The Graveyard Book

Concept Analysis

**Literary Text:** The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman (Harper Collins First Edition)

**Summary**

Nobody Owens lives in a graveyard because, when he was a baby, a man called Jack tried killed his family and then tried to kill Nobody. Bod (a nickname) grows up in an old graveyard with parents, Mr. and Mrs. Owens, who are dead, and a guardian, Silas, who is neither dead nor alive. His closest friends are people who have been dead for centuries. The book follows Bod as he grows from age six to age 15, when he is considered grown up and doesn’t need the graveyard to protect him anymore. While struggling to understand himself, the outside world (which he is not allowed to see as it is too dangerous), and his mysterious guardian, Bod must also deal with the fact that his killer is still out there looking for the child he should have killed years ago so that he can finish the job.

**Organizational Patterns**

The book is organized into longer chapters. There are eight chapters and they range from 15 to 85 pages in length. Each chapter is a small vignette into Bod’s life. They follow a sequential pattern, however many years pass in between each chapter. For example, in chapter one, Bod is but a toddler barely able to walk, yet in chapter two, he is age six. There are no explanations for these leaps in time; the reader finds out because about a page and half into the chapter, Gaiman will mention Bod’s age. This can be confusing for a reader if they are not aware of it to begin with. There are pictures scattered throughout the book, more frequent at the beginning, yet still present at the end. I would imagine that these pictures would be enjoyable to both a young reader and a more experienced reader.

**Central Question/Enduring Issue**

Fear

What is Fear? Bod grows up in a graveyard; he is living in a location that makes most people apprehensive. So not growing up learning to fear certain ideas, locations, and creatures, Bod has less fear, and is more able to accomplish what he needs to. In some ways fear seems to be almost what we learn and what we do not learn. Because Bod hasn’t learned to be afraid of things he isn’t. However on the other hand, Bod realizes that it is easy to fear what he doesn’t understand. He grows up fearing the world outside.

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the graveyard, and that begins to limit him. It isn’t until he is able to face his fear and leave the graveyard, that he can overcome these fears.

Where does fear come from? Many times throughout the book Bod is faced with fearful situations, or the people he is around become afraid. The first time this happens, Bod enters an ancient tomb and there is a creature that is called the Sleer. This creature feeds off of other’s fear, it seems to gain power the more afraid someone gets. The fear builds and builds until it blocks out our rational part of our brain, making some of the characters do crazy things. Because Bod lives in the graveyard, he has been given some of the graveyard abilities, and he can haunt someone, or visit them in a nightmare. Bod learns how to use the element of surprise to build up an emotional response. Once someone has been surprised, or gets jumpy, it is easier for Bod to feed their fright until they are panicked.

How do we overcome fear? When in the tomb with the Sleer, Bod quickly realizes that the Sleer is gaining power from their terror, and tells his friend Scarlett, that there is nothing to be afraid of. As Bod comes to understand why the Sleer exists and what it is doing, it no longer has power over him. A similar pattern happens when Bod is asking Silas about who his killer is. Bod has come to the conclusion that he needs to go to school so that he can learn things about the outside world. When Silas tells him he doesn’t think this is a good idea, Bod explains that he wants to learn more so that he can hunt down his killer and kill him himself. Bod’s whole life has been built on this fear of the outside world because of this killer, yet Bod realizes that by feeding this fear, he is accomplishing nothing. If he doesn’t seek knowledge, he will never gain the power to overcome what he fears. It is knowledge that will help him defeat fear.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Theme

Death vs. Life— Bod lives in a graveyard, so he is very familiar with the dead. His best friends are dead, everything he knows is death, and his life has been defined by the fact that he is not dead. Death doesn’t look nearly as terrifying when you are introduced to the loving Mrs. Owens, and the endearing witch, Liza. However, death is something that as humans we seem to feel out of control of. So to have a character that is so comfortable with the dead is somewhat unsettling. Sometimes he is too comfortable with death, such as when he tells Silas that he doesn’t really care if the man Jack kills him because that would mean he would get to be with his dead friends forever. Silas has to remind him how important life is, that there are limits to being dead. There are things that you can only accomplish when alive.
Myth and Tradition/Old vs. New— Being in a graveyard, Bod is exposed to the past more than many kids his age. He is taught history and grammar, by people who have been dead for one hundred years. His guardian is neither dead nor alive, and he has been put in the care of a werewolf. He is surrounded by the mythical and those who are deeply entrenched in their traditional ways. While this is different from a heavy fantasy novel where the myth is the solely driving the story, the plot in this book is driven by Bod’s actions. These myths and traditions enrich Bod’s experiences and help him to make wise choices.

Because the myths and traditions are so prevalent in the story, there seems to be a subtle battle between old and new. When Bod goes to school, many of the teachers identify him as odd because he thinks history happened in a different way than in the textbook. So Bod has to decide whether the stories he heard from the graveyard are true or if the stories they tell in school now are true.

Bod is also constantly frustrated with the fact that he doesn’t understand how the current world works. He is constantly pressing his guardian to let him go out into the world and learn about how society functions. He knows that in order to defeat his killer he will have to employ both his knowledge from the past, and knowledge about current society. So in some ways we see tradition and new age working against each other, but for the most part Bod realizes that he needs both. This idea is really evident during the dance of the Macabray. Here both the dead and the living, both the old and the new come together and dance. The night is full of magic, and Bod is swept away by it all, as he dances with the dead; mixing what is now with what is past.

Coming of Age— This is a novel about growing up and overcoming the most difficult and bizarre circumstances. Bod goes from being a child whose parents have been murdered, to child who lives in a graveyard with dead parents, to a teen who wants to have control of his destiny, to an adult who no longer needs the protection of the graveyard. More importantly, however, is Bod’s journey from being a nobody that is unwanted, to a somebody that taken care of by the graveyard, to Bod who cares about those around him, and is willing to sacrifice for them. He learns what is means to be alive and what his responsibilities are as a living human being.

Setting

Gaiman choose such a unique setting for his story. Most of the students will at least be somewhat familiar with a graveyard. However, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to show them maybe what a really old cemetery might look like. It also might be helpful for the students to draw a map of where things are in the graveyard, because Gaiman often describes what is in each corner, and where things are located in the graveyard. This would be important towards the end of the novel when the final battle between Bod and his killer takes place in the graveyard. It may also be helpful for the students to talk about what other things are associated with a graveyard, because it is because of

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living in a graveyard that Bod has special powers. He has been given the ‘Freedom of the Graveyard’. So it would probably be beneficial to help the students to remember what they already know/assume about graveyards.

Point of View

This story is told from third person omniscient. While this stays the same the whole time, it seems that the narrator is always just a few years older than Bod. The narrator always knows just a little bit more than Bod, and you always get the feeling that they aren’t telling you everything. Such as the descriptions of Silas, never tell you what Silas is. This narrator seems to try and keep as much information from the reader as long as they possibly can. The narrator never really comes out and tells you what Silas is, so what you are left with is the facts that he sleeps during the day, he can change into something that flutters, and he is able to persuade humans into doing what he wants. This is the same with the man called Jack that killed Bod’s original parents, the narrator keeps as many of the facts to himself as possible, leaving the reader perplexed and intrigued about this mysterious killer. All in all, I think that this narrator works for this novel because it adds to the mystery and suspense of the plot.

Allusion

This novel alludes to many different subjects and histories outside the text. One thing that plays an important role throughout the story is the allusion to the Celtic culture. The oldest grave in the graveyard is buried deep in the hill and dates back to Celtic times. The descriptions of inside the tomb and of the culture could be interesting to for the students to study.

There are also references to historical events and people. When Bod is taken by the ghouls, their names are the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, the Duke of Westminster, the Emperor of China, the 33rd President of the United States, and the famous writer Victor Hugo. Some of these allusions seem to have meaning, while others of them are simply for humor. However it would be interesting to pull out a bit of history and have the student do some research to see why Gaiman would choose these names for the ghouls.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Students will be able to identify with Bod as he struggles to make friend and fit in with his peer group. Whenever Bod enters the real world he seems to stick out like a sore thumb, even though Silas has made it clear that he is to keep a low profile. This idea that everyone is watching you and that everyone is noticing you, is something that teenagers will be able to identify with easily. They often feel like they are the only ones not wearing the right clothing, or that they don’t have the right haircut. While Bod doesn’t waste too much thought on these things, it is present in his life.
Students will also be able to identify with the fact that Bod is constantly an outsider. All of his classmates view him as ‘the other’ and he is left alone much of the time. Many times teens feel like they are the only one who is going through something hard. It would probably be comforting to see Bod go from ‘Nobody’ to somebody.

**Vocabulary Issues**

While the language of *The Graveyard Book* is fairly simple, there are a few places where it gets wordy, and occasionally the ghosts will speak and use old language that could be hard to understand. Because Bod is exposed to an older generation and their language, throughout the book there may be spelling differences, or vocabulary differences, depending on when that particular dead person lived. Words such as ‘nicked’ meaning to have stolen something, or ‘proconsul’ which is position in the ancient Roman government, frequent the text. This could provide an enjoyable learning opportunity for students to encounter words that they wouldn’t have normally.

Sometimes in a descriptive paragraph Gaiman will only use one sentence. The entire sentence is grammatically correct, but it can be difficult to get through without any periods. These longer sentences would be good things to study when looking at how we can piece together sentences. They are excellent examples of how to combine more than one idea without using ‘and’ ‘or’ or ‘but’.

Lastly, there are a few places where mythological/fantasy words enter the text. This is particularly prevalent in the ghouls chapter. ‘Ghulheim’ is the city of the ghouls, and a night gaunt is a huge bird that flies above and feeds on the ghouls. These words can be confusing and difficult for the students, but it may be interesting to study where these words come from. Ghulheim appears to have German roots: the word heim means home in German, so the word most likely means ghoul’s home. Spending some time on these words can be very beneficial for your students and could get them interested and excited about words.

**Background Knowledge**

Students do not need much background knowledge in order to read this novel. The world of the graveyard is simple, and Gaiman easily explains it to his readers. He uses myths that have been around for a long time, most of his readers are going to know. He uses their simplest forms so it requires the least amount of explanation to the reader. However, because Gaiman has grown up in England, and the setting is in England, there are a lot of references to English society, and customs. The students may need a little bit of knowledge about English history, and maybe what graveyards look like there. But other than these minor ideas, Gaiman carefully explains things to his readers.

**Implications for Student Diversity**

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There is only one instant where ethnicity and race is even mentioned and it is near then end. Scarlett is observing a bus driver and the narrator tells us that the bus driver's skin is even darker than Scarlett's (219). This is the first physical description we get of Scarlett. But this comment implies that she may be of a different race. However, this fact seems irrelevant to the story. It doesn’t change how Scarlett is described or viewed. She wasn’t portrayed as being lower class or having a lower socio-economic status. She came from your typical middle class family.

One thing that the book does touch on is how two people, who come from different backgrounds, can get along. Bod does this twice: once with his friend Eliza, and once with Scarlett. Eliza is a witch that was drowned, burned, and then placed in the unholy ground of the graveyard without a headstone. When Bod asks his parents about the witch that lives n the other side of the fence, they tell him to stay away from her because the people on that side of the fence are bad people. This never affects Bod’s opinion of Liza. He goes down and meets her, and they end up being friends for a long time. With Scarlett things are a little different. Because Bod has grown up in a graveyard and he can fade, he is very different from Scarlett. At first she thinks he is weird because he has all these different ideas, and because off his abilities. She soon gets over their differences, and her and Bod are friends as children and then again as teens. In both of these circumstances, Bod, Liza, and Scarlett are able to see past the prejudices they may have, to the real person underneath it all.

**Gender Issues**

There didn’t seem to be any gender issues in The Graveyard Book. Bod doesn’t necessarily represent the typical male, and there are few typical female characters. Bod’s ghostly mother, Mrs. Owens, is a very motherly sort, but Scarlett’s mother is a professor at a university. The book talks more about Bod’s female friends than it does his male friends. Neither Liza the witch, nor Bod’s friend Scarlett are portrayed as strictly female. They both seem to be androgynous. Both genders play an important ole in the novel, and neither is favored above the other.

**Research Issues/Project Ideas**

**Historical Person Sketch**—I can see this project working in two different ways. One way would be to go to a local cemetery and to choose a headstone, to either take a picture of this headstone or draw it, and then to write a fictional story about this person’s life based on their headstone. Another way to do it would be to get old obituaries, and then have the students embellish them and write a short biography of the person. I feel like these projects could help the students relate to the past, and also to the book. This project could be either a creative writing unit, or it could be driven towards researching a person and the facts about their life, resulting in a biographical sketch of their life.
Writing their own obituaries—The students could write their own obituaries, in thinking about what it is they want to be remembered by. You would have to be careful with this project though because you don’t want anyone who is suicidal writing something so depressing. As a teacher you would have to do a lot to prepare the students for this activity.

Writing about fears—The students could write to identify their own fears, and then come up with ways in which they could get over these fears.

Enrichment Resources

I think that it could be helpful for the students to read some of Neil Gaiman’s short stories before they read this book. When writing this book, many of the chapters started out as short stories, and it wasn’t until later that the whole book came together with a common theme and plot. So because the format is somewhat different from other young adult novels, it could be helpful for the students to get used to a short story form. Some of his short stories are: "Murder Mysteries", "Snow, Glass, Apples", "We Can Get Them for You Wholesale", and “A Study in Emerald".