
The Theme of Premature Burial in Garth Nix's Early Novels

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Over the past fifteen years Garth Nix has established himself as a leading Australian writer of Gothic fantasy for children and young adults. His fantasy quest novels mingle elements from sword and sorcery and Gothic horror, with the horror element at its most potent in *Sabriel* and its sequels. He has been a prolific writer, at his best when working on the larger scale of trilogies and series novels: it is in these more extended works that his talents as an accomplished storyteller and builder of richly imagined worlds are best demonstrated. In this paper I shall be focussing on his earlier novels, *The Ragwitch*, *Shade's Children* and *Sabriel* in the psychoanalytic contexts of the Freudian concept of the uncanny and the Jungian concepts of rebirth and individuation, and arguing that the theme of premature burial functions in these books both as a Freudian locus for the uncanny and as a Jungian locus for individuation and rebirth. It is through this theme of premature burial that the heroic Jungian world view of sword and sorcery in these novels encounters the more pessimistic Freudian world view of Gothic horror, an uneasy point of contact from which Nix's fiction derives much of its idiosyncratic flavour.

It is considerably more common in literary criticism to mount an argument from either an exclusively Freudian or exclusively Jungian perspective, so antagonistic are these theorists. Thus, in his book-length study of the Freudian uncanny, Nicholas Royle has nothing to say about any positive possibilities of rebirth from the grave in his chapter on premature burial. Jung mentions the uncanny nowhere in his collected works, despite acknowledging the 'disagreeable aspects' of the hero's battle for deliverance from the mother, part of his journey to individuation. When Jung describes such a hero as 'sunk in his own depths, he is like one buried in the earth, a dead man who has crawled back into the mother,'¹ he is contemplating the same phenomena as in Freud's analysis of the uncanny mother.² Nix's fantasy fiction demonstrates that these two understandings of the human psyche, as on a heroic path to individuation and as doomed to an appalling series of uncanny recrudescences, can coexist (if uneasily) in his combination of Gothic horror elements with the hero-quest—though it is only in *Sabriel* and its sequels that a measure of balance is attained. *The Ragwitch* struggles

with the combination of horror and hero-quest, sword and sorcery and the Gothic, while in *Shade's Children* Gothic horror prevails, premature burial retains much of its traditional horror, and these two books' happy endings prove as far from convincing as in most classic works of Gothic horror.

Part of Nix's originality in all three of these fantasy texts lies in his treatment of the theme of premature burial, using (as well as conventional imagery of dryness, earth and tightly enclosing coffin walls) imagery of wetness, of watery expanses either within the psyche or underneath the city. The wetness of these sites for premature burial suggests amniotic fluid, the tomb as watery womb capable of devouring and holding fast but also of affording a means of return to life. This imagery of an uncanny watery womb-tomb incarcerating the living dead in premature burial is at its most obvious in Nix's first novel, *The Ragwitch*, a children's story that invokes the Gothic horror of a doll, the Ragwitch, coming to malign life. The book's child heroine, Julia, finds herself wetly engulfed within the Ragwitch doll's mind, experiencing through the Ragwitch's senses, helplessly observing the doll's evil attempts to reconquer the world from which she was cast out centuries ago. Julia and several other good characters have been taken up into the witch-doll's psyche in a form of premature burial, violently sundered from their former lives. Julia finds herself in danger of becoming completely absorbed within this devouring mother's womb-tomb: 'You are inside me,' whispered the Ragwitch maliciously. 'Your essence has been consumed. But I will let you live a little longer, for my amusement.' (1990, p.32)

King Mirren is another of the Ragwitch's internalised victims; his state of being is also indeterminate, for the reader is informed only that he was presumed dead when his body disappeared during battle against the Ragwitch centuries ago. The magic-wielder Lyssa actually dies in human form but not in her tree-form, as her spirit enters the witch-queen's psyche. These characters partly experience their present, entombed, dead-yet-alive state of being as immersion in a strange fluid, at once cerebral and amniotic, in which they are helpless when the witch is paying them full attention, but able to swim about while she is distracted. These buried inhabitants also include a young, innocent

version of the Ragwitch herself, entombed within her own psyche as her previous self, alive only in memory.

The Ragwitch is a flawed novel. Nix struggles to resolve the paradoxes of being buried alive as a memory within one's future self or incarcerated within the womb-tomb of another being's psyche. A strong connection is established between the Ragwitch as a being of watery malignity and the fluid depths of the mind. Thus the witch-doll is repeatedly described as 'leaking' her straw stuffing, and her powers assail the good characters like a 'wave' or 'currents' of evil. To this extent the book builds up a Freudian world of Gothic horror in which the monstrous grave chamber is at once within and without the psyche, not merely the external threat of the Ragwitch's body enclosing the good characters but also, the book hints, the malign depths of their own unconscious, to whose lure Julia momentarily succumbs and, in the distant past, the innocent young witch has totally yielded.

Such a reading, with the unconscious as a Freudian horror of uncontrolled impulse and appetite, is called into question by less ominous episodes of dry burial. Within the wet world of the Ragwitch's interior are quite idyllic patches of dry land upon which the good characters assemble to resist their captor, and even find time to enjoy a picnic. These dry patches are explained as vividly experienced memories. The Ragwitch's psychic topography becomes confusing, even self-contradictory, as shifts occur in the narrative between the Gothic horrors of perpetual entombment for sentient and helpless victims and the potential sword and sorcery closure of battle waged on these dry patches by the warrior king and magic wielder, along with heroic Julia, against the great force of evil that contains them. Such shifts are always marked by the transition from an all-encompassing wet world to dry terrain, but no psychological explanation is given for the internal representation of memories in near-perfect geographical detail, as opposed to the amorphous fluidity of the Ragwitch's consciousness in perceiving, judging and deciding mode.

Premature burial also occurs in this novel outside the Ragwitch. Her principal servant, Oroch, conceals his red-rat body in tar-soaked bandages, emerging from his stony prison like a mummy resurrecting itself. The mummy that

cannot be contained within its tomb is a familiar inhabitant of the world of the literary Gothic, the reverse case to premature burial in that it should be dead but cannot be confined by normal burial practices; but Oroch, it seems, has been incarcerated alive in the monument he built for his evil queen, and thus provides another instance of premature burial, the wetness hinted at beneath his bandages.

Much further removed from Gothic formula is the episode of dry premature burial undergone by Paul, Julia's younger brother, who crosses into the Ragwitch's world to rescue his sister. Alone and lost, he is captured by the May Dancers and imprisoned in a deep dry pit in the earth:

He tried licking his lips, but there was no moisture in his mouth. Even tears were beyond his dried-out body, and he found himself unable to cry. Closing his eyes, Paul thought he might as well die then and there, and save himself the trouble later on—when a few lumps of earth fell onto his chest.
(p.25)

This dry ordeal is only temporary. Paul's pit is as much womb as tomb, in the sense that he is being tested there and reborn onto the hero-path of individuation, in Jungian terms. Thus his bed in the pit is said to be 'like a shallow baby's cot' (p.24). There is no dark current pulling at him or drowning him in evil, no prospect of repeated capture by the May Dancers or of perpetual imprisonment in their earthen pit. Rather, he is surviving (as all Jungian heroes must), the symbolic return to the mother's domain as womb-tomb.³ Paul's part of the story is in general much more aligned with sword and sorcery than with Gothic horror. He meets knights and peasants in a feudal kingdom, gains a magic weapon and eventually fights the Ragwitch in single combat. The dry burial that he experiences in this early episode with the May Dancers fits the Jungian paradigm of descent to the underworld of the mother's womb and rebirth much more closely than the Freudian paradigm of the endlessly repeated return of the repressed.

The book's ending is remarkably indecisive. The Ragwitch dies, killed in battle, stabbed by Paul's magic spear—or does she actually commit suicide, leaning into the spear, overwhelmed by the memory of her younger self—or is this act the outcome of her internal victims' momentary

take-over of her doll-body? The Ragwitch dies—except that the text also states that as an essence of evil, she can never be killed. Some, but not all, of her entombed inhabitants then find a final death as she ‘sinks’ into the earth. This ending leaves it unexplained why Julia, alone among the Ragwitch’s victims, can return to her own body and former life, and keeps open the possibility that the Ragwitch’s ‘sinking’ into death may imply some further wet resurrection to come.

Earlier, centuries before the narrative begins, the Ragwitch was defeated at the site of a sacred pool which was drained in the battle and has remained dry ever since. Now, the battle in which Paul defeats her is fought beside the same dry pool. This adds to the evidence for a consistent pattern of wetness and dryness in the novel, such that in her own wet domain of the uncanny (drowned knights brought back to life, red-raw mummy, internal fluids) the Ragwitch is invincible, but once battle has shifted to dry land, she can be defeated and (perhaps) permanently disposed of, in sword and sorcery fashion. This is perhaps why the book’s comic wise old man, Tanboule, lives high up a mountain in a curious house shaped like an ark: a ridiculous folly in realist terms, but in terms of the book’s psychic topography, a sensible precaution against the Ragwitch’s upsurges of malign power. At the start of the book, it appears that for centuries a dry form of burial has contained the Ragwitch within our world, wrapped in feathers like a monstrous dead-yet-alive chick within an enormous crow’s nest, another version of the dry maternal womb-tomb. As soon as she is freed from this premature burial and regains her power in her own world, the Ragwitch manifests wetly: ‘In a black pool, far underground, the water seethed and bubbled... and then the Ragwitch appeared in the pool’ (p.31).

The final mention of the witch ‘sinking’ into death at the end of the book hints at just such another possible return. The text here celebrates the successful ending of a hero-quest and the achievement of a measure of individuation by both child characters, while retaining the potential for further Gothic horror: as an essence of evil, the doll will prove indestructible. In both instances, that of the Ragwitch’s long ago defeat and that of her current overthrow, what seems to be a permanent dry burial retains the possibility of uncanny return.

Nevertheless, premature burial proves not so very terrible in this book. Within the Ragwitch’s amniotic mind, in its dry patches, Julia not only finds allies but can enjoy a sunshiny picnic. Nix’s alternations between Gothic horror and sword and sorcery, between the uncannily wet and the familiarly dry, rob the horror of much of its power. The book’s climax disintegrates into confusion over the exact fate of the witch-doll; here sword and sorcery and Gothic horror operate to cancel one another out.

Shade’s Children is a novel much more oriented to the outer world. Almost all of its action takes place in a city reminiscent of Los Angeles, fifteen years into our future, in a time when alien Overlords rule the earth, when all adult human beings have mysteriously vanished and children are cultivated as breeding stock and bodily parts for the Overlords’ monstrous armies, with which they play war-games. A few escapee children find refuge with Shade, an uncanny adult who is long dead as a human being but retains a kind of life as a disembodied consciousness encased in a computer. Depending on how the reader judges Shade, this electronic form of survival can be understood either as the uncanny return of the evil Shade or as the good Shade’s clinging on to life in premature burial, while he seeks to reverse the calamity that has befallen humanity. The theme of premature burial is most strongly suggested when (as in *The Ragwitch*) Shade’s younger, more innocent self wakes and struggles for domination within his older self’s electronic psyche. By now the character of Shade appears at best misguided, at worst actively malevolent, but at the novel’s start it is possible to read him as a nurturing, maternal adult.

The children and Shade live underwater in a submarine at dock in the city, entered through a tube: a very unlikely setting in realist terms but psychoanalytically suggestive of a nurturing womb with birth canal. This association renders Shade the symbolic mother rather than father of his children. The nurturing underwater enclosure of the submarine, Shade’s sanctuary, becomes a tomb when the Overlords detect and attack it. Along with his few surviving children, Shade now achieves heights of self-sacrificial heroism in a final battle, on dry land, in which the Overlords are decisively defeated and banished from our world. This part of the novel follows a Jungian pattern

of heroic quest and individuation, with the destruction of the womb-submarine precipitating a rebirth not only for his surviving children but for the whole human world.

It becomes less and less clear, as the book proceeds, whether Shade is more of a force for evil or for good. He repeatedly sends out his children on risky research trips and the book questions whether all this research is necessary, or whether he is in fact a monstrous parent sending his children out deliberately to die. Shade exists in the submarine in electronic form, as a hologram, but he builds himself a mobile mechanical body much like that of a giant spider, having previously manufactured a host of smaller spider- and rat-robots (these are Shade's other, uncanny 'children'). Symbolically, spiders function as representations of the monstrous feminine, so closely are they identified in literature with those species of spider in which the larger, more aggressive female devours the male. Shade as a robot spider is triply uncanny, in Freudian terms: as a sentient spider, as an animated machine, and as a long dead male self-entombing his consciousness within the semblance of a monstrous female.

Shade travels mechanically in his new spider body and eventually achieves full electronic coverage of the city, but his children's journeys take place mainly in the drains. These afford the safest means of travel, now that hostile battle troops and trackers patrol the city's streets and Wingers infest the skies. The drains radiate from a central underground reservoir, built to safeguard the drainage network from surges of water, but now the Overlord troops flush them with water to drown any human rebels. For the fifteen years since catastrophe struck the earth, it seems that Shade has been sending his children through the drainage system, across the central reservoir, to do his research and die. This pattern could be given a two-fold Freudian reading, from the perspective of the children and that of the Overlords. The children are an underground wet threat to the Overlords, the watery uncanny traversing the drains, that the Overlords must keep attempting to repress; alternatively, and much more in the spirit of the book, the Overlords are the monstrous invaders who must be battled incessantly, with no prospect of final victory while the battleground remains the wet expanses of the city. This latter reading is far more conventional, within the tradition

of dystopian science fiction. *Shade's Children* gains some of its uncanny power from the collision between these two readings, with the children battling the invaders but themselves aligned with Shade's other rat- and spider-robot children, obeying a long-dead mentor.

After this extended collision of two uncannies, the book's brief ending, its final battle on dry land, with a redeemed Shade sacrificing his life for the sake of his children's future, reads like a cursory attempt at a Jungian happy ending, replete with imagery of final death and rebirth. The children stacked in suspended animation in the Meat Factory can now be rescued from their premature burial. The monstrous troops for whose manufacture the Meat Factory inmates were processed, attain final death, freed in a different way from the premature burial of their Overlord-controlled bodies:

<i>A child is caught</i>	<i>foresaken at fourteen</i>
<i>A torment of terror</i>	<i>foul prisoned flesh</i>
<i>To know no kindness</i>	<i>battle the burden</i>
<i>Laid down at last</i>	<i>sleep now Sam</i>
<i>Dream no more death</i>	<i>fall to freedom</i>

(1997, p.299)

While these children, like most of the Ragwitch's inhabitants, find the freedom of a final death, for Shade's last two children a new life begins, Tolkien-style: 'He walked up to the woman and bent down to kiss her lovingly on the ear. She smiled and called out to the children. "Ella! Drum! Daddy's here!"' (p.302).

Much more compelling is the implication that for fifteen years Shade has functioned as a giant spider within a gigantic web of deceit and betrayal that spans the city. Indeed, the layout of the city's drainage system can be understood as spidery, with its central reservoir the bulbous body and its drainage tunnels the many legs. In such a reading, the children cannot escape Shade's wetly extended spider-body until they finally leave the city and climb a nearby mountain to destroy the equipment that has beamed the Overlords down to earth. Before that, each quest that the children undertake by way of these drains is also undertaken through the extended body of Shade as a symbolic spider, so that

these children too can be viewed as prematurely buried in a watery body as extensive as a whole city.

Nix's second novel, *Sabriel*, is much more accomplished than either *The Ragwitch* or *Shade's Children*. This book's equivalent to the watery womb-tomb of the Ragwitch's warped psyche and the drainage tunnels of Shade's dystopian world is the mystic river of death, accessible to forces of evil and to Sabriel and her father, who are Abhorsens, that is, good necromancers. These two suffer a self-imposed premature burial whenever they shift consciousness to enter the river of death: their bodies freeze, motionless and seemingly lifeless, and they will die if their spirit fails to return. In contrast, the dead in the river of death are not so much prematurely buried as inadequately confined by the barriers of death. Until they pass the river's ninth gate, they cannot achieve final and complete death but retain the potential to return to the world of the living though in monstrosly altered form. For the evil dead, this river affords a channel upwards, against the current, and Sabriel's world is littered with revenants.⁴ Such returns provide much of the book's Gothic horror, with Sabriel destined to strive against the return of the repressed in the form of shambling, rotten-fleshed dead bodies. The book plays the sword and sorcery narrative of Sabriel's quest as good magic-wielder and warrior against the traditional Gothic horror associations of necromancy, with aplomb.

Sabriel's helper, the enigmatic Mogget, could also be said to be prematurely buried in that his energetic form of white fire and calamitous power has been restrained for centuries if not millennia by the collar around his neck, binding him to an embodied form and servitude to the Abhorsen. He claims to be hungry for revenge but, as with the Ragwitch's defeat and 'death', it remains unclear how far Mogget cooperates with Sabriel in the replacement of his collar around his neck. Is he, then, an uncanny creature of burning energy entombed by necromantic art within a limited body, or is he an ally in the sword and sorcery war to which all Abhorsens are committed, wielding their swords, sounding their necromantic bells?

Much of Sabriel's story is taken up with fighting or fleeing from the revenant dead in the countryside, but eventually she visits the royal city of Belisaere in her quest to save

the kingdom and rescue her father, whose soul has been trapped within a waterfall in the river of death while his body remains frozen in self-imposed premature burial, standing in a reservoir underneath the city. Nix has modelled Belisaere (as its name, alluding to the Byzantine general, Belisarius, indicates) on the city of Constantinople; its reservoir is based on a magnificent Roman underground reservoir still functioning today, but he has infused this reservoir's cool expanses with a sense of the Freudian uncanny. Not only does Sabriel inflict temporary premature burial upon herself, standing frozen in the water as she seeks to rescue her dead-yet-alive father whose body stands frozen next to hers, but the reservoir is the site for an uncanny repetition of events that first occurred two hundred years previously.

At that time a prince lured his mother and sisters into the reservoir to kill them and use their blood to gain supreme power; now, in the story's present, he once again sets a trap to lure carriers of the sacred blood into the reservoir so that he can shed their blood and thus ensure his dominion. Once again, wicked prince and Abhorsen confront one another in the underground waters; once again, the prince's good brother is trapped but escapes with his life. This uncannily repetitive confrontation does not conclude Sabriel's quest to save the country from the evil prince: necromancer, bad prince and good prince must meet again in a different country, on dry land, for the pattern of repetitions to conclude—at least for this volume.

Nix's twist on the Freudian uncanny in *Sabriel*, as in *The Ragwitch* and *Shade's Children*, is that the repressed will always keep returning while in a watery underground setting where tomb functions as womb. Within the witch-doll's watery fluids, the good characters can do little except think and suffer, and it is in the external world, in a battle on dry land, that she is ultimately defeated and perhaps killed. In Shade's city, children are sent out through the drains to explore, fight and die, and it is only when battle shifts from drain territory to mountain top that final victory can occur. *Sabriel's* sequel, *Lirael*, begins ominously, some fifteen years later, with an evil being's burial chamber beginning to seep water that is destroying his magical imprisonment: the whole sequence is about to begin again.

Like *The Ragwitch*, *Sabriel* includes an instance of dry premature burial. After the first confrontation in the reservoir, the good prince Touchstone was petrified by the then Abhorsen, transformed into a wooden ship's figurehead that adorned a funeral ship placed in the royal burial ground deep below the land's surface. There he was left in a benign form of premature burial to await revival once the evil prince had been defeated. *Sabriel* happens upon him and revives him in a witty reversal of the Sleeping Beauty story. This instance of suspended animation for good purposes by way of a dry burial is echoed in *Lirael* when the heroine discovers a glass coffin in which an evil being has been confined, a monstrous variant on the story of the dead-yet-alive Snow White. The battle between *Lirael* and the accidentally freed monster occurs in a pool and, as to be expected, the creature is dominant in a wet environment but is overcome once battle shifts to the drier environment of an oak tree. *Lirael* manages to confine the creature to a bottle, another dry burial while still alive.

Were *Sabriel* to stand on its own as a single volume, it might be vulnerable to the kind of critique that Margery Hourihan mounts against Tolkien's hero-quest narrative:

Where the central binary opposition is defined as a conflict between good and evil the achievement of the hero's quest is a victory of the good and the closure asserts that evil can be clearly identified and defeated...The simplistic oppositions of the text deny the possibility of doubt or confusion about ethical issues. The moral difficulties, the indeterminacies and uncertainties, the 'bitter furies of complexity'...which are intrinsic to the human condition, are absent in Tolkien, and denied absolutely by the closure.

(Hourihan 1997, pp.52-3)

If *Sabriel* is read outside the context of its sequels, the Jungian world view perhaps too completely overtakes the grimmer world view of Gothic horror at its close, as necromancer and prince fall in love, as the kingdom regains a king, as *Sabriel* comes into her full power. It is not until *Sabriel*'s sequels that the never-ending nature of the Abhorsen's duties is fully established, the cost to herself and her family and the horror of those ever repeated ventures into premature burial. It is in this larger framework that

Nix can best establish a balance between the uncanny tale and the hero tale of individuation, almost always marked by transition from wet to dry premature burial.

In *Sabriel* and its sequels, Nix's psychic topography allows him to shift with ease between the genres of sword and sorcery and Gothic horror, largely because of his invention of the good necromancer. *Sabriel* and her father, who should according to convention rule the uncanny world of perpetual return, are instead sacrificial heroes and with them, the books adopt a more Jungian world view in which the kingdom can be healed, the dead can be given a final ending and love is sometimes strong enough to conquer death. In this way, it might be said, Freud meets Jung in the motif of premature burial. Both Freud and Jung are agreed that the tomb is symbolically the domain of the monstrous mother, and Nix's early novels concur, with their depiction of the terrible *Ragwitch*, the spidery *Shade* and the river of death that operates one way as a road to final death, the other way as a birth canal for the return of the repressed. There is a significant difference, however, between the maternal figures of *The Ragwitch* and *Shade's Children* and that of *Sabriel*. Early in this novel, *Sabriel* enters the river of death and summons up an advisor from its far reaches, a spirit that she believes to be her dead mother. In this novel, then, a good dead mother comes back from the place of final death to advise her daughter. The watery womb-tomb is here not only a place where monstrous rebirth can occur for the revenant dead but also a site for the dead mother to help her daughter on the hero-quest to individuation. *Sabriel* thus not only maintains the balance between the site of premature burial as a place of wet horror, a flawed and failing container, and as a place of dry containment for centuries, if not forever; it also achieves a simply loving (if very fragmented) relationship between the living and the dead, between the child and the mother. In contrast, *The Ragwitch* offers a solitary dry burial as part of the hero's path to individuation, little counterweight to the multitude of uncanny wet burials, and until its final pages, *Shade's Children* offers only the ambiguous sanctuary of a giant spider's web.

According to William Patrick Day's *In the Circles of Fear and Desire*, 'A truly successful hero or heroine in a Gothic fantasy would be a character capable of entering

the underworld, entering the state of enthrallment, and yet able at the same time to escape the self-hypnosis, paralysis and disintegration of identity this state engenders' (Day 1985, p.27) It is Day's contention that such a character can be found in the figure of the detective, when Gothic horror touches upon the newer genre of the detective story. Nix has found a different path to the creation of the 'truly successful hero or heroine' of whom Day speaks, not by way of detached intellectual activity but by way of sword and sorcery heroism. Nix's first novel puts together the two world views rather shakily; *Shade's Children* is overpowering in its dystopian pessimism; it is in *Sabriel* and its sequels that Gothic horror is fully balanced by the sword and sorcery version of the Gothic necromancer in the place of premature burial.



NOTES

1. Jung, Carl, *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia* trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), p.302.
2. Freud, Sigmund, 'On the "Uncanny"', *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* trans. J. Strachey, vol. xvii, p. 244.
3. 'The paralysis of progressive energy has in truth some very disagreeable aspects. It seems like an unwelcome accident or a positive catastrophe... this assault can become the source of energy for an heroic conflict; indeed, so obvious is this impression that one has to ask oneself whether the apparent enmity of the maternal archetype is not a ruse on the part of Mater Natura for spurring on her favoured child to his highest achievement.' Jung, *Symbols* pp300-301.
4. See my article, 'Fixity and Flow in Garth Nix's *Sabriel*' (*Papers* 11.3, 2001, 15-22) for an extended reading of this book's imagery of watery flow and icy fixity in terms of the Freudian uncanny. Here I argue for a psychoanalytic reading of the river as a monstrous birth canal.

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