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The pedagogical use of the Gothic element according to the psychosocial development of the child based on Erikson's theory

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ABSTRACT: Reading stories with Gothic elements to children has always been a point of discussion. Some people, mostly parents, find them pointlessly scary and terrifying, subverting the didactic part of the fairytales. If someone wants to find what book is appropriate for what age group, the categorization is based on the complexity of the vocabulary rather than the complexity of the theme thus the question whether or not the Gothic elements takes away the didactic part of a story still remains.
Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and his eight stages of development highlights what a person understands about how they grow, how their social circle impacts their growth, and why some people experience identity crisis. His theory helps educators, teachers and parents to adopt the appropriate stance in educating children. Every one of the eight stages happens to a different age group and shows what difficulties they have to overcome in order to grow.
Like Erikson's theory, many stories with Gothic elements, examine the maturation process, as well as the steps someone must take to learn from their mistakes and grow. Without this introduction to fear through the Gothic elements, children may enter adolescence unprepared to resolve intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. Thus, the Gothic element in children's literature, in addition to being a source of entertainment, achieves a didactic purpose by providing the emotional training wheels people need to mature.
KEYWORDS: Gothic element, pedagogy, Erikson's psychosocial development, children's books, age groups

I. INTRODUCTION

There had always been a struggle to choose what book is appropriate for which child according to their age. When it comes to the appearance of Gothic elements in stories and fairytales, most people find them too scary to be read to children.

Ferreira and Laundry recognize that you have to choose an age group if you want to tell a story (Ferreira, 2020), (Miriam Laundry Publishing, n.d.). Additionally, many publishing houses have categorized books to accommodate each age group (Kindle Direct Publishing, n.d.). This categorization methodology has proven to be inadequate. Since this methodology is based on the number of pages and the simplicity of the vocabulary, the choice of a book depends on the child's reading ability. There are many books containing an easy vocabulary, yet they are not considered suitable for children by some (barringtonstoke, n.d.), (BookTrust, n.d.). These stories usually have many Gothic elements and tent to scare children. Many people believe that the scary aspect of these elements is pointless and takes away the didactic purposes of the stories. However, the Gothic element serve a didactic purpose to every story (Howarth, 2014), helping children to find courage, overcome their fears and mature in a safe environment.

Helping prove that, is Erikson's theory of psychosocial development which shows what obstacles every age group has to face in order to grow. Each of his eight stages show what that crisis (obstacles) at each stage a person must overcome in order to learn from their mistakes and grow. and how these obstacles can be found in the Gothic elements of stories and fairytales.

In this article, I show that Gothic elements are found in many well known and loved children's stories and fairytales and how they can help children overcome the crisis of each of Erikson's developmental stages, proving that the Gothic element in children's stories is essential to a child's emotional and mental growth.

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II. CATEGORIZATION OF BOOKS BY AGE GROUP & NUMBER OF PAGES

Observing among the fairy tales, we will find that there are stories whose degree of complexity varies, thus emphasizing the necessity of defining age groups in children's books.

The easier the problem, the more suitable is the story to younger children, and respectively, the bigger the problem or stronger the evil, the more suitable is the story to older children. (Almon, n.d.) (Sally, 2010) The decision and ultimately the choice, as an answer to the question "which fairy tales are suitable for which age groups", is the problem of every kindergarten teacher, every teacher and every parent. (Almon, n.d.)

Several publishing houses that deal with the children's audience and children's book authors, categorize the books that are ideal for each age group based on the number of words and images that each book contains (Kindle Direct Publishing, n.d.) analyzing even the illustrations that are acceptable per category. Noting that the differences between their categorizations are quite small, it would be possible to consolidate them in the following table (noting, however, that the boundaries of the categories are not strict, but may change according to the audience on a case-by-case basis, depending on the children's reading ability):

Ages		Suitable Books
0-3		Picture books (board books) Nursery rhymes, lullabies & poems Maximum 300 words
2-5		Early illustrated Concept & novelty books Nursery rhymes, lullabies & poems Ideally 500-700 words
3-7		Picture Books for early readers Maximum 1000 words Books with pictures, illustrations & novelty books
4-8		Early level readers Maximum 2.000 words
6-9		Children's chapter books & Graphic Novels Ideally 4.000-6.000 words
8-12	8-10	Middle Grade chapter books with few illustrations & Graphic Novels 10.000 – 25.000 words
	10-12	Middle Grade chapter books with few illustrations & Graphic Novels 25.000 – 50.000 words
12+		Young Adult literature 45.000-90.000 words

Table 1: Categorization of books by age group and number of pages

Ages 0-3

According to *Table 1*, preschool books for children aged 0-3 years are short and easy to read. They come in cloth format or very hard pages of thick cardboard, with a maximum word count of 300. They have more pictures than text and are durable.The main purpose of books at these ages is to teach children basic language skills (for example learning the alphabet, distinguishing shapes and colors, etc.) (Miriam Laundry Publishing, n.d.). A picture book is meant to be read aloud (Ferreira, 2020) and they can be divided into two categories: Concept books and novelty books. Concept books teach factual information with illustrations and text (often single words) or even in the form of poems, songs and nursery rhymes. Concepts covered are shapes, body parts, colors, spatial relationships, numbers, alphabet, animals and more. Novelty books are books with pop-up windows, textures, buttons, sounds or with folding pages (Ferreira, 2020)

Ages 2-5

Books with lots of pictures and less text, for children aged 2-5, can have up to 800 words, with an ideal number of words under 500. The stories are slightly more complex, but the overall mood is usually happy and without sadness or hardship (Almon, n.d.). The images can cover the entire page and are usually present on every page (Ferreira, 2020) (penguin.co, n.d.)

Ages 3-7

Books with pictures and a strong story, up to a maximum of 1000 words. Picture books can be about anything and anyone but children respond best to heroes who are at their own age which means the protagonist is usually under the age of 7. (Vitale, 2022) (penguin.co, n.d.). Stories of this category have a strong pattern of repetition (Almon, n.d.) which involves the main character of the story often starting out in the world with a simple mission to complete. Although obstacles are encountered, they do not weigh on the soul of the reader (Almon, n.d.).

Ages 4-8

This age group is a level higher than picture books. The illustrations outnumber the text, which is usually a short story and the word count can range from 1.000 to 3.000. Usually, short stories come out in a series, to allow children to read one after the other, which helps them develop their reading skills (Ferreira, 2020).

Vitale explains that because at this age, young readers are still solely concerned with deciphering the language, these books tend to not

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focus much on what the story is about but, on the simplicity and repetition of words.

Vitale also states that in this category illustrations are particularly important, as the genre relies heavily on them to help children decipher the text (Vitale, 2022)

Ages 6-9

At this category there are the first chapter books and Graphic Novels[1]. These books are suitable for children who have already started reading on their own looking for something more challenging but are not yet ready to read a novel (Miriam Laundry Publishing, n.d.)

They contain simple plot and short chapters. While these books still tend to have illustrations, they focus more on the text. These also come out in series, just like the short stories, only here the number of words is between 4.000-10.000. Books in this category usually include sketches rather than color illustrations (Ferreira, 2020)

These books are intended for emerging readers therefore simplicity of words is the key to success. Despite that, these books have well-developed plots, and strong central and secondary characters. In terms of illustrations, they may contain color illustrations on each page for the youngest readers or black and white illustrations on one page of each spread (Vitale, 2022).

Ages 8-12

This category can be divided into two subcategories. Lower Middle Grade Ages (ages 8–10), with 10.000-25.000 words and Upper Middle Grade Ages (ages 10–12), with 25.000-50.000 words (penguin.co, n.d.)

Books in this category often have the main protagonist not older than 12 years old, otherwise there is a fear of being considered as Young Adult. Thematically they focus on things that pre-adolescents experience, such as family, school, and social situations (Vitale, 2022) (penguin.co, n.d.). The romantic element is limited to heart throbs or are non-existent and if they touch on difficult topics, they keep a hopeful tone (Vitale, 2022).

Lower Middle Grade novels tend to be elaborately illustrated while Upper Middle Grade may contain one picture per chapter, limited to only the beginning of each chapter (Vitale, 2022) or have no pictures at all (Ferreira, 2020) (Horslen, n.d.)

Ages 12+

From the ages of 12 and up, appears the "Young Adult" category such as the latest "Harry Potter" books, "Hunger Games", "Goosebumps" and many other. The wordcount in these books range between 45.000 and 90.000 (Fogle, 2020)

This category includes most of the genres that appear in literature for adults, with themes that usually trouble teenagers, such as friendship, sexuality, romantic relationships, drugs, alcohol, gender identity and more (Wells, 2003), (Salao, n.d.). Sex scenes and profanity can still appear (Vitale, 2022) Stories of this kind focus on the protagonist's challenges to find his place in the adult world (Vitale, 2022) and focus on his psychological and moral development from childhood to adulthood, in which character change is important (Bakhtin, 2007), (Jeffers, 2005), (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) For this reason, the books in this category can even be characterized as "Coming-of-Age Novels". The main character is over 12 years old but not more than 17 years old and several times the story is written in the first person, wanting to lead the reader to personal reflection (Vitale, 2022)

The existence of illustrations in this category is limited to the beginning of each chapter or there are none at all. But there will certainly be a complete illustration on the cover (Ferreira, 2020)

III. UNDERSTANDING THE GOTHIC ELEMENT

An extensive list of children's book recommendations depending on the child's age, can be found online. But while the books that are suggested are depending on the age group's reading ability, several ghost stories and generally stories with Gothic elements[2] have certain *suggestions*. For example, in Juno Dawson's book "Grave Matter" (2017) there is a *suggestion* that while the story has easy enough vocabulary to be read by children aged 8 and older, the "interest age" is for children from 12 and older as "Content may not be suitable for younger readers" (barringtonstoke, n.d.), (BookTrust, n.d.). The same can be seen with Chris Priestley's "Seven Ghosts" (2019), Julian Sedgwick's "Ghosts of Shanghai" (2015), and several others. However, someone can find many Gothic elements on many loved young children's books and illustrations even at ages 0-6 (e.g.,

[1] Graphic Novels tend to have longer stories than comics. Unlike comics, which have multiple book series of short self-contained stories, graphic novels focus on a larger narrative, which usually takes at least two books to complete (Library of Congress, n.d.)

[2] Gothic Fiction: Gothic fiction is a genre of literature that combines elements of horror and romanticism. Romanticism is characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism, the idealization of nature and suspicion of industrialization.

International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)
Volume 3, Issue 1, Jan.-Feb., 2023, pp: 492-506 www.ijhssm.org

"Winne and Wilbur: Winnie the Witch" by Valerie Thomas).

In recent years there has been an increase in both publication and sales of stories with Gothic elements for children (e.g., "Harry Potter", "A Series of Unfortunate Events", etc.) (Buckley , 2020) but according to Howarth, the Gothic element had always been present in children's literature.

From the Middle Ages, children have been reading bloodthirsty tales such as "Beowulf" (c. 850 AD). Even in the 17th century, stories appeared with images of babies burning in hell and raging rivers of fire. Through these stories, writers used the Gothic element as a means to curb children's behavioral problems and educate them through fear rather than experience. In the 19th century, many Gothic elements continued to appear in children's literature, (e.g., in some selected fairytales by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, etc.). Many of these authors used Gothic elements in their stories to help children understand differences between good and bad social behavior. The Gothic element now served the purpose of the story and was not used to set a somber tone that portrayed the children's fear of authority and God, as was the case in the 17th century.

According to Howarth, the Gothic element and children's literature deal with universal issues such as trauma, maturity and punishment. Nevertheless, there are many parents who believe that the Gothic element is too scary for children. And they believe that scary stories will mark them forever. These parents, thinking from an adult's perspective, believe that the Gothic elements subvert the didactic part that is expected to exist in children's literature, with pointless shock and terror.

What are the Gothic elements?

The researcher observes many common Gothic elements that appear in the stories. Almost every story with Gothic elements includes at least two of them. The Gothic elements that emerge through this research are as follows:

a. **Spooky atmosphere / Dark setting**
b. **Mansion / Abandoned building / Castle**
c. **Dark forest**

The forest, in which the heroes usually get lost, symbolizes the dark, hidden, almost impenetrable world of our reader's unconscious. It usually represents something unknown, which because it is unknown, is also scary (Justine, 2011). Strange events can happen in the forest and it can be a place of transformation, where the hero overcomes various difficulties and finds his way home. It can also represent a hiding place where the characters can take refuge, but it can also represent the things people fear the most (nls.uk, n.d.)

d. **Relocation**

The protagonist relocates from something familiar to something unknown and frightening (usually a castle).

e. **Dead Parent (absent parent)**

The death of a parent is not automatically a Gothic element in a story. But when this death contributes to the development of the hero's story by giving even more sadness and tragedy to their persona, it becomes a Gothic element (e.g., the tragic story of the Baudelaire siblings in "A Series of Unfortunate Events" begins with the wrongful death of their parents)

f. **Evil Guardian / Villain / Anti-hero**

In several present-day stories, the villain may take on the role of a guardian. They are generally seen to have a trusted role in the lives of heroes and it is the betrayal of this trust in the eyes of the readers that turns them into a Gothic element.

Many times, the protagonist takes the form of the anti-hero, a flawed protagonist with monstrous elements (e.g., the Beast, in "Beauty and the Beast").

g. **Omens and Curses**
h. **Nightmares and Visions**
i. **Damsel in Distress**

The woman character is often held captive in a castle, terrorized by a villain or anti-hero, and rendered powerless. In today's era of feminism, the "damsel in distress" rarely appears in original stories, as more and more female heroes appear. Sometimes there might be a "man in danger" and the female hero must save him (e.g., Tamlin from "Courts of Thorns and Roses") but usually this Gothic element in modern literature has dwindled (unless it's on the Romance Genre)

j. **Ghosts / Paranormal / Supernatural**

"Paranormal" according to MasterClass is the idea that there are certain phenomena that are outside the spectrum of scientific understanding, but could possibly be explained by science one day, even if the odds are slim. "Supernatural" is the phenomena that's outside any scientific explanation (MasterClass, 2021). The paranormal genre can include supernatural elements, but the reverse cannot happen.

"Supernatural" generally includes creatures that have been popularized by folklore and fairytales. The supernatural element can be angels, demons, the Devil, fairies, ghosts, ghouls/trolls, goblins, deities, monsters, mythical creatures (phoenix, centaurs, mermaids, dragons, unicorns,

International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)
Volume 3, Issue 1, Jan.-Feb., 2023, pp: 492-506 www.ijhssm.org

etc.), vampires, werewolves, witches, zombies, etc. Anything belonging to the paranormal or otherworldly realm (Boston Public Library, n.d.)

According to Howarth, when many people think of the word "Gothic" in a story, they often associate it with something scary and dark. But a Gothic element is more than that. The Gothic element reveals the deepest fears and desires. It is a subtle reminder that life is not always the fairy tale we hope it is (Howarth, 2014). The unknown can sometimes be scary because it often represents change. Embarking on a journey alone, physically or emotionally requires courage and dedication. For example, in "Snow White" (1812), the dark forest, the hunter who tries to kill her, the wicked old witch, the poisoned comb and the apple, all these Gothic elements of the fairytale are what will lead her to her autonomy and self-reliance. To suffer is to learn, so Snow White must suffer before she can escape the comfort and safety of her home. She must begin to rely on herself and assert her independence if she is to survive the tumultuous period that clearly symbolizes her adolescence. (Howarth, 2014)

IV. ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Almon, while agreeing with the necessity of the categorization of books, does not deny that even the narrator's own relationship with the story plays an important role. Sometimes a storyteller can love and understand a story so much that they manage to tell it even to younger children. "It is as if the storyteller's love of the tale builds a bridge to it." (Almon, n.d.). Vitale mentions that in order to categorize a book into an age group, it is not only the number of words that plays a role but also the theme of the book (supposedly referring to the perceptual ability of the reader). But most of the categorization of books are by age, number of words and reading and not on subject and perceptual ability. But even so, with the appearance of the Gothic element in a story, the general idea is that it will frighten, terrify and not be fully perceived by young children.

In 1950, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson developed one of the most popular and influential theories of social development, which centers around eight stages of psychosocial development (Kibin, 2024). In his book "Childhood and Society" he outlined a series of primary tasks of life. Tasks such as creating close relationships, productivity and experiencing "ego integrity" (Erikson, 1950)

It is firmly believed that Erikson's psychosocial theory should be taught to everyone as it is accessible and would greatly help all people of all ages to understand the relationship between life experiences and human behavior. Especially on adults, to learn how to help rather than hinder children's development. Erikson wanted to improve the way children and young people were taught and raised, and it would be appropriate if his ideas were more widely known and used in everyday life, beyond the clinical and counseling professions (businessballs.com, n.d.).

Erikson's theory was important because it addresses development throughout a person's life, not just during childhood. It also emphasizes the importance of social relationships in shaping personality and development at every point of development. It understands and explains the ways in which personality and behavior develop in a person's lifespan and is therefore useful for teaching, parenting, self-awareness, conflict resolution and generally for understanding of self and others (businessballs.com, n.d.).

The theory centers on the idea that as we age, we go through a series of psychosocial developmental tasks (Malone, et al., 2015). People of the same age do not automatically face the same difficulties and conflicts and do not share the same social environment (Cherry, 2022) (Howarth, 2014). Each stage involves a crisis of two opposing emotional forces (conflicts) where people come face to face and either overcome or fail to overcome (Walden University, n.d.). Erikson emphasizes that the word "conflict" is used "in a developmental sense to denote not a threat of disaster, but a turning point, a critical period of increased vulnerability and increased potential." (Erikson, 1968). The transition from one stage to another involves achieving a balance between the two opposing conflicts that represent each stage and is based on the maturity, difficulties, environment, dislikes of each stage (businessballs.com, n.d.). Each resolved conflict allows the individual to move on to the next stage, having managed through it to equip themselves with the appropriate tools they need to continue developing a strong sense of self (Howarth, 2014), (Malone, et al., 2015), (Cherry, 2022).

Erikson called the successful outcomes "virtues" and whether people develop them or not, they affect the rest of their lives (businessballs.com, n.d.), (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). If a conflict is handled correctly, the individual will feel a sense of mastery, which is sometimes referred to as "ego

International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)
Volume 3, Issue 1, Jan.-Feb., 2023, pp: 492-506 www.ijhssm.org

strength". If the conflict is not handled correctly, the person does not receive "virtue" but instead, "negative outcomes". Erikson developed clearer ideas and terminology to represent negative outcomes, dividing them into two categories: "Maladaptation" and "Malignancy" where, just like virtues, people tend to carry the psychological effects of previous unhelpful experiences with them for the rest of their lives. The individual will display a sense of inadequacy in this aspect of their development (Cherry, 2022) and will be more vulnerable to emotional distress (e.g., depression or hopelessness) and stagnation (e.g., lack of creativity and productivity) as they age (Malone, et al., 2015).

"Maladaptation" could be explained as "too much of a good thing", while "malignancy" could be seen as "not enough" or "inadequate".

A major weakness of psychosocial theory is that the precise mechanisms for conflict resolution and transition from one stage to another have not been well described or developed. The theory fails to explain in detail what kinds of experiences are necessary at each stage in order to successfully resolve conflicts and move on to the next stage. (Cherry, 2022)

Erik Erikson's theories of psychosocial development, can be found in many fairytales. Within every fairy tale lies a lesson in psychology (Kibin, 2024) (Bartleby, n.d.)

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

The stages of psychosocial development are as follows:

Stage	Developmental Phase	Age	Conflict	Significant Event	Outcome		
					Maladaptation	Virtue	Malignancy
1	Infancy	birth to 18 months	Trust v. Mistrust	Feeding & Comfort	Sensory distortion	Hope	Withdrawal
2	Childhood years	2-3 y/o	Autonomy v. Shame & Doubt	Toilet training	Impulsivity	Willpower & Self control	Compulsion
3	Preschool years	3-5 y/o	Initiative v. Guilt	Exploration & Discovery, Adventure & Play	Ruthlessness	Purpose	Inhibition
4	Primary School Ages	6-11 y/o	Industry v. Inferiority	School	Narrow virtuosity	Self-confidence & Competence	Inertia
5	Adolescents	12-18 y/o	Identity v. Role Confusion	Romantic relationships	Fanaticism	Fidelity	Repudiation
6	Young Adults	19-40 y/o	Intimacy v. Isolation	Social relationships	Promiscuity	Love	Exclusivity
7	Middle Age	40-65 y/o	Generativity v. Stagnation	Work & Parenthood	Overextension	Care	Rejectivity
8	Old Age	65 y/o until death	Integrity v. Despair	Reflection on life	Presumption	Wisdom	Disdain

Table 2: A brief summary of the eight stages of Erikson's model.

Stage 1: Trust v. Mistrust

The first stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is the most essential stage in life. The development of trust is based on the reliability and quality of the child's caregivers (Cherry, 2022) If the child is not provided with adequate and consistent emotional and practical care and love, the child will begin to lose trust in the adults in its life. Lack of trust will lead to mistrust, fear and the belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

Stage 2: Autonomy v. Shame and Doubt

Children at the second stage are just starting to gain some independence, take some basic actions on their own and make simple decisions about what they prefer. A key conflict of this stage is that children need to develop a sense of personal control over their physical skills. Potty training

plays an important role in helping children develop this sense of autonomy (Cherry, 2022), (Malone, et al., 2015), (businessballs.com, n.d.). By achieving these facts, the child develops autonomy and feels more secure and certain about themselves (Walden University, n.d.). If the child does not manage to gain autonomy during these years, he begins to feel ashamed and gains self-doubt.

Stage 3: Initiative v. Guilt

At this point in the preschool years of the third stage of psychosocial development, children begin to assert their power and control over the world through play and other social interactions. If they succeed, they develop initiative and a sense of competence. They gain a sense of purpose. If they fail to acquire these stage skills, they are left with a sense of guilt and self-doubt. When an ideal balance of individual initiative and willingness to work with others is achieved, the virtue known as "purpose" emerges.

Stage 4: Industry v. Inferiority

At this stage children must cope with new social and academic demands. They move away from excessive play and try to be more productive in life. The child's radius of significant relationships is especially important during this stage of psychosocial development as it extends beyond the family unit to includes school and neighborhood friends. The child begins to understand the importance of community and begins to imitate those around him. By encouraging improvement in abilities, and praising achievements from parents and teachers, the child will develop a sense of self-confidence and competence and belief in their skills (Cherry, 2022). If the child believes that they have failed in their efforts to be productive, they are likely to consider themselves a failure (Howarth, 2014) and have feelings of inferiority. They are more likely to begin to doubt their abilities and become inactive.

Stage 5: Identity v. Role Confusion

The fifth psychosocial stage happens in the teenage years. This stage plays an essential role in developing a sense of identity that will continue to influence behavior and development for the rest of a person's life (Cherry, 2022). During the teenage years, young people may receive confirmation of their ideals, values, and sense of self. They explore their independence and develop a sense identity. (Malone, et al., 2015) When psychologists talk about identity, they are referring to all the beliefs, ideals, and values that help shape and guide a person's behavior. Successful completion of this stage leads to the development of a strong sense of self and stronger feelings of independence, control, and personal identity (Cherry, 2022). Those who don't succeed in this stage, remain unsure of their beliefs and desires and will feel insecure and confused about themselves and the future.

Stage 6: Intimacy v. Isolation

In the early adulthood stage people are exploring personal relationships (Malone, et al., 2015). Erikson believed that it was vital for people to develop close, committed relationships with other people. By succeeding the conflict of this stage people acquire the virtue known as "love". It is characterized by the ability to create long-lasting, meaningful, durable and secure relationships with other people. Those who do not have a strong sense of self tend to have less committed relationships and suffer from loneliness and depression (Cherry, 2022), (Walden University, n.d.)

Although the age range for this stage is significantly longer than the previous ones, Howarth argues that the emotional needs associated with this stage remain constant throughout its duration. Even after the age of forty, these feelings continue to resonate according to the strengths and weaknesses of each person's individual relationships.

Stage 7: Generativity v. Stagnation

During adulthood people continue to build their lives but are focusing more on career and family. They cultivate things that will last them, often by having children or creating a positive change in the community, that benefits other people. Success in building a good and productive life leads to feelings of usefulness, fulfillment and a sense of contribution, acquiring the virtue of "caring", while failure leads to feelings of shallow participation in the world (Cherry, 2022)

Stage 8: Integrity v. Despair

The final psychosocial stage occurs during old age and focuses on life reflection (Malone, et al., 2015). At this point in development, people look back on their life events and determine whether they are happy with the life they have lived, developing a sense of satisfaction, pride, and integrity. Success in this stage leads to feelings of wisdom. They are ready to face the end of their lives with a sense of peace. Successfully completing this phase means looking back with few regrets and an overall sense of satisfaction. Those who on reflection feel only regret on things they did or didn't do, feel fear, sadness, bitterness and despair that their lives will end without accomplishing the things they feel they should have. They are likely to feel that their life is wasted (Cherry, 2022), (businessballs.com, n.d.)

International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)
Volume 3, Issue 1, Jan.-Feb., 2023, pp: 492-506 www.ijhssm.org

V. THE GOTHIC ELEMENT AND ERIKSON'S THEORY

Children have many fears. Two of the most common are the fear of abandonment and the fear of being overpowered. The best children's books address both of these fears. Rather than simply scaring children and making them feel stupid and embarrassed, these books respect children enough to validate their concerns and present stories that grab children's attention and give them new ideas and perspectives to think about (Howarth, 2014).

Like many Gothic stories, Erikson's theories examine the maturation process, focusing on themes such as healing, loss, and survival, as well as the steps we all must take to learn from our mistakes and grow. Using these internal and external conflicts, as well as the radius of important relationships, Erikson's psychosocial approach offers a fresh and exciting way of looking at children's literature, specifically the conflicts that arise in the maturation process and the ways in which the Gothic element helps to discover and resolve each fundamental crisis.

The Gothic element can be applied equally to children and adults. There is no emotion specifically for adults and, according to Erikson, "every basic conflict of childhood lives on, in some form, in the adult." Children and adults have the same fears but these fears take different forms depending on one's age and maturity. Children are fully capable of feeling anger, pain, jealousy, betrayal and fear. In childhood, fears simply manifest in different forms. Usually, if people fear something in childhood, they usually continue to fear it in adulthood. Without this introduction to fear, children may enter adolescence unprepared to resolve intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts such as puberty, sex, relationships, or peer pressure. Therefore, the Gothic element in children's literature, in addition to being a source of entertainment, achieves a didactic purpose by providing the emotional training wheels we all need to mature.

In his book "Under the Bed, Creeping. Psychoanalyzing the Gothic in Children's Literature" (2014), Howarth focused on only five of Erikson's eight stages because these five stages are the most relevant to children and young adults. He omitted the first stage, infancy, because the cognitive skills acquired at this stage do not include the types of literature he wanted to analyze. The last stage he analyzed was the sixth, the stage of early adulthood, because the maturation process is also related to adults. Some people in this age range may still be stuck in the previous stage, while others may have already completed stage six and moved on to the next. Howarth's analysis focused on how this group still clings to traces of their childhood, as well as the various ways in which children's literature reflects the trials and tribulations of this group.

Bellow there will be presented some Gothic elements of fairytales/stories and how these can help children progress through different stages of development.

Stage 2: Autonomy v. Shame and Doubt

Howarth sets an example through Christina Rossetti's narrative Gothic poem, Goblin Market (1862). He believes that while some will certainly argue that toddlers will not be able to understand many of the poem's themes, they can still understand the main ideas involving desire and impulsiveness, especially when aided by the illustrations.

For young readers, Lizzie symbolizes an adult presence in the book, a powerful reminder that children cannot function in the world without the help and guidance of a loving and caring authority figure. Laura's near-death experience, as well as the shame and doubt she experiences after returning home from the market, escalate the poem into a cautionary tale preaching the merits of behavior.

Goblin Market is an important contribution to children's literature, as through its integration with the Gothic element, it advises children to listen to their parents and not give in to temptation. Most importantly, it portrays the idea that misbehaving children can be saved and reassures children that although they will certainly make mistakes throughout their lives, there is the potential to benefit from those mistakes and, as a result, mature to respectable adults (Howarth, 2014).

Stage 3: Initiative v. Guilt

A very good story that Howarth sets as an example for this stage is that of Pinocchio, by Carlo Collodi (1883). In his book, Howarth tried to analyze how purpose and interception affect Pinocchio's character, and how Collodi incorporates these themes into his novel, emphasizing his belief that children's characters and personalities are shaped by grim experiences and harsh lessons (Howarth, 2014).

Being a wooden puppet, Pinocchio must earn the right to be a real boy. He wants to be independent and make his own decisions, like any real child. He must also learn to master the guilt that

accompanies missteps and the harm they often cause. These devastating consequences not only affect Pinocchio, but also those around him. It is natural at this stage of psychosocial development for a child to want to experiment with a new range of significant relationships and take on different responsibilities. The child wishes to move beyond the home and seek future roles, even if those roles exist solely in their own mind (Howarth, 2014). Pinocchio, however, has not learned to limit his sense of initiative and is thus constantly in dangerous situations. As Pinocchio wanders, yearning to develop his own identity, he continually makes bad choices and suffers the consequences. He also experiences moments of intense guilt in which, usually through fear and embarrassment, he admits his mistakes and vows to always behave and think rationally. Throughout the story, these feelings of guilt help shape Pinocchio's consciousness. This "inner voice" is personified and manifested through the character Jiminy Cricket.

While some adults may find the novel extreme in its various depictions of how children learn through misbehavior and punishment, Pinocchio's misadventures are symbolic and represent childhood incidents. The children are afraid for Pinocchio, but the fear is lessened by the realization that he is just a wooden puppet. Children between the ages of three and six can relate to Pinocchio, who alongside him, are trying to gain an identity while understanding the differences between right and wrong (Howarth, 2014).

Stage 4: Industry v. Inferiority

Howarth, analyzes this stage, using as an example the novel Coraline by Neil Gaiman (2002) where he deals with the conflicts that children experience when they feel the natural desire to follow their own habits and idiosyncrasies. It reflects the emotions and difficulties often experienced by school-age children trying to navigate Erikson's fourth stage of psychosocial development (Howarth, 2014).

This pursuit begins with a separation from parents (stage three). Coraline must move beyond her childhood, past the boundaries of the imaginary, into a landscape that can provide her with a sense of productivity and self-importance.

The fantasy world she finds herself in is certainly representative of many children's fears that adulthood is scary and limiting, and that they are unloved. The Gothic atmosphere that permeates the “other world” is terrifying for both young and adult readers. In it, there are rats and severed hands, a black cat, trapped children's souls, and even a fake mother who enjoys munching on black beetles.

In many ways, this story of a young girl discovering another fantasy world is similar to Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865). In both novels, the main character is brave and courageous as they encounter strange people and talking animals in their quest to survive and return home and to their family. Both novels contain the theme of "home away from home" and feature young girls who must think for themselves and survive without the help of their loved ones. Throughout their adventures, both Coraline and Alice gain a deeper sense of identity as they navigate through a series of obstacles that create conflict in their lives. Like many children, Alice and Coraline do not always understand why adults are so busy and serious and why their words and actions seem so confused. They dream of a world without parents and authority figures, where they are allowed to do whatever they want. Alice and Coraline's transition into a fantasy world gives these two young girls the opportunity to not only understand their own identities and feelings, but also to feel more confident when interacting with the adult figures in their lives. Surviving their ordeals in the fantasy world, having won over the creepy adult figures, instills in both girls a new confidence that they can rely on at home and in their respective communities (Howarth, 2014).

The presence of Gothic elements is an externalization of the psychological conflicts that often trouble many children as they move away from excessive play and try to become more productive in their lives. Neil Gaiman uses the Gothic landscape to symbolize the conflicts and emotions Coraline experiences as she moves away from reliance on her imagination and towards a sense of industry and productivity that will see her through adolescence. Gaiman evokes a creepy atmosphere as he describes the house Coraline lives in with her family. It is large with passageways, attics and cellars, and the spaces are also extensive, giving Coraline a chance to explore. Reading about such places, which are often associated with the Gothic, the readers expect Coraline to encounter danger at some point in the story, especially given the old well she's been warned to stay away from and the elusive black cat that slithers through the tall grass. By having the black cat as a character, Gaiman creates a sense of tension in the story, as well as a warning that Coraline may soon find herself in trouble.

In order for both Alice and Coraline to move forward in the fourth stage and resolve any necessary crises, they need to mature emotionally and gain self-confidence. Gaiman depicts this

important process by having Coraline move beyond the comfortable and safe environment of her home, into a new, unfamiliar landscape, with the Other Mother attempting to hold her captive. Similarly in Alice, Coraline moves away from her home and family into a new world. This natural longing to become independent, however, proves dangerous in Coraline's case as it becomes the catalyst for the book's disturbing plot in which her parents are kidnapped by a second set of parents who live in a Gothic world that darkly mirrors her own.

According to Howarth, Coraline's novel displays in a variety of ways the strengths and weaknesses that characterize the fourth stage of psychosocial development. She displays skill throughout the novel as she discovers the ability within herself to fight the false mother. With the help of her community, she becomes more confident in her decisions. Coraline also displays inferiority in the novel when she questions her own abilities, questioning whether or not she has the strength and intelligence to save her entire family. Because she must rely on herself throughout the novel, Coraline is able to overcome this sense of inferiority and develop a sense of productivity, a pride that comes from achieving the ability to think and act like an adult (Howarth, 2014).

Stage 5: Identity v. Role Confusion

Howarth for this stage analyzes the three versions of "Little Red Riding Hood": "Little Red Riding Hood" (Charles Perrault, 1697), "Little Red Cap" (the Brothers Grimm, 1812), and the French folk tale "Story of Grandmother" (considered the older version of these tales).

Howarth's choice to place these stories in Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development is because their main features are identity and role confusion, two issues that plague adolescents as they drift between childhood and adulthood. These three stories present various methods of dealing with sexual discovery and dealing with the dark side of human nature, featuring a girl on the verge of puberty whose parents have not instructed her about sexuality. It's a young girl's journey into womanhood, both in terms of menstruation and sexual awakening (Orenstein, 2002). Although many scholars choose to analyze these stories with a more child-friendly message (such as not talking to strangers and listening to their parents), there are several who have interpreted them as stories of sexual "predation" and discovery (Howarth, 2014) (Yolen, 2005). According to modern science, the wolves of fairy tales may be representative of sexual rapture. They believe that this relationship was not new, as it appears even in ancient stories (Jesse, 2000). While many have a sexual analysis of the story, with a negative connotation describing rape (Orenstein, 2002), several retellings focus on empowerment and depict Little Red Riding Hood successfully defending herself from the wolf (Orenstein, 2002).

Howarth refers to Little Red Riding Hood Syndrome, which takes its name from this well-known fairy tale. It's about the public's fear and misconception of wolves. It centers on the mistaken belief that wolves will attack humans without provocation leaving them helpless, only being able to thrash around and scream. While Red Riding Hood syndrome is primarily an adult fear, it arises from the same feelings of weakness and inferiority shared by children who are afraid of the dark or abandonment. So, it is no surprise that this fear of adults is mentioned in one of the most famous fairy tales. The word "syndrome," which is often synonymous with disease, echoes the sexual overtones found in many versions of Little Red Riding Hood, as well as the social taboos that accompany the flourishing of sexuality. Little Red Riding Hood is a story about stranger danger, but it is also a story about a young woman on the verge of adulthood. Discussing sexual activity between a parent and child is uncomfortable for everyone involved. In fact, when parents are faced with the reality that many teenagers have sex, they choose to turn a blind eye. In fact, many of the topics and issues associated with sex (such as love and communication, contraception, and ownership of our bodies) have been topics of debate for hundreds of years. Such issues are not bad or taboo, but natural and important contributions to identity formation, especially when it comes to resolving adolescent crises and progressing through these early stages of adulthood.

In "Story of Grandmother" by consuming her grandmother's flesh and blood, Little Red Riding Hood assumes the role of her grandmother and attempts to act out a grown-up love affair with the wolf. This cannibalistic element is important to interpret not in a literal sense, but in a symbolic sense. The flesh may symbolize the power and knowledge of the grandmother, while the blood may symbolize the onset of menstruation that all women must experience before reaching sexual maturity. As she drinks her grandmother's blood, she reaches physical maturity, she feels more confident about herself and is curious to play the role of a mature adult. Seeing how Little Red Riding Hood acts, immediately after assuming the role of her grandmother, gives one a deeper understanding of how a mature adult woman might act when faced

with intercourse. The girl's decision also reminds teenagers that only they have the ability to make sound, rational choices about their sexuality. Likewise, such intimate moments can come at any time during one's adolescence. Such moments should not be rushed, so as not to disrupt the maturation process, fueling negative emotions and increasing the risk of rejection that most teenagers experience in the fifth stage (Howarth, 2014).

While the other versions of Little Red Riding Hood focus on the Gothic landscape and danger of the forest, "Story of Grand-Mother" reveals its Gothic imagery with the flesh and bones consumed by Little Red Riding Hood, as well as the menacing figure of the wolf. The wolf is not only a vicious beast with sharp claws and teeth, but is also representative of the male sex, often seen as seductive, oversexed and dangerous. These characteristics parallel the representation of most male characters in Gothic novels, especially when applied to the Gothic motif of the "pursued maiden". This Gothic idea of a woman running away for her life from an oppressive male also relates to themes of isolation and abandonment, both of which appear in the various Little Red Riding Hood stories. The girl's absorption of the Gothic element, through consumption of the grandmother and through her intimacy with the wolf, represents her passage into womanhood and emphasizes that while the Gothic is an integral part of maturity, it should also be treated with respect as rite of passage, and not indulged in as a sexual fad that merely satiates one's curiosities. "The Story of Grandmother" also suggests that while the Gothic element is a necessary contribution to our growth, there are mature and immature ways to accept the more negative aspects of life. If the girl had been lazier, or perhaps more willing to sacrifice her grandmother, she might have been completely carried away by the wolf and lost her life at the end of the story. Such an ending would then undermine the pedagogical value of the Gothic element, depriving her of an important learning experience she needs to resolve those crises related to identity and role confusion. As in the other two versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the Gothic elements in "Story of Grandmother" provide the young girl with a firm understanding that coming of age, especially of a sexual nature, includes good times and bad times. These moments combine over time, during various stages of psychosocial and psychosexual development, to provide lifelong lessons that help shape our individual personalities.

Stage 6: Intimacy v. Isolation

For the final stage he explored, Howarth chose the story by J.M. Barrie, “Peter Pan” (1904) Undoubtedly, “Peter Pan” deals with the themes of coming of age, abandonment, the end; of play time and taking on adult responsibilities. However, few critics have addressed the novel's Gothic elements (pirates, poisonings, alligator attacks, and beheadings), and how they affect the sexual undertones that permeate the story and develop the relationships between Peter Pan, Wendy, and Captain Hook.

The conflict in this stage of development is the existence of a desire for expressions of love, but also a reluctance for fear of being vulnerable. The three main characters – Peter Pan, Wendy and Captain Hook - symbolize the pitfalls and obstacles of entering into a grown-up relationship. Each of these characters yearns for some form of intimacy. They crave a stable relationship, whether it is based on friendship or love. The love triangle between them defines three different ways of reacting to the demands of an adult relationship. Neverland, like many relationships, is a place of exile as well as escape. It’s a place where people may lose their identity if they do not choose to transcend the present moment. Such a move gives them an opportunity to reflect on the past and contemplate the future. In terms of psychosocial and psychosexual development, Neverland appears to be a transitional place that prepares one for the trials of early adulthood. (Howarth, 2014).

The Gothic elements in Peter and Wendy symbolize the fears inherent in growing up and having sex, including the violent emotions and tendencies that often accompany a loss of identity. It's an important reminder that relationships often involve competition and cooperation, a constant struggle not only between people and their identities, but also between people and their romantic partners. At the same time, they symbolize the constant fear of being alone, not being able to share personal experiences and living a life without romance and affection.

Both Peter Pan and Captain Hook are surrounded by friends, yet they do not develop close relationships with any of them. No character learns from the radius of their significant relationships. Instead, each abuses these relationships in an effort to achieve their own means. Solving crises at any given stage involves learning from a range of important relationships that people can think of as equals and not just expendable objects. But while Peter Pan is oblivious to this lack of intimacy, as shown by his ability to remain cheerful and naive, Captain Hook is acutely aware of his presence and laments his loneliness. If Peter Pan is angry at the thought of growing up to be a man, Captain Hook is

angry that he already has. Captain Hook cannot benefit from the Gothic elements of Neverland because, like Peter Pan, he does not interact with them. In many ways, they are extensions of Captain Hook's identity, and throughout "Peter Pan" he uses them not as educational tools that might offer self-reflection and help him gain intimacy, but as weapons to be used in his mission to destroy Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. By mishandling these Gothic elements, as seen in his failure to poison, stab, and drown his enemies, Captain Hook becomes more fixated on childhood and thus more isolated from any possibility of intimacy. While Peter Pan's rejection of the island's Gothic elements is evidence of his enduring innocence and youth, Captain Hook's absorption of the same elements only emphasizes his own intense loneliness and fear of growing old, a dread he also shares with Peter Pan. Captain Hook becomes a Gothic figure because he allows negative emotions to corrupt his character. While Peter Pan has not yet reached early adulthood, the stage when we usually gain a sense of our own mortality, Captain Hook hates being an adult and wishes to trade responsibility and reliability for simplicity and naivety. The lack of adult supervision in Peter's life, as well as his inability to interact with the Gothic elements, have not provided him with a set of codes and behaviors to respond to and learn from. He hasn't suffered a series of self-reflection-inducing crises. Even though Peter Pan says that "to die will be an awfully great adventure,", his courage in the face of death is not earned.

VI. CONCLUSION

Many would agree that there is a need to categorize books into age groups, as their degree of complexity varies (Miriam Laundry Publishing, n.d.), (Ferreira, 2020). For younger ages, books tend to have simple vocabulary, few pages and a lot of pictures. In contracts, books targeting older age groups, tend to have less pictures, longer chapters and more complex vocabulary, The general categorization is based on the degree of the vocabulary complexity rather than the complexity of the message they want to convey.

So, through this categorization, the main issue that emerges is that sometimes books with simple vocabulary can be easily read by younger ages, but thematically they are considered too complex for certain ages to understand.

Psychologist Erik Erikson responded to the question of which level of message complexity is appropriate for which ages with his psychosocial theory of development. Erikson wanted to improve the way children and young people are taught and brought up. Many believe that his theory should be taught to everyone, and especially to children, parents and teachers, as it helps people of all ages to understand the relationship between life experiences and human behavior, helping children develop emotionally and mentally (Cherry, 2022) (businessballs.com, n.d.).

In his theory, Erikson grouped ages based on eight stages of psychosocial development. Each stage develops and matures the person, as well as showing issues concerning them and the complexity of the message they can receive and understand. Adding to that, people of the same age do not always experience the same stage of psychosocial development, as one may not have managed to overcome the conflict of that stage.

Shumaker agrees with this as she states that no matter how you read a story with Gothic elements to a child, attention must be paid to their feelings. Children's feelings are real, even if the characters are fictional. Sensitive children may react differently and someone needs to know the temperament of each child. Referring to children as sensitive, we now understand that "sensitivity" has to do with what stage of development they are at.

Furthermore, in the categorization of books by age groups , there is the theory of: "the boundaries of the categories are not strict, but can be changed according to the audience on a case-by-case basis". Perhaps this case does not refer only to how well a child can read, but subconsciously the "case" went to the degree of complexity of the messages.

Some parents, thinking from an adult's point of view, consider that the Gothic element in a story, as a degree of complexity of conveying a message, subverts the didactic part that is expected to exist in children's literature, with the sole purpose of shocking and terrifying. The Gothic element is usually characterized by an eerie atmosphere, large castles, ghosts and monsters, dark forests and usually the orphaned children (protagonists) are asked to explore the world alone. But the Gothic element is more than just a means to scare children. The Gothic element reveals deeper goals and desires and helps children learn how to manage their own distressed feelings, as well as how to survive in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

When we interact with Gothic elements, we learn what scares us and what we find fascinating. We learn that we are not always in control of our imaginations. And we learn that domestic spaces

can be just as scary as a graveyard or a cabin in the middle of the woods. (Howarth, 2014). Children relate to characters in a Gothic story because they feel a kinship with someone who is confused and scared, often wandering alone, both physically and emotionally, in a vast world they don't understand and, perhaps more importantly, doesn't seem to understand them.

Like many Gothic stories, Erikson's theories examine the maturation process, focusing on themes such as healing, loss, and survival, as well as the steps everyone must take to learn from our mistakes and grow. By immersing themselves into stories with Gothic elements, children can learn how to deal with family and social issues that affect them in everyday life. Through Howarth's analysis of the Gothic element in several well-known fairy tales, proves that the Gothic element is more than a simple means to terrify and shock, and the degree of complexity of the messages they want to convey, befits the corresponding stage of psychosocial development . As Shumaker reports, "I felt grateful to E. B. White (author of "Charlotte's Web", 1952). Not only did he touch my child's soul, but he gave him an opportunity to practice how to cope when overwhelmingly sad feelings arrive" (Shumaker, 2016).

Children's literature pairs well with Gothic elements because the best children's literature is able to "reveal both our greatest pleasures and our deepest fears or anxieties". Understanding what pleases or frightens us is key to understanding what it means to be human and how we behave and understand each other. The stories children read, whether poetry or novels or picture books, can provide small clues to help them define their own individuality. Childhood is a journey and the Gothic element is a path we have to cross and even though it is a bleak and scary path, all children should be allowed to explore on their own, because children can appreciate the light only if they have played in the dark.

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