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„Postmodern Young Adult Fantasy  
and Contemporary Children’s Gothic”  
lesson for *The Literary Fantastic* BA lecture course

Jelen tananyag a Szegedi Tudományegyetemen  
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THE LITERARY FANTASTIC (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course)

# Postmodern Young Adult Fantasy and Contemporary Children's Gothic

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Olvasási idő: 60 perc

**AIMS:** The chapter offers an introduction to fantastic fiction addressing young audiences including postmodern young adult fantasy and contemporary children's gothic genres.

**TOPICS to be discussed:**

- coming-of-age fantasy
- quest fantasy
- trauma narrative, problem novel
- school novel
- fairy-tale revisions
- intertextuality
- metafictionality
- homely gothic
- gothic bordercrossings
- children's gothic = fusion of humour, horror, and hope
- acoustic uncanny
- gross-out aesthetics
- pedagogy of hope
- fantastic worldbuilding
- modes of making magic

**RECOMMENDED READINGS:**

[Patrick Ness. \*A Monster Calls\* \(2018\)](#)

[Neil Gaiman. \*Coraline\* \(2002\)](#)

[Neil Gaiman & Dave McKean. \*The Wolves in the Walls\* \(2003\)](#)

[Tim Burton. \*The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories\*. \(1997\)](#)

[Edward Gorey. \*The Gashlycrumb Tinies\* \(1963.\)](#)

[Maurice Sendak. \*Where the Wild Things Are\* \(1963\)](#)



## Defining Young Adult Fantasy

### YOUNG ADULT FICTION

- Young Adult Fiction targets readers (and features characters) between ages 12-18
- New Adult Fiction (Older Young Adult): readers and characters in 18-30 age bracket
- **Transitory category** between children's literature and adult fiction BUT often **Crossover fiction**, cross-writing: addresses dual audience of youngsters & parents → family adventure
- **Coming of age narrative** (*Bildungsroman*): focuses on psychological and moral development of protagonists, growing pains, conflicts related to maturation,
- **Quest narrative**: search for meaning of life (fairy tale origins: youngest child leaves home to seek his fortune), plot revolves around a rite of passage, a psychological/ social journey of self-discovery
- **Problem novel**: identity crisis, metamorphosis
- Leaving home, attempt to find one's place beyond one's family unit, „limes” experience: a different world/self emerges with entry into elsewhere: **boarding school story**
- Common **topics of adolescent crisis**: "friendship, getting into trouble, interest in sex, money, divorce, single parents, remarriage, problems w parents, grandparents, younger siblings, concern over grades/school, popularity, puberty, peer pressure, race, death, neighborhood, work” (similar to fairy-tale tropes: need/fulfilment, lack/remedy, basic principles of human existence: life, death, love, hate, quest, challenge, reward, punishment, but in a world significantly diff from our reality)
- **Trauma narratives** (within realistic frame: Janne Teller: *Nothing*, Jane Yolen. *Briar Rose*, Sylvia Plath: *Bell Jar*, JD Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*)
- **Visual storytelling**, imagetextual enchantment, demands for transmediation
- **Popular genres**: beyond realism: fantasy, romance, dystopia –genre blending

### YOUNG ADULT FANTASY THEMES

- Posthuman encounters (Burgess. *My Life as a Bitch*, Melissa Meyer: *Cinder*, Peter Dickinson: *Eva*, Brian Aldiss: *Supertoys Last All Summer -AI*, cyborgs)
- Queer desires (Emma Donoghue. *Kissing the Witch*, Jeanette Winterson: *Twelve Dancing Princesses*)
- Lookism (DW Jones. [Howl's Moving Castle](#), Westerfeld. *Uglies*, Alex Flinn. *Beastly* Films: [Mirror](#) [Penelope](#))
- Fairy-tale revisions (Anthony Schmitz. *The Wolf's Own Tale*, Gregory Maguire. *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, [Wicked](#), Angela Carter: [Bloody Chamber](#))
- Boarding school, portal quest (Seanán McGuire: Wayward children series. *Every Heart a Doorway*, JK Rowling. *Harry Potter* series)
- Myth recycling (Rick Riordan. [Percy Jackson](#))
- Conformity/rebellion (Gail Carson Levine. [Ella Enchanted](#))
- Gothic bordercrossings (Neil Gaiman [The Graveyard Book](#))
- Interspecies romance (Sarah J Maas *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Stephenie Meyers [Twilight](#), Cassandra Clare *His mortal instruments/Shadowhunters*)
- Post-apocalyptic dystopia (Suzanne Collins: [Hunger Games](#) series, Veronica Roth: [Divergent](#) series)
- Imagetext (Ransom Riggs. [Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children](#))

**Postmodern Fantasy's Ambiguities**

POSTMODERN FICTION	FANTASY FICTION
Metafictionality (fiction emphasizes its fictional constructedness, strategies of defamiliarization, alienation, reminds readers they are reading a book)	Immersive pleasures: fantasy worldbuilding
Unreliable narrator	Willing suspension of disbelief
Self-reflexivity	Storytelling performance can be a frame
Intertextuality	Recycles myths, legends, folklore, fairy tales
Irony, playfulness, black humour	Fictional universe sets an alternative to consensus reality, can grim and/or comic too
Self-conscious about language use	Language functions as instrument of enchantment, Word Magic

**Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials***

- ✚ YA high fantasy/ science fantasy/ religious fantasy –generic hybrid
- ✚ shift to postmodern storytelling: change in nature of children’s adventure story
- ✚ movement from relentless faith (CS Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*) to a hermeneutics of suspicion, scepticism, mistrust, and moral ambivalence, political concerns → deconstructs ideological boundaries of fantasy (Alan Garner’s *Elidor*)
- ✚ Epic trilogy of fantasy novels: *Northern Lights/The Golden Compass* (1995) *The Subtle Knife* (1997) *The Amber Spyglass* (2000)
- ✚ Coming of age story of two teen characters, Lyra & Will
- ✚ rite of passage → serious theological themes: question of original sin (Lyra as new Eve?)
- ✚ intertextual references to: Biblical themes, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Blake’s spirituality
- ✚ critique & repetition of CS Lewis’s Christian-Romantic model of human development
- ✚ critique of institutionalized religion as totalitarian (Magisterium, the Church), war declared against heaven to destroy God's regent Metatron to give humans free will
- ✚ Multiverse: movement between parallel universes
- ✚ Steampunk features: technological sophistication: particle physics as experimental theology, energy weapon of Daemons
- ✚ Posthuman aspects, humanimal bonds, humans’ inner selves have animal embodiments
- ✚ Magical objects: alethiometer, subtle knife
- ✚ Fantastic creatures: talking polar bears, witches, angels, mulefa, harpies, ghosts
- ✚ Portal quest fantasy: search for the Dust (human consciousness, dark matter)
- ✚ Metafictionality: are we writing our own stories? is there predestination? or free will?



### J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007)

- ♣ 7 epic fantasy YA novels
- ♣ adventures of a young wizard at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
- ♣ quest to defeat the evil Lord Voldemort
- ♣ Voldemort's hybris= aims at immortality, totalitarian control, destruction
- ♣ coming of age Bildungsroman
- ♣ generic hybrid: boarding school story, detective mystery, dark fantasy, portal quest fantasy
- ♣ the Boy who Lived: Dickens' poor orphan figure, boy Cinderella, folk-tale hero
- ♣ adolescent anxieties: failure to fit in, need for friends, peer pressure, loss of trust in adults
- ♣ main themes: death, camaraderie/friendship, power of love, the evil within, being the chosen one (predestination), question of free will, survival vs tyranny, oppression, bigotry, prejudice, abuse of power, a plea for tolerance, empathy
- ♣ magic as a practical knowledge to learn (classes like defense ag. Dark Arts, proper pronunciation of [magic spells](#) like Vingaridium Leviosa!)
- ♣ physical, corporeal signs of magical gift
- ♣ two fantasy structures mingle:
  1. intrusion family (secret magical elite involved in affairs of mundane world)
  2. portal fantasy (consensus reality opens to magic realm: mutual fascination)
- ♣ Fantasy world created through transforming the mundane: \*realization of magical things as real (spell, wand)/ \*substitution (*Daily Prophet*) \*exaggeration (extremely dangerous pets)/ \*animation (living portraits)/ \*antiquation (old fashioned objects: cloak, quill)
- ♣ the KNOWING & the IGNORANT (muggles): parallel realities leak into each other
- ♣ Worldbuilding (Marauder's Map, Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans, Newt Scamander)
- ♣ Fictitious book within the book: *The Tales of Beedle Bard*
- ♣ 😞: a derivative patchwork (GrecoRoman&Norse myths), religious criticism (Dark Magic)
- ♣ 😊: a moving children's story, stimulates fantasy, magical beasts, monsters: Death Eaters, Dementors, House Elves, BUT teaches democracy, empathy, goodwill, ethics of enchantment
- ♣ with the thematization of crime, evil, injustice challenges children's literary genre
- ♣ can be read along the lines of trauma studies, dilemma: how to cope with fear, loss, death?
- ♣ [harrypotter.fandom.com](http://harrypotter.fandom.com), cult following, [fanfictions](#), queering the text
- ♣ transmediation ([The HARRY POTTER Alliance](#), Pottermore, film adaptations, spin-offs: [Fantastic Beasts](#), [The Cursed Child](#))
- ♣ problems of translation: domestication or foreignization (Tóth Tamás Boldizsár)



[CLICK to see the new media enhancement of the series at the website Pottermore](#)

### Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011)

- ✦ Based on idea of Siobhan Dawd --dual authorship + Jim Kay illustrations
- ✦ Trauma narrative: mother's terminal cancer
- ✦ family melodrama, gothic fable, YA low fantasy
- ✦ Therapeutic potential of imagination, storytelling as way to sublimate fear, cope with grief
- ✦ Reevaluation of notion of monstrosity (illness, death, nightmare, loss of parental support, alienation, isolation, bullying, vulnerability)
- ✦ Spiritual guide= non-human other: yew tree: Green Man, pagan tree spirit, vegetal Other
- ✦ Narrative structure: embedded fairy tales
- ✦ conventional plot but unexpected conclusions, offers guidelines concerning lived reality healing stories meant to help teen protagonist to come to terms with his anxieties, remorse, desires, and face unbearable truth
- ✦ Freudian theme: fear of being bitten/ fear of biting, dread and compensatory aggression
- ✦ Fear: evolutionary function, cultural malaise, surmounted in fairy tales
- ✦ Mother Nature serves justice
- ✦ Pact on storytelling to defy death (Sheherazade)

### Gothic Fiction: Genre History

#### CLASSIC GOTHIC FICTION

- "masculine plots of transgression of social taboos by an excessive male will"
- horror mingles with dark romance, and the influence of sensation novel,
- the pleasure of uncertainty: hesitation (Todorov), uncanny (Freud)
- dark secrets, doubles, supernatural events, confused remembrance, ghosts (déjà vu)
- Terror Gothic (anxious suspense) vs Horror Gothic (gross violence)

#### FEMALE GOTHIC COUNTER-TRADITION (Ellen Moers, 1976)

- The formerly heroic male transgressor turns into a villainous patriarch. This authoritarian despot usurps the great house, threatens with death, rape, or entrapment the heroine, who reflects ironically on her situation within the confines of her gender/genre.

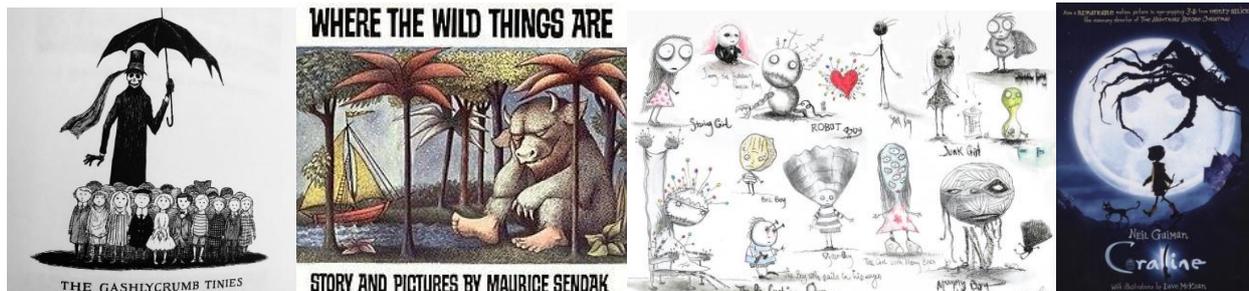
#### FEMALE NEO-GOTHIC

- Reveals that the happy ending of marriage, the fulfilment of the family romance plot as a reward at the end of the gothic heroine's quest is a male fantasy interiorized by earlier protagonists but rejected by their increasingly independent successors,
- „Gaslighting:” psychological manipulation, male abuser strategically destabilizes female victim's confidence in her distinguishing truth from falsehood, convinces her that she is mad

#### HOMELY GOTHIC

- Home as a primary comfort zone is defamiliarized as alien, potentially threatening to the inhabitant's safety or sanity
- A crisis in the increasingly dysfunctional family (incest, matricide, abusive parenting, orphanhood: Coraline, Addams Family, Harry Potter, Corpse Bride, Lemony Snicket)





## Children's Gothic

- Origins of children's literature: didactic forms in the 18<sup>th</sup> century emerge as a counter-reaction to horrifying, immoral 'adult' genre of Gothic (Beforehand: ghost stories, folk tales, old wives' tales (not specifically for child audience, though discipline by terror))
- YET 1<sup>st</sup> piece of children's literature still recognized today as a children's book: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* mocked "morals and manners" of children's instructive tales: through a nonsensical combination of humorous and horrific effects was designed to take Gothic fiction's place, without becoming itself a Gothic text per se.

*„When the genre of didactic narrative is turned back on itself, and indeed turned upside down and inside out, the result is not a return to the Gothic stories children used to read before children's literature was invented, but the beginning of a new children's literature tradition, the tradition to which all subsequent children's literature belongs.” (Jackson, Coats, McGillis 3)*

**Children's gothic themes and topoi:** rejuvenates genre by means of its multiple subversions

☠ haunted home: treacherous, labyrinthine, nightmarish gothic place/landscape ≈ child's mind disturbed by anxieties, sense of being lost, desire to be found/to find oneself → „unhoming” (Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999–2007))

☠ safe fears of „hide-and-seek” –combination of horror + humour + hope

☠ double consciousness: desire & fear of growing up; good enough dysfunctional family

☠ naughtiness as wrongdoing against adult order & bold rebellion: „the good bad child”

☠ Perplexing figures: evil child, monstrous mother, demonic toy –safe things associated with childhood's protected sphere defamiliarized as disturbingly uncanny

☠ thematization of taboo topics: death, mortality, vulnerability, loss, heartbreak, homesickness, isolation – ethical, psychologically therapeutical addressing of traumas at the heart of childhood (Coats)

lure of the Unknown: ethics of uncertainty: Weird fiction

☠ pedagogy of fear → pedagogy of hope: children's gothic as optimistic genre: promise that troubles/ fears can be overcome

☠ tragic endings with a comic effect: grotesque, absurd, carnivalesque chaotic, fancanny, OR yuckie, gross-out aesthetics

☠ amusing confrontation w. the monster within us –conclusion: there is nothing to be afraid of OR it is all right to be afraid

☠ celebrates children's resilience, imagination

## Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002)

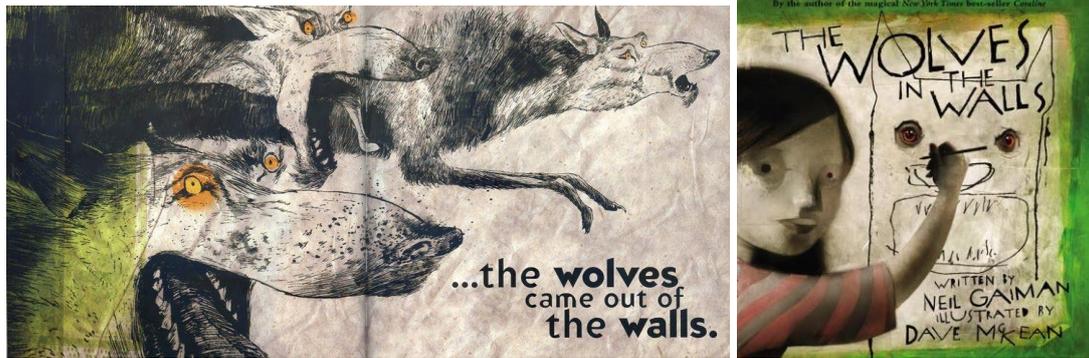
- ✚ YA horror fantasy novella, portal quest fantasy
- ✚ Intertextual inspirations: Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Catherine Storr's *Marianne Dreams*, Lucy Lane Clifford "The New Mother," Andersen's vs Hoffmann's *Sandman*
- ✚ Motto from Chesterton: "Fairy tales are more than true, not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because that they tell us that dragons can be beaten."
- ✚ Target readership: + 8 years old, girls' adventure story



*Plot: Her writer parents are too preoccupied with their own work to entertain Coraline. Becoming bored, the little girl embarks on an expedition in their home, and explores a secret door. Behind it she finds an Other house inhabited by an Other mother (an uncanny double of her real parent) whose initially seemingly ideal self is gradually replaced by a monstrous persona as she turns out to be a witch. The Beldam's horrendous agenda is to replace Coraline's eyes with buttons, to "eat her up," "steal her soul," and preserve her in an eternal childhood, keeping her forever blind, undifferentiated, and passive under her suffocating guardianship. With the help of supernatural helper figures, such as ghost children and a talking cat, relying on her own courage and creative wit, Coraline fights the demonic Other Mother and gains back her real, imperfect but loving parents and her freedom.*

- ✚ Symbolism: fear of enucleation, fear of loss of power, fear of silencing by parent
- ✚ Gothic themes: child's fear of growing up, losing one's home/protection (similar theme: Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, Patrick Ness: *A Monster Calls*)
- ✚ Fear of dysfunctional family, ultimate monstrosity: bad mother figure
- ✚ „An Eye for an I”: question of identity problematized: coming of age anxieties
- ✚ Tagline: „Be careful what you wish for.”
- ✚ Demythologizes idealized family relations → celebrates 'good enough' parenting and child's autonomy → "I think I've become a single child family" is a recognition of triumph rather than defeat
- ✚ Suggests that psychoanalytical myth of the "infantile desire for a permanent (re)union with mother" necessarily leads to "parasitic substitute of love that destroys difference"
- ✚ Helper figures: ghost children, sarcastic black Cat as psychopomp guide
- ✚ Coraline's clever gender subversion: she pretends to play w dolls to divert attention of Other Mother, but the girlish game is only „a protective coloration," she's a tomboy at ease w masculine tasks of "saving souls, capturing talismans, & defeating demons"
- ✚ creative, courageous child: "You really don't understand, do you? 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."
- ✚ Acceptance of one's own vulnerabilities, imperfections: "When you're scared but you still do it anyway, that's brave."
- ✚ Marvellous and scary events are told in a matter of fact tone
- ✚ Transmediation: animated motion picture by Henry Selick (2009) graphic novel by Russel P. Craig (2008), [puppet play by Budapest Bábszínház](#)

TASK: [Click and watch the Opening Scene of Coraline's film adaptation and discuss how the uncanny effect of the children's gothic genre is translated/ mediated into the moving image and musical \(film score\) form.](#)



### Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *The Wolves in the Walls* (2003)

- 🐾 Illustrated horror short picture book for youngsters
- 🐾 Powerful mixed media art (photo, paint, collage, drawing)
- 🐾 Ominous uncertainty, Todorov's hesitation, danger lurking within safe space of home, horror of the Unsaid: „*Lucy is sure there are wolves living in the walls of their house and, as everybody says, if the wolves come out of the walls, it's all over.*”
- 🐾 family must flee, but Lucy creeps back to the house to rescue her bedtime toy, a pig puppet and has enough courage and resourcefulness to fight beasts and gain back her home
- 🐾 Intertextual inspiration:
  - ✚ private mythology: Gaiman's daughter's nightmare about wolves coming out of house's walls and occupying home
  - ✚ folk/fairy tales about predators lurking in forest: Little Red Riding Hood, 3 Little Pigs
  - ✚ CS Lewis' Narnia: no one believes Lucy when she tells about fantastic but true events
  - ✚ the fable of „The Boy who Cried Wolf” literalized
  - ✚ mock cautionary tale
- 🐾 a very noisy text: „hustling, bustling, crinkling, crackling, sneaking, creeping, crumpling, clawing, gnawing, nibbling, quabbling noises” –onomatopoeia, mock Gothic atmosphere created with acoustic uncanny effects, oral tradition of storytelling
- 🐾 Lucy's warnings ignored, but she is right: attests truthful reliability of children's imagination
- 🐾 Generic hybrid: invasion fantasy, homely gothic, mock cautionary tale, nonsense humour
- 🐾 Image and text create comic effects together: wolves sliding down the banisters wearing the family's clothes, ice cream strewn over the page when the wolves are finally evicted
- 🐾 Final twist at the end of the story: change of perspective, the family creeps back to house and the wolves flee because „when the people come out of the walls, it's all over!”
- 🐾 Everything goes back to normal... until Lucy hears a strange noise from the walls that sounds like an elephant trying not to sneeze ☺ → open-ended story, repetition compulsion, anxiety maintained in comic manner



## List of recommended readings

- BUCKLEY, Chloé Germaine. *Twenty-First-Century Children's Gothic: From the Wanderer to Nomadic Subject*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- COATES, Karen. „Between horror, humour, and hope: Neil Gaiman and the psychic work of the Gothic.” in *The Gothic in Children's Literature*, 77-92.
- JACKSON, Anna, Roderick MCGILLIS, Karen COATES. *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*. New York, Routledge, 2007.
- KÉRCHY, Anna. „Children's and Young Adult Literature.” *Routledge Companion to Fairy-Tale Cultures and Media*, ed. Pauline Greenhill et al. New York: Routledge, 2018. 235–245.
- KÉRCHY, Anna. „Humor, horror, hiátus. A groteszk gyerektest mint szövegmotor Kócos Petitől Pacasrácig.” *Gyerekirodalom és medialitás*. Ed. Hermann Zoltán et al. Budapest: l'Harmattan, 2020. 63-77.
- MCARA, Catriona McAra, David CALVIN, szerk: *Anti-tales: The Uses of Disenchantment*, Newcastle upon Thyne, Cambridge Scholars., 2011.
- MCCORT, Jessica R: *Reading in the Dark. Horror in Children's Literature and Culture*. Mississippi UP, 2016.
- OLSON, Daniel. *21st Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels Since 2000*. Farnham: Scarecrow, 2011.

### TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Can you mention a few major themes of young adult fantasy?
2. How does children's gothic relate to the gothic genre?
3. How are the stable concepts of home, family, identity destabilized in children's gothic/young adult fantasy?
4. What are the major characteristics of crossover fiction? Explain how different layers of meanings can be activated for children and adult readers.
5. How does the Harry Potter series mingle a variety of fantasy genres?
6. How does the theme of the double/doubling appear in *Coraline*?
7. Why can we read *A Monster Calls* as a trauma narrative?
8. How does *Wolves in the Walls* combine hesitation and humour?