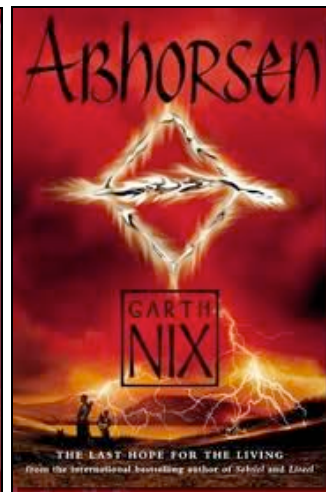
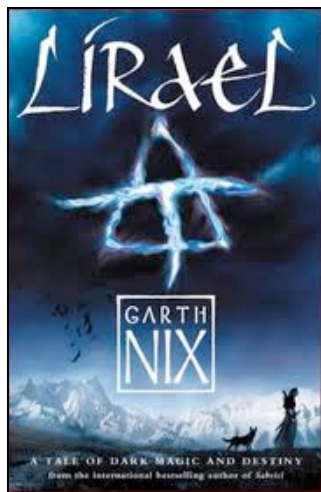
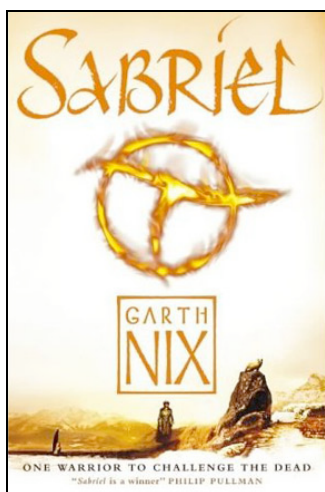




The Handling of Death in Teenage Fiction  
A Close Analysis of Garth Nix's  
*The Abhorsen Chronicles*



Je, Christine Hansen, déclare avoir réalisé ce travail par mes propres moyens.

Luxembourg, le 20 octobre 2010

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## Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to examine teenage literature with a focus on the topic of death. As an analysis of teenage literature involves many facets, the work is divided into two main chapters.

The first chapter, on the one hand, concentrates on adolescent identity, on ensuing reading habits and teenagers' fascination with complex subjects. On the other hand, it also examines the critical reception of teenage fiction and its growing recognition as a genre of its own.

The second chapter consists of a close analysis of a work of teenage fiction in order to investigate the validity of the arguments developed in chapter one. The selection of *The Abhorsen Chronicles* by Garth Nix is motivated by the key role played by death in these books and by its great popularity in the teenage fiction publishing world. The subchapters about this trilogy are organized around three major topics: death, youth and gender.

The conclusion will attempt to link the findings from this example of teenage fiction with the theoretical issues exposed in the first chapter.

## Table of contents

INTRODUCTION .....	6
CHAPTER 1 .....	10
TEENAGERS UNDER THE LOOKING GLASS .....	10
i) Teenagers' psychology and their interests in relation to literature.....	10
ii) Teenagers' fascination with 'death' .....	17
iii) Children's and Teenage literature in the light of critical studies.....	24
CHAPTER 2 .....	37
GARTH NIX'S <i>THE ABHORSEN CHRONICLES</i> .....	37
A. PRESENTATION OF THE AUTHOR.....	37
B. PRESENTATION OF THE CHRONICLES .....	42
C. BOOK 1: SABRIEL.....	45
i) The importance of teenage protagonists in 'Sabriel'.....	45
ii) The representation of death in 'Sabriel' .....	54
iii) Gender as an important momentum for the plot in 'Sabriel' .....	60
D. BOOK 2: LIRAE.....	64
i) Analysis of the teenage protagonists in 'Lirael' .....	64
ii) The presentation of death and magic in 'Lirael' .....	70
iii) Female heroines versus male weaklings in 'Lirael'?.....	75
E. BOOK 3: ABHORSEN .....	79
i) The final stage and loss of youth in 'Abhorsen'. .....	79
ii) An ultimate look at death in 'Abhorsen'.....	83
iii) Male or female: any winners? .....	90
CONCLUSION .....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	96
A. LIST OF REFERENCES .....	96
B. WEBSITES .....	101

## Introduction

As death has always been part of human experience, it is a topic that has been present in literature since the very start. It is a subject that is intriguing, fascinating and sometimes frightening. This thesis, however, will not attempt to encompass the vast topic of death within literature but it will narrow its analysis down to works for young adults. In order to do so effectively, the initial focus will be on theoretical issues linked to the two main components of this thesis: on the one hand, young adult literature and its target audience and on the other hand, the relation of this audience to the subject of death. Secondly, it will take a well-known work of young adult fiction which treats the topic of death and consider how the author has dealt with the matter in his work. In this case the author will be Garth Nix and the text *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. Finally, the conclusion will allow reconsidering the theoretical aspects in the light of the findings from the close reading to infer how death can be treated in young adult literature.

Before focusing on teenagers' reactions to death, it may be relevant to recall briefly how adult literature approaches the subject. As has been mentioned previously, death is omnipresent in the history of literature; however, it has been treated quite differently throughout the ages, as will be suggested through the following examples.

As Patrick Süskind points out in his book *On Love and Death*<sup>1</sup>, in the last 200 years death has become a sort of taboo topic that is not openly talked about. Contrary to more ancient times, death is not a part of everyday conversation in society anymore and not even seen as a part of everyday life and family relationships. Death is a subject that reminds us of our mortality, of the fact that we do not live forever and that we have to leave our loved ones sooner or later. It is therefore perceived as a kind of 'eternal negative, a spoilsport, literally a killjoy, and we want nothing to do

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Süskind, *On Love and Death* (London: Old Street Publishing, 2006).

with such characters today”<sup>2</sup>. It is repressed and simply not talked about during social events.

Nevertheless, death has always posed one of the fundamental questions about human existence and it is vividly present in literature and poetry and in the realm of the arts in general. It may be that the arts are the only means of approaching such an intricate and difficult topic. Scores of writers could be quoted; the very limited and personal selection, presented in no specific order, merely aims at situating some of the issues dealt with in the following inquiry. Death is a subject that haunts every human being and it is often associated with its most powerful counterpart, which is love. Thomas Mann has expressed this link between love and death in his diary, the feeling being launched by a young waiter whom he fell in love with: ‘Farewell forever, charming boy! ... I will live a little longer, do a little more, and die. And you too will mature as you go on through life, and will die some day. O incomprehensible life that affirms itself in love.’<sup>3</sup> Of course, these lines also recall his famous work *Death in Venice* <sup>4</sup>. Oscar Wilde picks up the topic in his dramatic version of the story of Princess Salomé, who closely connects love and death through killing her object of desire and affection<sup>5</sup>.

Poetry appears to be the genre that has most often touched upon the subject. Wilfred Owen is trying to make sense out of mass death in World War I, but he is not ready to accept the underlying irony, ‘The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est /Pro patria mori.’ <sup>6</sup>, whereas Walt Whitman, in his magisterial ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’<sup>7</sup>, turns a

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<sup>2</sup> Süskind, p. 40

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Süskind, p. 41. The original text is ‘Leb wohl, in Ewigkeit, du Reizender...! Ich werde noch etwas leben, noch etwas tun und sterben. Und du reifst auch auf deinem tieferen Wege und gehst einmal dahin. O, unfäßliches Leben, das sich in der Liebe bejaht.’ Thomas Mann, *Tagebücher 1949-1950*. Edited by Inge Jens (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1991), pp. 219-220.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Salome* (1891 in French) 1893

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est”, in *Adventures in English Literature*, Pegasus Edition (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 955-956.

<sup>7</sup> Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, from *Memories of President Lincoln*, <http://theotherpages.org/poems/whitm01.html>.

lament for a public figure into a meditation on how death affects us all.<sup>8</sup> The death of her husband, the poet Ted Berrigan, and two later deaths in the family have deeply influenced Alice Notley's own work. Love, death and pain suffuse her persona's voices<sup>9</sup> and have led her to create mythical contexts for her poems. T.S. Eliot treats his grief about his Aunt Helen with some irony and understatement, maybe in order to protect himself from the overwhelming feeling of loss: 'The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet--/ He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.'<sup>10</sup> Poets have taken a huge number of different postures towards death and dealt with it in a great variety of ways. A religious poet like John Donne writes of the need to use time for repentance before dying 'Teach mee how to repent; for that's as good / As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood' (Holy Sonnets VII)<sup>11</sup> and defies the power of death in the sonnet opening on the famous lines 'Death be not proud, though some have called thee/ Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so.' (Holy Sonnet X).<sup>12</sup>

The theme of death has also central importance in the poetry of Dylan Thomas. In 'And Death shall have no Dominion'<sup>13</sup> he expresses the wish to outrun death by focusing on reincarnation, whereas in 'Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night'<sup>14</sup>, he makes a passionate plea to his dying father to resist death. For Emily Dickinson love and death, Eros and Thanatos, are intricately intertwined and in her well-known poem

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2008/aug/22/posterpoemsdeathbecomesus>  
*Billy Mills Friday 22 August 2008*

<sup>9</sup> Alice Notley, "II—The Person That You Were Will Be Replaced", from *Mysteries of Small Houses* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Aunt Helen", in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917.  
<http://online-literature.com/ts-eliot/poems/19/>.

<sup>11</sup> John Donne, "Holy Sonnet VII",  
<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/holysonnet7.php>.

<sup>12</sup> John Donne, "Holy Sonnet X", <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/sonnet10.php>.

<sup>13</sup> Dylan Thomas, "And Death Shall Have No Dominion",  
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=178637>.

<sup>14</sup> Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Night",  
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=175907>.



‘Because I could not stop for Death/ He kindly stopped for me,’<sup>15</sup> she suggests the desire to have death as a lover and to elope with him.

Be it as it may, this brief survey should have given some glimpses of the variety of approaches writers have taken to grapple with the theme of death. Their work reflects the fact that many human beings do not come to terms with the thought that death may be the end, that there may be nothing after this life, the simple feeling of finality. Indeed how could one ignore a topic so closely linked with the most fundamental emotions and instincts in our lives, with love and hope, sadness and despair?

So if grown-ups remain ill at ease with death and mortality, how do children and, more importantly for this thesis, teenagers, cope with these timeless questions? More specifically, how does the author of one series of novels addressed to teenage readers treat the subject in consideration of the age of his audience?

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<sup>15</sup> Emily Dickinson, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”, in *Adventures in American Literature*, Pegasus Edition (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 329.

## Chapter 1

### Teenagers under the looking glass

As the title indicates, this thesis is going to focus on teenage literature, or young adult literature, as it is sometimes called. This specific genre has only gained interest in the literary criticism field during the last few decades, which is quite astonishing considering the fact that the audience of teenagers has always been present.

This chapter is going to focus firstly on what is of interest for teenagers, how they function and what distinguishes them from adults and younger children, especially in their attitudes to death. Therefore, a closer analysis of why teenagers are specifically interested in the topic seems unavoidable and also crucial for this thesis.

The second part of this chapter will analyse how adult critics treated teenage fiction in the past. When did teenage fiction start? What distinguishes it from children's fiction and how has it evolved in the past decade?

These questions will be confronted in this chapter and on this basis I shall extract a methodology with which to analyze my case study.

#### *i) Teenagers' psychology and their interests in relation to literature.*

Human beings go through various stages of development in their lives. Paradoxically, though adolescence seems to be the most complex stage it has been rather neglected in research throughout history.

Such a concern with issues of age and representation reflects a more general late twentieth-century interest in theorising and deconstructing identity within cultural and literary studies.<sup>16</sup>

The following example demonstrates that even the norm as to the point of separation between children and adults has not always been commonly accepted and therefore it is not surprising that adolescent literature was not considered.

[In] medieval times, laws generally did not distinguish between child and adult offenses. After analyzing samples of art along with available publications, historian Philippe Aries concluded that European societies did not accord any special status to children prior to 1600. In paintings, children were often dressed in smaller versions of adult-like clothing.<sup>17</sup>

Social education in particular focused on a behaviour pattern that did not allow any freedom and followed a strict social etiquette. Nevertheless, Aries' interpretation has been criticized because he mainly focused on aristocratic, idealized subjects. Childhood has nonetheless always been a topic of interest. Philosophy has analysed the subject throughout history and theorists have come up with three major alternative perspectives from which to view childhood: original sin, *tabula rasa*, and innate goodness. All of these can be seen today as oversimplifications of the states of either childhood or adolescence, and it is only in the last century and a half that youth has been acknowledged as a highly complex and unique period of life.

Appleyard mentions in his work that G. Stanley Hall and Erik Eriksson came up with the picture of the typical adolescent, which we take

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<sup>16</sup> Alison Waller, *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (London: Routledge), 2008, p. 2

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.essortment.com/all/historyofchi\\_ribu.htm](http://www.essortment.com/all/historyofchi_ribu.htm)

for granted in our current western society. It is normal for us to understand that the pressure put on the inexperienced child, of coping with adults' expectations and choices, plus the sudden changes in the body, lead to a highly emotional and often extreme behaviour pattern. Typical features would for instance be:

sudden and erratic physical growth, intensified sexuality, idealism that is often grandiose as well as naïve, self-consciousness, romanticism, moodiness and ambivalence, ambition and drive, rebellion and crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Most of those characteristics do not seem surprising to the modern person, least of all because all adults have experienced them for themselves. Still, it should not be taken for granted that such states have always been recognised.

Nonetheless, in the end the public realisation and acceptance of this stage in human development is certainly a reason why adolescent fiction has had the chance to develop or even be initiated in recent periods. So it is important to analyse which elements might have influenced the writing for this specific audience and what differentiates this audience from a children's or adult readership.

First of all, it is vital to understand when looking at one stage of a human's development how identity is perceived. The post-structuralist notion is that identity is not a whole but rather a combination of fragments all representing different identities focusing on various elements, such as age, gender or class, for example. Those fragments inevitably vary according to who analyses or perceives them. However, in this thesis, adolescence and its identity are regarded as a paradigm which allows them to be treated as a common term, giving enough room for various

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<sup>18</sup> J.A. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2005, p. 96.

interpretations and acting as ‘a useful umbrella term under which the variants of modern subjectivity can be explored.’<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore crucial to give a definition of how adolescence is perceived in this thesis. I base my views heavily on Alison Waller’s notion; she distinguishes between the terms ‘adolescent’, ‘youth’, and ‘teenager’ and ‘young adult’. However, I mainly focus on ‘adolescence’ and ‘teenager’, as those two are more relevant for the analysis of this topic. In Waller’s opinion adolescence ‘describes a stage of life featuring emotional and social qualities that are caused by, or are dependent upon, a specific historical-cultural setting.’<sup>20</sup> She explains this general definition by referring to Mitterauer’s theory, which claims that adolescence mainly coincides with puberty and biological change. Nonetheless, she also mentions that one cannot solely base adolescence on biology and she presents Christine Griffin’s claims as counterexamples. Griffin states that adolescence cannot be based uniquely on biology but has to be combined with social factors in order to reach completion. Furthermore, one should add Coleman and Hendry’s model, which echoes the post-structuralist notion that adolescence is not simply one single stage of development but rather a series of stages from childhood toward maturity. It is this concept that will be adhered to this work.

The term ‘teenager’ on the other hand, in Waller’s opinion, relates to a more commercial phenomenon created in the United States at the end of the Second World War. She quotes Natalie Babbitt who stated that the ‘category *teenager* itself is a new one, of course. It made its first appearance during the Second World War and was created partly by parents, partly by manufacturers and partly by Frank Sinatra.’<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Waller points at the commercial interests that are involved in such a categorization, notably by book publishers.

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<sup>19</sup> Waller, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Waller, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Waller, p. 9.

Commentators have identified a variety of 'first' young adult novels to be published in Britain, notably *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger (1951) [...], Beverly Cleary's *Fifteen* (1956/1962), S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967/1970) and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968/1969), as well as much earlier Australian contender, Louise Mack's *Teens* (1897).<sup>22</sup>

The roots of the term 'young adult' clearly derive from the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association. Hence it is rather exclusively used in reference to classify young adult fiction.

However, in this thesis when referring to young human beings in their adolescence I do not make a significant distinction between the terms 'young adults', 'teenagers' or 'adolescents'.

The next step consists in looking at what differentiates those young humans from adults and children. As pointed out previously, young adults go through serious identity issues, which shift their interests mainly to their inner thoughts and emotions. Young people try to find out who they are and what kind of person they want to develop into. However, this decision is made very complex as their personal desires may clash with what society and their peers, consider as appropriate.

Interestingly, this inner conflict is also reflected in their reading preferences. There are no straightforward lines of thoughts anymore and it is therefore important to take a look at how those insecurities come to be and how they are targeted in literature. To do so, the most logical approach is to consider the ending of childhood and the beginning of adolescence, to see what the main changes are and how they affect the teenager undergoing them.

Psychologist Jean Piaget has claimed that young children usually focus on the world around them; they are curious about its various facets and eager to experience its new elements. This means that they do not worry about their own persons so much as about their surroundings. The

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<sup>22</sup> Waller, p. 9.

act of observing outside changes and events takes on the highest priority in order for them to learn and to develop experiences and ultimately fundamental survival skills for life in our society.

Teenagers, however, consider the outside world, and especially the concept of realism, differently. They start to think more critically and consider themselves and their surroundings as two different entities. Outside experiences are not simply accepted anymore but they are doubted and analysed in depth. Furthermore, teenagers start to reflect much more on their individual personae as a part of society. How do they fit in whilst staying true to their own wishes, desires and character?

This process often leads to a thorough and critical analysis of themselves and to intense comparisons with their peers and even their social idols. Teenagers seek to know how they blend in and what their social status might be. This act of self-doubt and often merciless judgment of the surrounding world by the teenager are also vividly present in their perceptions of literature. They no longer feel satisfied with simple linear stories describing events with a beginning, middle and end. Teenagers demand complex characters, reflecting their own issues and even sometimes providing guidance or a solution. A 'story's truthfulness to life is not something a reader can take for granted but must make judgement about.'<sup>23</sup> Suddenly it is not so easy anymore to be simply submerged into the plot and this is when the fascination with the concept of 'realism' starts to emerge. Teenagers claim that they often judge literature on "whether or not it was 'true to life'"<sup>24</sup>. This criterion, however, does not exclude fiction as a popular genre with its age group. On the contrary:

[among] the younger junior high students, mystery is the preferred type of fiction, along with adventure, romance, historical fiction, and science fiction.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Appleyard, p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> James R. Squire, *Responses of Adolescents while Reading Four Short Stories* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English), 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Appleyard, p. 99.

However, as mentioned previously, there is a big shift in how they perceive fiction during their teenage years in contrast to their childhood period. It is not only the stories that they expect to be different from those which they used to read but also the world they are dealing with in the novels. This world is not innocent or black and white anymore but complex with evil taking on a considerable and powerful role, as opposed to the guaranteed happy ending of children's stories. These books deal with death, sin, sex and prejudice. Good and evil are not two separate entities but often intertwined and interdependent. It is therefore the young adult's role to take on a spectator's view and judge the characters and events for themselves. It is not so easy to identify with all the characters anymore but the challenge of thinking about this intricacy is what makes the reading experience exciting and interesting. The process of reading takes on a role that becomes more and more similar to the thinking process present in the adolescent's everyday life.

Therefore, the novel often provides a guide for the young adults looking for their own personality. Nonetheless, in their real lives teenagers face society directly, and this is often the most complex and feared entity that they are confronted with. Their definite goal is still to find out who they are and want to be.

Similarly, although they want to choose freely the roles they will play, they are mortally afraid of being forced into activities that might expose them to ridicule or self-doubt. [...] They violently object to anyone who sets limits to their self-image and ambition.<sup>26</sup>

This rejection of authority is due to major self-doubt and insecurities. Anything that might force adolescents out of their so-called comfort zone is discarded and even considered as hostile. The novel therefore seems to be a perfect medium, as its messages are not

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<sup>26</sup> Appleyard, p. 98.



necessarily imposed but suggested and hidden for the readers to find and accept, or refuse, on their own terms.

The question therefore arises as to the position of death, and in particular its depiction in fiction, within this period of inner struggle and self-doubt – as opposed to safer and less controversial topics.

ii) Teenagers' fascination with 'death'

In 2007 one major topic at the book fair in Bologna was the argument whether publishing children's and teenage books about death was acceptable<sup>27</sup>.

Just a few short years ago, while teen sex had long been OK-ed and drug use was creeping in 'for authenticity', death was cited as the last taboo. Now, death seems to positively stalk children's books, with characters confronting the grave with sometimes alarming abandon.<sup>28</sup>

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, for example, shows many incidents of people dying in sometimes cruel and very shocking ways. Philip Pullman has his heroine Lyra confronted with the death of her loved ones, such as Roger, but he also includes her dealing with these emotions of loss and sadness. Furthermore, many classic children's books had already picked up on the subject much earlier, such as *Black Beauty*<sup>29</sup> or *Charlotte's Web*<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, the death of an animal, especially a pet, is often the first confrontation a child has with loss. In *Black Beauty* the scene of the horses burning and dying in the stable is one of huge impact, shattering the beautiful children's world where nothing bad can happen to the innocent and the good. In *Charlotte's Web* the lonely passing away of the spider symbolises the awareness that death is not a

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2008/jan/04/juliaecclesharethebowerbir>.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty*, 1877.

<sup>30</sup> E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*, 1952.

scene out of a Disney cartoon where one is lifted into the sky in a beautiful light, surrounded by heart-warming songs. It is not guaranteed that people will die in the circle of their loved ones, it is much more likely that they will die alone and unnoticed, just like the spider does. For children this is a notion that they probably have not come across yet. And those first brushes with the idea of death are often threatening and harsh.

Still, teenagers seem to be drawn to it. And there are several reasons for this. During puberty, death in particular is a topic that is not perceived as clearly anymore as it was before. The straightforward idea that people die to go straight to a better place is challenged by perceptions of hell, sin, evil and also the possibility of no future existence. Its mysterious essence is intriguing for young adults and fits perfectly into the concept of a vague identity with teenagers looking to find a definite place in life and unambiguous meaning. Teenagers start to understand perceptions of 'subjectivity and the relativism of points of view'<sup>31</sup>, which can often lead to a sense of insecurity and finally even isolation as the security of a straightforward train of thought starts to dissipate. Teenagers are confronted with uncertainty as to how they should behave and whether their thoughts and feelings are acceptable. They wonder if they dare to show the outside world the "real me? 'The me nobody knows'"<sup>32</sup>? All of those questions lead not only to a quest for their own official and public identity but furthermore to 'an attempt to come to grips with a philosophical truth about existence'<sup>33</sup> and ultimately the end of it. The stage of only perceiving reality as something present and non-altering is taken over by the act of thinking beyond what is present. Hypotheses start to emerge and it is possible for adolescents to think outside of their own realm of experiences. Jean Piaget's notion of the 'formal operational' stage of adolescence, for example:

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<sup>31</sup> Appleyard, p. 97.

<sup>32</sup> Appleyard, p. 97.

<sup>33</sup> Appleyard, p. 97.

[it] refers to the point when an individual can make hypotheses and consider outcomes without having concrete terms to rely upon. It is also the moment when there is a progression to 'thinking about thinking'.<sup>34</sup>

Philip Pullman once said that '[there] are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in children's books'<sup>35</sup>. Adults tend to have made up their minds whereas teenagers, turning into adults, are in the midst of pondering those philosophical and existential questions. It is therefore necessary for this thesis to focus on the role and importance of literature in this process of teenage development. We have previously mentioned that literature suggests answers but that it leaves it to the readers to find them out for themselves. Nonetheless, J.A. Appleyard indicates that there is a pattern that seems to be most effective as far as teenagers are concerned. According to him the most intriguing novels seem to reflect the complexity that teenagers are newly confronted with but to an extent that is still reasonable and not exaggerated. In other words, young adults are not overwhelmed by the philosophical or moral questions that these works raise but they are confronted with them in a digestible manner within a context that is accessible to them. Children's books frequently make the reader an observer from the outside, as in Enid Blyton's work for example, whereas young adult literature adds another dimension by granting an insight into the character's inner life<sup>36</sup>. This means that the reader gets to spy on the characters' thoughts, emotions and inner insecurities. This does not mean that every young adult book presents this scheme but it becomes strikingly more frequent.

Nevertheless, for Appleyard this does not mean that the characters need to be exceptional or unusual. 'Most of their characteristics are

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<sup>34</sup> Waller, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Phillip Pullman, in his Carnegie Medal Acceptance Speech, <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/pullman/author/carnegie.html>

<sup>36</sup> as in *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, for example, where the plot is based on this inner voice  
Laurie Halse Anderson. *Speak*, 1999.

stereotypes by adult standards. The difference is only partly a question of whether they are well drawn.<sup>37</sup> This means that adolescents yearn for characters they can identify with, and in order to create plausible protagonists the author cannot reach out too far. The characters need to be familiar to the reader and therefore also reflect the inner predicament of choosing between being unique or relatively mainstream, the dilemma being that even though uniqueness is appealing and strong it also may lead to exclusion.

As for the storyline, the classic structure of a straightforward plot is not intriguing enough anymore to young adults. Maria Nikolajeva points out that in children's books the journey taken by the main characters is often circular, reflecting the return to a safe haven, which is home. She backs up Jacqueline Rose's theory which supports the perception that 'children's literature seeks the safety of the nursery at the beginning and ending of each narrative.'<sup>38</sup> In young adult fiction, however, the adolescents often do not have a choice of returning home but are in one way or another forced to move on, which reflects their development towards adulthood and away from childhood.

Furthermore, the young adults know that the world is not simply black and white and safe, like their home is or pretends to be during their childhood; therefore darker themes and complex storylines, which are not talked about in public, seem to be the most interesting matters. They can more easily be aired in books.

Literature has to match the complexity of life and books should not just embody the readers' wishes and fantasies, but also reflect realistically the darker parts of life and the newfound limits on their idealism<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Appleyard, p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> Waller, p.29.

<sup>39</sup> Appleyard, p. 109.

Moreover, liminality<sup>40</sup> between childhood and adulthood is, according to Victor Turner, 'frequently linked with death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to wilderness and to an eclipse.'<sup>41</sup> Turner's terms are indeed crucial in the context of teenage literature.

These are metaphors that regularly occur in teenage fantastic realism. David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999), for example, employs games of death and darkness in its narrative and Robert Cormier's *Fade* (1988) tends towards Freud's sense of 'entropy' (as the opposite of energy, and the longing for death or Nirvana) in its treatment of invisibility.<sup>42</sup>

Two of the most popular teenage authors of recent time are Robert Cormier and Philip Pullman, both winners of multiple prestigious literary awards, such as the Carnegie Medal, the Whitbread award or several British Book Awards. Robert Cormier is one author who deals, very frequently, if not exclusively, with those subjects in his novels, such as *I Am the Cheese* (1974)<sup>43</sup>, *After the First Death* (1979)<sup>44</sup> and *Heroes* (1998)<sup>45</sup>. Mitzi Myers interviewed him in 2000 and asked him on how he dealt with the subjects and how he transmitted his ideas or inspiration to his audience. Cormier seems to make it clear that he is intent on having readers think for themselves and that there are no easy answers or

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<sup>40</sup> Turner explored Arnold van Gennep's threefold structure of rites of passage and expanding theories on the liminal phase. Van Gennep's structure consisted of a pre-liminal phase (separation), a liminal phase (transition), and a post-liminal phase (reincorporation). Turner noted that in liminality, the transitional state between two phases, individuals are "betwixt and between": they do not belong to the society that they previously were a part of and they are not yet reincorporated into that society. Liminality is a limbo, an ambiguous period characterized by humility, seclusion, tests, sexual ambiguity, and community.

Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1974) (Cornell University Press 1975), pp. 231- 232.

<sup>41</sup> Waller, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Waller, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Cormier, *I am the Cheese*, 1977.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Cormier, *After the First Death*, 1979.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Cormier, *Heroes*, 1998.

patterns to follow. When asked how he manages to grasp the readers' attention and whether it is actually possible to teach a moral lesson through horrible scenarios, Cormier bases his answer on his method of storytelling. He insists that a good story is all it takes to grasp the audience's focus and to transport them into a world that they might not have known. He thinks that 'that is how big themes are translated into human terms, how we can take something like the Holocaust while seeming to reduce it to a story or even an anecdote, make it real and vital, whether it's aimed at a young person [...] but older people too.'<sup>46</sup> He therefore confronts his audience with a topic that might still be unknown to them, but in a way that makes it seem familiar and therefore easy to identify with. Hence, complex subjects do not lose their essence but they become more approachable and less daunting than, for example, a philosophical essay.

Philip Pullman proceeds in a similar manner. The author takes his younger audience very seriously and does not hesitate to confront them with intricate ideas, notably death. Pullman takes the state of mind of young adults and profits from their sense of existence and their realisation that they are mortal and will not live forever, not knowing what awaits them after this life. Pullman conveys this idea of time being relative partly through the character of Serafina Pakkala, who is a beautiful witch in *His Dark Materials*<sup>47</sup>. Witches, in Pullman's world, get much older than human beings and therefore witness many more deaths than do normal humans. Serafina explains to young Lyra that she has seen many loved ones come and go and that how time is perceived depends on how old a person may be. 'Pullman is in this passage introducing to younger readers the immoral themes of *tempus fugit* [time flies] and *memento mori* [remember you too

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<sup>46</sup> Mitzi Meyers, " 'No Safe Place to Run To': An Interview with Robert Cormier", *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Volume 24, Number 1 January 2000, p. 450.

<sup>47</sup> Phillip Pullman, *His Dark Materials* (London: Scholastic), 2007.

must die], more brutally expressed in Pozzo's furious cry in *Waiting for Godot*<sup>48</sup> cursing time tormenting him.

Nevertheless, Pullman does not explicitly say that the readers will die and sooner than expected. He introduces the idea through one of his characters conveying its essence to another character, in this case Serafina to Lyra. The readers can therefore choose whether they want to dwell on this idea or just continue without any further involvement, even though it may have crept into their subconscious without their knowledge. A further idea that Pullman introduces is that of death being present in one's life all the time. In *The Amber Spyglass*<sup>49</sup> Lyra enters a realm where she can actually see 'the deaths' of the people living there. The explanation is quite simple. Everyone has 'a corporal death' constantly present, however, we do not see 'it' in our world. In this instance, "Pullman writes 'death' without a capital letter. It's not an abstraction, not something remote or general, but infinitely close, intimate and banal"<sup>50</sup>. He therefore confronts teenagers with death as an everyday presence, maybe aiming at taking away any anxiety surrounding the topic.

Even if death might seem an extreme topic, it fits in perfectly with the inner tumult of the teenager's inner state of mind. According to Sandrea de Minco, it is essential for teenagers to read works about the topic in order to deal with it. However, she does not limit the interested reading audience to teenagers but includes adults who might manage to understand the youngsters better through this medium. Books dealing with critical topics, such as death, are usually really complex, with death augmenting the fear of having something imposed on oneself and therefore creating the urge to resist authority in general. This act of rebellion is very common among teenagers; being able to retrace the root of this worry might help them understand it better and deal with it accordingly.

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<sup>48</sup> William Gray, *Death and Fantasy: Essays on Philip Pullman, C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald and R.L. Stevenson* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> Phillip Pullman, *His Dark Materials* (London: Scholastic), 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Gray, p. 107.

In the best of the literature, death speeds the journey through resistance and withdrawal toward self-expression and connection. Good writers know that a believable encounter with death must include the reactions and resolutions of the main character<sup>51</sup>.

Similarly, teenagers will often first only take in a situation and consequently react spontaneously before processing the whole experience and finally evaluating their initial reaction before taking a decision of how to continue their path.

Keeping these ideas in mind, I will analyse how Garth Nix represents death in *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. But before I go on to the close analysis I feel that it is vital for this thesis to take a look at why young adult fiction has to be taken seriously and how it has battled for its place in literary criticism over the years.

iii) *Children's and Teenage literature in the light of critical studies.*

Ever since the enormous publication success of J.K Rowling's Harry Potter series, contemporary Young Adult (YA) literature has seen a rise in its appreciation by those who, in the past, have not given YA literature a second glance. This is not to say, of course, that significant works categorized as YA have not been out there, only that contemporary works that have been labelled as YA tend to be ignored by many serious literary critics. Some still believe that YA literature is merely a secondary category of child-like storytelling – didactic in nature – and unworthy of serious literary evaluation, when, in fact, it is really an overlooked and

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<sup>51</sup> Sandrea deMinco, "Young Adult Reactions to Death in Literature and in Life", *Adolescence*, Spring, 1995.  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2248/is\\_n117\\_v30/ai\\_20870822/?tag=content](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2248/is_n117_v30/ai_20870822/?tag=content).



underappreciated literary genre that has only recently begun to attract the critical attention that it deserves.<sup>52</sup>

In this long opening quote, the problem that teenage fiction encounters today is very clearly specified. Daniels shows how it is often not perceived as a genre of its own and that it has not even been noticed until quite recently. Furthermore, young adult literature is frequently combined with children's literature and not distinguished as a separate entity. However, as we have seen in the previous section, there is a considerable difference between a child and a young adult. This is of course also reflected in how this reading audience perceives their texts and how they choose the material they want to spend time with. It is therefore crucial to analyse how those two genres can be differentiated and how they have been perceived and developed in the critical world up until now. This creates a challenge as these genres partly overlap. Moreover, different readers have different perceptions to some extent about what they are dealing with. Nevertheless, I will try to see whether we actually can find some differences and analyse what they are.

Another issue teenage fiction encounters is that even if it is acknowledged it is often not taken seriously. It is recurrently and wrongly judged to be simplistic and trivial, even though neither children nor teenagers can be perceived as being so. Quite the contrary is the case. Very few adults, if any, undergo as many physical and psychological changes as children and especially teenagers. The question therefore arises as to what young adult fiction is and why we should take it seriously in a literary context. A new response to the "increasing literariness" of

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<sup>52</sup> Cindy Lou Daniels, "Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies" *ALAN Review*, Winter 2006.

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4063/is\\_200601/ai\\_n16350744](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4063/is_200601/ai_n16350744) accessed 03/11/2009

sections of children's and young adult literature is needed, with new analytical equipment and new categories of evaluation.”<sup>53</sup>

Is it possible to clearly differentiate between Children's Literature versus Young Adult literature? Seth Lerer opens his book *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*<sup>54</sup> with the striking sentence: 'Ever since there were children, there has been children's literature.'<sup>55</sup> He refers back to the Greeks and Romans and to influential writers, ranging from John Locke and St. Augustine to Dr. Seuss, giving them all as examples for the seemingly accepted presence of children's literature. Nevertheless, Lerer also reminds his readers that childhood itself is a subject in a

shifting category that has meaning in relationship to other stages of personal development and family life. Greeks and Romans, Byzantines and Anglo-Saxons, Renaissance and Revolutionary cultures all had clearly defined concepts of the child and, in turn, canons of children's literature.<sup>56</sup>

He specifies exactly what he means by this statement by referring to the idea of a recent philosopher, Marx Wartofsky, who claims that children's personal outcome is dependent on whom they interact with socially, and on how others have perceived them during their development. Children's literature, in his view, works in the same manner, being dependent on 'readers, owners, sellers and collectors'<sup>57</sup>. He also gives a clear definition based on the fact that he perceives children's literature as being books written for children and books read by the children, even if they were not necessarily initially written for the targeted

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<sup>53</sup> Hans-Heino Ewers, "The Limits of Literary Criticism of Children's and Young Adult Literature", *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Volume 19, Number 1 January 1995, p, 80.

<sup>54</sup> Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*, (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Lerer, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Lerer, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Lerer, p. 2.

audience. Furthermore Lerer also reminds us that children's literature was not always that clearly specified nor taken seriously. 'For a long time, what was *not* literature was the ephemeral, the popular, the feminine, the childish.'<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Lerer is able to justify the origins of this kind of disdain towards children's literature by referring to medieval literature, which had a similar fate because its narrative elements, of which many are still very present in children's literature, such as allegory, moral fables, romance and symbolism, but which have been discarded by many post-enlightenment theorists of literature and modern poets and fiction writers. Those elements have indeed been considered as childish and therefore not serious literary features. Consequently, it was a long time before any official judgements about children's literature were made. Furthermore, Lerer proclaims that there has never been a golden age of children's literature. The reason for this is, in his opinion, the fact that children's literature is not a simple literary category but rather 'a kind of system, one whose social and aesthetic value is determined out of relationships among those who make, market, and read books.'<sup>59</sup> However, even though this definition delivers a vague image of how children's literature has developed, Lerer provides a clear message about the existence of children's literature today:

Recent criticism has made clear that children's literature exists *as literature*: that is has forms and genres, an imaginative scope, a mastery of figurative language, an enduring cast of characters, a self-conscious sense of authorship, a poetics, a politics, a prose style.<sup>60</sup>

This thesis especially takes on this last point of view, of children's literature being a type of literature on its own, as stated by Lerer, and that it has definitely had difficulties in getting a position in the literary world of

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<sup>58</sup> Lerer, p.7

<sup>59</sup> Lerer, p. 7

<sup>60</sup> Lerer, p. 11.

criticism. Moreover, it is thanks to the success of children's literature that young adult literature has recently been able to pursue the same path and create its own mark in literary studies and research. Therefore in this thesis it seems justifiable to focus directly on the category of young adult literature.

In general, I think it is safe to claim that young adult literature is still a relatively unexplored terrain in literary criticism. It has only fairly recently risen to the surface of the literary world and claimed its own position. The reasons for this are various but in *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* Alison Waller, like Daniels, mentions that the development of genres, and the recognition of young adult literature itself, are closely linked to how authors, publishers and readers perceive adolescence. The question is now why and how this has come to be. She quotes Dorothy Matthews:

Although teen-age fiction cannot boast of such masterpieces as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *The Wind in the Willows*, it is possible to point to a marked improvement in the quality and signature of recent books.<sup>61</sup>

Even though this is a rather patronising statement by Matthews, it points to the crucial word in this context: '*recent*'. In the 1970's Robert Bator expressed his regret that children's literature often only seemed to be perceived as being an offshoot from adult literature or as he put it 'a peninsula dependent on and emanating from the main body of literature'<sup>62</sup>. Today it seems that young adult fiction is doomed to be similarly perceived to be a branch of that peninsula. Young adult fiction is ultimately always compared to children's and adult fiction, which therefore makes it difficult to perceive a book of young adult fiction in its own right

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<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Matthews, *Writing about Literature: Current Approaches and Future Directions*, in *Young Adult Literature in the Seventies: A Selection of Readings*, ed. Jana Varlajs, Metuchen, (NJ: Scarecrow, 1978), p. 36 quoted in Waller, p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Bator, *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature* / [compiled by] Robert Bator, (Chicago : American Library Association), 1983, p. 20

and to assess its own intrinsic values. There is as yet no young adult fiction 'classic' comparable to *The Wind in the Willows* for example. The reason for this is that it is very difficult to establish where the lines between children's and teenage fiction are drawn. It is easy to see the difference between a children's picture book and a teenage novel. Nevertheless, it is very challenging to determine when a child has ceased to be a child and has become an adolescent, as the transition is gradual. Isabelle Holland comes to the conclusion that young adult fiction is what an adolescent is just currently reading. This is a very bold statement, depending on the idea that adolescents can be clearly defined. However, Waller tries to compile a list of elements that are frequent in young adult fiction in comparison to children's and adult fiction:

[A] young adult novel is generally shorter than an adult novel, has fewer or no subplots, and uses language that is accessible and appropriate to young readers. It might also be widely accepted that a young adult novel should be *about* adolescence in some way, that is, it should have a teenage protagonist and a plot that incorporates elements of adolescent experience or interest.<sup>63</sup>

Obviously there will be exceptions. Despite its many subplots Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995 – 2000) has a strong appeal to teenagers, for example, even though it is of a considerable length and has many subplots. Once again the standards are 'propagated through conceptions on the part of authors, publishers, teachers and readers of what a teenage novel might be, but also through commercial and institutional pressures.'<sup>64</sup> John Rowe Townsend even goes as far as to conclude that it is ultimately only the publishing industry that makes the distinctions. Nonetheless, even though it seems an impossible task to create a stable definition of young adult literature, the reason for this

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<sup>63</sup> Waller, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Waller, p. 16.

complexity is quite clear. Young adult literature is too vague a category and also shifting too much to pin point its exact characteristics. The canon of young adult literature is constantly changing because teenagers tend to look at some adult novels and appropriate them as their own. The publishing industry reacts and starts to market those novels as young adult fiction as well as adult fiction. A few popular examples are Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*<sup>65</sup>, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*<sup>66</sup> or novels by Isabelle Allende, Jane Austen or Robert Westall.

Furthermore, there are some novels that transmit a clear educational message, such as how to handle first experiences with sex, contraception, drugs, etc. Judy Blume and Melvin Burgess are authors who represent this type of group for example, even though their methods of transferring those messages are very different; as Waller states:

A number of crucial events often occur around adolescence or signal a stage of development or a coming of age: first experience of death; first sexual encounter; first relationship; first movement between schools or into work; cultural signifiers such as alcohol, drugs, music, film or computer games; and general markers of identity achievement or maturation and empowerment. Young adult fiction might be identified where two or more of these practical checks apply to a text.<sup>67</sup>

These elements are of course only a guide to what young adult literature could be defined as. Furthermore, as work for adolescent readers is more and more conceived as an object of literary criticism, various questions of interpretation of young adult literature are raised. Anna O. Soter is interested in the relation between literary theory and

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<sup>65</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960.

<sup>66</sup> J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951.

<sup>67</sup> Waller, p. 16.

teaching young adult literature<sup>68</sup>. One of her aims is to present alternative approaches to teaching young adult literature. She proposes various critical perspectives, such as psychological criticism, feminist reading, new historicism, culturally situated response and narrator strategies. With references to works for young adults which reveal some literary characteristics, she shows how an emphasis on interpretation can help develop students' critical appreciation of literature in general. In her conclusion, she shows that the distinction between personal response and critical analysis may be arbitrary and limiting. Experience demonstrates that young readers can offer a wide range of interpretations and are capable of participating in the literary dialectic.

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<sup>68</sup> Anna O. Soter, *Young Adult Literature and the New Literary Theories: Developing Critical Readers in Middle School* (New York and London: Teachers College Press: Columbia University, 1999).

However, I want to come back once more to the notion that it is indeed the publishing industry that has the most powerful position over this specific kind of literature. It is clear that with the huge successes in young adult literature, such as J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, the publishing industry has reacted and this issue demands discussion. For a long time neither teenagers nor adults would have thought of reading anything 'beneath' adult fiction. There are supposedly two main reasons for this phenomenon: firstly 'because publishers [have presented] most books in a package that an older teenager or adults wouldn't want to pick up and carry around, let alone read.'<sup>69</sup> In other words, marketing has for a long time not targeted the young adult readership. Books were presented to be appealing respectively either to children or to adults. It might appear childish or



simply socially inadequate for adults to read such books. Secondly, the covers were not up to date. As can be seen with the example of the *Sweet Valley High* series a modern new look for the same

books has helped to re-launch this 80's series. 'With the 2008 re-emergence of Sweet Valley High, the series is again assuming a responsive position similar to the one it occupied in 1983.'<sup>70</sup>

Another example of teenage appealing marketing is without a doubt Melvin Burgess' *Doing it*, which targets teenagers' curiosity for sexuality straight on. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is also an example that has seen a modern repackaging. The current trend is that publishers make sure that today the image of the childish disappears or is replaced by a neutral or adult version as soon as the book tends towards a teenage audience.



<sup>69</sup> Daniels, p. 78.

<sup>70</sup> Amy Pattee, "Everywhere, or a Reflection: describing the 'Sweet Valley High'experience" (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004), Advisor: Brian Sturm.





Having mentioned *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, I want to continue to focus on the genre of fantasy in young adult fiction, as the close analysis in this thesis will look at elements within this genre. 'Fantasy is an extensive, amorphous and ambiguous genre, resistant to attempts at quick definition.'<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, this thesis is going to work with some characterisations of the fantasy genre and notably with those offered by Alison Waller. Waller gives a definition of what she perceives as 'fantastic realism' in young adult fiction. 'In these books, incredible, supernatural, and magic elements invade the adolescent's everyday and diurnal world: elements, such as metamorphosis, hauntings, doppelgangers, invisibility, magic gifts, witchcraft, time-slip, cyberspace and virtual reality.'<sup>72</sup> However, all of these elements are depicted in the world as we know it in opposition to pure fantasy where all of those factors can also occur in magic kingdoms, parallel universes and so on. As will be discussed below, in Garth Nix's world, for example, we encounter a kingdom, full of magic and surreal aspects and yet still similar to our representations of the medieval world, bordering a world alike to ours, more specifically the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, even though those elements remind us of the fairytales in our childhood and therefore somehow also childishness, fantasy is also linked to an inner world within the readers themselves that is very private and personal.

Publishing trends and opinion polls ... tell us a couple of important things. One is that young people today, as they did in past decades, often enjoy escaping from the mundane and frightening

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<sup>71</sup> M.O. Grenby, *Children's Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 144.

<sup>72</sup> Waller, p. 1.

world of 'real life' into the reassuring peril of science fiction and fantasy. Another is that series books are as popular today as' ... (ever)<sup>73</sup>

This therefore shows that teenage fantasy is worth taking a closer look at. In his presentation of the realism versus fantasy debate, John Stephens agrees that fantasy is a metaphoric mode which "gives the theme a more mythic dimension, characteristically linking it with the idea that a magical force inheres in the signified apprehended 'nakedly'"<sup>74</sup>.

This means that words, as well as descriptions of events and actions stand for something else, which the reader is likely to detect under the surface meaning of the story or through conventional literary features: 'In so far as fantasy writing comments on contemporary social practice, it does so by indirections, parallels, figures, even allegory.'<sup>75</sup> As Stephens adds, fantasies may integrate elements of the realistic mode, especially in fiction for young readers. This does not prevent fantasy writing from becoming ideologically ambiguous or merely escapist. It is language and forms of discourse, which determine the values underlying the writing for children and adolescents. Furthermore, it invites for personal interpretation based on individual experiences.

This view is further explored and encouraged by Aliel Cunningham. Aliel Cunningham attempts to describe the educational values of young adult fantasy literature.

Her focus is not only on what fantasy literature consists of but also on what it can accomplish. She looks 'at six different ways in which fantasy literature can be used to reveal, explore, and shape the moral identity of teen readers.'<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Beach, Deborah Appleman, Susan Hynds, Jeffrey Wilhelm, *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), p. 287.

<sup>75</sup> Stephens, p. 288.

<sup>76</sup> Aliel, Cunningham, "Engaging and Enchanting the Heart: Developing Moral Identity through Young Adult Fantasy Literature." In Janet Alsup (ed.), *Young Adult Literature*

By relying on the “power of wonder” fantasy, in her eyes, awakens a sense of mystery and the hunger for the exploration of unknown worlds. It also inspires by showing how the improbable may triumph. Fantasy can also empower thanks to the way young protagonists are seen to cope with issues of destiny. It guides and helps explore moral themes. Moreover, the end of stories usually offers the opportunity for an evaluation of the characters’ quest or journey. Lastly, fantasy can be said to be ‘speaking the language of the invisible realm’<sup>77</sup> by dealing with ultimate questions.

‘In these ways fantasy provides private meanings for adolescence, acting as an intrinsic facet of identity rather than merely providing epic scope for individual heroic actions.’<sup>78</sup> In fantasy, identity therefore includes being different, being capable of doing extraordinary things and also having to find one’s true being through a quest. ‘More often, fantastic novels represent adolescence as essentially individualist through the very aspects of fantasy that suggests difference or loss of self: the ‘other’, madness or erasure.’<sup>79</sup>

I believe that this part of the first chapter has shown that young adult fiction is far from simplistic and childish. Unfortunately, one of the reasons for the absence of literary criticism of young adult literature still is that, as suggested by Daniels, ‘many of us who write about these books and teach them and have charge of them on behalf of young readers refuse to hold the books to real literary standards.’<sup>80</sup> The latter point reflects once more the refusal to take this genre seriously and suggests that if any works have been considered it has been done in a patronising manner and therefore not reflecting the real value of such a literary piece.

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*and Adolescent Identity across Cultures and Classrooms: Contexts for the Literary Lives of Teens* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 113.

<sup>77</sup> Cunningham, p. 128.

<sup>78</sup> Waller, p. 63.

<sup>79</sup> Waller, p. 63.

<sup>80</sup> Daniels, p. 1.

Victor Nell is one example of a critic who went as far as to compare the demands of childhood texts to those of Harlequin romances<sup>81</sup>.

Despite recent efforts and interests in the realm of literary criticism, essays or articles about this specific genre are still sparse and most likely still in the making. It took a long time before children's literature was considered to be a literary genre, and teenage fiction is at present still at the beginning of its development. Nonetheless, I also believe, as stated previously, that the move towards young adult literature has been widely positive and that there is no reason not to take it seriously as a subject for an academic thesis.

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<sup>81</sup> in Deborah Thacker, "Disdain or Ignorance? Literary Theory and the Absence of Children's Literature", *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Volume 24, Number 1, January 2000, pp. 1-17.

Harlequin romances definition: *any of a series of romantic novels with simple stories about romantic relationships between men and women* (Macmillan Dictionary).

## Chapter 2

### Garth Nix's *The Abhorsen Chronicles*

#### *a. Presentation of the author*

Garth Nix (born 19 July 1963 in Melbourne) is an Australian author best known for his young adult fantasy novels, most notably the *Old Kingdom series*, *The Seventh Tower series*, and *The Keys to the Kingdom series*. Contrary to popular beliefs, Garth Nix is not a pseudonym but the author's real name. Nix was raised in Canberra. Subsequent to a period working for the Australian Government, he travelled in Europe before returning to Australia in 1983 and undertaking a BA in professional writing between 1984 and 1986 at the University of Canberra and worked there in a bookshop after graduation, before moving to Sydney in 1987, where he worked his way up in the publishing business. He was working sales and was a publicist before becoming a Senior editor at HarperCollins. In 1993 he commenced further travel in Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe before taking on a career as a full-time marketing consultant with his own company Nix Evans Proprietary Ltd. His first works to be published were actually articles and scenarios for the role-playing games *Dungeons and Dragons*. His *Abhorsen Chronicles* are a New York Times bestseller and his books have been translated into 38 languages and have sold over five million copies<sup>82</sup>. Nix is definitely a fantasy author and is also well known in young adult fiction circles, which is why his work is so relevant to this thesis.

It is also crucial to see how Nix himself thinks about this idea of being a young adult or children's fiction fantasy novelist. In several interviews<sup>83</sup> he states that in fact he did not aim to write for children. 'I

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<sup>82</sup> <http://theauthorhour.com/garth-nix/>.

<sup>83</sup> [www.Sydneywriterscenter.com.au/podcast/garthnix.com](http://www.Sydneywriterscenter.com.au/podcast/garthnix.com)  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/bristol/content/articles/2007/09/24/garthnix\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bristol/content/articles/2007/09/24/garthnix_feature.shtml)

write for myself at separate ages.<sup>84</sup> Naturally this does not mean that he excludes a child audience but it rather stands for the idea that Nix does not have one particular child or one particular age in his mind when writing, but rather a range of different ages that he can remember well and identify with.

Natasha Giardina<sup>85</sup> for example discusses that adult authors involuntarily speak and write differently once they are aware that they are addressing a child audience, which would not apply in this case. This might argue that Nix's work is more genuine in contrast to a patronising author's voice. It is therefore rather crossover literature that aims at all ages. Nix provides some autobiographical details in the 'Preface' of *Across the Wall: A Tale of the Abhorsen and Other Stories*. As he explains, he started writing stories at a very young age and added some illustrations and even a sort of cover story for them. However simple these narratives are, they give evidence of a sense of plot and fantasy, qualities that have marked all his subsequent work. Nix has continued writing ever since. As a teenager, for instance, he got some role-playing games 'Dungeons and Dragons' into print<sup>86</sup>, but not all his writing career has been devoted to fiction. It has also reached 'from speeches for CEOs to brochures about brickworks to briefing papers on new Internet technologies'.<sup>87</sup>

In the 'Introduction to Nicholas Sayre and the Creature in the Case', he gives some insights into his creation of his fantasy worlds. It seems that he makes up the worlds as he writes and admits to not

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[www.kidsread.com/author/au-nix-garth.asp](http://www.kidsread.com/author/au-nix-garth.asp),  
[http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth\\_nix/garth\\_nix\\_interview.asp](http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth_nix/garth_nix_interview.asp).

<sup>84</sup> [www.kidsread.com/author/au-nix-garth.asp](http://www.kidsread.com/author/au-nix-garth.asp).

<sup>85</sup> Natasha Giardina, "Across the Great Divide: Trojan Horse Mechanisms and the Cultural Politics of Children's Fantasy Fiction", in Nickianne Moody & Clare Horrocks, eds., *Children's Fantasy Fiction: Debates for the Twenty-First Century* (Liverpool: John Moores University and The Association for Research in Popular Fiction, 2005), p. 268.

<sup>86</sup> Garth Nix, *Across the Wall*, (London: HarperCollinsPublishing), 2005, p. xii.

<sup>87</sup> *ibidem*

knowing all about these lands, their people and creatures. Neither does he refer to any literary or other sources of inspiration:

Unlike many fantasy writers, I don't spend a lot of time working out and recording tons of background detail about the worlds I make up. What I do is write the story, pausing every now and then to puzzle out the details or information that I need to know to make the story work.<sup>88</sup>

As his work is mainly attractive to young adults, it is therefore highly likely that he had his own preferences during that age in mind when he was writing. However, Nix is of the opinion that despite this starting point of writing, his books fit the children and teenage market so well because of their strong plots. 'Story is king in children's novels and that is what I love. I am very story-oriented.'<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, he is also aware that fantasy is often very popular with children and teenagers; he sees this as having various reasons but mostly because 'it offers an exciting and often adventurous story which takes them out of the normal surrounds, which is part of the attraction of reading.'<sup>90</sup> This idea of escapism is, as has been discussed previously, very relevant to teenagers. Still, Nix also acknowledges the fact that he has to some extent been lucky with his career due to the success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. As he claims himself:

In that time the whole climate for children's and young adult fantasy has changed. With *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman and so on, the world climate has changed, the things I was writing about have much more demand. So I was fortunate in that respect that I haven't jumped on the bandwagon, I was already on it. As I

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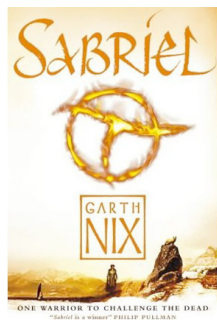
<sup>88</sup> *ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> [www.kidsread.com/author/au-nix-garth.asp](http://www.kidsread.com/author/au-nix-garth.asp).

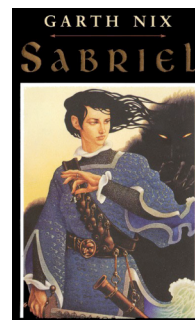
<sup>90</sup> [http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth\\_nix/garth\\_nix\\_interview.asp](http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth_nix/garth_nix_interview.asp).

described it to someone else that I was swimming along, paddling with this little canoe and suddenly the Potter-Pullman wave caught up with me and I've been carried along in its wake.<sup>91</sup>

Due to this change, which was discussed in the previous chapter, the covers of his books were also altered for the British market. Instead of using the more childish American and Australian covers these editions, by offering more abstract illustrations, do not 'dictate an age group'.<sup>92</sup>



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The book [*Sabriel*] has a large adult readership in America as well as a young adult readership and to my mind it's proved to be one of those books that can be read by anyone from eleven or twelve up. Adults read it, teenagers read it and very precocious kids read it, and with the British cover it will suit any of those audiences.<sup>95</sup>

So why do *Sabriel*, *Lirael* and *Abhorsen*, the three main works of *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, qualify as having a special appeal to teenagers? First of all, *Sabriel* is a story about a girl who is 'at the point in her life where all sorts of things could happen and where she has to make her decisions for the future. [...] So it's an adventure story, it's a fantasy story, it's a coming of age story'.<sup>96</sup> In other words it can be perfectly seen as a guide for teenagers facing their inner turmoil and coming of age just

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<sup>91</sup> ibidem

<sup>92</sup> ibidem

<sup>93</sup> Sabriel cover UK

<sup>94</sup> Sabriel cover AU and US

<sup>95</sup>

[http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth\\_nix/garth\\_nix\\_interview.asp](http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth_nix/garth_nix_interview.asp).

<sup>96</sup> ibidem



like Sabriel. Moreover, it is important for Nix to stay realistic for some aspects of the narrative even when writing a fantasy novel.

You need to feel that this is a real story that could be happening somewhere, it's not here, it's not now, but if you start with a foundation of reality you can build upon it with layers of mysticism or myth and so on. [...] That applies to characters who seem like real people, not stereotypical cardboard cut out constructs who just serve plot purposes.<sup>97</sup>

This kind of realism and its honesty are of course appealing to teenagers, as has been demonstrated previously, because this age group does not want to be spared or have simplified black and white characters. Nix based some of his inspiration for his books on World War One, comparing the trenches with the Wall separating the Old Kingdom and Ancelestierre. He also says that the helplessness the soldiers on the parapets of this Wall face when confronted with magic reminds him of the generals who sent their soldiers towards a hopeless and pointless fight during World War One. 'I never thought of that at the time, as a sort of metaphor for the brass hat stupidity of World War I, but it is.'<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, he also reveals that it is sometimes a struggle to convey the fantastical ideas from head to paper. Death, for example, is a very vast and complex idea, so how does he face this challenge when dealing with it as one of his main sub-characters? The interviewers of [www.teenreads.com](http://www.teenreads.com) asked whether he ever considered his fantasy settings, in which death is definitely central, to be too intense to write about. Nix answers in the following words:

To a degree, all my fantasy settings are too intense to write about. I always feel that I don't have sufficient skill to get across perfectly

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<sup>97</sup> ibidem

<sup>98</sup> ibidem

the look, feel and sound of say, the Abhorsen's House. Similarly, with the river of Death, I am only able to get down on a paper a little of what is in my head.<sup>99</sup>

For all of those underlying ideas Nix's work is a fascinating subject to discuss and the following chapters are therefore going to take a close look at what he has managed to put to paper and how his abstract and powerful notions can be considered to be relevant to a teenage audience. An outline of plot, characters, setting and key elements seems indispensable as an introduction to Nix's fantasy world. It will be followed by a close analysis of the three selected books, organised around the topics of youth, death and gender. The aim is to investigate how Nix gives life to abstract notions in order to meet the expectations for teenage literature.

### ***b. Presentation of the Chronicles***

Nix's three books are set in two main countries. The culture of one of them is very close to our own western European culture, even though the story takes place in what we might consider the past and, as Nix has stated<sup>100</sup>, in a period similar to the early twentieth century. This country is called Ancelstierre. Through the course of the stories it becomes more and more involved in the happenings of the plot, starting from the north border of the country to its centre and main politics.

The second country is the Old Kingdom and is very different, ruled by different principles and laws of nature which are different from ours. 'Things not handmade disintegrate or fail to function; Charter Magic,

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<sup>99</sup> [www.teenreads.com](http://www.teenreads.com).

<sup>100</sup> [http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth\\_nix/garth\\_nix\\_interview.asp](http://www.jubileebooks.co.uk/jubilee/magazine/authors/garth_nix/garth_nix_interview.asp).

worked through understanding and use of the Charter Mark (symbols that make up the Charter that describes the world), is used by Charter Mages.<sup>101</sup> The opposite of Charter Magic is Free Magic, which is often dangerous and evil as it opposes the Charter most of the time. However, the most striking feature in the Old Kingdom is death.

Death is a vast river along which the spirit must travel before reaching the final gate and release into true death. On the journey, the Dead spirit is vulnerable. It can be enslaved and used by necromancers [...]. Necromancers can reanimate corpses with Dead spirits or use such spirits to create even more powerful creatures. In the past such corrupt magic was opposed by the royal family and the Abhorsen, who like a necromancer can enter Death and compel the Dead with seven named bells, each with its particular power and significance. The Abhorsen's duty is to combat Free Magic creatures, necromancers, and the Dead.<sup>102</sup>

When the Chronicles begin, with *Sabriel*, the royal family of the Old Kingdom has been defeated by a renegade prince and anarchy therefore reigns; only the Abhorsen is capable of maintaining a moderately acceptable level of order. Sabriel, the main protagonist of the first book, is the Abhorsen's daughter and the story's chain of events starts with her going on a journey to find her father who sent her a message that he is in danger. He also confides to her his seven bells, which are his most powerful tools. Sabriel is accompanied by a cat called Mogget, who is however a free magic creature, enslaved by the Abhorsen for generations. Sabriel does not manage to save her father. But she completes his mission and defeats Kerrigor, a powerful dead creature and the former renegade prince. More importantly, she grows up and at the end of the story she is ready to become the new fully-fledged Abhorsen.

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<sup>101</sup> K.V. Johansen, *Quests and Kingdoms: A Grown-Up's Guide to Children's Fantasy Literature* (Sackville, Canada: Sybertooth Inc, 2005), p. 425.

<sup>102</sup> Johansen, p. 425.

*Lirael* starts in a different geographical part of the Old Kingdom, the glacier which is the home of the Clayr. The Clayr live in 'a vast communal complex tunnelled into mountain and glacier in the north. Their lives are dominated by the Sight, visions of possible futures they see in the ice.'<sup>103</sup> Readers have met two members of the Clayr in *Sabriel*, but in *Lirael* their role and culture are clarified considerably. Lirael herself has always lived with the Clayr but her physical appearance, her lacking of the Sight and her not having parents make life very difficult for her as a teenager. Initially she is very depressed and even considers suicide. Nonetheless, she finds relief and satisfaction in her new job, which is that of third, and later second, assistant librarian in the Library of the Clayr. This Library houses many secrets, mysterious knowledge and magical elements and it is through these that Lirael meets her companion, the Disreputable Dog, and unknowingly gets prepared for her own journey. Finally, the Clayr "see" Lirael and understand that she has to go on this mission but they do not know what she has to do exactly. The only thing they know is that she has a crucial role to play in the battle against the greatest evil and threat the entire world has faced since the creation of the Charter. On her quests Lirael meets Sam, Sabriel's son, and both are the main characters in the second book.

*Abhorsen* concludes the three main stories of the Chronicles and is mostly concerned with following Sam and Lirael as they come to terms with themselves and their roles in life and responsibilities. It also includes the final battle against evil, reuniting all the important characters of the books to stand together against Orannis, the Destroyer, and the end of the world. The story has a happy ending with good winning over evil, even though many sacrifices have to be made.

The Chronicles include many features typically appealing to a teenage audience. The most important one is of course that the protagonists are teenagers themselves at the beginning of their quest. Moreover, their journey and growing-up are described so realistically that

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<sup>103</sup> Johansen, p. 426.

it is easy to identify and sympathise with them. Furthermore, Nix uses a very complex and intriguing topic as a thread through his story, the topic of death with all its facets of destruction, decay, fear but also release in some cases.

Even though Nix uses such an abstract topic as death to create the main frame of his story, his style and descriptions are very typical of teenage fiction. First of all his world is described with a great many details, including a visual map, prologues and epilogues helping the reader to understand the history of the countries and not to get disoriented in between the books. He also includes many animal figures which are the constant companions and confidants of the main protagonists. Moreover, although the characters are very multifaceted, they have clear notions of good and evil. They do not doubt what they are told by their parents or guides or the books they are given to help them on their journey.

So despite their complexities the stories are without a doubt intricate and ambiguous, leaving the reader in suspense. But much is also explicitly spelled out, something which is often not the case in an adult novel where the readers are expected to make connections on their own, relying on their general knowledge and life experience. Nevertheless, just as Nix has said himself, the books are still interesting for a very large audience, teenagers and adults alike.

Due to their multifarious nature it has seemed appropriate to consider each book individually with its treatment of the three major topics of this analysis, which are youth; death; gender.

### **c. Book 1: Sabriel**

#### *i) The importance of teenage protagonists in 'Sabriel'*

Even though the main character, eighteen-year-old Sabriel, is introduced to the reader as wearing an ordinary school uniform, it soon

becomes obvious that she is anything but ordinary. Not only does she wear a prefect's badge, which signifies that her behaviour has been admirable and that she has been given special responsibility by the school's headmistress, but when the reader first meets her she also brings back a dead rabbit from the realm of death. Nix, therefore, immediately combines the ordinary and familiar with fantasy and imagination. Nonetheless, he also makes sure that Sabriel does not appear like a superheroine, confident of her powers and superior to others. On the contrary, having rescued the bunny, she scolds its owner for breaking the school's rules and leaving its grounds; she is therefore acting like a prefect, confident and strict. Nevertheless, as soon as the little girl and her bunny have disappeared, Sabriel 'let the tremors take her till she was bent over, shaking with cold. A moment of weakness and she has broken the promise she had made both to herself and her father.'<sup>104</sup> This insight into her inner emotional state and thoughts, created by the author very early on in the story, allows the reader to perceive that Sabriel is just reacting like a normal teenager, worrying, insecure and not confident of her decisions yet. Her 'moment of weakness' has simply been empathy because she did not want to see the little girl sad and crying over her dead bunny. In other situations this empathy would have been considered as a virtue but in this case she has broken a promise which seems to be very dear to her. This incident shows the reader immediately what kind of moral priorities Sabriel has. She is far from reckless and thoughtless, because even though she has acted impulsively, she is aware of the consequences and now worries about them after having taken the risk of standing by her decision. This means that she is willing to face the outcomes of her actions because her moral priority was to help the little girl and the rabbit despite breaking a promise. Moreover, she has managed to pull herself together and show her façade of a model prefect to the little girl before allowing herself to be taken over by her worries and fears. This signifies that she is a strong person, aware of her impact on

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<sup>104</sup> Garth Nix, *Sabriel* (London : HarperCollinsPublishing, 2003).

the people around her, which definitely portrays a remarkable maturity for her age of eighteen.

Another important feature that is introduced right from the start is Sabriel's family. The reader meets the protagonist when she realises that her father, who is her only family, is either dead or in great peril. For a teenage girl this situation is surely a great deal to cope with, even if death is a topic she has grown up with. Still, her love of her father encourages her to go looking for him alone and to start out on an unknown journey. Strangely enough, this rather unusual and dangerous situation is immediately accepted by the adults surrounding her. The Magistrix of the school simply remarks: 'You are going to be leaving us, aren't you?'<sup>105</sup>, and having seen the situation in a vision about the future she does not try to stop Sabriel, nor does she raise any concerns she might have. This indicates that even though Sabriel is a school girl, her position as the Abhorsen's daughter changes her status in comparison to the other school inmates. Nonetheless, it also means that her being special isolates her. This is a feature that can be very appealing to teenage readers, as we have seen in the first chapter. Being special is often linked with a kind of loneliness and Sabriel reflects this fact, making her figure attractive to many teens who are fighting to find their own personality and meanwhile feel left out and sometimes lonely even when they are surrounded by other people.

Still, Sabriel is by no means flawless. Her upbringing across the wall in Ancelstierre has left her quite sheltered and not exposed to magic as much as she would have been had she grown up in the Old Kingdom. This becomes clear as soon as she reaches the wall and meets the soldiers protecting it. She meets the Corporal of the garrison and when she sees his Charter marks, she realises that there are many symbols she does not recognise. This shows right at the start, even before she crosses the wall, that she has much to learn in order to succeed in her

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<sup>105</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 27.

quest. Her vulnerability is revealed which makes her approachable to readers.

Shortly after this incident, Sabriel has another experience which makes her realise how important she actually is and how many people 's lives she affects. Her father's magic has protected not only the garrison but also part of the population across the wall in Anclestierre. However, were he to die, this protection would falter and many human beings would be in danger. Sabriel therefore suddenly realises that 'she hadn't really thought beyond her own concern for her father. Now she was beginning to expand her knowledge of him, to understand that he was more than just her father, that he was many different things to different people.'<sup>106</sup> She becomes conscious of the fact that, up until that moment, she has only seen a fraction of the bigger picture, which is something she has to learn and which symbolises her journey of growing up. She realises that she is not only responsible for her family, but for her entire surroundings. This new train of thought definitely shows us how she matures within hours at this point due to her facing an extreme situation. Her age of eighteen can definitely be seen as indicating her closeness to adulthood. Right now at the beginning she is still a teenager, but the reader is led to conjecture that by the end of her quest she may well have altered towards maturity and adulthood.

Even though she is young in comparison to the Corporal in command of the garrison, she is immediately taken seriously and actively involved in what is happening on the other side of the wall and her desire to travel alone is not questioned but supported. The Corporal immediately shares his knowledge about the Old Kingdom and does not hide the fact that it is a dangerous place. Nonetheless at one point he admits that he has a daughter almost Sabriel's age and that he would not allow her to take on the same journey as Sabriel's. Her reply, "I am only eighteen years old on the outside,' she said, touching her palm against her breast with an almost wistful motion. 'But I first walked in Death when I was

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<sup>106</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 41.



twelve”<sup>107</sup> makes apparent to the reader that she has had anything but a normal childhood. The Corporal acknowledges and even laments this by telling her that he wishes she could have had some of the trivial joys that his daughter has, instead of her responsibility.

However, although Sabriel has read and been told much about the different customs and rituals of the Old Kingdom through books and her father, she is not quite prepared to face all of those elements in reality. When she reaches the first broken Charter on the first night of her journey, she realises that it had taken human sacrifices to break it. Being suddenly confronted with the dried blood and the certainty that such evil actually exists frightens her and robs her of her confidence. She feels sick and even starts to panic. Nonetheless, she forces herself ‘to still her mind of its imaginings’<sup>108</sup> in order not to lose her focus. In parallel with her inner strength are her physical qualities. She has been trained in arms, something which is set to the test at once when she is attacked by a vile creature, called Thralk, and has to kill it straight away. She does so by wounding it with her sword and then banishing it back to Death with her bells. What strikes the readers is that all of her actions are swift and confident once more, which is obviously a pay off from her thorough education.

In contrast to this portrayal of Sabriel’s inner and outer strength, though, Nix tries to avoid as much as possible depicting her as superior to other teenage girls. While she is clearly not an average teenage girl, after her encounter with Thralk, Sabriel requests the help of her dead mother to find her way to Abhorsen’s house. It is revealed that she has ‘met’ her mother this way once before, in the realm of Death, and that this moment was when she had her first period. Her father had not been comfortable discussing this topic with her and her school had a tradition of ignoring anything to do with sexuality, so that her father had arranged that the spirit of her dead mother should meet her and answer any questions she

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<sup>107</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 46.

<sup>108</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 63.

might have. This incident reflects her sharing in the ordinary experience of girls, which helps the female reader to connect more easily with Sabriel. This idea is intensified when Sabriel reaches the Abhorsen's house and cannot manage to control the servants or 'sendings', who are all people made from Charters and therefore not real human beings. She is forced to take a bath and is treated quite roughly during the process, being scrubbed violently and having her hair brushed very vigorously. 'But Mrs Priorite's techniques for dealing with domestic servants didn't seem to work on domestic sendings. It kept scrubbing, occasionally tipping hot water over Sabriel.'<sup>109</sup> This situation is especially comical considering the fact that at that point she has already slain a dead creature and managed to escape from a Mordicant, which is another kind of very dangerous monster controlled by a powerful necromancer, but nevertheless she is now unable to control her servants in her own house. Once more, her vulnerability and shortcomings are highlighted in a likeable manner through humour.

Furthermore, there is another character designed to appeal to teenagers. When Sabriel gets to her house a cat awaits her. It soon becomes clear that this is not an ordinary animal but a creature of Free Magic, which is very dangerous, and of great ancient power. Mogget, the cat, is therefore a highly ambiguous character. On the one hand, he is under control through a spell and is bound to assist Sabriel. On the other hand, his true nature is unpredictable, powerful and potentially evil and very dangerous. This uncertainty and haziness of his character is certainly appealing to the teenage reader as this cat is definitely not a clearly defined good or evil character. It is up to the reader to figure out throughout the story how to judge sarcastic Mogget.

It is also this cat that makes Sabriel aware of the fact that it is highly likely that her father is dead. Sabriel refuses to believe this and spontaneously even tries to go into death to bring her father back. Mogget scratches her in order to break her focus and to make it clear to her how

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<sup>109</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 97.

dangerous this idea is and how she would act like an ordinary necromancer and not like the Abhorsen, who would not perform such an act. It is not her role to bring people back from death but to return things that are already dead and are only controlled by others. Sabriel soon realises her foolishness and selfishness and openly admits her vulnerability by asking Mogget to help her. “Help me, Mogget,” Sabriel suddenly pleaded, reaching over to touch her hand to the cat’s head, scratching under the collar. ‘I need to know – I need to know so much!’<sup>110</sup>

After this incident Sabriel’s journey continues and the readers become witnesses of many small adventures and her learning curves. Through Charter magic Sabriel learns to fly a Paperwing and as any learning process this is realistically described with its ups and downs.

The Charter marks felt clumsy and difficult in her head, as if she were trying to push a heavy weight on badly-made rollers – then, with a last effort, they came easily, flowing into her whistled notes. Unlike her earlier, gradual summonings, this wind came with the speed of a slamming door, howling up behind them with frightening violence, picking up the Paperwing and shunting it forward like a giant wave lifting up a slender boat.<sup>111</sup>

This passage demonstrates very well how Sabriel is learning, her movements and actions not yet being elegant but rather clumsy and struggling, just as with any other person learning something new.

Parallel to learning practical things, such as flying a Paperwing or learning to control Charter marks, Sabriel also learns how to come to terms with her new identity. When she gets to a small village, which is in peril and therefore very suspicious towards strangers, she introduces herself for the first time as the Abhorsen. “I am the Abhorsen,” Sabriel

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<sup>110</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 103.

<sup>111</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 135.

said reluctantly. ‘Enemy of the Dead.’”<sup>112</sup> This shows the reader how much she has developed in such a short time. A few days earlier she would not have accepted that her father might be dead and now she has realised and, more importantly, practically accepted that she has to think about the people around her and her responsibility towards them. This acceptance does not make it easier for her when she finally rescues her father and then has to let him go to sacrifice himself, but it is clearer to her what her mission is. Once again, at the moment of the father’s departure from his daughter it becomes obvious that Sabriel has not had a normal life. On the other hand, the message her father gives her before his sacrifice is applicable to everybody’s life.

‘I have not been an ideal parent, I know,’ Abhorsen said quietly. ‘None of us ever is. When we become the Abhorsen, we lose so much else. Responsibility to many people rides roughshod over personal responsibilities; difficulties and enemies crush out softness; our horizons narrow. [...] Our parts now, which perforce we must play – are not father and daughter, but one old Abhorsen, making way for the new.’<sup>113</sup>

Even though the message focuses on the role of the Abhorsen it appears to be meant to inspire anybody reading the book and inviting them to live a meaningful life. As this story is read by many teenagers it can only be hoped that it will be noticed and applied.

Nevertheless, the story also holds joyful moments, such as when Sabriel and Touchstone, the second main character, realise that they have fallen in love. Nonetheless, this love is not kindled in a romantic or stereotypical way but through the means of fear. As both of them are once more in peril, it is up to Touchstone to save Sabriel, who has been

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<sup>112</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 200.

<sup>113</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 280.

wounded by an arrow, and it is only then that he suddenly draws from a pool of energy that he had not known before.

Sabriel wondered how Touchstone could possibly still have the strength for such a spell. [...] She screamed a little as the arrow shifted in her side, but Touchstone didn't seem to notice. He threw his head back, roared out like an animal-like challenge, and started to run up the road, gathering speed from an ungainly lurch to an inhuman sprint.<sup>114</sup>

It takes, however, a bit more time until Touchstone finally admits his love for her and he only does so because they face a situation whose ending appears to be most likely death. "I love you," he whispered. "I hope you don't mind."<sup>115</sup> This moment is crucial not only for the sequence of the book but also for the reader's involvement. It creates a whole new area of the story that the audience is likely to be eager to know more about. To teenagers two youngsters falling in love is very easy to identify with and serves as an exciting and clear hook that they are likely to be caught on.

However, the book does not end on a happy note altogether. At the end of this part of the *Chronicles* Sabriel has to defeat Kerrigor, a powerful dead creature who once used to belong to the royalty of the Old Kingdom. The final battle between Kerrigor with his Dead Hands, which are dead people whose corpses are being used to fight, and Sabriel and Touchstone takes place at Sabriel's old school. Against her will Sabriel knows that she has to involve the school girls as some of them have had classes in Charter magic. "They're only schoolchildren," Sabriel said sadly. "For all we always thought we were grown women."<sup>116</sup> This notion of feeling already grown-up and not being acknowledged as being so by one's surroundings is once again a very familiar feeling to any teenager. Sadly, some of the girls, whether involved or bystanders, do not survive

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<sup>114</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 297.

<sup>115</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 327.

<sup>116</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 335.

the ending of this book and once more the story reflects a realism that involves everyone and spares no-one. Young people are treated as equal to adults at the end and it becomes clear that Sabriel has made not only a physical journey but also a change from teenager to responsible grown-up.

*Sabriel* therefore is likely to appeal to teenagers because it so often reflects their wish to be taken seriously and to be given responsibility. However, the book also shows very clearly that everything comes at a price. Sabriel's adventures are by no means positive ones. She has lost her father and many friends on the way and seen terrible things. It is therefore emotionally realistic, even if the story takes place in a fantasy world.

ii) *The representation of death in 'Sabriel'*

Death is clearly the main topic in *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. The three books revolve around it even though the reader only gradually gets to know all of death's facets in this fantasy world. In the previous chapter, the presentation of the Chronicles, the river and the realm of death have already been roughly described. This chapter will now take a closer look at how death is presented in *Sabriel* and what kind of impact this might have on the reading process. Furthermore, it is crucial to keep in mind that this book has been labelled as teenage fiction and therefore it is essential to analyse whether Nix has developed a special strategy to handle this topic.

Nix throws the reader straight away into the world of death. The prologue tells the story of Sabriel's birth. However, this is not a joyous moment but rather a tragic and dramatic one as Sabriel's mother dies after having given birth to her daughter. The baby itself is very weak and soon starts to drift off into death. The people who assisted the unknown pregnant woman have already started to accept that both are dead when

the Abhorsen arrives, claiming that the newborn girl is his daughter. Realising that her life is threatened, he travels into death straight away to recover her. 'Slowly, a chill mist began to rise from his body, spreading towards the man and the midwife, who scuttled to the other side of the fire – wanting to get away, but now too afraid to run.'<sup>117</sup> Once arrived in the river of death in front of the First Gate, the Abhorsen quickly realises that his daughter is being held by a creature which is planning to kill her. The creature, having come back from the Seventh Gate where the Abhorsen had banned it previously, is very powerful, as even the Abhorsen's bells cannot cast a spell over it. Nonetheless, the Charter mark that the baby received just moments before is powerful enough to save her, and the creature Kerrigor is banned once more by the Abhorsen. This event presents the realm of death very vividly to the reader. It becomes very clear that in Nix's world death is not instant obliteration nor immediate annihilation. The dead do not go straight to heaven or hell but have to travel via the powerful river through seven gates before they reach their final destination. During this journey there are many potential dangers, especially if they are prone to attack from ambitious dead creatures, eager to return back to earth and hungry for power.

This is not the only unusual notion the reader is being confronted with during the prologue. After having rescued his daughter from death, Abhorsen brings her back to life, startling the people who had seen her and her mother die. In those three pages, the uniqueness of the realm of death is therefore very well presented to the audience, with crucial but sparse explanations included in an exciting plot so that it does not become a tedious read through a simple alignment of descriptions. The readers gradually discover the implications of this background and thanks to many more details new insights will occur until the end of the third book.

Nonetheless, it is also important to underline that death does not only affect the Abhorsen and his family but also the rest of the world. An

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<sup>117</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 10.

early instance can be found at the beginning of the story when the Colonel tells Sabriel about his worries over the Dead he encounters. The Dead keep on rising and killing his soldiers in a brutal manner in order to feed on their life energy. Through the Abhorsen's help they have managed to control the dead at least close to the border but it is clear that the humans in the Old Kingdom as well as in Ancelstierre are as good as powerless against those creatures and in grave danger should they be outnumbered. All of those ideas are encrypted within the story and not spelled out directly by the author, making the process of uncovering the fantasy world's rules and habits much more interesting. These characteristics are typical of teenage fiction as has previously been pointed out in the discussion of the difference between children's and teenage fiction.

Death, however, is not depicted as something 'normal'. Sabriel has grown up with death. As soon as she crosses the wall she makes her first discovery of a dead soldier who has been killed by the Dead previously. As she continues, she suddenly notices a 'hand that peeked out of a drift on the other side of the road. But as soon as she saw that, her attention focused and Sabriel felt the familiar pang of death.'<sup>118</sup> Still, this does by no means make her indifferent or unreceptive to it. Soon after having found the dead soldiers she finds a message left behind by one of the soldiers who was a Charter mage and therefore capable of throwing Charter spells. The message was in the form of something that we would compare to a recording. 'A voice came from nowhere, close to Sabriel's ear. A man's voice, husky with fear, backed by the sound of clashing weapons, screaming and total panic.'<sup>119</sup> It is at that moment that Sabriel suddenly realises that so far she has actually never witnessed a living person die.

She felt ill, nauseous, and took several deep breaths. She had

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<sup>118</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 52.

<sup>119</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 58.



forgotten that for all the familiarity with death and the Dead, she had never seen or heard anyone actually die. The aftermath she had learnt to deal with...but not the event.<sup>120</sup>

This incident does not only show the reader how vulnerable Sabriel still is in front of death, despite her ability to control some parts of it, but also how far death has various faces and forms of impact on people. As Sabriel notices herself that, even though she has been trained to deal with dead creatures, they are much scarier than any living human being. The compassion and the sympathy she has for her fellow humans make her susceptible to sadness, frustration and the feeling of helplessness, all feelings which the readers can identify with and which make her likeable and recognisable. Nonetheless, as we have seen in the previous subchapter, she manages to pull herself together and learns to deal with these situations as fast as she can, therefore taking on a kind of role model function, showing that it is necessary to be strong and adapt to new situations as soon as possible in order to react effectively.

Up until a certain point the reader has just heard about all of those dead creatures. But gradually throughout the book the different forms that the Dead can take are revealed and described. The first dead creature the reader meets is Thralk. Thralk was once a human being unwilling to die. As he was being pulled down by the river of death, to be transported beyond the Seventh Gate, he managed to hold on at the Fourth Gate and had waited for three hundred years when, with the help of Kerrigor's return, he had managed to come back to life. His spirit then occupied a vacant corpse and he is now hunting for living humans on whom to feed himself. He finds Sabriel, though he is unaware of who she is, and intends to kill her and feed on her life energy. Sabriel fights him and through her bells sends him back beyond the Seventh Gate. Thralk senses this and is furious as he does not want to die 'permanently'. He offers to be Sabriel's Hand, a synonym for slave. Hands have no control over their actions and

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<sup>120</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 59 .

are the lowest amongst dead beings in the Old Kingdom. But Sabriel is relentless and does not accept his offer and rings the bells so that Thralk finally vanishes into death. This encounter is very strange because even though Thralk is definitely evil, killing people, and inhabiting their corpses, he also awakens empathy in the readers because his wish to live can be appreciated by everyone. It is therefore once more clear that Nix does not intend to draw black and white characters but he wants to sustain an ambiguity, leaving the readers to judge.

Furthermore, Nix also makes it consistently clear that even though death is omnipresent it can still not be taken for granted. Sabriel managed to learn the art of the Abhorsen through her father but also through the help of *The Book of the Dead*. This book, however, is a tool for which Sabriel has a good deal of respect for and is even afraid of. 'Sabriel shrugged, as if to show that she knew all about the book. But that was just bravado – the inner Sabriel was afraid of *The Book of the Dead*.'<sup>121</sup> It reveals once more that death is not necessarily the sought release from life but can also turn into something worse than the life lived on earth. Sabriel has to deal with those situations, yet the fact that she is afraid of them shows that she is still human and vulnerable, which makes her likeable and realistic for the teenage audience.

Thralk provides one sad example of what can happen to a person after having 'died unsuccessfully'. Sabriel witnesses an even worse scenario when she sees living people being abused and finally killed by the Hands of Kerrigor and his assistant, the Mordicant. 'There were men and women – living, breathing people. Each was shackled to a partner's leg by an iron chain and they shuffled about in these pairs under the dominating presence of the Mordicant.'<sup>122</sup> This scene shows how helpless and vulnerable living human beings are when facing the dead. It reminds the reader that Sabriel has a vital responsibility to protect those around her. It also makes the readership feel uncomfortable because it makes

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<sup>121</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 107.

<sup>122</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 112.

them remember scenes of slavery, which they know from their real world. It therefore draws them back into the book as it shows the similarities and reminds them how frail they would actually be if they were in Sabriel's world. This element makes the story realistic and therefore interesting, especially for a sceptical and critical teenage audience.

However, it being bad enough that those unfortunate people are used as slaves, it is even worse to discover what they have to do, which is to use grave dirt, meaning the remains of their loved ones, to build a kind of dam to the Abhorsen's house to get to the house without having to wade through the water.

She looked back through the telescope again and took some heart in slowing work as the last light faded, though at the same time she felt a pang of sympathy for the poor people the Dead had enslaved. Many would probably freeze to death or die of exhaustion, only to be brought back as dull-witted Hands. Only those who went over the waterfall would escape the fate. Truly, the Old Kingdom was a terrible place, when even death did not mean an end to slavery and despair.<sup>123</sup>

This passage makes it quite clear that in some cases suicide is better than being caught in the river of death by the Dead. When Sabriel releases the melting waters from the glaciers into the valley in order to protect the Abhorsen's house, this view becomes even more vividly suggested through her response when she

felt the people die, convulsively swallowing as she sensed their last breaths gurgling, sucking water instead of air. Some of them, at least two pairs, had deliberately thrown themselves into the river, choosing a final death, rather than risk eternal bondage.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 113.

<sup>124</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 116.

This also shows that Nix as an author is not afraid to shock his readers with unpleasant details, an element which is also sure to attract younger readers who have up until recently mostly heard stories with happy endings devoid of such appalling scenes.

Sabriel is not the only character who has been affected by death from a young age. Touchstone, the bastard son of the King of the Old Kingdom, witnessed how his whole family was sacrificed by his half-brother Rogir, who would later become Kerrigor; he has to live with the fact that this sacrifice had only been possible because Touchstone fell into a trap and therefore endangered and finally lost all his family. Sabriel has to face the same sort of encounter with death when she finally finds her father, manages to bring him back to life and then has to witness how he sacrifices himself so that she can flee with Touchstone.

Death is therefore presented in a variety of ways, on the one hand alterable and on the other ultimate and final, and is surely one of the major elements that keeps the readers tied to the book. However, it is mainly depicted as a repulsive and fearful element, challenging the readers' beliefs based on current scientific, popular or religious views on death. It is therefore definitely attractive for teenagers who are, as we have seen, yearning for elements that will challenge their points of view and who are now confronted with questions and alternative ideas through fantasy. They are not spared from unpleasant scenes in any way but on the contrary confronted with tough emotional and descriptive features.

### *iii) Gender as an important momentum for the plot in 'Sabriel'*

Even though youth and death are definitely the two main topics of this close analysis, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Garth Nix has chosen a female protagonist. This section, however, is not written from a purely feminist standpoint in order to determine whether the female roles are stronger than the male ones but rather to analyse the treatment of

gender and its likely impact on a teenage audience. *Sabriel* is interesting for that specific aspect of analysis because Touchstone, who is the second most important character in the story, has a considerably less important role and appears less frequently, neither is he described in such depth as Sabriel. The reader is therefore clearly invited to identify with the girl. This does of course raise the question whether this feature might alienate certain reader groups, such as teenage boys, for example. The following section will take a look at how gender is dealt with in *Sabriel* and will then try to reach a conclusion about how Nix has handled the issue in this book.

Despite the fact that the readers learn early on that Sabriel attended an all-girls boarding school they witness soon enough that Sabriel is anything but solely ladylike. We have seen that Sabriel has been told how to deal with servants, even though she cannot manage her own at the Abhorsen's house. Yet, she is not especially affected by this defeat, which shows that even though she has been taught the typical female values of the time she does not completely live by them. They are surely important to her but in this context she does not have a problem in shifting her priorities and dealing with issues that might appear to be more appropriate for young men. An example of this occurs in Chapter six where we witness how Sabriel has slain the creature Thralk. In this instance it is worth analysing how her fight is actually described.

Just as his slimy, corrupted fingers stretched forward, Sabriel opened her eyes and demonstrated the stop-thrust that had earned her second place in Fighting Arts and, later, lost her the First. Her arm and sword straightened like one limb to their full extent and the sword point ripped through Thralk's neck, and into eight inches of air beyond.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *Sabriel* p. 73.

This passage first of all reveals that even though Sabriel attended an all-girls school, the latter by no means taught only academic subjects and good manners. On the contrary, Sabriel manages to kill her opponent quickly and successfully. This means that Nix deliberately discards the notion that a single sex school teaches stereotypical and old-fashioned gender specific attitudes and behaviour. In his world a female hero can be just as efficient in her fighting skills as a male one. Furthermore, the scene is described in detail, not sparing the readers the gory aspects, which is once more an element that a young audience might appreciate especially.

However, the most striking description of gender differentiation happens in chapter thirteen when Sabriel first meets Touchstone, who at that point is still transformed into the figurehead of a boat. When Sabriel sees him, she suddenly realises that in fact the figurehead is naked. 'She blushed a little, for it was an exact likeness, as if a young man had been transformed from flesh to wood, and her only prior experience of naked men was in clinical cross-sections from biology textbooks.'<sup>126</sup> This incident definitely shows how Sabriel is still inexperienced in some parts of her life. She might be able to fight and to travel in death but she has not had any experience with the opposite sex yet and this embarrasses her and makes her feel somehow uncomfortable. This awkwardness, which is practically unavoidable for teenagers at least once in their lives, continues when Mogget, her magical cat, reveals to her that she actually has to kiss the wooden carving in order to bring the prisoner within back to life. 'She didn't want to kiss just any wooden man. He looked nice enough, but he might not be like his looks. A kiss seemed very forward. He might remember it and make assumptions.'<sup>127</sup> This situation is comical considering the fact that the kiss is merely a means to order to blow life back into Touchstone, very much as in popular fairy tales, such as *Snow White*, for example. Sabriel is so experienced with magic in many ways

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<sup>126</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 156.

<sup>127</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 163.

but in this situation she is clearly out of her comfort zone and behaves nervously like any teenage girl would. She is even worrying about her reputation afterwards, which is really irrelevant in comparison to restoring life. This awkwardness is further enhanced when Touchstone slowly awakes.

She lowered him hastily to the ground, all too aware that she was embracing a naked young man – in circumstances considerably different than the various scenarios she'd imagined with her friends at school or heard about from the earthier and more privileged day-girls.<sup>128</sup>

This element juxtaposes the everyday background of her life in school with her extraordinary nature of being the Abhorsen. These kinds of emotions are repeated when later on Touchstone touches her for the first time after the latter incident. Sabriel is surprised by 'the sudden shock it gave her.'<sup>129</sup> Another, far more vivid event is when they stay in an inn and Sabriel hears two people having sexual intercourse in the next room. She thinks it is Touchstone and a maid and tries to ignore the noise and thinks of different reasons why this should not matter to her. 'She didn't think of Touchstone in that way. Sex was the last thing on her mind. Just another complication – contraception – messiness – emotions. There were enough problems.'<sup>130</sup> In spite of all of those arguments she is still very relieved when Mogget informs her that Touchstone is actually residing in the other room next to her, which makes it obvious that she has in fact been jealous.

Those moments and insights make Sabriel more human and easier to identify with, especially for a young female audience. However, through her ability of handling rough situations as well, as noted previously, she also incorporates qualities probably more appealing to the male audience.

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<sup>128</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 164.

<sup>129</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 236.

<sup>130</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 240.

Nonetheless, it is also important to mention how she is perceived in her role as the Abhorsen. When Touchstone awakes, he sees her and has the following train of thought: 'A woman looking down at him, a young woman, armed and armoured, her face ... battered. No, not a woman. The Abhorsen, for she wore the blazon and the bells. But she was too young, not the Abhorsen he knew or any of the family...' <sup>131</sup>

This observation is vital as it reveals that the Abhorsen is actually perceived as either being male or rather genderless. This notion is recalled later on when Sabriel discovers the inscription on her sword. 'I was made for Abhorsen, to slay those already Dead.' <sup>132</sup> It does not even include an article in front of the word 'Abhorsen', rendering the noun even more neutral. The Abhorsen is serving a purpose and nobody really considers their private life or their feelings. Nix, in order to avoid rendering the latter image absolute for his readers, opens up the inner life of his protagonist as he does in order to avoid such a vision of his hero.

He wants Sabriel to stay real and not to become an icon without feelings or flaws, dissimilar to ordinary human beings.

#### **d. Book 2: Lirael**

##### *i) Analysis of the teenage protagonists in 'Lirael'*

In *Lirael* the young protagonists are faced with similar issues to those of *Sabriel*, but they deal with them in a different way. The story takes place in the same world, that is the Old Kingdom, yet fourteen years after the end of *Sabriel* and much has happened since then. Sabriel has married Touchstone and they have two children called Ellimere and Sameth.

The key challenges have remained the same. In this book of the Chronicles it is not Kerrigor who is the main villain but something yet

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<sup>131</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 166.

<sup>132</sup> *Sabriel*, p. 210.



unknown to the characters. They meet some people who are part of a bigger problem but they do not yet manage to identify their chief enemy. The protagonists and heroes of this part are once again teenagers, who in their turn have to deal with identity issues and responsibility. However, Nix manages to differentiate them from his first protagonist Sabriel so that his series does not get boring and predictable to the readers. Furthermore, Nix incorporates different types of teenagers, in order to provide interesting elements for his various readers.

The first character whom we meet is Lirael, the lead person of this book. She represents the typical teenage phase of identity search even though hers is spelled out much more drastically through the context of her upbringing. Lirael lacks information about her origins. All she knows is that she was abandoned by her mother when she was five years old and had not been told who her father was. In fact nobody, except her parents, knows who her father is. Adding to this obvious identity issue Nix has created further obstacles for Lirael. The girl grows up amongst the Clayr, who are a people living in a glacier and standing out physically and mentally from other people due to their fair physical appearance and ability to see parts of the future. Lirael, however, does not fit in. She has dark hair and eyes, contrary to the rest of the Clayr who are all blond or very light brown haired, and she does not have the Sight, the ability to see the future. Lirael gets constantly frustrated because until she has the Sight, she is publicly considered only a child. Moreover, she cannot escape this categorisation because she actually has to wear a specific blue robe, which symbolises to everyone that she is still a child. On her fourteenth birthday yet another, younger girl receives the Sight and Lirael once more feels extremely miserable.

Annisele would be the one to wear the white robe, to be crowned with the silver and moonstones, while Lirael once again would have

to put on her best blue tunic, the uniform of a child. The tunic that no longer had a hem because it had been let out so many times.<sup>133</sup>

Lirael suffers enormously from this exclusion up to the point that she actually considers suicide. 'Her voice sounded confident, but inside she wasn't so sure. Suicide wasn't something the Clayr did. Killing herself would be the final, terrible confirmation that she just didn't belong.'<sup>134</sup> These dramatic thoughts reflect those of many teenagers who are often very extreme in their feelings and reactions without actually thinking them through. However, fortunately most of them, just like Lirael, are quickly distracted from their pain, sometimes even by mere trivialities. In this case Lirael receives her birthday present, which is enough to distract her for a bit. 'Lirael took the package. It was soft, but quite heavy. For a moment all her thoughts of killing herself were gone, driven away by curiosity.'<sup>135</sup> Unfortunately for Lirael the present, which is a blue tunic, throws her right back into her sombre mood and drives her on to the top of the glacier where she wants to perform her final deed. However, as nothing goes to plan she is confronted by members of the Clayr and is relieved to hear that two of the strongest members, twins, had not received the Sight until they were sixteen. So by that time Lirael has forgotten all about her suicidal intentions, which demonstrates how quickly the moods and also passionate feelings in teenagers can change; this is surely a familiar scenario to many young readers who certainly empathise with Lirael and her sense of not belonging. Nix does not portray Lirael as a shallow dramatic young girl. He makes it very clear that she deeply suffers from being different. Even when she is nineteen she still has not received the Sight. On the other hand, she is very strong in Charter Magic and has been given tools to see the past and fight Free Magic. Yet, she still cannot get over the fact that she is not like a regular daughter of the Clayr. Even after the revelation that she is the Abhorsen-in-Waiting, which is an

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<sup>133</sup> Nix, Garth, *Lirael* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 29.

<sup>134</sup> *Lirael*, p. 32.

<sup>135</sup> *Lirael*, p. 33.

enormous privilege, her first thought goes to the fact that she will never see the future, though she can see the past. Lirael is a very moving character in that she really represents the unfulfilled dream. No matter how many good things happen to her, she cannot get over the fact that her one desire, one that she has had since she was little, is never going to be fulfilled.

Furthermore, similarly to Sabriel, Lirael also seeks out the trust and comfort of a quite unusual friend. In this case it is not a cat like Mogget but the Disreputable Dog, whose existence itself is a mystery as she is not a normal dog but a creation made of Free Magic and the Charter. So once more, it is not a straightforward human character that Lirael is drawn to but a unique, special and different being. In fact, she shuns contact with other people of the Clayr because they remind her of being dissimilar. 'Lirael felt she had nothing to talk about or share with them, so she stayed silent, hiding behind her hair. After a while, they stopped inviting her to sit with them at lunch, or to play games of tabore in the afternoon, or to gossip about their elders over sweet wine in the evening.'<sup>136</sup> However, Nix does not necessarily condone this behaviour. On the contrary, he uses the Disreputable Dog to tell Lirael to let go of her self-pity. "'That,' said the Dog, her voice losing all sympathy, 'is self-pity, and there's only one way to deal with it.' 'What?' asked Lirael sullenly. 'This,' said the Dog, lunging forward and nipping quite sharply on her leg.'<sup>137</sup>

Nevertheless, after a while Lirael manages to cope with her identity problems through her work at the library and her librarian uniform and through her passion for Charter Magic, which now allows her to transform herself into various animal shapes. It is certainly not a coincidence that Nix chose Lirael to be able to perform such a magical task. Clearly Nix has deliberately created Lirael for the role with which he endows her in his trilogy. She is definitely the one person in all of the Chronicles who has to deal the most with her persona and her identity quest.

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<sup>136</sup> *Lirael*, p. 75.

<sup>137</sup> *Lirael*, p. 227.

Another character, who has different but also similar problems is prince Sameth, Sabriel and Touchstone's son. Sam has grown up with the expectation to become the new Abhorsen after his mother dies. He has been trained by his mother to some extent and is very much aware of the fact that everyone expects him to become just as good an Abhorsen as she is. However, Sam himself does not want to take over this role. He has never felt comfortable around death and after a terrible encounter with Hedge, a powerful dead necromancer, at the beginning of the book, he is petrified by death to the point that he cannot control himself because of fear. Thus Sam does not represent teenage identity issues, as his roots are so obvious that they actually become a nuisance for him, but he shows how hard it is for a youth to deal with pressure and very high expectations. This is not to say that he is a coward. On the contrary, at the beginning of the story he directs his fellow pupils against a vicious attack by the Dead and ventures unprotected into death in order to save his friends. Nonetheless, he is wounded because he is not prepared enough and partly also because his mother is not ready yet to let go: 'I have delayed teaching you to some degree because I wanted you to stay the dear little boy I can so easily remember.'<sup>138</sup> Sabriel knows too well what it is like to be confronted with the evil in death and to have to grow up quickly. Sam cannot cope with this pressure and when once he finally manages to somehow blurt out that he is not comfortable with the situation, he is not taken seriously enough by his mother. He truly wants to be a good Abhorsen and says so himself: 'I wish...I wish I were a proper Abhorsen'<sup>139</sup>, but as it turns out he is not meant to be one at all, which obviously comes as a huge relief for him.

Both teenagers faced with their shortcomings show quite inadequate behaviour. Lirael does not accept being different and flees into isolation and self-pity, whereas Sam acts childishly and even like a coward as he not only suggests going to the Abhorsen's house for

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<sup>138</sup> *Lirael*, p. 210.

<sup>139</sup> *Lirael*, p. 370.

information but also seeks to be safe himself: 'And from there, a secret cowardly voice said in his mind, he could take a boat to Abhorsen's House. He would be safe there. Safe from the Dead, safe from everything.'<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, he does not really make himself very useful and behaves like a spoilt child. He ruins the birthday party which his sister organised for him. by being moody and depressive. 'The feast ended early, with everyone cross and short-tempered.'<sup>141</sup> Both characters are therefore somewhat extreme in their behaviour.

At the end of the book neither Lirael nor Sam shows real motivation for their tasks but only a sense of duty; they have no other choice. In fact, they do not act like the usual heroes of children's books, who generally relish their tasks. They behave very realistically according to their age, meaning that they are not overjoyed by the idea of having to face an unknown danger and hard work.

Nix does not only introduce characters with exceptional challenges in this book. Ellimere, Sam's sister, who is nearly fourteen months older than her sibling, is a very normal girl. She is described as being organised, responsible and often bossy towards her younger brother even though she is also caring. 'Ellimere took her responsibility seriously. And she thought that one of her duties as co-regent was to address the shortcomings of her younger brother.'<sup>142</sup> It is she who organises his dancing and sports lessons, who puts together Sam's birthday party and who urges him to study *The Book of the Dead*. She is portrayed as the typical older sister who is strict and in general rather a nuisance to her younger brother.

So all in all, the youngsters that are met in this book each represent a different facet of youth and the different issues that teenagers have to face during this period. Lirael definitely represents the search for identity, Sam reflects the pressure that young people have to deal with considering the expectations of grown ups and even society, and Ellimere

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<sup>140</sup> *Lirael*, p. 363.

<sup>141</sup> *Lirael*, p. 256.

<sup>142</sup> *Lirael*, p. 201.

reminds readers of the small familiar conflicts that adolescents might encounter with other siblings, or sometimes friends. Nix has therefore managed to create a believable mix of youngsters and their problems in *Lirael*, without repeating the features already tackled in *Sabriel*. The protagonists are similar yet different and therefore still interesting for a teenage audience.

ii) *The presentation of death and magic in 'Lirael'*

*Lirael* is constructed rather differently from *Sabriel* in the sense that readers now already know a great deal about death in the Old Kingdom. In this book they will still witness different presentations of death but the inner hierarchy between evil dead servants is further explored. The story also focuses more and more on elements of magic. *Lirael* is tapping into the realms of the Charter and Free Magic but finally connects those with death, whereas Sam is more exposed to death itself and the creatures rising from it. Furthermore, this book also presents the politics of Ancelestierre in a new light associated with death.

This analysis will first start with what the readers learn about the hierarchy of the Dead. It is clear that dead Hands are always the lowest creatures, which are either roaming around freely or directed by a necromancer. The necromancers are quite powerful as they can raise people back from the Dead in order to have them serve as their Hands. Furthermore, they can either kill people or propel them further into death with their seven bells. The Abhorsen uses the same bells, but to banish the Dead and necromancers. So these tools can be used for good or evil depending on who is using them. However, necromancers have different powers amongst them. In *Lirael* it is clear that Hedge is a very powerful necromancer serving directly the evil enemy of the humans. Chlorr, on the other hand, is a very old necromancer but she has overestimated herself and is finally bound to Hedge so that she has to serve him. The fact that those servants of evil, so to speak, become organised, inevitably poses a

big problem to Sabriel, who is busy trying to control and banish the evil in the Old Kingdom. “‘We get no rest,’ said Touchstone. ‘There is always some new trouble, some anger that can be dealt with only by the King or the Abhorsen. Sabriel gets the worst of it, for there are still too many Dead abroad, and too many idiots who would open further doors to death’”<sup>143</sup>

Sam becomes a victim of these organised Dead more than once in this part of the story. Right at the beginning, he and his schoolmates are attacked by Hedge in Ancelstierre with a big number of Dead. However, contrary to Sabriel Sam does not deal very effectively with death. ‘As Sam thought of that, he felt his sense of death suddenly alert. It disoriented him at first, till he realised what it was.’<sup>144</sup> As we have seen in the previous section, this passage confirms that Sam is not yet ready to face the dangers of death. He is insecure and inexperienced and even suffers from his confrontations with death. Not only is he wounded during his struggle with Hedge, but his awareness of death also makes him feel ill:

Weakened by pain and by the morphine they were giving him for it, Sam was unable to drive away his sense of death. Always it loomed close, filling his bones with its bitter chill, making him shiver constantly and the doctors increased his medication.

He dreamed of bodiless creatures that would come from death and finish off what the necromancer had begun, and he could not wake from the dreams.<sup>145</sup>

In the previous book, Sabriel had also been confronted with new situations, such as for the first time witnessing a person actually dying, but she never had a breakdown as strong as Sam’s. It therefore really shows that even though death is not an unknown element in the Old Kingdom it has very different impact, on different people. Another example of this is the influence of *The Book of the Dead*. Sam suffers from its presence.

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<sup>143</sup> *Lirael*, p. 52.

<sup>144</sup> *Lirael*, p. 162.

<sup>145</sup> *Lirael*, p. 190.

‘Sam reached for the package, but as his fingers touched the wrapping, he felt a terrible chill and the sudden presence of death, despite the spells and charms that were supposed to prevent any traffic with that cold realm, woven into the very stone around him.’<sup>146</sup> He gets physically sick when he is confronted with it, contrary to Sabriel who has never had a problem consulting it. Lirael, the Abhorsen-in-Waiting, immediately feels comfortable with the book and cannot wait to study it as soon as she sees it for the first time. Sam explains to her that the book has the power to destroy people but Lirael instinctively knows that she has to study it. ‘Sam heard the straps of the saddlebags being opened behind his back. Then came the soft brilliance of the Charter light, the snap of the silver clasps – and the ruffling of the pages. There was no explosion, no sudden fire of destruction.’<sup>147</sup> These incidents demonstrate the protagonists are still in awe of death despite being confronted with it so frequently. Nix makes it very clear that death is not something that should be taken for granted and that indeed his characters are dealing with something exceptional.

However, Lirael does not encounter death as early as Sam. She has always had a special view of death: ‘As a small child she had liked to play-act dramatic death scenes from famous stories. She had stopped play-acting years ago, but had never stopped thinking about death.’<sup>148</sup> However, she has never physically encountered anyone from death, such as a Hand or anything similar. Rather, her journey is embedded in the realm of magic. Her quest, so to speak, begins with her becoming a librarian. Lirael has no idea at that point that she is destined to leave the Clayr in order to serve the Charter together with Sam, Sabriel, Touchstone, Mogget and the Disreputable Dog. The library itself, however, already suggests a kind of foreboding that it is not a normal library as we know it. First of all, it is situated in the heart of a glacier but the structure itself is very unusual as well:

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<sup>146</sup> *Lirael*, p. 205.

<sup>147</sup> *Lirael*, p. 443.

<sup>148</sup> *Lirael*, p. 31.



She knew the general layout well. The library was shaped like a nautilus shell, a continuous tunnel that wound down into the mountain in an ever-tightening spiral. This main spiral was an enormously long, twisting ramp that took you from the high reaches of the mountain down past the level of the valley floor, several feet below.<sup>149</sup>

This architecture perfectly reflects the many mysteries, the wisdom and knowledge that may be hidden inside this library. The downward curve into the dark unknown also represents a kind of gradual way towards danger and maybe even death. Lirael knows that some rooms and corridors bear danger inside them but she has no idea what exactly and her curiosity takes a hold of her as she dares to explore them during her shifts. She makes her first encounter with a Stilken, which is basically an evil monster of Free Magic. The good thing is that at the same time she finds the little dog statuette, which allows her to summon the Disreputable Dog. The dog also discovers Lirael's path, which had been prepared for her by the old Clayr who had seen her in the past in their visions. During her exploration she is tested on numerous occasions by armed Charter sendings to see whether she is a real daughter of the Clayr. She passes all the tests and finally finds herself in a chamber where she discovers *The Book of Remembrance and Forgetting*, seven pipes and the Dark Mirror, as if they had been waiting for her, which they had, as it turns out later. This is the first half of Lirael's destiny but she has to venture further when she is told by the Clayr that she has been seen in a vision and that she has to leave the glacier in order to fulfil her destiny. Lirael finally connects death with the Charter Magic when she sees the relation between her roots as a daughter of the Clayr and the Abhorsen-in-Waiting. Her sword Nehima is of the same kind as Binder, the Abhorsen's sword. Furthermore, she is now able to see into the past with the Dark Mirror but only when she is in death. Unlike Sam, Lirael

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<sup>149</sup> *Lirael*, p. 63.

manages to walk into death without any trouble and she does not feel as out of place as he did. It is therefore interesting to see a new point of view of how death can affect different people in various ways in the Old Kingdom.

However, just as in *Sabriel*, Nix does not spare us from the sombre facet of how death influences the citizens of the Old Kingdom and Ancelstierre. Quite shockingly, it becomes obvious that the evil powers of the Old Kingdom have reached politics in Ancelstierre. Politicians have decided to send fugitives to the Old Kingdom to specific locations where they are particularly vulnerable to the Dead. 'We think that they plan to bring all two hundred thousand Southerling refugees into the Old Kingdom – and kill them.'<sup>150</sup> They are basically used as living ammunition for the Dead to kill and feed on and to create an army for the enemy of the inhabitants of the Old Kingdom. It is presented like genocide through the situation of grown-ups and children alike being killed in horrific ways.

Dead Hands had surrounded a group of men, women and children. [...] The people were screaming too, and shouting, and crying. The Dead roared and screeched back, as they pulled their victims down and ripped their throats out or rent them limb from limb.'<sup>151</sup> '[A dead creature] rushed at a small boy who would not stop screaming. The jaws closed and the scream was instantly cut off. Sobbing with fury and revulsion, Lirael spun around and hewed off the thing's head, Nehima showering silver sparks as it cut through.'<sup>152</sup>

It is at this point that not only the protagonists but also the readers realise how cruel and powerful this enemy actually is and the brutality with which the characters have to deal. Nix does not embellish any scenes at all, mirroring images that the reader might recognise from warfare, which however would not include humans being eaten by dead creatures. The

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<sup>150</sup> *Lirael*, p. 276.

<sup>151</sup> *Lirael*, p. 485.

<sup>152</sup> *Lirael*, p. 487.

main message, that innocent people are being slain, remains nevertheless the same. The question of who the enemy actually is, is therefore not only raised for the protagonists of the book but also for the readers, who encounter comparable situations in the news frequently.

iii) Female heroines versus male weaklings in 'Lirael'?

*Lirael* stands out because its protagonists are teenagers and because Nix has drawn female characters who are obviously stronger than their male counterparts. This section will now focus on how male and female characters differ in their behaviour and will analyse whether Nix, a male author, favours his female over male characters.

One of the main new elements the readers come to know in the second book of the trilogy is the society of the Clayr. This society is mainly ruled by females and its structure reminds us of the organisation of the amazons<sup>153</sup>. Even though the women of the Clayr do generally not fight as the amazons did, they are a mainly female society. 'The Clayr often bore children fathered by visiting men, but they didn't usually leave the Glacier to find them, and they made no secret of the fathers. And for some reason, they almost always had girls.'<sup>154</sup> This passage makes it clear that, even though men are respected by the members of the Clayr, they are not a full-time part of their life. Marriage does not exist and men are mainly used to create female offspring. Lirael herself thinks in the

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<sup>153</sup> The Amazons were fierce warrior women. From birth they were brought up to be warriors. Female children in the Amazons tribes were said to have their right breast seared during childhood to facilitate the use of a bow. Their main weapons were the bow, the librys (a double edged axe), and a crescent shaped shield. The Amazons were said to be able to tame and ride horses long before mainland Greece acquired the skill. The ability to ride on horseback gave them an obvious edge in battle and added mobility. Accounts as to the culture and rulership of the Amazons remain sketchy, however some sources say there were two Amazon queens; one who ruled over domestic affairs and one who ruled over battle and warfare. Conquests of the Amazons were throughout Greece, and their legacy of fierceness and triumphs in battle were noted by the Spartan leader Lycurgus as well as many Greeks.  
<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/aegean/amazons/amazonwho.html>.

<sup>154</sup> *Lirael*, p. 23.

same way. 'Once she had the Sight, she might think of doing as the other Clayr did, and bring a man up to the Upper Refectory for dinner and a walk in the Perfumed Garden, and perhaps then...to her bed.'<sup>155</sup> This way of thinking might not be very romantic but it seems to be normal to the members of the Clayr and is uncontested. Furthermore, the society seems to work very well with a clear hierarchy depending on how strong a person's Sight is and how they might have been seen in a vision. This works perfectly, except for Lirael who does not gain the Sight and who is not seen in any vision until shortly before she starts out on her quest.

Lirael has therefore grown up in a very peculiar background. Nonetheless, she is constantly portrayed as courageous and beautiful at the same time, even though she herself does not perceive it this way. One early incident revealing her courage is when she encounters the Stilken. She knows that it is her duty to destroy it. After having stolen the sword Binder from her superior librarian she is only supported by the dog when she ventures once more into the library to the remote underground chamber where she knows that the Stilken awaits her in order to kill her. However, Lirael manages to destroy the creature: 'Lirael stepped forward and Binder leapt out in a perfect stop thrust, straight through the Stilken's neck. Golden fire raged, white sparks plumed like a skyrocket's trail and the creature froze a mere two paces from Lirael, its hook almost touching her on either side.'<sup>156</sup>

Furthermore, we have seen previously that she does not shy away from venturing into death and accepting her mission. Another interesting point is how she is viewed by the people around her, notably men. We have seen in the former section that she never really feels comfortable and that she does not think that she fits in. However, in reality she has a different effect on her surroundings:

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<sup>155</sup> *Lirael*, p. 216.

<sup>156</sup> *Lirael*, p. 138.

[...] she did not speak, not even to the Clayr on kitchen duty. So the young men simply watched her, and the more romantic of them dreamed of the day when she would suddenly come over and invite them upstairs. Other Clayr occasionally did so, but not Lirael. She continued to eat alone, and the dreamers continued to dream.<sup>157</sup>

Another person who was not unaffected by her is Sam. When he asks her about her age, 'Lirael looked at him, puzzled at the question, till she saw the glint in his eye. She knew that look from the Lower Refectory.'<sup>158</sup> However, Lirael is by no means interested in a relationship of any kind and wishes to be left alone in that matter. In this light the story develops differently from *Sabriel* where the two main protagonists form a romantic relationship, which means that a love story is included in the first book. So all in all it can be concluded that Lirael as a protagonist comes across as a controlled, courageous and beautiful young woman even though she is by no means perfect due to her inner insecurity considering the Sight.

Sam, on the other hand, is portrayed very differently. He is represented as a coward most of the time. Even though it is clarified that his encounter with Hedge was traumatising he is consistently shown as inferior in comparison to Lirael. He cannot recover from his initial incident with Hedge without Touchstone's help. He actually wishes that he could go to the Abhorsen's house in order to be safe from everything around him instead of fighting and he does not actually help Lirael very much at the beginning of their joint journey. 'On her exploration she had done what she wanted, and in the Library was strict discipline and a chain of command. Sam had provided useful information but otherwise seemed to be a nuisance.'<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, even after Lirael's true identity has been revealed, Sam can still not overcome his fear and behaves in a very

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<sup>157</sup> *Lirael*, p. 216.

<sup>158</sup> *Lirael*, p. 475.

<sup>159</sup> *Lirael*, p. 438.

childish and unpleasant manner unlike Lirael who in the end accepts her fate:

‘I’m...I’m afraid of Death,’ sobbed Sam, holding up his burnt wrists so Lirael could see the scars there, scarlet burns against the lighter skin. ‘I’m afraid of Hedge. I...I can’t face him again.’ ‘I’m afraid too,’ Lirael said quietly. ‘Of Death and Hedge and probably a thousand other things. But I’d rather be afraid and do something than just sit and wait for terrible things to happen.’<sup>160</sup>

Lirael shows in this incident far more maturity and strength, even though she is only a little older than Sam and has not been prepared for such an eventuality as Sam has by his parents.

Nix retains credibility by revealing many of Sam’s inner thoughts to the readers. In contrast to Ellimere, who has grown up under the same familiar circumstances, Sam ponders much more about the importance of the differences within society. ‘Why was royal, Abhorsen and Clayr blood different from normal people’s – even that of other Charter Mages, whose blood was sufficient to mend or mar only lesser Stones?’<sup>161</sup> In the Old Kingdom it is therefore not just a belief that blood is different depending on what a person’s origins are but a fact. Ellimere, on the other hand, is never demonstrating any real feelings other than those of being bossy, angry or worried about her parents. Apart from a few remarks of concern for her mother we do not learn a lot about her nature in comparison to her brother. Sam does therefore definitely appear to be a more sensitive and yet weaker person than Lirael but he cannot really be compared to his sister as the latter is not put the test to the same extent.

Another interesting character is the Disreputable Dog, who in fact is a bitch. Nevertheless, she does not behave in any way like a stereotypical female. She is quite ruthless in her opinions at times and

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<sup>160</sup> *Lirael*, p. 518.

<sup>161</sup> *Lirael*, p. 268.

speaks in a very straightforward and not very elegant language. 'New smells, new sounds, new places to piss...' <sup>162</sup> Furthermore, in this book she is also much more active, courageous and useful than her male animal counterpart Mogget, who is mainly sleeping and only occasionally interfering. So once more, even though they belong to the realm of magical creatures, the female character is more effective than the male.

Finally, it is interesting to notice that the word 'Abhorsen' is neutral. Mogget refers to it in the following way. 'I have served the Abhorsen for many centuries' <sup>163</sup>, therefore rendering the word genderless. This is interesting in the sense that in this domain of power Nix does not draw a gender line thus suggesting equal qualities for both men and women.

To conclude, Nix clearly favours the female gender in *Sabriel* and *Lirael*. However, he does not deny any potential in his male characters and the stories would not have been able to develop without them. Still, it does not seem surprising that Nix's Chronicles are often linked with the word feminism or women empowerment <sup>164</sup>.

### **e. Book 3: Abhorsen**

#### **i) The final stage and loss of youth in 'Abhorsen'.**

In the last book, *Abhorsen*, the main characters all reach the final stage of their journey and the end of their youth, in terms of innocence and identity confusion. In this section, the analysis will focus on Lirael and Sam, who have undergone the most drastic changes of all the protagonists in the narrative.

First of all it has to be said that even though both protagonists have changed a good deal they have not actually aged that much in terms of years. When Chlorr, for example, sees Lirael at the Abhorsen's house she

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<sup>162</sup> *Lirael*, p. 396.

<sup>163</sup> *Lirael*, p. 512.

<sup>164</sup> notably under the category of *popular feminism-and-interesting-women books* on the webpage of [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/feminism-and-interesting-women) <http://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/feminism-and-interesting-women>.

judges her as rather harmless due to her still quite young appearance. 'The maker of the fog had seen her, black haired and pale skinned, surely no older than twenty, a mere fingernail sliver of an age.'<sup>165</sup> She does the same with Sam, whom she sees as 'a young man, hardly more than a boy, curly haired from his father, black eyebrowed from his mother, and tall from both.'<sup>166</sup> However, both youngsters have changed and become more mature. Sam finally knows that he is a Wallmaker<sup>167</sup> and that he is not a rather unskilled Abhorsen-in-Waiting, which gives him more confidence and courage because he knows that he is good at Charter Magic. Due to this recognition, he manages to grow up and face his fears and challenge himself rather than cry and drown in self-pity and cowardice. When Lirael has to go into death in order to see into the past and fulfil her prophecy, Sam tells the Disreputable Dog to go and help her and he reassures the dog that he will stay back and hold off Hedge as long as he can. Considering that Hedge has been his greatest fear, this gesture clearly shows how Sam has finally learned that he is part of a bigger plan and that he has accepted the fact that he might lose his life in this battle for the greater good. This idea is reinforced by an incident where Sam offers to Lirael to go with her into death, even though the readers know that he does not feel comfortable and is even scared in death: "'Do you want me to come with you?' asked Sam. He took out his panpipes and gripped the hilt of his sword. Lirael could tell he meant what

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<sup>165</sup> Garth Nix, *Abhorsen* (New York, HarperCollins, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>166</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 17.

<sup>167</sup> The Wallmakers were the builders of the Wall that divides the Old Kingdom from Ancelstriere and creators of the Charter Stones; people particularly skilled in the creation of magical objects. They created the weaponry of the Royal Family (such as the twin swords wielded by Touchstone), the ceramic, nearly impervious armor known as Gethre owned by the Abhorsens, the Abhorsen's sword, and other extremely magical objects and weapons possessed by the Clayr. It can be deduced that they were the last 2 bright shiners, Ranna and Belgaer. They invested all of their power in their creations, thus leaving no bloodline. Therefore, for the majority of the books, it is apparent that the Wallmakers are 'extinct' and no longer exist. By the end of *Lirael* and for the whole of *Abhorsen*, we find out that the Wallmaker bloodline has been reconstituted in Prince Sameth, explaining his uncanny ability to create magical "toys" and enchant weaponry, which otherwise would 'take months' to do. The line was probably brought back for the sole purpose of defeating Orannis. The symbol of the Wallmaker is a silver trowel or spade. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabriel#The\\_Wallmakers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabriel#The_Wallmakers)



he said.”<sup>168</sup> Sam redeems himself further when he fights a large number of the Dead and overcomes his fear indeed this time: ‘But as he fought the Dead, he fought his own fears, pushing them away into some distant corner of his mind that so badly wanted to draw air into his lungs. They would stay there, and he would fight well beyond his last breath.’<sup>169</sup> This passage proves that he has accepted the circumstances he is in and illustrates how he has evolved from a fearful boy to a brave man who has completely modified his priorities. Sam has therefore probably undergone the most drastic change in the story.

Of course, Lirael also alters during the course of the last book. She has not only changed psychologically but also physically.

Before she went to join Sam and Mogget downstairs, Lirael paused for a moment to look at herself in the tall silver mirror that hung from the wall of her room. The image that faced her bore little resemblance to the Second Assistant Librarian of the Clayr. She saw a warlike and grim young woman, dark hair bound back with a silver cord rather than hanging free to disguise her face.<sup>170</sup>

Considering the fact that it has not been such a long time since she left the Clayr, Lirael has undergone a striking evolution. The fact that she finally does not feel the need to hide her identity anymore is a huge step from teenage confusion to adult maturity. Nevertheless, at this point she is still not ready to let go of her former life entirely and she takes a thread of her old uniform as a keepsake to remind her of where she comes from.

It is shortly after this incident that Lirael is finally obliged to accept her new identity as Abhorsen-in-Waiting. After she defeats a creature in Death, Sam notices the following: ‘You really are the Abhorsen-in-Waiting now.’<sup>171</sup> and Lirael agrees and ‘she felt as if she’d claimed something when she’d announced herself as such in Death. And lost something

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<sup>168</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 384.

<sup>169</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 466.

<sup>170</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 37.

<sup>171</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 148.

too.<sup>172</sup> This is a key scene in the story as it clearly defines the moment when Lirael accepts her fate and mission as the future Abhorsen and puts her life-long identity as an imperfect daughter of the Clayr in the background and past. In this sense Lirael and Sam finally feel that they fit their new identities and stop suffering from the notion of being different or inadequate according to the expectations of those who surround them.

Despite these parallels, there are some differences. In opposition to Sam, the lonely Lirael gains a whole new family. 'Funny to think he's my nephew [...]. It feels very strange. An actual family, not just a great clan of cousins, like the Clayr. To be an aunt, as well as having one. To have a sister too...'<sup>173</sup> Nix makes it clear to his readers how important family is and the nature of their contribution to individuals' development. In Lirael's case this revelation contributes to her feeling complete and in synchronisation with her new identity. Moreover, when Mogget delivers her a message from Arielle she finally gets to know why her mother abandoned her. Lirael's journey of inner confusion is therefore over and she can fully focus on her mission in peace with herself.

Lirael and Sam are not the only ones who undergo a change in this book. Sabriel, whom the readers have followed so closely during the first book, is also affected by all of those events and has acquired a new point of view by the end of the book. First of all, when she finally meets Lirael she can actually make sense of what the Clayr have told her. She has a half-sister and a definite inheritor of her powers and knowledge and mission. 'So you are the sister I never knew I had'<sup>174</sup>, Sabriel says and with her acknowledgement of her new family the circle of change within the main characters finally comes to a close, everyone accepting this development and getting ready to move on. The teenagers have grown up and there is no more confusion about identity; Nix appears to be trying to tell his younger readers that sometimes there are more important events in their lives than just their own personal worries. Having said that, it is

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<sup>172</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 149.

<sup>173</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 256.

<sup>174</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 488.

clear that these characters have survived many more atrocities than any readers of his are likely to have to face, but the message can still be applied to everyday life.

This sort of message is also included when Sabriel goes back to her old school and sees the memorial to all those who have fallen fighting Kerrigor. It means that there will always be innocent victims, who die for what can be hoped to be a just cause. This idea can and should be easily applied to our society where wars and political and religious fights still claim too many innocent deaths. This realisation brings forward the final message that everyone should take from the characters of *The Abhorsen Chronicles* in order to be inspired to fight for a meaningful cause, to shed fears and take responsibility. The books therefore definitely promote growing up and serve as a guide of inspiration to do so.

ii) *An ultimate look at death in 'Abhorsen'*

In *Abhorsen* it becomes clear straightaway that the main protagonists have a crucial task upon their hands. If they fail, an apocalyptic future awaits not only them but also everyone around them, as Orannis, a huge evil force, plans to destroy earth and its inhabitants.

The plan had many parts, in many countries, though the very heart and reason for it lay in the Old Kingdom. War, assassination, and refugees were elements of the plan, all manipulated by a scheming, subtle mind that had waited generations for everything to come to fruition.<sup>175</sup>

Even though Orannis seeks to destroy the world, life under his reign does not seem worth living either. With his growing power, more and more elements of death cross over into the world. *Abhorsen* gives many previews of what Orannis' power is capable of and how he has changed

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<sup>175</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 16.

the destiny of good and evil people on earth. There is Chlorr, for example, who has never been a good person but who now after death is worse off than ever before.

She had once been a living necromancer, and she took order from no one. She had made a mistake, a mistake that had led to her servitude and death. But her master had not let her go to the Ninth Gate and beyond. She had been returned to Life, though not in any living form. She was a Dead creature now, caught by the power of bells, bound by her secret name. She did not like her orders, yet had no choice but to obey.<sup>176</sup>

Chlorr is by no means meant to be pitied, but her fate shows that even those who served the evil in their time have fallen still lower than before and that they too suffer under the new power that is stirring. Nonetheless, the innocent people are still those who are in the most pitiable state. Not only are their bodies worn out, 'lumbering corpses who climbed clumsily along the riverbanks, though they feared the swift-flowing water'<sup>177</sup> but also their minds. The most atrocious aspect of this situation is that the dying people of the Old Kingdom often know what is going to happen to them. On one occasion, Lirael finds a group of merchants who have been killed and she goes into death to speak to one of the most recently murdered. She finds a young woman called Mareyn who tells her what happened but who also begs her to lead her beyond the Ninth Gate.

The necromancer of the pit, whose name I dare not speak,' said Mareyn. 'He killed my companions, but he laughed and let me crawl away, wounded as I was, with the promise that his servants would find me in Death and bind me to his service. I feel that this is

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<sup>176</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 19.

<sup>177</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 22.

so, and my body also lies unburnt behind me. I do not wish to return, Mistress, or to serve such a one as he. I ask you to send me on, where no power can turn me back.<sup>178</sup>

The fact that Mareyn knows what is going to happen to her is even worse than living in oblivion. In fact, all the creatures of the Old Kingdom seem to know what awaits them once they have been raised from the Dead. 'Hedge fell from his skeleton horse, which reared and then dived forward, smashing through several ranks of Dead Hands to plunge into the water in an explosion of white sparks and high-pitched screaming. Instinctively, it had known how to free itself and die the final death.'<sup>179</sup> By using an animal, a creature that has nothing to do with the conflict and is unable to protect itself, that gets hurt and then unconsciously knows what to do, Nix stimulates the readers' empathy and makes it clear how literally all life is affected by the horror of this destructive power.

On the other hand, the Southerlings, who are refugees, have no idea what awaits them. It is bad enough to be murdered but having to serve after death seems in this world the worst fate one could encounter. Orannis' main servant, Hedge, does not hesitate to wake numerous Dead so as to make them serve his Master. 'Hedge drew two bells from his bandolier. Saraneth, for compulsion, Mosrael, to wake the spirits [...] He would use Mosrael to rouse as many as possible, though use of that bell would send him far into Death himself.'<sup>180</sup> In practice, this manifests itself as the following scenario: 'Everyone in the reconnaissance troop went down, the horses, too, or running free. Then there were these things lying all around the carts. Bodies, we [soldiers] thought, dead Southerlings, but they got up as well. I saw them, swarming over my mates ... thousands of monsters, horrible monsters.'<sup>181</sup> A little later the marching refugees are described in similar terms. 'Hundreds of families, grandparents, parents,

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<sup>178</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 136.

<sup>179</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 190.

<sup>180</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 332.

<sup>181</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 344.

children, babies. They all had the same scared look on their faces.’<sup>182</sup> These two passages make it very obvious how innocent and peaceful people finally end up dead and, worse, ultimately killing each other. Nix describes those scenes mercilessly and gives very realistic details even though such an event will of course never really happen. However, the suffering comes across as real to the readers and raises the dread and empathy for the protagonists considerably.

For Lirael, this part of the story is also life-changing because, just like Sabriel before her, she encounters her first familiar victim. “‘ I knew him,’ said Lirael, glancing back at the guardsman. Her voice trembled until she took a deep breath.”<sup>183</sup> ‘She felt so useless. She kept on being too late, too slow. The Southerlings in the river, after the battle with Chlorr. Barra and the merchants.’<sup>184</sup> The readers, knowing what is happening to those enslaved after death, can only sympathise with Lirael and understand her feelings. Her mission becomes personal at this stage and moves away from a simple duty, which makes the end even more frightful and emotional.

However, not everyone dies a horrible death and death itself is also not always a bad thing, but is changeable and has many different facets. The original Wallmakers, for example, did not completely die but became part of their artefacts as the readers have seen previously. ‘The Wallmakers had disappeared millennia ago, putting themselves into the creation of the Wall and the Great Charter Stones. Quite literally, as far as Sam knew.’<sup>185</sup>

Furthermore, death can change its face in many various ways. It is obvious that dying in the Old Kingdom does not mean that one indeed rests in peace eternally. The realm of death itself is described when Lirael has to go there to look back into the past from the Ninth Gate.

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<sup>182</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 376.

<sup>183</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 87.

<sup>184</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 129.

<sup>185</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 34.

Interestingly, the first eight precincts are rather negatively described, unlike the Ninth:

The Ninth Precinct was utterly different from all other parts of Death. Lirael blinked as she emerged from the darkness of the Eighth Gate, struck by sudden light. The familiar tug of the river at her knees disappeared as the current faded away. The river now only splashed gently round her ankles, and the water was warm, the terrible chill that prevailed in all other precincts of Death left behind. [...] Dead rose too, she saw. Dead of all shapes and sizes, all rising up to the sea of stars.<sup>186</sup>

Lirael manages to withstand the call but Hedge, for example, who should have died a long time ago, cannot resist and he falls towards the sky, defying all sense of gravity as we know it in our world. The final journey is therefore literally uplifting and freeing and ultimately a positive one.

Nonetheless, death is not only present in the realm of the river of death but it also takes on different shapes in other elements. One instance is the bells, which are tools to manipulate death in different manners. Mosrael is a good example for this claim. 'The second bell was Mosrael, the Waker. Lirael touched it ever so lightly, for Mosrael balanced Life with Death. Wielded properly, it would bring the Dead back into Life and send the wielder from Life into Death.'<sup>187</sup> It is therefore clear that this balance between life and death is not a black and white area but includes multiple shades of grey. Both elements are intertwined and can actually be exchanged by a necromancer or Abhorsen. Moreover, the bells and their purposes and origins are not always straightforward. The bell Astarael is without a doubt the most powerful of the seven bells. Whoever hears her sound is propelled into death, even the wielder. The books

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<sup>186</sup> *Abhorsen*, pp. 443, 444.

<sup>187</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 39.

reveal that all the bells come from seven 'people' who originally created the Charter. The Disreputable Dog is, for example, a left over of Kibeth and the protagonists meet indeed a fraction of what remains of Astarael, who is extremely dangerous as she seems to be a part of death itself and is not only able to send other people into it. 'A river flowed around and in front of the shining woman. A cold river that Lirael knew at once. This was the river of death, and this creature was bringing it to them. They would not cross into it but be swamped and taken away.'<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, she can control time as the dog explains: 'Time and Death sleep side by side [...] Both are in Astarael's domain.'<sup>189</sup>

Nonetheless, even the sound and power of Astarael can be altered under special circumstances. At the end of the story the seven bells are wielded together in order to create a new sound.

Finally, Lirael swung Astarael, and her mournful tone joined the ring of sound and the magic that surrounded Orannis. Normally, the Weeper would throw all who heard her into Death. Here, combined with the other six voices, her sound evoked a sorrow that could not be answered. Together, the bells and Dog sang a song that was more than sound and power. It was the song of the earth, the moon, the stars, the sea, and the sky, of Life and Death and all that was and would be.<sup>190</sup>

Death, the main topic of this book, is therefore in this case alterable and can even be used to do good. Nix has taken a source of great fear and handled it in so many different ways in these books that in fact the topic becomes probably less frightful to his readers as it plays a main part in the story and in reality also does in the readers' lives. Death is an abstract notion, however, through Nix it becomes clear that its unknown qualities do not indeed have to be negative. The author takes this

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<sup>188</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 61.

<sup>189</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 70.

<sup>190</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 504.



mysterious and horrific notion and twists and shapes it as he wants for his story. He cannot be criticized, as nobody knows for sure what death actually is or what it brings with it. For these reasons death does suddenly not seem as unknown anymore, nor does it remain a taboo issue in this story.

Nevertheless, Nix does not only use death as an abstract idea, manipulating it according to his needs to create a good story. He also integrates elements well known to us. For instance, he does not only limit the killing to the necromancers and the Dead Hands. People actually also kill each other, just as they do in our real world. Sabriel and Touchstone are attacked with guns and a bomb by the fanatics of a political party. It is hence not only the dead creatures of the Old Kingdom who are 'bad' but Nix also draws attention to general human weaknesses. For example, the whole plot against Sabriel and Touchstone and the conspiracy to get rid of the Southerlings would not have been feasible without the help of corrupted people in Ancelstierre. In one incident it becomes clear that the politicians of Ancelstierre had been bribed, when a messenger comes to Hedge to claim the promised money: "I've also come for the ...the fourth payment, as a greed,' continued Geanner, staring up at Hedge. 'We have done all you asked.'" <sup>191</sup> So it is obvious that it has been through human weakness and greed that the whole plan has come together.

Nix also shows the positive side of human beings when he describes how different courageous people face death and want to fight against it. One example is Lieutenant Drewe who is not ready to let any of his men down and who makes this very clear to a man called Berl. 'Whatever the Army's failings, the Royal Ancelstierran Navy has never stood by while innocents die. It will not start doing so under my command!' <sup>192</sup> Another soldier, Kerrick, dies after he fulfils his last duty of sending distress rockets, even though he would have preferred to run and hide. Nonetheless, he succeeds and dies shortly afterwards when he is

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<sup>191</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 335.

<sup>192</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 316.

surrounded by the Dead and falls down the lighthouse. A further, important example is Nicolas Sayre, who has been manipulated in such a way that he does not realise what he is doing until Lirael helps him to remember who he actually was. After that moment he desperately tries to fight against Orannis within him, but he is too weak and his will alone is not strong enough to defeat the evil inside him. He also seems to have died at one point and his last words to Sam are: 'Try and make it right.'<sup>193</sup> So even though he knows that his life is over, he fights for the right cause and is aware of it.<sup>194</sup>

This demonstrates the argument that Nix uses death in many different ways, as is going to be further developed in the conclusion.

### *iii) Male or female: any winners?*

This last close look at *Abhorsen* is going to focus on how Nix finally handles gender roles to see whether he finally favours one gender above the other. It might be true to claim that the result is a tie. On the one hand, there is Chlorr, who was once a powerful female necromancer but has been defeated by Orannis, the ultimate destroyer and who seems to have been given a male form. On the other hand, there is Astarael, who is the most powerful of the seven who won over Orannis. 'Something so bright that Lirael realized she had shut her eyes and was seeing through her eyelids, eyelids seared through with the image of a woman.'<sup>195</sup> Despite her power she has a tragic fate. "'It was her coming,' said the Dog. 'It is her fate, that her knowing self will be forever outside what she chose to make, the Charter that her unknown self is part of.'"<sup>196</sup> In other words, she is an outcast from her own creation and is not allowed to take part in Life. So

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<sup>193</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 480.

<sup>194</sup> Even though he comes back in Nix's follow up story 'The Creature in the Case'<sup>194</sup>.

<sup>195</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 61.

<sup>196</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 65.

even though she is powerful, she can in the end only be pitied. Nevertheless, the female gender is empowered through Lirael, who has without a doubt undergone the strongest evolution of all the characters in the story. She does not hide anymore nor feel insecure. 'There was something unnerving about her eyes. A toughness he [Nick] had never seen in the young women he knew from the debutante parties in Corvere.'<sup>197</sup> It is safe to say that she has grown up to be a strong, courageous woman, who ultimately defeats the Destroyer.

However, the balance between male and female heroes seems to be quite even if one looks at Sam's development and finally at Sabriel and Touchstone's love for each other. 'He looked at Sabriel. She saw the fear in his eyes. But it was fear for her, she knew, not for himself.'<sup>198</sup> This couple demonstrates that they need each other and that they balance each other out, just as Sam has to help Lirael in order to succeed.

So finally, over the course of the whole story the women have indeed been stronger and more present but in the end they depend on everyone around them. It is therefore indeed a great read for girls and women but boys and men are in no way excluded as they have enough strong characters that they can be inspired by and even look up to.

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<sup>197</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 200.

<sup>198</sup> *Abhorsen*, p. 163.

## Conclusion

*The Abhorsen Chronicles* give evidence of many aspects of teenage fiction discussed in the first chapter. The main protagonists mirror typical teenagers: they are on a quest to find themselves and their position in society just as modern teenagers do on a daily basis as we have seen previously. They find themselves in a state of liminality with experiences typical of transition phases. Starting to reflect about their responsibility towards others they emerge from their childhood cocoon into the world of adolescence and finally arrive at the threshold of adulthood. During this development they become aware that consequences do not only affect their own persona but also people around them. So even though Nix's teenagers are fictional and live in a more ancient, fantasy era, they are dealing with issues still familiar to the contemporary reader as their psychology matches typical standard human characteristics.

Furthermore, Nix does not provide a simple, obvious plot with straightforward characters but on the contrary a fast-moving story with sub-plots and ambiguous protagonists who invite readers to form their own opinions and discover their various facets gradually. Nix's stories take place in a fantastical world; they are not simplistic and the narrator's voice is by no means patronising towards readers. Moreover, Nix tackles one of the most complex topics known to mankind, which is death, in works addressed to teenagers. Fantasy proves to be an excellent choice of genre for such a topic and such an audience.

Ursula Le Guin has emphasised the fact that fantasy literature is always interested in ultimate things, like death, mortality, eternity, love, sacrifice and community. In her famous essay "Why Americans are afraid of Dragons?" (1979), she vehemently defends the crucial role of fiction, fantasy and imagination for children's development of critical and autonomous thinking:

For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom. So I believe we should trust our children. Normal children do not confuse reality and fantasy – they confuse them much less often than we adults do (as a certain great fantasist pointed out in a story called “The Emperor’s New Clothes”).<sup>199</sup>

For Nix death is not a taboo subject. In *The Abhorsen Chronicles*, he constructs a fantasy world to take up some of the challenging questions surrounding death. He is not afraid to use it in many different ways in his stories. Sometimes it takes on alien and frightening shapes and is associated with cruelty, painful experiences or magical powers. Examples of this would be the Hands, the necromancers and the deaths of many innocent bystanders. On other occasions, it is familiar, coming in the form of long awaited release or painful leavetaking, depending on whose experience it is. The passage through nine gates, for example, recalling various mythologies, is more complex than the idea of going straight to heaven or hell. Nevertheless, even in Nix’s world, full of fantasy, the author does not furnish a final answer. Having reached the ninth and final gate, the dead in his stories merely encounter a starry night-sky as the ultimate destination of death. So Nix shows his readers some of his thoughts of what Death could be like but eventually he leaves it to his readership to draw a conclusion. One might argue that exactly this approach is so successful with teenagers if one refers, for instance, to

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<sup>199</sup> Ursule K. LeGuin, “Why Americans are afraid of Dragons?”, In *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ed. Susan Wood. (Hastings on Hudson, NY: Ultramarine Publishing, 1980), p. 44.

Pullman or Le Guin, who both state that children and teenagers are not as afraid to tackle intricate topics as adults are. Nonetheless, he suggests, through the good characters winning over the bad ones, one should do one's best in life but he does not always paint a black and white picture. His final image of love conquering obliteration, an idea very well known in literature as has been discussed in the introduction, supports this idea. It is only through a joint effort and finally Mogget's or Yrael's support that the ultimate force of evil, Orannis is destroyed. It is therefore also crucial to remember that it is the little pleasures in life, such as fish for Mogget, which awaken his love of life and provoke his final decision to join the six in order to close the circle of the initial seven. The love that overcomes death in *The Abhorsen Chronicles* is not sexual passion as exemplified with the reference to *Death in Venice* in the introduction; it is bonds of friendship, family ties and burgeoning feelings of mutual attraction.

Other aspects that Nix's trilogy includes are typical elements of young adult novels. Appleyard points out the importance of truthfulness; it is there but in the sense of fantastic realism as described by A. Waller.

The language used is accessible for a teenage audience; descriptions of unfamiliar settings are embedded in action and dialogue. The books with a total of some 1200 pages achieve epic scope. It is the type of narrative whose terminology readers gradually become familiar with; the fast moving plot makes for compelling reading and complete absorption. Readers are encouraged to create their own representations of the world of *The Abhorsen Chronicles*. If one recognizes young adult fiction as a genre of its own, one also has to accept the idea of different possible readings: teenagers will not read the stories in the same way as adults do. Although younger readers may not be able to grasp Nix's possible references to other literary characters, works and cultures, such as Shakespeare's Touchstone in *As you like it*, it does not hinder them from enjoying the stories and becoming involved in them. The aim of teenage literature is not to produce a sense of intertextuality, which is not

meant negatively in this case; very often, it is these stories that help young readers build up their own repertoire of fictional contexts.

To conclude, this thesis has shown through the presentation of various theoretical considerations and close analysis that teenage literature has earned its right to be taken seriously. Stories like *The Abhorsen Chronicles* are not merely trivial or childish. On the contrary, they provide a vessel for escapism so dearly needed by many adolescent readers in order to cope with the real world surrounding them. They can support teenagers' process of development through their mediated messages and encourage critical thinking. Death can hardly be seen as a simple topic and Nix's success in dealing with it has demonstrated how well teenage fiction can handle such delicate subjects. Finally, Garth Nix is widely recognised as one of the most popular young adult authors and this thesis should have demonstrated why and how he has merited this acknowledgment.

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