himself to obtain a gravestone for Liza, and even exits the graveyard, without permission, to do so. Though Bod is unable to buy Liza a proper grave marker, Bod succeeds in making her one, a small feat of independence (130–131). Throughout *The Graveyard Book* (2008), there are various attestations of Bod’s expanding independence, such as befriending a human girl named Scarlett, in spite of only knowing dead people; making Silas send him to a real school; thwarting the schemes of two school bullies, rather than sticking to the shadows; unearthing his past; and, eventually, leaving his home behind. As Bod is ceaselessly evolving in a realm of stagnancy, an orphan rising from the ashes, he is inclined to behave independently, and accustomed to varying goals, changing as he continues to mature.
On his journey to becoming himself, Bod has differing purposes, as he moves through childhood and adolescence. Starting from a young age, Bod’s love of knowledge becomes his first purpose in life. Yet, as Bod grows older, he begins to feel that he no longer needs lessons, and he stops aiming for a purpose in life, stalling in ignorance (62). Bod finds the lessons of Miss Lupescu, his strict, substitute guardian, unworthy of his time, since he does not see the point in them (63). Bod is proved wrong, when Miss Lupescu’s teachings prevent his death. Suddenly, Bod realizes that there is a lot more for him to learn, regaining his ambition once again (89). With death surrounding Bod at every corner, he must find his will to live. Dwelling in a graveyard where his chosen family sleeps most of the daytime, Bod musters up the energy to wake up every day, exhibiting his willpower, and demand for purpose (140). This presents the Orphan’s determined nature, as well as the character’s refusal to follow the crowd. Still, Bod fails to grasp his full capacity, likening himself to the dead. This changes, when Silas decides to tell Bod about his family’s deaths, and clarifies that Bod is alive:

“You’re alive, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you change the world, the world will change. Potential. Once you’re dead, it’s gone. Over. 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.” (165–166)

Knowing the doom of his birth family, Bod is rejuvenated, and knowledge merges with a temporary purpose in his life, a vow of revenge against his family’s killer. When Mrs. Owens insists that there is nothing Bod can do, Bod disagrees and plans to accomplish his revenge by learning everything (201). Bod’s intent in vengeance culminates in his final battle with the Jacks, where he uses everything he has learned throughout his life in the graveyard. After Bod tricks Jack Frost into becoming the Sleer’s master, a fate consisting of being constricted by the Sleer for eternity, he fulfills his prophecized purpose in life (265). No longer hunted by a bloodthirsty brotherhood, Bod is free to discover a new purpose, to “want everything,” see what the world has to offer, as well as what he can offer the world, and be himself, in every way (286).

Void of human parents to assist in his identity journey, Bod must figure out, entirely on his own, who he is beyond the graveyard. For most of the story, Bod is in a perpetual state of identity crisis. Orphaned as a toddler, Bod has no recollection of his past prior to the graveyard. Bod’s backstory matches that of many literary orphans, who do not have the luxury of knowing their history. Not even the article regarding his
family’s killings discloses his birth name (227). The fact that Bod’s birth name is unknown highlights his search for identity, a main theme of orphan stories. When Mr. and Mrs. Owens adopt Bod, they give him the name Nobody, as he “looks like nobody but himself,” echoing Bod’s individuality (19). At first, the Owens’ confidence in Bod’s unique identity does not transfer to him. Bod struggles with his identity, being raised by beings so unlike himself. Regularly, Bod believes that he is one of the graveyard’s creatures; a belief that it is continually shut down (32; 152). Because of his little interaction with his own kind, Bod does not fully comprehend his humanness and his character is behind in development. Meeting Scarlett, at the age of four, forms parts of Bod’s identity, as she is his first human contact since entering the graveyard. Scarlett helps Bod come to terms with his humanness. However, Bod is left in the domain of the dead, when Scarlett moves to Scotland (53). Although the graveyard is his home, and he loves both Silas and his ghost parents, Bod longs for the outside world on multiple occasions, misses Scarlett, and wants to attend a human school. This is an example of the Orphan desiring the lost part of him-/herself, principally parents and the life that the Orphan could have led. In this case, Bod yearns for his human side, which he has been deprived of since his birth family’s deaths. The Danse Macabre, a rare event where the living dance with the dead, confronts Bod with the differences between him and his graveyard family. While Bod craves reflecting on the dance—a meaningful experience to him—the ghosts are happy with keeping it locked in memory (151–153). Bod fails to understand the ghosts’ perspective, since he is alive and reminiscing is a value of the living. The fact that Bod is alive, and a person yet to live out his life, becomes more apparent as he ages. Bod seems to ignore his differences from his family or choose only to notice their similarities, possibly so that he does not end up alone, a state an orphan fears and actively tries to avoid. Belonging is one of the Orphan’s strongest desires. At fifteen years old, Bod grows apart from his ghost best friend, Fortinbras Bartleby, who is forever ten years old, and, instead, Bod starts to get along with Thackeray Porringer, a ghost closer to Bod’s age, whom he used to dislike (213). Furthermore, Liza, one of Bod’s closest friends in childhood, develops a crush on Bod, as he reaches her age, and starts to avoid him (214). Losing most of his ghost friends, Bod faces isolation. For the first time, Bod truly recognizes that he is the Other of the graveyard, an understanding with which literary orphans are troubled. Paradoxically, Scarlett’s return alludes to the beginning of Bod’s departure from the graveyard, as he is reminded of the world that exists past the graveyard’s fence. Bod and Scarlett resume their friendship, and Scarlett
aids Bod in finding his family’s killer. During the climax of Jack Frost and Bod’s altercation, Jack presents Bod with the opportunity to know his birth name, a symbol of Bod’s identity, but Bod has already figured himself out: “I know my name [...] ‘I’m Nobody Owens. That’s who I am’” (264). In the wake of Bod’s handling of the Jacks, which Scarlett finds immoral, Bod and Scarlett’s friendship severs abruptly. The loss of Scarlett brings to mind Bod’s orphanhood, as he loses his link to humanity again, as well as his first real friend, a part of his identity. Scarlett’s differing opinions of him—friend or foe—cause Bod to think about his character and future. Moreover, since the child of the Jacks’ prophecy needs to have reached adulthood, Bod’s victory against the Jacks signifies the beginning of a new stage in his life (253). With a farewell to his friends and family, and his ghost mother’s lullaby in his head to “leave no path untaken,” a song that mirrors his identity journey, Bod leaves the graveyard, with a suitcase, money, and a passport in his own, strange name (288). In true coming-of-age fashion, Bod departs from his home to venture out into the unknown, and discover who he is outside of the graveyard. Moving beyond the weight of his orphandom, Nobody becomes somebody, or realizes that, perhaps, he was already somebody, with a little help from his chosen family.
Conclusion

Delving into the Orphan’s history in literature, and studying the character type, alongside three modern fantasy novels in which the Orphan is a protagonist, it is safe to say that the Orphan is an important, treasured, and profound literary figure. Although Dahl’s narrator, Harry Potter, and Bod Owens represent a tiny percentage of modern fantasy orphans, as well as literary orphans in general, the three heroes manifest the preponderance of the Orphan’s compelling, characteristic qualities. Familial bonds, the fear of rejection, reckless acts of selflessness, sticking it to the Man, and the search for identity and worth, as examined in Dahl’s, Rowling’s, and Gaiman’s works, are ingrained in stories about the Orphan. These themes and traits are born from the character being orphaned, a literary device that allows the isolated and outcast Orphan to be the hero the character’s stories necessitate. Without parents, the stakes are raised. The Orphan has to discover the world alone, in charge of his or her own destiny. Orphans in literature offer the unique perspective of seeing the world through the eyes of innocence and youth, unfiltered by parental influence. With orphanhood comes pain and crisis, which creates a well-rounded character that knows both light and darkness, life and death, while enjoying a freedom that other literary heroes lack.

While the Orphan’s independence permits authors to write whatever their imagination conjures, more so with the opportunities found in modern fantasy, the character’s suffering arouses sympathy in readers. Readers walk alongside the Orphan, feel his or her emotions, and celebrate the character’s sweet victories, with an understanding that one day they will become the Orphan. The universal fact that every person will, at some point, become parentless is what sets the Orphan apart from any other literary character. It gives the Orphan a vulnerability that feels instinctively veracious, and to which all readers can somehow relate, a cathartic release, even if the Orphan deals with other situations a reader may never experience, like magical conundrums or a life as a beggar. Orphanhood is a predicament that a reader fantasizes about, in regards to the liberation and the adventures the character encounters, and readers relish in becoming a part of the Orphan’s family. At the same time, a reader wishes to break loose from the reality of the terrors of literal orphanhood by simply closing a book shut. A case of having a cake and eating it, too, the Orphan offers an escape into a world where a child runs the show, but also serves as a reminder of
gratitude for existing outside of the pages of an orphan story, as bereavement is not something a person takes lightly, specifically one as radical as losing a parent.

Despite the invariable theme of parental loss, the Orphan is not timeless in all manners, though the character does endure the tests of time. Instead, the trope and figure easily adapt to changes, and constantly thrive as the motif evolves. Folktales, Victorian literature, comics, and modern fantasy are the main stages in the Orphan’s evolution in literature. Going from superficial and symbolic to sentimental to multifaceted, the Orphan has progressed, even in the face of a decades’ long dry spell, and continues to be a fan favorite. Literary orphans have found their footing in novels and comics, to such a degree that they are the ruling champions of writers’ pages, as the Orphan’s frequency in fiction is unmatched. Following the Orphan throughout the character’s diverse depictions in literary history, it is clear that the Orphan holds a special place in literature, and refuses to be replaced. The power of parentless protagonists on journeys towards self-actualization lives on in various depictions of the Orphan’s plight in fiction. Plunged into independence and forced to face loneliness head-on, while dealing with the normal worries of coming-of-age, the Orphan blurs the lines between childhood and adulthood. Representing hope in the face of distress and a future after tragedy, the Orphan, in the end, surpasses the character’s core issue, orphanhood, and becomes more than his or her hardships. The Orphan moves from pathetic to presenting numerous possibilities. Literary orphans demonstrate that the idea of bereavement, as well as its consequences, is a haunting and tantalizing fixation for readers. “And until the day when none of us feels the pain of isolation, orphans will continue to symbolize it for us” (Kimball 573).
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