

SIGNA'S CHARACTER BUILDING IN ADALYN GRACE'S *BELLADONNA*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the character development of Signa Farrow, the orphan protagonist in Adalyn Grace's *Belladonna* (2022), using Erik Erikson's theory of Identity vs. Role Confusion. The research aims to identify the stages of Signa's character development and to explain the impact of her character's development on the narrative and other characters in the novel. This study applies a qualitative descriptive method with a psychological literary approach. The data are taken from narrative descriptions, dialogues, and events that portray Signa's emotional, moral, and psychological growth. The findings reveal that Signa's character building develops through four main stages: struggles and isolation, adaptation and social learning, moral conflict and responsibility, and identity acceptance. These stages reflect Erikson's identity development process, showing how Signa transforms from an emotionally insecure orphan into a confident young woman with a clear sense of self. The study concludes that *Belladonna* presents orphanhood not merely as a condition of loss, but as a psychological foundation for identity formation and emotional resilience in young adult fiction.

Keywords: *character building; Erikson theory; identity development; orphan character; young adult fiction*

INTRODUCTION

Young adult fiction frequently portrays identity as a dynamic process shaped by emotional conflict and moral decision-making. Among the character types that embody this process, the orphan protagonist occupies a prominent position. Deprived of consistent familial support, orphan characters often confront instability, social alienation, and uncertainty regarding their sense of self. Despite their narrative significance, critical discussions tend to address these figures symbolically rather than examining the psychological mechanisms underlying their identity formation.

Existing literary scholarship largely frames orphan characters in terms of social marginalization, moral allegory, or narrative utility (Lawton & Cain, 2022; Zasacka, 2023). Other studies highlight the association between orphanhood and themes of independence or empowerment in contemporary young adult narratives (Spencer & Craig, 2023). However, such analyses frequently emphasize outward struggle and thematic meaning, leaving a noticeable gap in the exploration of how identity is internally constructed through emotional experience and personal conflict.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory offers a valuable perspective for addressing this gap. His concept of identity versus role confusion describes adolescence as a period marked by exploration, crisis, and eventual identity consolidation (Erikson, 1968). These developmental stages parallel the structural logic of coming-of-age narratives, making the theory particularly relevant to literary analysis. Nevertheless, while Erikson's framework is well established in psychology, its application to orphan identity formation in young adult fantasy fiction, especially in works featuring female protagonists, remains limited.

Grace (2022) offers a distinctive narrative through Signa Farrow, an orphan whose life is shaped by emotional rejection and supernatural fear of Death. Rather than reinforcing traditional portrayals of orphans as powerless, the novel depicts Signa's identity as emerging through gradual psychological growth, ethical responsibility, social engagement, and self-acceptance. This progression positions her character as an effective subject for psychosocial literary analysis.

In response, the present study examines Signa Farrow's character development as an orphan using Erikson's theory of identity formation. The study seeks to (1) delineate the stages of Signa's character development in *Belladonna* and (2) analyze how these stages influence her behavior, relationships, and narrative significance. By emphasizing the psychological dimension of orphan identity construction, this research contributes to discussions of young adult literature. It offers insight into representations of resilience, agency, and identity among marginalized protagonists.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis was guided by Erik Erikson's psychosocial framework, focusing specifically on the identity formation process reflected in the narrative. Textual data was interpreted thematically by grouping events and character responses into stages of identity conflict and resolution. All data were derived from *Belladonna* (2022), with emphasis placed on narrative elements that portray Signa Farrow's emotional responses, moral decisions, and psychological transformation. Dialogues, descriptions, and critical plot developments served as the main analytical units. The interpretive process relied on the researcher as the primary instrument, responsible for selecting, organizing, and contextualizing relevant excerpts. Through repeated close reading, the researcher ensured coherence between textual evidence and theoretical interpretation. This study applied a qualitative descriptive research design, prioritizing interpretive understanding over quantification. The approach enabled an in-depth examination of character building by focusing on meaning construction, emotional development, and identity negotiation within the literary text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stages of Signa Farrow's Character Building

The findings reveal that Signa Farrow's character development in *Belladonna* progresses through four interconnected stages: initial isolation, adaptation and social learning, moral responsibility, and identity acceptance. These stages align with Erik Erikson's psychosocial concept of *Identity vs. Role Confusion*, demonstrating how Signa's identity gradually evolves from confusion toward clarity through lived experience.

Early Isolation and Identity Confusion

At the beginning of the novel, Signa is portrayed as an orphan marked by instability, rejection, and emotional neglect. Her repeated displacement among guardians and the stigma surrounding her supernatural abilities contribute to deep identity confusion. The data indicate that Signa internalizes social rejection and interprets herself as dangerous and unwanted. This condition reflects Erikson's assertion that the absence of emotional security disrupts identity formation during early development.

Adaptation at Thorn Grove

The second stage emerges when Signa arrives at Thorn Grove. Unlike her previous environments, Thorn Grove provides structure, social interaction, and relative emotional safety. The findings show that exposure to social norms, etiquette, and interpersonal relationships allows Signa to begin experimenting with new social roles. Her confusion about manners and belonging illustrates an identity exploration phase, in which she begins to redefine herself beyond the label of a cursed orphan.

Moral Agency and Responsibility

The third stage is marked by Signa's increasing moral awareness and sense of responsibility, particularly through her involvement in uncovering the truth behind Blythe's poisoning. Rather than remaining passive, Signa actively seeks solutions, confronts authority figures, and accepts emotional risk. This phase indicates a shift from survival-oriented behavior to value-driven decision-making, signaling progress toward identity consolidation.

Identity Acceptance and Resolution

The final stage of character building occurs when Signa accepts her supernatural abilities and reinterprets her past. Instead of viewing herself as cursed, she recognizes her role as a mediator between life and death. Validation from other characters reinforces her self-worth and confirms the stability of her emerging identity. This stage reflects Erikson's notion of identity achievement, in which personal values, abilities, and social roles are integrated.

The results demonstrate that Signa Farrow's character building is not a linear transformation but a cumulative psychological process shaped by trauma, relationships, and moral challenges. This finding supports Erikson's theory that identity formation requires active engagement with conflict rather than avoidance. (Erikson, 1968).

Consistent with Lawton & Cain (2022) The study shows that orphan protagonists function as mirrors of adolescent psychological struggle. Signa's early emotional withdrawal aligns with Spencer & Craig (2023) argument that the absence of parental guidance forces orphan characters to construct identity through experience rather than inherited values. Her gradual trust in Syllas and the Hawthorne family illustrates how substitute emotional bonds facilitate identity exploration.

Furthermore, Signa's transition from passivity to moral agency supports Dollarhide et al. (2023) They claim that character development is driven by ethical decision-making rather than instruction. Her willingness to confront danger and authority indicates identity formation grounded in personal values. This transformation challenges earlier literary representations of orphan characters as passive victims and as supporting characters. Zasacka (2023) view of modern female protagonists as active agents of self-definition.

Psychologically, Signa's acceptance of her abilities represents a successful resolution of Erikson's identity crisis. By reframing her past trauma as a source of strength, she achieves emotional integration. This finding aligns with Maehler & Hernández-Torrano (2025), who argue that identity is fluid and reconstructed through reflection and social validation.

Overall, the findings confirm that *Belladonna* presents orphanhood not merely as a condition of loss but as a catalyst for resilience, moral growth, and identity achievement. Signa's character building illustrates how adversity, when paired with supportive relationships, can lead to psychological maturity and self-acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Identity resolution, rather than prolonged suffering, ultimately defines Signa Farrow's character development in Adalyn Grace's *Belladonna*. By accepting her abilities and reconstructing her past, Signa achieves psychological maturity that reflects Erikson's concept of successful identity formation. Emotional recognition from significant relationships further stabilizes her self-concept and transforms her former sense of alienation into a sense of self-worth. Before reaching this stage, Signa undergoes a process of moral and emotional testing that reshapes her identity. Her decision to take responsibility for Blythe's safety signals a shift from withdrawal to ethical agency, illustrating the transition from role confusion toward purposeful action. These choices demonstrate that identity emerges through responsibility and moral commitment rather than passive endurance. Social adaptation at Thorn Grove plays a central role in this transformation. Exposure to stability, guidance, and interpersonal connection allows Signa to challenge the internalized beliefs formed during her early experiences as an orphan. This environment facilitates identity exploration by offering alternatives to the fear and isolation that previously defined her self-image. At the foundation of this process lies Signa's childhood, marked by abandonment, instability, and emotional deprivation. These early conditions generate identity confusion consistent with Erikson's theory, establishing the psychological conflict that drives her development. Taken together, this study confirms that Signa's character-building illustrates how identity in orphan narratives is constructed through adversity, relational support, and self-acceptance, reinforcing the relevance of psychosocial theory to literary analysis.

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