

## The Quest for Identity in Howl's Moving Castle |

Punda Somkid<sup>1</sup> and Supaporn Yimwilai<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Graduate Degree in English at Srinakharinwirot University

E-mail: nanasomkid@hotmail.com

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### Abstract

Fostering children identity since adolescence is important since identity has a long-term effect on the basis of living. To achieve this goal, children's literature can be used as simulation and media to educate and nurture children mindset. This study is conducted to explore identity developmental process of the female protagonist, Sophie, in Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* and to investigate the effects of the quest on identity development. The study is analyzed by using Joseph Campbell's *The Hero Journey* and James Marcia's *Identity Status* as theoretical frameworks. The results reveal that experiences from the quest journey highly influence Sophie's self-perception and identity. After series of trials, she gradually changes from a dependent and submissive woman with negative self-perception to an independent and confident woman with

acknowledgement of herself. The acknowledgement of herself leads Sophie to have freedom to live as she wants. This study points out that adventurous journey helps cultivate a well-developed identity.

**Keywords:** identity, identity status, quest, the hero's journey

## การค้นหาอัตลักษณ์ในนวนิยายเรื่อง Howl's Moving Castle

ปัทมา สมคิด<sup>1</sup> และสุภาภรณ์ ยัมวิสัย<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> สาขาภาษาอังกฤษ มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ

E-mail: nanasomkid@hotmail.com

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### บทคัดย่อ

การดูแลอัตลักษณ์ของเด็กตั้งแต่ช่วงวัยรุ่นเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นเนื่องจากอัตลักษณ์ส่งผลกระทบยาวในการดำรงชีวิต เพื่อที่จะบรรลุเป้าหมายนี้เราสามารถนำวรรณกรรมสำหรับเด็กมาใช้เป็นเครื่องมือจำลองและสื่อเพื่อสอนและหล่อหลอมความคิดของเด็กได้ การศึกษานี้จัดทำขึ้นเพื่อสำรวจกระบวนการพัฒนาอัตลักษณ์ของตัวเอกหญิง โซฟี ในนวนิยายเรื่อง *Howl's Moving Castle* โดยไดอาน่า วินน์ โจนส์และเพื่อสืบหาผลของการผจญภัยต่อการพัฒนาอัตลักษณ์ การศึกษานี้ใช้ทฤษฎีการผจญภัยของผุ่กล้าของโจเซฟ แคมป์เบลล์และทฤษฎีสถานะอัตลักษณ์ของเจมส์ มาร์เซียในการวิเคราะห์ ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าประสบการณ์จากการผจญภัยส่งผลเป็นอย่างมากต่อ

การรับรู้ตัวตนและอัตลักษณ์ของโซฟีหลังผ่านบททดสอบ  
จำนวนมากเธอค่อย ๆ เปลี่ยนจากผู้หญิงที่ต้องพึ่งพา  
ผู้อื่นและหัวอ่อนที่มีมุมมองต่อตัวเองในทางลบไปสู่ผู้หญิง  
ที่มีอิสระและมีความมั่นใจที่มีการยอมรับตัวตนของ  
เธอเอง การยอมรับตัวตนนำโซฟีไปสู่การมีอิสระที่จะ  
ใช้ชีวิตอย่างที่เธอต้องการ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ยังแสดงให้เห็นว่าการผจญภัยช่วยสร้างเสริมให้เกิดอัตลักษณ์ที่  
พัฒนาแล้ว

**คำสำคัญ:** อัตลักษณ์, อัตลักษณ์ตัวตน, คำถาม,  
การผจญภัย

## Introduction

Fostering a child's mindset during adolescence is important because adolescents learn about their identity and their role as a member of society during this period. In his theory of psychosocial developmental stages, Erik E. Erikson stated that adolescence is the developmental period for identity, and role confusion may occur when adolescents try to find their self and their social roles (1968). Having a well-developed identity has a long-term effect on one's life; therefore, supporting self-development in adolescence is valuable.

Besides learning through education and through communication between peers, literature can be an excellent tool to educate adolescents and to develop their sense of self. According to Martha Crippen (2012), Literary texts can be used as an intermediary to nurture readers' positive thinking and perception, enabling them to develop a positive self-attitude and confidence. Furthermore, experiences gained from reading literature have a significant impact on the adolescents' emotional, psychological and intellectual growth, which relates to their identity development (Alsup, 2010). Children can gain emotional experiences and develop problem-solving skills from a character's reaction to different events and then apply them to their daily lives. One children's book that portrays identity development and can educate children on identity development is Diana Wynne Jones' *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986).

*Howl's Moving Castle* is a story about Sophie's journey to understand and accept herself. Sophie inherits a hat shop from her father; however, she is unsatisfied with her current condition. Her journey starts when she is cursed to be an old woman. Sophie ventures

to break the curse and must confront her fears and difficulties. In the end, Sophie develops from a timid person who follows other people's directions to a confident person who can choose her own direction in life and who accepts the way she is. This research explores the quest and experiences influences on the main character's identity development.

### **Marcia's Identity Status**

According to James Marcia (1967), the essential variables used to determine identity statuses are exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to the period of search and discovery to find suitable ideals for oneself. Commitment is the degree of an individual's action and expression of self-worth (sense of one's own worth as a person), beliefs or ideals (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Identity can be categorised into four statuses by the degree of exploration and commitment:

1. Identity diffusion: Identity diffusion is the least developed status. An individual in a diffused status does not make a commitment upon his values or beliefs, nor does he perform an exploration. This includes the individual that thinks about making a move but does not take any action. In this status, the individual can be either carefree or dissatisfied with present conditions. Also, the individual does not know his distinctiveness from other people and relies on external sources for personal evaluation (Marcia, 1980). This individual is easily influenced and changes to fit within the group (Miller 1989).

2. Identity foreclosure: An individual with the identity foreclosure status commits to roles or future goals without exploring other options. In limiting the possibility of exploring and finding the ideal situation, the individual with a foreclosure identity fixes his mind to a pre-set goal.

Julian Rotter defines behaviours in foreclosure status as having “low freedom of movement [with] the achievement of superiority through identification”—which Marcia mentioned as “a description for one who is becoming his parents’ alter ego” (as cited in Marcia, 1966, p.558). The individual accepts the ideal, which may be decided by parents or peers, without question. Foreclosure status also applies to individuals who determine their future but do not have actual experiences related to their goals.

3. Moratorium: An individual with the moratorium status explores alternatives without making a commitment. This status may continue for years or develop into identity achievement. Moratorium is a pre-stage to achievement status (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Exploration in this status is equal to experimenting with different choices to discover one’s ideals.

4. Identity Achievement: Identity achievement is the most advanced identity status. A series of commitments are made after exploring identity. An individual with this identity status knows what he wants to do and freely acts without relying on external sources. Marcia states that identity achievement status, or a well-developed identity, ‘gives the individual a sense of one’s strengths, weaknesses and uniqueness’ (as cited in Hendry & Kloep, 2012).

One’s identity status can change at any time, and an individual is not required to experience every status. Harold D. Grotevant (1987) suggested that developmental position and circumstance influence willingness to explore, while life events affect recommitments. Marcia (1980) claims that a well-developed identity structure is flexible, enabling it to adapt to the changing society and relationships. While an individual does not have to experience each status, one’s status may change due to crisis and/or commitment levels.

## Identity Development in Howl's Moving Castle

### 1. Diffusion Status

Howl's Moving Castle focuses on Sophie who lives in the society where beliefs and myths play an important role in daily life. According to Campbell, the ordinary world reflects a character's old self because the setting influences the character's identity (as cited in O'Shea, 2011). Sophie's old world, a community with a strong local belief and social expectations, causes her to become an aimless and obedient person. In this society, beliefs and myths play an important role in daily life; for example, the eldest of three siblings is believed to face failure when seeking fortune. At the beginning of the story, Sophie is in the diffusion status<sup>5</sup> an individual who does not have self-determination and who allows other people to make decisions for her. There are two main reasons behind her identity status: household responsibility as the eldest child and the local belief about this child's fate.

Sophie's aimlessness shows through her ignorance of her future life path. An individual with a diffusion identity status is not eager to explore other possibilities in life outside a familiar environment (Marcia, 1966). Sophie cares only her current responsibility as an eldest daughter. She shows no interest in searching for her future career, and due to her devoted father, she does not think about her future. Sophie lets other people determine her future, and she concentrates solely on her responsibility as the eldest sister, which is taking care of the younger sisters. When the two little sisters argue on what they want to do in the future, Sophie does not show any interests or her opinions (Jones, 2008, pp. 2-3). Her aimlessness, letting her life become as other people pleased, results in an ignorance of her possible abilities.



The aimlessness causes Sophie to have no idea who she is and what she is capable of besides sewing and caretaking. According to Play and Exploration (2008), an individual can acknowledge his/her expanded capabilities through exploration and experimentation. This idea contradicts Sophie's situation because she only knows her current ability due to other people's opinions and due to her limited life experiences as the eldest sister. Sophie thinks she is capable of only sewing and caretaking. She knows about her sewing ability because her stepmother, Fanning, complimented her handmade clothes. Sophie thinks she is good at caretaking because she can handle arguments between her two siblings and because she grew up acting as their babysitter (Jones, 2008, pp. 2-3). However, she does not know her capabilities outside her role as a daughter and sister. Sophie's aimlessness limits her routine to housework and to taking care of her younger siblings, preventing her from exploring other fields and discovering her true abilities.

The local belief regarding eldest children also influences Sophie's identity, and it is one of the reasons that lead Sophie to be obedient when her parents choose her life's path. The story starts with the myth that the eldest should not go on a journey to seek fortune:

In the land of Ingary, ...it is quite misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes (Jones, 2008, p.1).

This belief involves the concept of allowing the eldest to inherit the family business; however, the belief strongly influences Sophie's thinking and her way of life. After the death of her father, Sophie's

stepmother establishes future plans for the three daughters according to the local belief. Believing in the local prophecy and always listening to other people's instructions, Sophie obediently agrees with Fanning's decision to be a hatter. Sophie's initial obedience eventually leads to her transformation from the diffusion status to the foreclosure status.

## 2. Foreclosure Status

An individual with a foreclosure identity devotes to one goal without exploring other possibilities (Marcia, 1966). This definition perfectly describes Sophie. Since the community believes the eldest should not seek adventure; even if Sophie wants to try something new and exciting, she still thinks that being a hatter is suitable for her. She accepts this future since her stepmother, as well as the local belief, expects her to have this career (Jones, 2008, p.8). The eldest must take over the family business, and Sophie establishes this as her goal.

However, living a lifestyle that contrasts Sophie's true self leads her to lose confidence. Sophie suffers from being an obedient child, and she unconsciously expresses her suffering through a lack of confidence. Jane Fisher, a professor of Women's Health at Monash University, stated that a lack of confidence shows through negative thoughts about self and social isolation (as cited in "Social Connectedness" 2014). Low self-confidence can appear as a lack of communication skills (Rosenberg & Owen, 2001). This is clearly portrayed in Sophie's case. Sophie's social isolation stems from a lack of social interaction and intimate relationships with other people. She secludes herself at the back of the shop sewing hats, and she later talks with the hats more than she talks with other people (Jones, 2008, pp. 11-13). Sophie reduces her participation in social activities,

and most of her conversation partners are objects. Sophie always has excuses for isolating herself from the community and her family members: being busy, exhaustion, distance of her sister living place (Jones, 2008, p.16). These excuses are used to cope and to avoid communicating with other people.

With prolonged social isolation, Sophie later develops symptoms of anxiety. Social isolation is significantly relevant to anxiety disorder (Meltzer et al., 2013). Sophie is accustomed to social isolation, and her confidence is lost to the point that she starts to show anxiety when she goes out. Sophie's anxiety worsens her condition, and her actions cause decreased confidence, isolation and increased anxiety before the cycle repeats. Thus, living up to social expectations does not always lead to happiness. She feels bad about herself and gradually develops fear when communicating with other people.

A chance to break free from Sophie's unsatisfied life in the foreclosure status cannot occur without the call to adventure. To discover one's true self, the hero must distance himself from the community that influences the hero's thinking and way of life (Campbell & Moyers, 1988; Porter & Mistler, 2012). Being driven out of the hometown, or comfort zone, forces the hero to struggle for a better life and provides a chance to discover one's self and to gain wisdom and insights (Palmer, 2000). Thus, the call to adventure signals the end of the foreclosure status and begins the moratorium status, the period of exploration. However, the hero may or may not set out on the adventure at first (Campbell, 2008). Sophie must be pushed forward two times before venturing from her old world.

Sophie's acknowledgement of her own problems and her desire

to change are the first call to adventure. Sophie's problems are that she is too obedient and always does what people tell her to do. Sophie is obedient to her parent's choice for her life path, and her lack of concern for her problems is demonstrated in her unwillingness to seek a better life. This ignorance results in a loss of confidence and in her living an unhappy life. She cannot improve her living conditions without disclosing her problems. The development cannot occur if the person does not acknowledge the problem and have the will to change (Williamson, 1991). This is the same as Sophie, who ignores her problems and lets them continue until she becomes unhappy.

Sophie starts to realise her own problems when her little sister brings them to light during a conversation. Sophie visits one of her sister, and her sister states that Sophie's condition is worse than before (Jones, 2008, p.26). The sister also mentions Sophie's unpaid job. The sister mentions Sophie's unpaid job and her slave-like obedience to their stepmother (Jones, 2008, p.27). This event triggers Sophie to recognise her problematic situation and to consider change. Now, she has a drive to change through acknowledging her problem. She starts to doubt her stepmother's actions and tries to bargain for her rights.

Nevertheless, the first call to adventure fails because of Sophie's obedience to her stepmother. Foreclosure status traits, such as obedience and responsibility, still chain Sophie to her old world. "Maybe I am being exploited, ...but someone has to do this or there will be no hats at all to sell" (Jones, 2008, p.31). Although the first call fails, Sophie's loyalty, as well as her foreclosure status, is shaken.

The second call to adventure starts when Sophie is cursed to be an old woman. The Witch of the Waste, or the evil witch, curses

Sophie to be an old woman because she believes Sophie stole her lover. This curse breaks the chains of family responsibility, for being old means being free from the social expectations of youth: working or marriage (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Being old means no longer belonging to the original world; thus, nothing can prevent Sophie from seeking her fortune. She no longer waits for advice from other people. Sophie calmly chooses to leave on her own without saying anything to anyone (Jones 37), and this is the end of her foreclosure status and the beginning of her moratorium status.

### 3. Moratorium Status

The hero must pass a series of trials, or tests, to achieve the goal, and this concept is the same as the exploration performed during the moratorium status to discover one's self. The trial period is a series of contributions leading to the journey's goal: knowledge of the inner self (Widdershoven, 1988). For Sophie, living with Howl is considered a chance to play different roles and to experience her trials, even if not voluntarily. According to Alan Berman et al. (2001), the exploration's objectives are to observe one's self and mind, to examine one's capabilities and to practice one's problem-solving and/or crisis management. The trials are a long road for Sophie to achieve the goal of self-realisation. Sophie must pass various tests in different roles and learn through trial and error to become assertive, to gain confidence and to understand herself better.

The first trial is to receive acceptance from the householder. After departing from her hometown, Sophie heads to seek for help from Howl, a fearsome wizard who owns the castle. She plays the role of a cleaning lady to prove that she is useful, and Howl should let her

stay. She works diligently to receive acceptance; however, she ends up causing trouble for the other people in the castle. Sophie steals the other residents' work and bothers other people for additional work. Howl even states Sophie might prefer to be a slave because all she asks for is more work (Jones, 2008, p.99). Howl shows Sophie that she can do what she wants while also being accepted by him. In this role, she learns that she should do what makes her feel comfortable. She learns she does not have to push herself to satisfy other people and to make them accept her.

Her second trial is managing a crisis and reconciling her emotional experiences when Howl throws a tantrum. In this test, she must rely on her past experiences to manage her current problem of dealing with Howl's tantrum. According to Pim Teunissen and Tim Wilkinson (2011), practice increases confidence when nursing students apply knowledge and skills to actual operations. Repeated practice enhances one's confidence and management skills. This statement is proven correct in Sophie's case when she plays the role of Howl's caretaker. When Howl makes a mess in the castle, Sophie manages the crisis with the same mindset of when she dealt with her younger sisters, who always used to throw tantrums (Jones, 2008, pp. 119-122). Sophie realises Howl throws tantrums because he is unable to manage his many problems. Understanding the cause of Howl's temper, Sophie makes him talk about his problems, and this resolves the crisis. Sophie's confidence increases due to the repeated past performances, and she can now manage her new problems by adapting her past experiences with her family members to solve such problems.

Her third trial is gaining the confidence to interact with strangers.

Encouragement from her companion influences Sophie's confidence when she is an old witch at the wizard's spell shop. Normally, the other castle residents play the role of shopkeeper; however, this time, Sophie must sell items by herself. Calcifer encourages Sophie to sell the spells with confidence. He affirms that confidence is significant and that "[t]hose spells are mostly belief. Don't look uncertain when you give it to [the customer]" (Jones, 2008, p.189). After making several sales, Sophie's fear is gone, and she can act in the role of the witch, selling her own newly created spell to a customer (Jones, 2008, p.191). Her confidence gradually increases with each sale, and this helps Sophie improve her performance. With the enhanced confidence, she can now comfortably communicate with customers.

Her fourth trial is talking and bargaining with important people. Sophie's different reactions when she meets such people reflect her improved assertiveness. In term of behavior, "confronting your fear repeatedly helps develop skills and mastery. Mastery decreases the chance of failure and therefore reduces the need to worry" (Shpancer, 2010). Sophie also decreases her worry and develops her communication skills by encountering important people numerous times. First, she meets Mrs. Pentstemmon, an old witch who is Howl's teacher, to prove that the truth is not always as bad as in her catastrophic thinking of the worst case-scenario. Sophie feels agitated under the situation with the higher up. "Mrs. Pentstemmon turned herself back toward Sophie, and Sophie felt more nervous than ever" (Jones, 2008, p.232). Sophie cannot freely communicate with the old witch. Most of the conversations are on the old witch's side, and Sophie can only reply in short sentences. Sophie imagines the

worst-case scenario, and it makes her extremely nervous, while, in fact, the old witch is quite generous.

Later, Sophie must talk with the king twice, and each time she has different reactions due to her prior experiences. When Sophie first appears before the king, she has serious anxiety and feels bashful.<sup>44</sup> Sophie suddenly overwhelmed by the fact that she is standing talking to the King<sup>+</sup> [a]nd she found she had forgotten every words<sup>+</sup> Howl had told her to say," even though she manages to speak something (Jones, 2008, p.243). Sophie cannot comfortably respond the king; however, with the prior experience she gained when meeting the noble witch, Sophie manages to finish her talk. Afterwards, when Sophie appears before the king a second time, she is assertive. Past experiences enable Sophie to gradually become accustomed to talking with powerful people like the king, and now she is assertive enough to even ask for a ride home via a royal coach and with the little princess on her lap (Jones, 2008, pp. 258-261). Her fear of important people disappears once she has had repeated encounters with the actual situations. Sophie proves through her collected experiences that the situation is not bad as she feared, and these experiences also accumulate to strengthen her assertiveness.

#### **4. Identity Achievement Status**

Sophie develops from the moratorium status to the identity achievement status when she returns to her community. Returning to the old world is the period when Sophie must adjust herself and confront her core problem for the sake of re-joining the community. The goal of this act is the same as developing herself to achieve the identity achievement status. For Sophie to reach identity achievement



status and live in society as her true self, she must negotiate a mutual understanding with her family, accept her strengths and weaknesses, and embrace her true self.

Sophie's adjustment to the old world starts when she reunites with her family members, acknowledges that they accept her the way she is. Jean S. Phinney (1989) stated that the understanding and acceptance of one's origin is a trait of identity achievement. Even though Sophie moves back to her hometown, she still feels out of place and cannot meet with her family. "She did not dare go and see [her sisters] for fear [her sisters] would not know her... She just could not bear either of her sisters to see her as an old woman" (Jones, 2008, p.336). However, her stepmother, and later the other family members, remember Sophie and feel happy to see her after being away such a long time. After meeting with her family members, Sophie is freed from her negative thoughts. She realises her family members know about her curse and still accept and care about her (Jones, 2008, p.380). Sophie slowly makes peace with her old self and learns that she can fit within society while being her true self, and if not, at least her family accepts her. The distrust she had is gone, and she changes her attitude towards her family.

Besides understanding and reuniting with her family, Sophie must accept her strength and weakness through encountering of her fear by herself. An individual with an identity achievement status has "a sense of one's strengths, weaknesses and uniqueness" (as cited in Henry and Kloep, 2012, p.42). Sophie acknowledges her strengths and weaknesses through confronting her core problem: she must face her true self, which obstructs her from returning to the old world. To

travel off from the castle alone is the mission she must finish to prove her development. This action represents her strengths, confidence and strong will to confront her fears without other people's support. In the past, Sophie had always left the castle with somebody else. Sophie avoided leaving the castle by blaming her fear on the scarecrow. However, now she admits that the scarecrow is not that scary and it is "a convenient excuse for not leaving the castle" (Jones, 2008, p.394). Now, Sophie decides to travel alone; she accepts her weakness and her fear of confronting her problems, and she is ready to move forward. Her action produces different results than at the beginning of the story because Sophie accepts her fear of travelling alone and overcomes it. She is capable of managing her fear without relying on other people, as she used to do in the past. Sophie knows her strengths enough to fight the evil witch by herself.

Sophie finally develops an identity achievement status by shedding her curse and helping her companions. Sophie helps her two companions by breaking their contract, reviving Howl, and freeing Calcifer (Jones, 2008, pp. 422-423). She accepts her true potential as a witch and changes from a receiver to a giver. Her appearance, which has reverted back to her original form, no longer matters to Sophie anymore, for she ignores it and keeps helping Howl (Jones, 2008, p.423). Sophie does this by herself, representing the insignificance of outer appearance and her strong will to be a helper. She leaves her old woman appearance to fully use her ability and to help Howl and Calcifer. Besides, Sophie's shape-shifting back to the original appearance means she accepts her real self.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study show that Sophie's quest affects her identity, enabling her to develop from diffusion status to identity achievement status. Furthermore, experiences help shape Sophie's self-development. Experiences during the quest influence Sophie's positive change of self-esteem, and she gradually accepts her true self. Through adventure, Sophie gains experiences and becomes mature. The experiences broaden her perspective in life and deepen her understanding of herself. The personal growth, which develops through experiences, comprises confidence, assertiveness, and maturity. The finding of this study proves that self-searching and experience gaining are important. In addition, understanding relationship between experience and identity development benefits further studies on importance of life adventure in adolescence through children's literature and actual activities. This understanding encourages educators to add experimentation and exploration to the curriculum or to extra activities outside academic study.

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