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**More than True:
Cognitive Universals in a Reader Response Analysis
of Neil Gaiman**

Doctoral Dissertation

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem dizertační práci vypracoval samostatně a uvedl v ní předepsaným způsobem všechny použité zdroje.

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I dedicate this work to the memory of prof. Norman N. Holland (1927–2017).

*Fairy tales are more than true—not because they tell us dragons exist,
but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.*

—Neil Gaiman paraphrasing G. K. Chesterton

Table of Contents

1. Of Donkeys and Dragons.....	7
2. The Case for Cognitive Reader Response Criticism	
2.1 A Perpetual Crisis.....	11
2.1.1 New Criticism and the Behaviorist Paradigm.....	13
2.1.2 The Dawn and Dusk of Postmodernism.....	16
2.2 Where is Meaning?.....	20
2.2.1 Saussure and Semiotics.....	21
2.2.2 Deconstructing Gaiman.....	25
2.2.3 The Crisis Revisited.....	31
2.2.4 Cognitive Literary Theories.....	35
3. Reader Response Study I	
3.1 Norman Holland’s Model.....	40
3.1.1 Defenses and Fantasies	42
3.2 Defenses and Fantasies in Neil Gaiman’s “How Do You Think It Feels?”.....	44
3.2.1 Parameters.....	45
3.2.2 Results.....	46
3.3 Between Dream and Reality: The Fantastic-Realistic Dialectic	55
3.4 The Process of Reading Neil Gaiman.....	62
4. Aesthetic Universals in Neil Gaiman’s Post-Postmodern Mythmaking	
4.1 Harmony and Dissonance as Means of Aesthetic Effect.....	69
4.2 Gaiman’s Hero’s Journey in <i>Neverwhere</i>	72
4.2.2 The Limits of Campbell.....	78
4.3 In Search of a New Monomyth.....	83
4.3.1 <i>Neverwhere</i> as Heroic Tragi-Comedy.....	86
4.3.2 Gaiman between Archetype and Divergence.....	90
4.4 Gaiman between the Modern and the Postmodern.....	98
4.4.1 Gaiman between the Postmodern and the Pseudo-Modern.....	102

5. Reader Response Study II	
5.1 Emotions of Reader Response: An Introduction.....	109
5.2 Happiness and Sorrow in Neil Gaiman’s “Troll Bridge”	111
5.2.1 Parameters and Results.....	115
5.2.2 Jack’s <i>Hamartia</i> : Discussion of the Findings.....	119
6. Conclusion.....	123
References.....	129
Appendix A: The Survey Form to “How Do You Think It Feels?”	140
Appendix B: The Survey Form to “Troll Bridge”	142
Resumé.....	143
Annotation.....	148

1 Of Donkeys and Dragons

I read my grandchildren stories. If they like a story, they want it read ten thousand times. One story that they like is about a donkey that somebody has turned into a rock. The rest of the story is about the little donkey trying to tell its parents that it's a baby donkey, although it's obviously a rock. Something or another happens at the end, and it's a baby donkey again. But every kid, no matter how young, knows that that rock is a donkey, that it's not a rock. It's a donkey because it's got psychic continuity, and so on. That can't be just developed from language, or from experience.

—Noam Chomsky¹

In his famous paraphrase of G.K. Chesterton, Neil Gaiman tells us something important about the very nature of storytelling: stories are a set of instructions. And even though the particular events of this and that tale may have never happened, and they inform us of the lives of people that never were, these tales are, in a sense, more genuine than the truth itself. Foregoing factuality, fiction can account for something much more fundamental—something that is constitutive of our common human heritage.

This conviction, in Gaiman's case, could be backed by a lifetime of experience: of an avid young reader growing up in Portsmouth—the birthplace of Dickens and the place of Kipling's early education—and the South England countryside; of a London journalist in the 1980s, enthusiastically interviewing all of his literary heroes, whose classic works of sci-fi and fantasy he'd read as a boy; and, finally, of a celebrated author, whose tour de force *The Sandman* had launched him from the obscurity of British comics and non-fiction writing to establish him as an international star writer—scaring, delighting, and instructing millions of readers, listeners, and viewers who have encountered his prose works or one of their various adaptations.

¹ See Chomsky and McGilvray 2012, 27.

The stripped-down, lucid quality of his paraphrase, when compared to Chesterton's original quote,² is characteristic for Gaiman's writing more generally. Taking inspiration from a treasure trove of literary tradition—be it Norse mythology, obscure Victorian authors, or the *Doctor Who* TV show—Gaiman constantly succeeds in picking out the timelessly appealing and repackaging (repurposing) it for a contemporary audience. One could argue that he shares this “eye for the fundamental” with the author of the quote opening this introduction, Noam Chomsky, probably the most important American analytic philosopher of the present era.³ The Chomsky quote further elucidates the idea from Chesterton and Gaiman, and anecdotally enumerates what every reader, writer, grandfather and literary critic instinctively knows to be true:

“If [my grandchildren] like a story, they want it read ten thousand times.” People, as well as readers, tend to keep to familiar patterns, especially if they have proven enjoyable—a fact well-understood by Sigmund Freud. “One story that they like is about a donkey that somebody has turned into a rock.”⁴ Tales of magic and wonder have historically, but especially in the contemporary period, enjoyed great popularity. There are also some motifs—such as the one of metamorphosis—which, apparently universally, run through the mythologies and literatures of the world and can be traced, important and larger-than-life, like Ariadne's thread, throughout humanity's cultural labyrinths. “The . . . little donkey [is] trying to tell its parents that it's a baby donkey, although it's obviously a

² “Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon” (Chesterton 1909). The Neil Gaiman paraphrase comes from the epigraph to *Coraline* (2002).

³ While the second volume of the *Norton Anthology of Western Philosophy: After Kant* (Schacht, Conant, and Elliott 2017), dedicated to the analytic tradition, includes only Chomsky's famous early review of B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* along with one other excerpt; and Wikipedia, as of August 2018, fails to list him on its pages “Analytic Philosophy” and “American Philosophy” altogether, readers of Chomsky's essays on language and thought (see e.g. the criticism of semantic externalism in Chomsky 2000) soon realize the radical contribution of his approach to the fundamental questions of the human mind when compared to the much more extensive (but far less illuminating) philosophical work of his contemporaries like Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke, John Searle, or Donald Davidson.

⁴ Chomsky is apparently referring to the children's picture book *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* by William Steig (1969).

rock. Something or another happens at the end, and it's a baby donkey again." We too, as readers of fiction, face the trials and tribulations of the protagonists; we empathize and feel certain emotions in response to the unraveling plot and search for a sense of closure. And, all this while, we are guided by something "that can't be just developed from language, or from experience." If, following Chesterton and Gaiman, we assume stories are a set of instructions, then the Chomskyan perspective informs us that these instructions are biological in nature; they are a part of our common biological endowment.

The above break-down of the quote about the baby donkey encapsulates the main points of interest of my thesis: familiarity and surprise in the reading process; readers' understanding of the fantastic; literary universals; reader's emotional responses to fiction; and, finally, how all of the above potentially ties together. It follows from this list of problems that the method most suitable for such a study would be that of the reader response critical approach—an approach not unlike the one employed by I.A. Richards a century ago and documented in his remarkable book *Practical Criticism* (1929). I claim that Richards—and, along with him, the majority of 20th century literary theorists—failed to realize the potential of his own method, using it merely as an auxiliary means of demonstrating his own normative ideas about literary value. I believe that an empiricist, reader response inquiry, backed by contemporary theories from the fields of psychology and cognitive neuroscience, could prove to be the most promising approach in the field of literary studies today.

Apart from delineating the main questions of this thesis, the authorship of the two quotes by Gaiman and Chomsky illustrates the zeitgeist in which the present work has been written. Now is the eve of postmodernism, a cultural era characteristic for many features which can be found in Gaiman's writing, with its many intertextual borrowings, recontextualizations, genre and paradigm drifts, problematizations of identity, and ontological anxieties. On the other hand, Gaiman's works could be seen as a reaction to the postmodern fatigue, purportedly functioning, first and foremost, as straight-forward, satisfying traditional narratives reminiscent of his 19th century idols. In this fashion, Gaiman's writing stands opposed to postmodernist literature, just as Chomsky's analytic thought and rational activism is anathema to the obscurantism of the postmodern intellectual. Chomsky has helped us transcend the structuralist paradigm in his capacity as a linguist, and imaginative authors like Gaiman are constructing a literary tradition which

is to take the place of our current one. On the following pages, I argue that literary critics should follow suit and that (following in the footsteps of luminaries such as Norman Holland, Keith Oatley, or Patrick Colm Hogan) more of us should begin a search for the “universal grammar of reader response,” or, the shared cognitive capacities which underline all of our interactions with literature, and use the theories (not to say discoveries) thereof to inform our work.

In writing this thesis I hoped to address a number of intersecting contemporary issues, which could be understood as a corollary of the alluded paradigm shift in the English-speaking academic and popular cultures. First, a meditation on Neil Gaiman’s oeuvre as a creative realization of one of the possible ways out of postmodernism: what is the significance of the popularity and the cult status of this British-American author for understanding predominant trends in contemporary genre writing? Second, a search for a mode of enquiry representing a way out of the dominant post-structuralist intellectual paradigm, which appears to have exhausted itself.⁵ Lastly, a study of the possible avenues in a search for the universals of literary creation, reception and understanding: is there a timeless set of principles, the identification of which can not only shed light on the role imaginative creators like Gaiman play in shaping contemporary culture, but also establish foundations for the broader literary enquiry in the 21st century?

⁵ Academic works on Gaiman have so far operated with by-and-large postmodern text-active models, using poststructuralist approaches (Jódar, Klapcsik), Campbellian mythological approach (Rauch, Lukach), or genre studies (Coats).

2 The Case for Cognitive Reader Response Criticism

2.1 A Perpetual Crisis

In contrast to the gradual, halting, yet undeniable progress of scientific knowledge, literary scholars rarely produce knowledge that can withstand the critiques of the next generation.

—Jonathan Gottschall⁶

In his book *Literature, Science and a New Humanities* (2008),⁷ Jonathan Gottschall talks about what could be, with a measure of dramatic overstatement, called an eclipse of the humanities: a culmination of “decades of downward trends in undergraduate humanities enrollees and majors,” hitting literary and culture scholars probably the hardest, transforming them from respected intellectuals into “laughingstocks of the academic world . . . savagely parodied in academic novels, humiliated by hoaxers, and held up to ridicule by satirical journalists” (1). Gottschall, positioning himself within this “parodied” and “ridiculed” field identifies this trend as society’s revenge for “our perceived pretentiousness, for the impenetrability of our verbiage, for our unearned moral vanity, and for our apparent contempt for reality” (1).

A decade later, the social standing of the humanities appears to be in no better shape. Sophisticated arguments disguised as pranks played by serious scientists and scholars such as Sokal and Bricmont (who Gottschall alludes to when he mentions “hoaxers”) in their (in)famous parody article submitted to the American cultural-studies journal *Social Text* in 1996, which they themselves characterize as “crammed with nonsensical, but unfortunately authentic, quotations about physics and mathematics by prominent French and American intellectuals” (Sokal and Bricmont 2003, ix), give way to simple-minded attacks, largely by populist reactionaries on the right, targeting anything and everything

⁶ See Gottschall 2008, xi.

⁷ *The Chicago Manual of Style* author-date form of citations is utilized throughout this thesis to make space for a more extensive footnote apparatus.

subsumed under the tenuous label of “cultural Marxism.”⁸ It is even more disheartening when ill-conceived attempts at criticism are embraced by respected scientists and public intellectuals,⁹ who are sometimes characterized as representatives of the so-called “third culture.”¹⁰

But it is not the “jargon-clotted language or extremes of political correctness” (Gottschall 2008, 3), so despised and lashed at by celebrity scientists, alt-right pundits, and reactionaries in public offices, what Gottschall identifies as the *hamartia* of a field which, literary critics and theorists agree, is “floundering, aimless, and increasingly irrelevant to the live concerns not only of the ‘outside world’ but also to the world inside the ivory tower” (Gottschall 2008, 2). There has been a crisis of identity in the field of literary studies (or in “English” as a formal academic discipline within the Anglosphere) going as far back as anyone can remember—the “painful anxieties about its *raison d’être*” (3), expressed in a never-ending search for the justification of its “(usually) impressionistic study of the landscape of make believe” (4).

⁸ This category is generally understood to encompass anything from gender theory, literary, media or culture studies, through liberal and left-leaning policies (including those of universal health-care, affordable college education, anti-gun legislation, affirmative action, minimum wage, LGBTQ rights, etc.) to just about anything else of humane interest that takes place in universities, which have been historically on the fore-front of social change, and thus viewed with great suspicion by the conservative populist right. For a definition of the term, see Wilson 2015.

⁹ In a tweet from May 19, 2017, Richard Dawkins wrote: “Son of Sokal? @PeterBoghossian brilliant hoax paper . . . satirizing pretentious charlatans of Gender Studies @GodDoesnt.” Here, Dawkins’s approval of Boghossian, who published a nonsensical article in a predatory pay-to-publish journal, finds itself in a company of enthusiastic voices from publications such as the right-wing extremist news website Breitbart. For a further discussion of the Boghossian affair, see the *Salon* article “Why the ‘Conceptual Penis’ hoax was a bust: It only reveals the lack of skepticism among skeptics” (Torres 2017).

¹⁰ “The third culture comprises the vast field that reaches from the evolutionary theory debate (Dawkins and Dennett versus Gould) through physicists dealing with quantum physics and cosmology (Hawking, Weinberg, Capra), cognitive scientists (Dennett again, Marvin Minsky), neurologists (Sacks), the theorists of chaos (Mandelbrot, Stewart), authors dealing with the cognitive and general social impact of the digitalization of our daily lives, up to the theorists of auto-poetic systems, who endeavor to develop a universal formal notion of self-organizing emerging systems that can be applied to ‘natural’ living organisms and species as well as social ‘organisms’” (Žižek 2005, 67).

Allen Tate asked the question “Is Literary Criticism Possible?” as far back as 1950, and answered himself saying “literary criticism, like the Kingdom of God on earth, is perpetually necessary and, in the very nature of its middle position between imagination and philosophy, perpetually impossible. Like man, literary criticism is nothing in itself” (Tate [1950–1] 1970, 44). And it has always been this “aboutness,” this referentiality, what lies at the heart of literary criticism’s perpetual crisis of identity. Can the literary studies justify their existence by “initiating students into the priceless expansions of attentive and sensitive reading,” or by “providing a criticism of the culture as a whole,” or by “transforming drawing room natter about stories and poems into an autonomous and rigorous science of the forms, themes, and deep structures of literature?” Could it be just a program of “using literature as a vehicle for advancing political and social goals . . . ?” (Gottschall 2008, 4)

2.1.1 New Criticism and the Behaviorist Paradigm

T. S. Eliot once characterized criticism as “an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one’s own perceptions or those of others,” wherein the perceptions “do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility” (Eliot [1920] 1975, 58). And it were these “theoretical scaffolds” upon which the later New Critics¹¹ built their practice—supplanting, from the 1950s onward, the tradition of using literature as a proxy for the study of history or of biographies of canonized authors. They also worked towards weeding out the tendency of using criticism as an outlet for a manner of gushing in which we “please ourselves with our own impressions” of the literary work and of its characters and their emotions, not finding “the impressions of another person, however sensitive, very significant” (Eliot [1920] 1975, 52).

¹¹ “A ‘New’ critic or teacher was to put aside biography, historical background, evaluation, everything else really, until the critic had closely examined the words-on-the-page themselves. The bibliographical and philological components of English still had their usefulness in establishing those texts and the meanings of their words, but literary history became much less useful. The older ideal of expressive realism faded. Instead of reading through texts to the people or events they represented, a proper professor-critic was to concentrate on the text itself, as language” (Holland 1992, 66).

Two decades after Eliot's essay, Norman Foerster identified as the primary concern of a critic the

structure, the esthetic properties of the [literary work], its architectonic features such as unity, balance, emphasis, rhythm, and the like, the shapely pattern resulting when all the . . . emotions, sense perceptions, images, allusions, ideas, ethical insights, have been brought into more or less complete interplay and fullness of tension. (Foerster 1941, 70)

This characterization of a "New" critic's work gets as close to a mission statement or a textbook definition of their practice as it possibly could. In the coming decades, the mission of interpreting literary works in the fashion indicated above became the primary concern of the critic and the academic teacher of English. Rather than using literature as means of establishing a common national identity and culture by the study of great texts and the circumstances of their composition (see Holland 1992, 64), the literary text itself and its structure became the sole objects of concentrated interest.

And yet the nature of the critic's object of inquiry remained enigmatic. It takes a contemporary reader of this and similar early New Critical essays only a moment to realize the epistemological difficulties arising therein. "Emotions, sense perceptions," etc., are mental phenomena after all. How should we be able to tell apart these "architectonic features" from pure "impressions," which Eliot cautioned us about? An idea of objectivity stemming from some immutable, *universal* element comes to mind—an object worthy of systematic (if not yet "scientific" in a strict sense) analysis, which both the New Critics and their Old World counterparts, the Russian formalists and European structuralists, strived for. The location of this universal element, which should reveal itself, even if just obliquely, in the process of close reading, emerging from the sea mists of mere impressionism and a jumble of tangential sentiments, revealing a literary "truth" and pointing towards a timeless aesthetic value like some memory of Yeats's Byzantium, remained elusive in an age where behaviorism was the dominant paradigm in the study of human thought and action.

The idea of mind-external loci of the action which Foerster describes as "complete interplay and fullness of tension" was rampant in the literary studies throughout the 20th century, finding support in its structural-linguistics and behavioral-psychology counterparts.

Ferdinand de Saussure informs us in one of his lectures that “it would be a mistake” to think “that there is an incorporeal syntax outside material units distributed in space. . . . The material units alone actually create the value by being arranged in a certain way” (Saussure [1916] 2011, 139). B. F. Skinner, the last great figure of behaviorism, took a different approach, calling the “outside material units” mere “traces” (Skinner 1957, 7) of verbal behavior. He shared his greatest critic’s, Noam Chomsky’s, distrust of what is traditionally called *referentiality* of language,¹² but his solution for this problem was radically (and woefully) different: instead of trying to explain human language as a discrete cognitive module in the brain, Skinner resigned from any attempts to formulate any concepts for a description of cognitive phenomena and, instead, posited the practice—the behavior—of language users as the locus, if not the meaning of, expressions.¹³ In this framework, literary text should be judged solely by its function, or the influences which lead to its creation, and by the impacts it has, in turn, on the outside environment, as reflected in the behavior of its readers.

And still, the inherent problem in the New Critical project was not limited to the nature of the object of its enquiry. Even though the endeavor of literary criticism was formulated as standing apart from the historical and social happenings, the history and society had caught up with it. Alfred Kazin talked, in the 1960s, about his experience of a literary critic becoming, in the public mind, a kind of a gatekeeper of values which had

¹² i.e. the common-sense idea adopted by many philosophers of the mind, which tells us that the word “cow” *refers* (in some hard-to-define way) to the animal out there (in the language-external, mind-external, physical world) which eats grass and gives us dairy.

¹³ The lengths to which Skinner was willing to go to avoid even considering conceptualizing any kind of cognitive phenomena could be observed decades later, in one of his last interviews, where he describes the way he worked: “I am changing the external causes [to make me] a productive thinker . . . The idea that I’m retrieving something, retrieving thoughts . . . do you retrieve a name from memory? Well I don’t think so at all. You go through the alphabet to prompt yourself, you work to get the name to come. You don’t go to a filing cabinet to pull it out . . . or dial a button to have something appear on a computer screen. The whole idea of retrieving information [of cognitive psychologists] is ridiculous. We don’t retrieve, we try to create conditions under which something happens. And when I’m writing a paper I have an outline, a topic, a lots of things arranged in a useful file. I do everything I can to get the next sentence out. I don’t compose it, I don’t search for it, I don’t retrieve it from some mess of memories or something like that” (Skinner 1988, starting at 11:57).

hitherto fallen within the purview of family, religion, or state ideology; he echoed a sentiment expressed by Randall Jarrell, who had stated that many intellectual couples expected from a literary critic the sort of spiritual guidance dispensed by a priest (Kazin 1960). By their very nature and the nature of their interests, literary scholars were drawn out of their ivory towers and became increasingly enmeshed within the living culture, which was just about to undergo tectonic shifts of the 1960s, creating ever higher demand for the public intellectual to make sense of what was later to be known as the postmodern age.

2.1.2 The Dawn and Dusk of Postmodernism

Norman Holland characterizes the critic as “no more than an audience member who speaks to and for the rest of us in a more public and formal way” (Holland 1992, 60). In reality, be it in reviews and essays intended for popular consumption or in academic writing, literary criticism often becomes a means of “making public statements, prompted by literature, about society, history, psychology, or, in general, the human condition” (60). Social and political commentary is often intertwined with, or gives rise to social and political action, and this has become more apparent since the late 1960s, and certainly since around 1980, when “many literary scholars have envisioned themselves striding in the vanguard of noble movements of social liberation and transformation” (Gottschall 2008, 4).

With the onset of postmodernism comes a new language, postmodern artists and critics start to “speak about their ‘discourses’—by which they mean to signal the inescapably political contexts in which they speak and work” (Hutcheon 2002, 4). Critics embark on an “investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning” (6). It is no longer of any concern whether meaning is contained within Saussure’s “material units distributed in space,” or if it resides in human behavior, or somewhere else—we are *immersed* in meaning, because we are immersed in society. “Structures of society are symbolic; individuals, insofar as they are normal, use them in real behaviors; insofar as they are mentally ill, they express them by symbolic behaviors” (Lacan [1950] 2006, 108).

In his masterpiece of literary theory, *The Critical I* (1992), Norman Holland presents, in his characteristically limpid writing, a brief breakdown of the challenges literary criticism faced around the onset of the postmodern period, and he weights, with great wit and

insight, the merits of each of the challengers. In the vibrant period of the late 1960s and 1970s, New Criticism starts to appear increasingly stuffy and elitist, assuming (or so it seemed to the post-structuralist critic) the existence of privileged readings espoused by a caste of old white males with specialized training. Its challengers are part of a wide cultural movement, “drawing energy and impetus from the great emancipation movements” of the time, “from the radical epistemology of post-structuralism, and from immediate catalysts like the Vietnam War and the student uprisings of 1968” (Gottschall 2008, 4). Literary scholars, drawing inspiration from continental—mainly French—thinkers embark on what Gottschall calls “a great project of denaturalization” (ibid.).

They set out to show that almost everything that people considered to be “natural”—gender roles, sexual orientations, suites of attitudes, ideologies, and norms—were actually the local, contingent, and endlessly malleable outgrowths of specific historical and social forces. (Gottschall 2008, 4)

Not only can the literary theory no longer stay apolitical, it must face the ideology hitherto inherent in its method. It does not suffice to shift focus from the lionized writers in the Anglo-American canon to marginalized voices (women, black, indigenous, queer, etc.), the entire critical methodology must be dismissed as another force of oppression and control. The one challenger which, according to Holland’s reading of literary criticism’s recent history, comes out on top as the most universal and adaptable replacement for New Criticism is the post-structuralist theory.¹⁴ Poststructuralism and its various postmodern theoretical nieces and nephews address the second problem identified in the previous section (2.1.1) by giving literature its context back. Yet, at the same time, they make the perennial problem of “object of enquiry” even more acute: literary criticism becomes just another weapon in the political struggle, moving further away from the ideal of embedding itself among the sciences.¹⁵

¹⁴ Holland highlights the role of Lacanian criticism as the most influential and versatile beside Derrida’s (Holland 1992, 60). He chooses Lacan as one of the primary targets of polemic in his book, reflecting his own background as a psychoanalytic critic and drawing on his frequent associations with many brilliant Lacanian thinkers.

¹⁵ Indeed, the postmodernists couldn’t care less for such an ideal if the sciences and the entire project of the Enlightenment are posited as a cultural construct of powerful men of Western European descent, just

While we can argue about the merits of poststructuralism within the social emancipatory struggle, it appears now, about five decades since the theory's inception, that it has failed to amass a lasting, appreciable, and transparent body of knowledge about literature, or to deepen our understanding of the phenomena connected with the functioning of literary texts in the same way which various scientific disciplines contribute to our understanding of the nature of the world and our place in it. Gottschall observes that the "liberation paradigm" behind various academic endeavors has exhausted itself, and by this revealed itself for what it truly was: a political and cultural, rather than scientific, movement. "There is a nervous sense that prime tenets of post-structuralism—which once seemed startlingly radical—amount to the endlessly rococo embellishments of a great banality: we can't be completely sure of anything. There is a feeling that scholars have gone much too far in reducing literary works to the power plays of the weak and strong, to 'reading until you find the victim' or 'reading for evil'" (Gottschall 2008, 6).

We should be careful, however, as Gottschall and Holland are, not to dismiss the politics of postmodernism based on the assertion of its epistemological deficiency when applied in areas such as literary enquiry. Postmodernism's heritage of anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, and skepticism should be understood as a lasting contribution to our socio-cultural discourse and to its various emancipatory struggles, which find themselves besieged these days—from one side, by the unsophisticated foundationalist fundamentalism; from another, by the proponents of the third culture, who operate within a naïve ontology somewhere between Descartes and a vaguely Eastern spirituality.

Postmodernism's positive contribution has not been purely political, however. Its various currents and expressions—poststructuralism (again) in particular—have contributed to the realization of the fundamental problem within the field of literary theory; they have, in the words of the poet, forced our (cultural, academic, discursive) moment to its crisis. Norman Holland's *The Critical I* (1992) provides a persuasive account of how poststructuralism marks an end of an era, serving as a necessary coda, so the

another "oppressive socio-political invention" (Gottschall 2008, 5) used by the colonizers against the colonized, by the elites, through an artificially created majority consensus, against the marginalized. It would seem ironic that the same "oppressive socio-political invention" was the precondition for the poststructuralist and postmodernist theories to blossom in their privileged Parisian context.

fundamental questions of the nature of literary criticism could be re-formulated. While detractors of Jacques Derrida may claim that deconstruction has deconstructed itself, it also has to be added: not before succeeding in taking the whole tradition of literary inquiry and its methods with it.

2.2 Where Is Meaning?

I mean, what's French culture? So, if I drink French wine, am I part of French culture? I mean that it's perfectly useful, it makes sense to study, but recognize that you are not identifying an entity in the world, you're just looking at a complex of things from a particular perspective that you are interested in for some purpose or another.

—Noam Chomsky¹⁶

There is an underlying assumption in all formalist¹⁷ critical approaches—structuralist, psychoanalyst, deconstructionist, etc.—about the nature and location of meaning, i.e. they invariably posit meaning within the text (or context, subtext, metatext, hypertext, etc.). If the constraints of text limit the desired interpretations, all of physical reality (including all other possible realities, perhaps) is semiotized and posited as text. Without delving into the discussion of semantics and referentiality, we can claim, quite uncontroversially, that meaning has traditionally been discussed in connection with the (human) mind. Vincent Descombes identifies the basic question of every philosophy of the mind, indeed of any discipline dealing with what we have come to label as “mental.” The question is: “Where do you locate the mind?” (Descombes 2001, 2) He identifies two possible answers: without, or within.¹⁸

There appears to be a certain characteristic, perhaps a number of characteristics, of the written text, or rather, the ways we think about texts and writing, which have led the majority of the traditional literary theory (ranging from various structuralist approaches to feminist or Marxist criticism) to subscribe to the former of the two answers provided by

¹⁶ See Chomsky 2012, 367.

¹⁷ The classifying label “formalist” here is used in Holland’s sense, encompassing approaches that “assume that a text creates meanings, and either the ‘I’ [i.e. the particular reader’s cognitive capacities] has little to do with that process or they have little to say about what the ‘I’ does” (Holland 1992, 99).

¹⁸ “Within, according to the mentalist heirs of Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Maine de Biran and among whom one can also place the phenomenologists and the cognitivists. Without, according to the philosophers of objective mind and the public use of signs, for example, Peirce and Wittgenstein” (Descombes 2001, 2).

Descombes. Both the New Critics and poststructuralist share the same premise of an impersonal meaning, an objective text “out there in the world.” While the structuralist posits a natural unity which the model reader is to arrive at by the process of close reading, the deconstructionist’s mission is to point out the impossibility of this endeavor.

This way of thinking about texts and literature comes to us, it seems, quite naturally; in fact, it is counter-intuitive for humans to think of meaning any other way. This framework is built around a logic which Michael Reddy calls the “conduit metaphor” (Reddy 1979, 288). It is precisely this logic which leads us to what he regards as the “bizarre assertion that words have ‘insides’ and ‘outsides,’” leads us to “assert, without batting an eyelash, that ‘the meaning is right there in the words,’” or to assume that “the listener’s task must be one of extraction. [The reader] must find the meaning ‘in the words’ and take it out of them, so that it gets ‘into his head’” (ibid.). The role of the reader until the emergence of reader response criticism (and its proponents, the so-called “Holy Family,” comprising Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Norman Holland; see Holland 1992, 114) used to be for a long period understood to be limited to “receiving and unwrapping a package” (Reddy 1979, 289), a task seemingly so simple and mundane it hardly warranted attention of serious scholars and literary theoreticians.

2.2.1 Saussure and Semiotics

Norman Holland traces the modern origins of the unfortunate (and borderline mystical) conviction that “texts generate their own readings or misreadings” (Holland 1992, 116) back to Ferdinand de Saussure. The folk-scientific understanding of how meaning operates and where it resides, reflected in the conduit metaphor, finds its linguistic reflection in the beginnings of structuralism: Saussure speaks of “idea or phonic substance that a sign *contains*” (Saussure [1916] 2011, 120, emphasis mine), where “the signs that make up language are not abstractions but real¹⁹ objects” (102). While Saussure does not speak of

¹⁹ While it isn’t certain what would constitute an “unreal” object, given his claims of “material units distributed in space,” it is safe to assume that Saussure attributes a quality to linguistic structures which is not (entirely) mind-internal. When he speaks of “meaning and function” which exist “only through the support of some material form,” he is certainly not using the expression “material” to refer to some material neural structures inside the human brain (Saussure [1916] 2011, 139).

words as containers, we can see how a school of thought rooted in the structuralist tradition (such as narratology or deconstruction) could be prone to such covert conceptualization. Some contemporary (functionalist, non-generative) linguists and semioticians assert the existence of three “spheres,” i.e. “a physical sphere, a semiotic sphere, and a sphere of mental processes” (Rastier, Cavazza, and Abeillé 2002, 5), wherein the “semiotic” and “mental” spheres are presumably non-physical,²⁰ which would lead one to necessarily conclude that they are metaphysical. The metaphysics alluded to in the conduit metaphor is surely at home in the semiotic sphere, which is “made up of signs that are put into play and exchanged” (ibid.).

Even if meaning and language don’t reside in the same house, they surely are next-door neighbors, so if we conclude (erroneously), as Saussure did, “that language is only a social fact” (Holland 1992, 122), it won’t take much effort to place meaning “out there” in society as well. Indeed, externalist accounts of the mind appeared intuitive, even sensible, in the era of Peirce, Saussure, or Wittgenstein, when cognitive, neurobiological, or cognitive research was either non-existent or very rudimentary. “Saussure was writing long before there was a psychology that could deal with our speaking or understanding speech or writing. He may have understood that. At any rate, he wisely chose to dismiss psychology from his account of the way we understand language” (Holland 1992, 128). The other “father of semiotics,” Charles Sanders Peirce, was similarly dismissive of, if not outright hostile to, psychological accounts, and tried to de-anthropomorphize his theory.²¹

What Saussure and Peirce share with much of the 20th century literary scholarship is that their ideas (Saussure’s insistence that “signs are not abstractions but real objects” notwithstanding) operate at a level of abstraction, removed from both the “physical” world

²⁰ “We do not dismiss the hypothesis that the other spheres possess a material substratum, but they are not reducible to it” (Rastier 2001, 5).

²¹ Paolucci gives us this grotesque example to illustrate Peirce’s position: “A psychologist cuts out a lobe of my brain and then, when I find I cannot express myself, he says, ‘You see your faculty of language was localized in that lobe.’ No doubt it was; and so, if he had filched my inkstand, I should not have been able to continue my discussion until I had got another. Yea, the very thoughts would not come to me. So my faculty of discussion is equally localized in my inkstand. . . . It is plain enough that the inkstand and the brain-lobe have the same general relation to the functions of the mind” (Peirce 1931–1935, 7.365, quoted in Paolucci 2011, 78).

and the cognitive “reality” of individual minds. While “Saussure treats language as existing in some sort of Platonic space, apart from the humans who use it” (Holland 1992, 133), Peirce imbues the physical world with what the less sophisticated could mistake for mystical forces.²² Other, more recent theories in the field of semiotics, would seemingly like to do away not only with psychology, but, indeed, with the laws of physics as well.²³ While the disappearance of the subject in the postmodern thought of “superstar” figures such as Foucault or Barthes was largely politically motivated, it appears rather inexplicable in apolitical and “modest” academic fields which have never claimed the same celebrity.

In any case, theories (whether of literature, language, signs, or the human psyche) rooted in Saussure’s ideas necessarily inherit his two main shortcomings: first, the handwaving of psychological processes, based on the “doubtful premise” that “we understand language because language simply signifies” (Holland 1992, 122), and second, the woeful inadequacy of explaining how language actually works, beyond a limited,

²² Claudio Paolucci, whose theoretical project has been to marry Saussure’s structuralism to Peirce’s semiotics, gives us a taste of the famous American thinker’s work, talking about one of Peirce’s key concepts, the *interpretant*: “A cognition (sign) can illuminate its object under a certain respect or capacity only by referring to previous cognitions in the absence of the object. Such previous cognitions always contribute in structuring the particular point of view by which the cognition stands for his object and illuminate it under a certain respect. Peirce calls interpretants these previous (or following) cognitions that determine ‘the cognition that is present to the mind.’ He will describe these interpretants not as some entity located in the individual’s mind, but as something culturally and intersubjectively distributed in the community. . . . the individual stream of thought tends to stabilize in a set of beliefs that find in the intersubjectivity of the community their only warranty” (Paolucci 2011, 72; inside quote Peirce 1931–1935, 5.311). In Paolucci’s reading of Peirce, “cognitions” are, somewhat counter-intuitively, external to the mind of the individual, belonging, instead, to the (we might add: conceptually ill-defined) “community.” The psychological here is secondary, encompassing merely the reflections of the primary (cultural or communal) reality; individual mental phenomena are rendered as unworthy of consideration and can be conceived solely thanks to the legitimation on part of the culture or community “out there.”

²³ In a recent conversation about biosemiotics, Howard Pattee claims that “the amazing property of symbols is their ability to control the lawful behavior of matter, while the laws, on the other hand, do not exert control over the symbols or their coded references. . . . That is why organisms and symbol systems in some sense locally appear to escape the global behavior of physical laws, yet without ever disobeying them” (Pattee 2009, 320). I suggest the kind reader replace the first instance of the word “symbols” in the quotation with “God,” and draw their own conclusions.

superficial formal description.²⁴ It is an unfortunate feature of the humanities that obsolete theories which have reached a high level of acclaim in the past prove to be quite difficult to dispense with. It is hard to imagine contemporary physicists ignoring, say, the advancements in quantum theory which took place in mid-1920s; and, indeed, the more scientific-minded linguistic departments *have* relegated Saussure to history books. Yet structuralism is far from dead, finding a hospitable place in literary and cultural studies. It is paradoxical, how the “signifier” and the “signified” survive through poststructuralism even though deconstruction has successfully achieved exactly what it set out to do: reveal the emptiness and naiveté inherent in Saussure’s basic tenets, making structuralism implode on its own terms.

Yet structuralism was thoroughly refuted even before the arrival of Derrida and his followers. Noam Chomsky “identified the structural linguistics that derives from Saussure as ‘radical behaviorist reductionism’” (Holland 1992, 130). Holland, too, subscribes to the view that Saussure’s “is an extreme stimulus-response, behaviorist picture of the mind that, among psychologists, even the most devout of Skinnerians might not endorse” (ibid.). The advent of cognitive sciences, with Chomsky at its forefront, spelt doom for both behaviorism and structuralism—but it has been only gradually and with a significant delay that they found their way into the field of literary research.

Vis-à-vis Saussure’s idea of *langue* as a system of signs shared by all speakers within a given linguistic community, Chomsky posited an internalist, individualist concept of *I-language*, rejecting the common-sense, everyday understanding of the term:

In ordinary usage . . . when we speak of a language, we have in mind some kind of *social* phenomenon, a shared property of a community. What kind of community? There is no clear answer to this question. . . . The term “language” as used in ordinary discourse involves obscure sociopolitical and normative

²⁴ Holland, in his scathing analysis of Saussure, points out that “any elementary textbook in the psychology of reading will show that word-sounds do not simply imprint word-images on our psyches. . . . To anyone who has seen the difficulty psychologists and psycholinguists have in making the connection from sound to sense, his claims are sheer flimflam—intellectual sleight-of-hand” (Holland 1992, 127). He goes on to say that Saussure “erred . . . by psychologizing the idea of signifying. He promoted his purely formal account of language into a psychological account of what we do when we understand language” (129).

facts. It is doubtful that we can give a coherent account of how the term is actually used. . . . But in pursuing a serious inquiry into language, we require some conceptual precision and therefore must refine, modify, or simply replace the concepts of ordinary usage, just as physics assigns a precise technical meaning to such terms as “energy,” “force,” [etc.] departing from the imprecise and rather obscure concepts of ordinary usage. It may be possible and worthwhile to undertake the study of language in its sociopolitical dimensions, but this further inquiry can proceed only to the extent that we have some grasp of the properties and principles of language in a narrower sense, in the sense of individual psychology. It will be a study of how the systems represented in the mind/brains of various interacting speakers differ and are related within a community characterized in part at least in nonlinguistic terms. (Chomsky 1988, 37)

The contemporary followers of Saussure and Peirce seem to have got the idea backwards: they start from the culture, the interpretive community, the shared language use as observed in corpora, the texts of various genres out there in the world, the workings of impersonal and abstract forces, the free-play of signifiers, etc., disregarding the individual mind within the human brain, from which (if we are to maintain any semblance of congruity with the wealth of understanding and explanations provided by the sciences) all of the above phenomena must necessarily originate.

2.2.2 Deconstructing Gaiman

A stylistic use of metaphor and abstraction in scholarly text can be useful, even inevitable, when we discuss literature. The crucial point here is, however, to always remain conscious that what is used is just that: a metaphor, an abstraction; lest we might be led to believe that *style* can substitute for *substance* and that “ordinary use” (even clever use) of language can somehow reveal a hidden meaning in the absence of fact. Consider this excerpt from a post-structuralist text criticizing Neil Gaiman:

Most critical assessments of Gaiman's works . . . often hail Gaiman as the “Prince of Stories,” a titular honor that celebrates Gaiman's singular narrative

ability and conflates his identity with that of the protagonist in the *Sandman* series—Morpheus, the King of Dreams. Such celebratory criticism, however, denies the elements constituting Gaiman's author(ity). Author(ity) hereafter refers to his ability to author texts (in their broadest senses of published works, readers, and his own authority as *the-one-who-authors*) as well as the recognition and celebration of such an ability to (re)author *authors/others*. . . . such celebratory criticism is . . . surprising given the extent to which it perpetuates a mythic *auteur* that is at odds with most postmodern criticism and theory—a body that has promoted textuality since the late Sixties when Roland Barthes declared the author dead. Moreover, it is surprising because it requires us to substitute the polymorphous perversity of/with/through textuality for the amnesiac pleasure of being subject to the (Dream) King's author(ity)—substituting polymorphous free play for a polyMorpheus perversity. (Smith 2008, 1–2)

Note the use of language in the excerpt: the play on “authority/author/auteur/other”; the attribute “Dream” in parentheses to conflate the real-world “Prince of Stories” with his creation; the “polyMorpheus” pun. This is the kind of rhetoric quite characteristic for the practitioners of deconstruction. While it establishes the main topic—a conflict between, on one hand, Gaiman’s proclaimed practice of elevating narratives to a position of transpersonal importance and self-sufficiency, and, on the other, the imposition of his authorial authority upon the stories and mythologies he borrows and re-creates (in Smith’s words, “the drive to establish Gaiman's author(ity) denies the textuality he seems to promote”).

In this case, the approach amounts to no more than sophism, a (mis-?)use of words from “ordinary discourse” in a “scholarly” context so as to make them appear to reveal a hidden, paradoxical truth, without bothering to “assign a precise technical meaning” (Chomsky 1988, 37) to any of them. The replacing, by Smith in his essay, of “imprecise and rather obscure . . . concepts of ordinary usage,” which Chomsky cautions us against, by puns and witticisms and similar “textual play” (Smith 2008, 3), serves as little more than a

showing-off of style, or, perhaps, a cover for a lack of any substantial argument.²⁵ “Fooling people into mistaking a submarine for a whale doesn’t show that submarines really swim; nor does it fail to establish the fact” (Chomsky 1996, 24).

Smith wonders how the postmodern critics, which subscribe to the concept of “polymorphous textuality,” can celebrate Gaiman, whose imposition of authority “perverts” this concept. Gaiman apparently does this by “(re)authoring” his illustrators’ work (on comic book projects such as *The Sandman*) “as part of his own incorporative production,” and this tactic supposedly represents “a central aspect of Gaiman’s strategy to promote his author(ity)” (Smith 2008, 7). Smith documents his claims by interviews with Gaiman’s collaborators, (an uncharitable assessment may claim) cherry-picking references to make Gaiman appear as “the controlling nexus from which artistic creativity *and* familial fulfillment can and do emerge,” lamenting the omnipresence of Gaiman’s “guiding hand” (Smith 2008, 8). In this manner, Smith goes on to frame the mundane facts of working on a collaborative project (including the usual back-and-forth between a comic’s author and its illustrators, or being an editor to an anthology) as some nefarious power-play with dark ramifications. Following the deconstructionist style, his writing is impersonal, without overt statements about Gaiman’s motivations or any other features framed in psychological terms, while at the same time repeating suggestive expressions such as “perversity” or “manipulation” when characterizing Gaiman’s (inter/meta/epi/para/etc.)textual strategy. It is no wonder that in a conceptual frame where texts and meanings belong to the “community” or “culture,” even the unremarkable assertion about ethically neutral

²⁵ This practice belongs to the same conceptual universe as the conviction that there could be a meaningful discussion of “the question of whether robots can murder or airplanes can fly—or people; after all, the ‘flight’ of the Olympic long jump champion is only an order of magnitude short of that of the chicken champion” (Chomsky 1996, 24). The additional discussion of the fact that in Japanese people indeed fly when their jump (see the Japanese verb “tobu”) would also be similarly “meaningful.” As Chomsky concludes, “these are questions of decision, not fact; decision as to whether to adopt a certain metaphoric extension of common usage. There is no answer to the question whether aeroplanes really fly (though perhaps not space shuttles)” (ibid.).

phenomena such as that a particular author of a given text is both its *creator* and the *person with complete creative authority over it* could be made to sound sensational.²⁶

Smith does here what Saussure did: they both pretend to forgo psychology to legitimize their theoretical framework while building their argument, and then, in a dialectical feint, end up with a synthesis which includes psychological claims—about Gaiman’s character in Smith’s case, and about the speaker of language (generally) in Saussure’s. Barthes might have declared the author dead, but that doesn’t mean he or she can’t be raised from the dead if the occasion calls for his or her smearing. Even the reader, who comes “to see textuality only by forgetting the *authors/others* for the pleasure of knowing Gaiman’s author(ity)” (Smith 2008, 7) isn’t left alone; he or she is enlisted by Smith as an accomplice in the smear by being stripped of any individuality, becoming a mere function of the text, being rendered as a psychological entity only in its capacity to be hypnotized and manipulated by the Prince of Stories. Within the system of “power relations [Gaiman] exerts over his readers” (Smith 2008, 14), Smith implies the relationship between the author and reader is one of master and pet, as demonstrated by his designation of Gaiman’s intertextual embeddings (of references or quotes of Carrol, Shakespeare, etc.) as “treats” (Smith 2008, 15).

Smith combines incidents from Gaiman’s professional life and Gaiman’s own commentary (in introductions, afterwords, interviews, etc.) with remarks from interviews with his collaborators concerning both his character and his methods with purely textual analysis to achieve what would, on the surface, amount to be a commentary on Gaiman as a writer and, by extension, as a human being and ethical actor. However, his references to Barthes and his idea of the death of the author along with the impersonal, de-psychologized method of Jacques Derrida which Smith utilizes suggest that Gaiman is here a purely abstract construct, a product of the text (metatext, context, etc.). And yet it

²⁶ Examples of other supposedly problematic measures employed by Gaiman include “implicit references to demonstrate his power at the micro [level]. He demonstrates the extent of his encyclopedic author(ity) by embedding relatively minor elements within the body of his texts. His use of arcane words (e.g., ‘sigil’ throughout *Sandman* and ‘serewood’ in *Stardust*) represents the most minute scale. . . . he incorporates such minor elements as further proof of the degree to which he controls all levels of textuality in his works” (Smith 2008, 13). Smith explains that the “demonstration of such absolute control is crucial to maintaining and instituting the suppressive agency’s author(ity)” (ibid.).

remains unclear how a strictly impersonal reading can produce (reveal) motivations, agendas and “rhetorical strategies” which are meant to “confine the interpretive matrix of those works to the context that [Gaiman] authorizes” (Smith 2008, 19). It appears as though a psychological construct of the author is created and used to legitimize given interpretations of his texts and then, when this construct becomes untenable and psychologically implausible, it is abandoned—it dissolves in the sea of “textual play.” One way of reading this piece of criticism would be that, after committing the intentional fallacy, Smith washes his hands by pointing to the post-structuralist thinkers who demonstrated that the author, not to mention the author’s intention, wasn’t really part of the picture in the first place.

To what degree (if at all) should the authorial intent be taken into consideration in literary interpretation has been a contentious, widely discussed point since the rise of the New Critics.²⁷ W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, in their 1946 essay “The Intentional Fallacy,” warn against confusing the “author’s designing intellect” with the key to unlocking the meaning of a poem (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954, 4). As I have observed previously (Čipkár 2016, 44), “structuralist narratology and post-structuralism have only further buried any considerations of authorial intent” with what David Herman aptly sums up by the term “anti-intentionalist bias” (Herman 2013, 36). Within this intellectual vein, the thinker who is probably the most widely associated with the idea of the “death of the author” is Michel Foucault. Interestingly enough, Holland considers the gist of Foucault’s phrasings to be not so far removed from his own model; compare Holland’s: “One constructs an author by testing hypotheses against what we know. Whether our construction feels right will depend in part on whether that construction fits with other hypotheses of ours, notably our critical practice” (Holland 1992, 176), with Foucault’s: “The author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (Foucault, cited in Holland 1992, 176). In both frameworks, an author is a “construct,” or a “functional principle” we depend on both as readers and critics.

²⁷ For a further discussion of this point, as well as some practical observations, see my cognitive reader response analysis of Angela Carter (Čipkár 2016, 44).

The point where they differ is where they posit this “author.” For Foucault, this place is “discourse” or language, which is external to “man.” For Holland, this construct, in so far as it can be identified as actual, is either purely cognitive, or representing a formal description of a cognitive phenomenon, internal to the human brain.

Both Holland’s and Foucault’s concerns about the “author-function” represent a vibrant debate which has emerged in literary theory. As I have discussed in a prior work (Čipkár 2016, 44), there have been attempts to circumvent the intentional fallacy and, within the structuralist theoretical framework, introduce a concept that would “allow textual designs—that is, what readers, viewers or interlocutors construe as the nonrandom patterning of textual features—to be accounted for through attribution of intentions to a designing agent” (Herman 2013, 53), a concept that Wayne Booth²⁸ labels “implied author” (Booth 2005, 75). This would represent a “persona, whose inferred communicative aims and larger value orientation afford a rhetorical context for interpreting acts of narration” (Herman 2013, 53).

Smith’s “implied Gaiman” is a peculiar two-faced character, who claims to promote “inclusivity and alterity . . . in his texts and life as well as [sic.] for which he is often celebrated” (Smith 2008, 29), but who actually “manipulates that apparent textuality to achieve this delusion . . . [of] exclusivity and denial of the text’s hybridity in favor of hierarchy and stasis” (ibid.). Mundane acts of self-promotion and marketing,²⁹ the appearance of the author’s name at multiple places in his product, websites associated

²⁸ In his 2005 essay “Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?” Booth presents one of the main reasons for why he has proposed the idea of “implied author” in the first place: a feeling of “distress about the widespread pursuit of so-called objectivity in fiction” (75). Here, as in the case of Foucault and Holland, we see an intersection (if not overlap) between otherwise radically opposed ideas, in identifying a critical issue. “Interestingly enough, scholars coming from a standpoint of radical cognitivism, a completely different tradition, which only concerns itself with particular reader interpretations and the processes leading to them without any regard for an ‘objective meaning,’ would readily sympathize with [Booth’s] sentiment. Pursuit of objective meaning of fiction is,” as we will see, “indeed [far removed from] the work of such reader response critics, such as . . . Holland” (Čipkár 2016, 44).

²⁹ Even Smith himself admits that “such promotion may not seem surprising given the commercialism of such sites,” but it does not stop them from accusing Gaiman of a peculiar metaphysical crime of “blurring of the lines between product and producer(s)” which “reflects Gaiman’s larger rhetorical strategy designed to privilege him as the author(ity) of all of his works” (Smith 2008, 25).

with Gaiman linking to Amazon pages where his books can be purchased, as well as Gaiman's frequent quotes from Shakespeare—all are linked together by the unifying principle of the nefarious manipulator. Suffice to say, this implied author should be understood as an inference provided by Smith's imagination, and, indeed, it informs us more about Smith's own mental processes and agendas than those of Gaiman's. And while I argue elsewhere (Čipkár 2016, 48) that the category of the implied—or inferred—author as a “hermeneutic integrative device” could illuminate some universal principles with regards to narrative reception, a selection of more naïve readings would appear to be more suitable than one with an overt theoretical agenda.

The opportunistic nature of readings such as the one given by Smith appears to be a constant risk tied to the very nature of the deconstructive or other post-structuralist methods. The realization that “since the forces of language cannot be mastered” and whenever “I try to mean . . . my meaning is dispersed, divided, at odds with itself” (Holland 1992, 154) gives critics a *carte blanche* to push their own message—be it feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, or even a criticism without any detectable emancipatory or didactic value, as seen in Smith's case.³⁰

2.2.3 The Crisis Revisited

It is difficult to imagine an effective critique of deconstruction which does not acknowledge the problem with the ideas of its precursor. Comparing Saussure's formal description of language to a flat Earth theory, Holland admits it has “a certain commonsensical appeal,” but “a better linguistics³¹ . . . and a great deal of psychological evidence” shows its profound

³⁰ Holland identifies the core problem with deconstruction in Derrida's assumption that “the linguistic processes described by Saussure, signification and the differencing of signs, act like forces” (Holland 1992, 153), an assumption evidenced by Derrida's remark in an interview: answering the question whether meaning is determined by the person reading a particular text/sign, Derrida says: “Meaning is determined by a system of forces which is not personal. It does not depend on the subjective identity but on the field of different forces, the conflict of forces, which produce interpretations” (Holland 1992, 155).

³¹ A “better” linguistics would be one which realizes that “communication is not a matter of producing some mind-external entity that the hearer picks out of the world, the way a physicist could.” Such a linguistics understands that “communication is a more-or-less affair, in which the speaker produces external events

inadequacies (Holland 1992, 154). The basic requirement for deconstruction (in the sense: for the idea of deconstruction to be conceivable in the first place) is an assumption of a fixed meaning, which can nevertheless (be shown to) subvert itself and prove, eventually, that there is no definite truth which can be claimed about it, or any sign or text, for that matter—but this can only be demonstrated in the context of a structuralist framework.³² Derrida pushes Saussurean theory to its inevitable conclusion without ever actually denying its premises—any such analysis is glossed over with fanciful language.³³

And still, the challenge posed by deconstruction is but a symptom of a deeper problem common to all theoretical approaches which originated in “a broader structuralist revolution that sought to use Saussurean linguistics” as a guiding science for the study of a

and hearers seek to match them as best they can to their own internal resources” (Berwick and Chomsky 2016, 86).

³² In the words of Frank Lentricchia: “The work of deconstruction rests on the very vocabulary of knowledge-as-representation that it would subvert” (Lentricchia 1983, 50).

³³ An example of which would be: “The structuralist stance, as well as our own attitude assumed before or within language, are not only moments of history. They are an astonishment rather, by language as the origin of history. . . . By virtue of its innermost intention, and like all questions about language, structuralism escapes the classical history of ideas which already supposes structuralism’s possibility” (Derrida [1963] 2001, 2).

Often, when Derrida does seem to arrive at a place of correct intuition, he nevertheless arrives there using the dubious conceptual framework inherited from structuralism. According to his reading of Bataille, “the poetic or the ecstatic is that in every discourse which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense” (Derrida [1967] 2001, 330) and in order to save this “poetic” and wrestle it from “nonmeaning,” we need to (according to Bataille) affix it with a commentary about the very absence of its meaning. Derrida further quotes Bataille identifying the paradox of such affixation: “I cannot speak of an absence of meaning, except by giving it a meaning it does not have” (332). This comes close to the internalist cognitivist conviction that *physical* poems (and other texts “out there”) are devoid of meaning, and readings are provided solely by readers themselves, i.e. “giving them meaning they do not have.” Of course, any similar hopes of finding common ground are dashed by Derrida’s reassertion that we are still talking about processes which language *does* to meaning, to itself, and to us—i.e. rather than the case being of us as people using language, it is the other way around.

Holland’s objection is, again, pertinent here. “By making ‘signification’ purely the activity of signs or a quite unverified ‘public agreement’ (that is, Saussurean langue), one drops out of the picture the real audience . . . the psychology of the intender or the interpreter has been replaced by what the philosopher, critic, or semiotician is good at and feels more comfortable with: texts” (Holland 1992, 181).

wide range of cultural phenomena (Herman 2005, 19). The seminal figures of narratology, Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, all “construed particular stories as individual narrative messages supported by a shared semiotic system” (ibid.), a shared semiotic system, we might add, as ill-conceived as Saussure’s idea of *langue*, its direct precursor. The founders of narratology posit ideas compatible with the tenets of Russian formalism and the Anglo-American New Criticism, including the “insistence on the autonomy of verbal art” (Herman 2005, 22) which Holland characterizes as the “assumption of a fixed meaning ‘in’ the text” (regardless of whether this meaning resides in the signs themselves, or in the differences between them, or remainders, traces, absences . . . see Holland 1992, 156) or as the confusion of “*meaning* as one element in a formal description of language with *meaning* as a psychological event in somebody’s mind” (161). The paradigm of the active text remains the same for post-structuralism as it was for the New Critics and for semioticians; indeed, the majority of literary theory throughout the 20th century. The only parameter which has changed is the scope: we have journeyed from the text “doing things,” to language acting like a force and seemingly depriving us of our autonomous existence.³⁴

Valentine Cunningham traces, correctly, the origins of the current crisis of Theory (a crisis, in any case, as perceived by the editors and contributors of the 2005 volume *Theory’s Empire*, expressing a sentiment not unlike Gottschall’s) back to Saussure, pointing out the drive, on part of literary and other theorists, to “scientize” their writing by looking to more formal accounts, i.e. linguistics. Cunningham explains that “the closer to linguistics the Theorist operates the more possible and convincing [they become]. The linguistic parts and structures and functions of writing—a dental fricative . . . or a phoneme, a dative, a signifier, a sentence—are not dissimilar in their knowability and boundedness to particles or moons, objects whose nature and behavior can be identified and predicted and truly theorized”

³⁴ It seems quite peculiar how the counter-intuitive and scientifically baseless view of language as an acting entity “out in the world” has proven difficult to dislodge from contemporary theory despite the fact that Chomsky and others have demonstrated the biological nature of the language faculty (see Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch 2002; or Berwick and Chomsky 2016). Moreover, one does not need to be trained in psychology, linguistics or cognitive theory to realize that “denying the self and minimizing the perceptual life of man, [deconstruction and other forms of postmodernist] theory deliberately refuse to acknowledge that the relation of mind and world is more basic than language” (Wellek 2005, 43).

(Cunningham 2005, 25). Cunningham rightly points out and problematizes the idea that texts could be subject to the same (or analogous) line of enquiry as any other (natural) object; where he errs, however, is the conflating of *linguistics* (or, more broadly, *science*) with Saussurean structuralism. While criticizing Saussure's post-structuralist heirs, he accepts the same erroneous assumption they have made, lauding "Saussure's wonderfully generous donation to literary theory," (rightly identified as the foundation for Theory's "wide field of interests"), highlighting Saussure's

double-sided vision of linguisticity—on the one hand, a radical menu of definitions of language as such, which fired and fed concepts of signification as an activity on the inside only of language and so also of text; on the other, a pointing to a new science of signs in society, semiotics, a way of seeing and analyzing all human structures as like language, as in a deep way all textual.
(Cunningham 2005, 28)

I can identify two crucial points of contention in this account. First, the unquestioned assumption that posits "signification as an activity on the inside only of language and so also of text," in other words, the implication of text "doing things," with the reader (speaker of language) at most playing the role of a footnote; second, seeing the unfortunate "semiotization" of reality as a positive development, Cunningham's apparent reservations to the study of "Satire, or the Novel, or the Sixteenth Century" (25) in the same fashion we would study the elementary particles or the Moon notwithstanding.

While Cunningham points out "Theory's obsessive linguisticity," observing how "the Saussurean terminology and concepts . . . became simply normative for literary study" (*ibid.*), he does not stop to evaluate them on either their linguistic or their psychological merit, as Holland has done. Derrida & co.'s *hamartia*, according to Cunningham, was that they misconstrued structuralism, split the signifier from the signified (Cunningham 2005, 29), a transcendental crime most likely akin to eating from the tree of knowledge. Too busy casting out the postmodernist transgressors from paradise, Cunningham, not unlike many other contributors to the same volume, glosses over the inherent problem with the modest-looking theory which gave rise to the great contemporary Theory to begin with: Saussure's bankrupt account of human language.

Holland goes on to criticize Jonathan Culler, Roland Barthes, Michele Foucault, J. Hillis Miller and other theorists who “took over Saussure's premise that the person did not enter into the understanding of language” (Holland 1992, 168), but he does not stop there. Even the so-called “bi-active” models of reading, posited as a collaboration between reader and writer, where the reader fills in the semantic gaps as elicited by some structural elements in the text, is condemned. This compromise between the “reader-active” and the “text-active” models, e.g. in the semiotics and literary theory of Umberto Eco,³⁵ still presupposes a process of signification, i.e. “a radical behaviorist reductionism.” Another example of the “bi-active” model (in Holland’s usage), would be Wolfgang Iser’s *Rezeptionsästhetik*, which, even though it shifts the focus to reader reception, nevertheless assumes “a uniform pattern of grasping and comprehending for ‘the’ reader, fixed by schemata in the text.” Similarly to other theorists of his day, Iser “locates in the text the schemata that a psychologist would find in individual readers,” ultimately treating the text as active. The text “invites, allows, impels, induces, guides, and so on. Iser's model thus entails the contradictions of Saussure's linguistics (or, in Iser's case, Roman Ingarden’s aesthetics)” (Holland 1992, 184).

2.2.4 Cognitive Literary Theories

The Critical I was published quarter of a century ago, and while Holland’s objections have certainly been echoed by more than a few, these dissenting voices have remained far between. One such voice, succinctly expressing and summing up the broached concerns, was Gerhard Lauer’s:

More than anything else, literature is a psychological phenomenon. Only as such it has meaning. Literature may be a text, be declaimed or performed; in any case, it always comprises processes in the reader or spectator and in the author, who both initiate mental processes—processes of creativity and

³⁵ Holland argues against the model presented by Eco in *The Role of the Reader* (1979), observing, with biting sarcasm, that “the semiotician simply points to all these interpretations as observable facts. What another school of criticism would call the critic's interpretation, semiotics promotes to a code that binds us all. The semiotician's interpretations become invulnerable, exempt from the psychological processes to which lesser beings are subject” (Holland 1992, 181).

imagination, of interest and motivation, of communication, of understanding and interpreting, and of mental effect. Literature is empty without psychological processes. Literary studies have for most part concentrated only on a small part of these mental processes, primarily by focusing on interpretations by mostly professional readers and by using psychoanalytical concepts that are more or less convincingly brought to the field. Literary studies have also tried hard to exclude other processes from their area of expertise. As a result, modern empirical perspectives on the psychology of literature have been almost completely edged out of the field. (Lauer 2009, 145)

The crucial word in the quote above is *almost*; there have been some very lively and hopeful developments in the field, a search for more interdisciplinary approaches. Since the early 1990s, but particularly in the last decade, a great number of scholars has emerged to answer the challenge presented by the rising popularity of the cognitive sciences and the crisis of Theory—the cognitive revolution seems to have finally arrived in the field of literary studies.

One oft-cited work, Alan Palmer's *Fictional Minds* (2004), develops a methodology of better understanding fiction by a focus on the minds of the characters—the eponymous “fictional minds.” Its core claim, i.e. that narratology and other forms of literary analysis would benefit by introducing into its repertoire concepts from psychology and the cognitive sciences, is in line with Holland's (and mine) line of thought, so far as Palmer talks of how “the reader infers the workings of fictional minds and sees these minds in action from observation of characters' behavior and speech,” reflecting how in “real life the individual constructs the minds of others from their behavior and speech” (Palmer 2004, 11).

Analysis of folk-scientific concepts (psychic continuity, theory of mind, etc.) which readers and writers employ in constructing and understanding fictional narratives, can indeed be instructive for the study of literature defined as a study of the “mental,” even beyond the scope of “ethnoscience.”³⁶ However, the bulk of Palmer's book is concerned with the understanding of fictional minds as objects of narratological study, analogous to “real-world” minds. The maxim of focusing on the study of minds as objects inside the text

³⁶ For a discussion of what falls under the scope of ethnoscience, see Chomsky 2000, 90 and 135.

appears to me as another rendition of the “transcendental signifier,” masked by somber, level-headed, cognitivist jargon.

We can observe the same drawback in otherwise brilliant *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) by Lisa Zunshine. While her illuminating observation that “works of fiction provide grist for the mills of our mind-reading adaptations that have evolved to deal with real people” (16–17) remains a crucial addition in the field of cognitive literary studies, in her analyses of particular works she attributes agency to the text in a way reminiscent of Iser and Eco.³⁷ Her account of the cognitive phenomenon of mind-reading as the key to unlocking enjoyment in character-driven narratives is persuasive, yet its narrow focus and lack of consideration for empirical testing renders it reminiscent of previous psychological approaches, which have managed to demonstrate, for instance, the omnipresence of the Oedipal complex and its counterparts in all art. This is not to say that Zunshine’s account is doomed to suffer the same fate, only that a more robust reader response investigation is needed to determine its position within the broader picture of a search for cognitive universals that enter the literary “experience.” Related shortcomings can be identified in the field of cognitive poetics more generally, along with the tendency to masquerade folk-psychological inferences with technical language borrowed from artificial intelligence studies and cognitive psychology.³⁸

Yet there is little doubt that most of the difficulties alluded to could be surmounted by emphasizing empiricist approaches—the principal among these being the reader-response and cognitive-neuroscientific ones. With the latter, there still remain reasons for a reserved attitude; Lauer sums up the principal concerns with the approach voiced by Koepsell and Spoerhase, observing that while “the cognitive neurosciences provide a

³⁷ In her analysis of Richardson’s *Clarissa*, Zunshine follows “a series of episodes in the novel that *increasingly force* the reader to doubt the trustworthiness of at least one of its two narrators” (Zunshine 2006, 82), and argues that multiple levels of embedded intentionality in the novel’s various exchanges “*subtly heighten our admiration* of the ease with which the clever and observant Lovelace can figure out what other people, including Clarissa, are thinking” (89, both emphases mine). She appears to attribute attitudes she herself holds to the model reader based on her idiosyncratic theoretical interest, which is the reflection of apparent instances documenting mind-reading between the novel’s characters. There is little consideration given to empirical readers in her account.

³⁸ For instances of these, along with many brilliant insights, see Gavins and Steen 2003; and Zunshine 2015.

number of valuable parameters for empirical research in reader response . . . their insights are not useful for philological research,” namely because they “have so far not produced results that are relevant for literary studies or touched “upon normative questions of interpretation” (Lauer 2009, 145). Marvin Minsky, the guru of the field of artificial intelligence, also warns us against trying to explain high-tier neurobiological phenomena (such as human consciousness) by observation of individual neurons—he likens this approach to trying to understand computer programs by looking at individual transistors on the microchip (2006). Despite all reservations, cognitive neuroscience can serve a crucial role in the development of the humanities if its findings are adopted with a requisite dose of skeptical thought and philosophical reflection.³⁹

Finally, another pitfall on the road to consilience is the simplistic interpretation and application of Darwinism, which many scholars outside the actual field of evolutionary biology are prone to. This includes attributing intentionality to evolution and its products, such as Clark’s claim that “minds evolved to make things happen” (Clark 1997, 1) or

³⁹ There has been, however, an unfortunate development within the cognitive sciences over the last two decades, of which I advise caution; any literary scholar feeling ready to inform their work by cutting-edge cognitive research should watch out for the following key words: extended mind, distributed cognition, embodiment. By his 1997 publication *Being There*, Andy Clark brought to the fore a movement within cognitivism which challenges the orthodoxies of the field labeled as “internalist.” Instead, he offers an approach seemingly vindicating the old externalist conceptions of mind and meaning, but amounting to little more than a more imaginative re-branding of behaviorism. While some more traditionally-minded literary theorists might find this solution to the perennial problem of “where doth meaning reside, in the brain or on the page?” (the solution being that the concept of the mind is extended to literally encompass the physical print on the page or the pixels on the iPhone screen) somewhat elegant, its potential to explain anything at all about the workings of the mind and human cognition is quite low. While Clark admits that “one could always try to explain [one’s] action in terms of internal processes and a long series of ‘inputs’ and ‘actions,’” he argues that “this explanation would be needlessly complex” (Clark 2008, 223). Thus, instead of a complex explanation he opts for no explanation whatsoever—at least not an explanation which, to paraphrase Alan Turing’s influential 1950 paper (442), would be meaningful enough to deserve discussion. Clark makes rather bizarre (and, to me, fundamentally misguided) exclamations about “biochauvinism” (Clark 2008, 77), “skin-and-skull-based prejudice” (91), or engages in semantics disputes about certain labels, namely “cognitive” (86). If we in the literary studies accept Clark’s epistemology, we condemn ourselves to live indefinitely in Derrida’s shadow, victims to “unlimited semiosis and hermetic drift” (see Eco 1994). For a striking and brilliant criticism of the extended, embedded, distributed, and embodied approaches, see Rupert 2009.

effectively equating evolution with natural selection—theorists move on very thin ice when they start pondering questions such as whether being a writer entails some selective advantage.⁴⁰ A very instructive account about the common misinterpretations of the notion of “selection-for,” of the phenotype fixation, and other complexities of evolution has been given by Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini (2004); they caution us against accepting selectionist neo-Darwinism as axiomatic—a tendency which has overtaken “entire departments, journals and research centers,” and a consequence of which has been the thriving of social, epistemological, and psychological Darwinism, as well as evolutionary ethics or evolutionary aesthetics (Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini 2010, xiv), i.e. research programs based on a fundamental flaw in the neo-Darwinist evolutionary theory—and a flaw, indeed, in Darwin’s original theory itself.⁴¹

These considerations, however, should not keep us from audacious exploration in the ever-growing interdisciplinary dialogue between the humanities and the sciences, utilizing the most effective empirical methods available to us as researchers of literature—namely, reader response.

⁴⁰ Ideas in a similar vein are developed by Brian Boyd (2009).

⁴¹ “What we doubt is that the attempt to subsume the aetiologies of phenotypes under a uniform theory is well advised. Just as the pursuit of natural history would seem to suggest, the sources of matches between organisms and their environments are thoroughly heterogeneous. Darwin thought that ecological selection for fitness uncovers the underlying similarity of . . . most such cases, but he was wrong. Either adaptationist theories cannot support relevant counterfactuals about trait selection or they draw uncashable cheques on key notions (such as ecology and phenotype), which on close inspection turn out to be interdefined. We suspect that, to a first approximation, the natural history of phenotype fixation really is just about as anecdotal as it seems to be. . . . Darwin didn't manage to get mental causes out of his account of how evolution works. He just hid them in the unexamined analogy between selection by breeding and natural selection.” (Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini 2010, 161–2)

3 Reader Response Study I

3.1 Norman Holland's Model

What is needed today is literary theory that, one, acknowledges the human beings who create literature and literary experiences and, two, rests on a firm foundation in current linguistics and psychology.

—Norman Holland⁴²

The key question of reader response and of literary theory more generally, posed in the late 1980s by Norman Holland when he first formulated what was to become his neuropsychanalytic approach, was a two-sided question: why different readers interpret certain aspects of the same work differently; and why they interpret certain aspects the same? To answer it, Holland proposed a model of a multi-tiered system of feedback loops, where the reader applies their hypotheses against the engaged literary object:

We can systematize these four levels of experiencing literature as a hierarchy. We can imagine a stacking of feedbacks . . . Each feedback loop provides the rule or test or hypothesis for the loop below it. The loops below both enable and limit the loop above:

→ at the most abstract level, I have my identity understood as an identity theme and a history of variations on that theme (will this satisfy me?);

→ at intermediate levels, I have tactics I have internalized from culture, of two kinds:

1. *canon-tactics*: tactics for understanding followed by my interpretive community; rules with which other people in my culture may well differ (Marxism, psychoanalysis);

2. *code-tactics*: tactics followed by my entire culture; rules that no member of this culture would normally believe otherwise (stop sign, fork);

⁴² See Holland 1992, xii.

→ at the lowest level, skills using my organs of perception and movement (sights, sounds, etc., that just about all other people share). (Holland 2009, 231)

The lowest level in this model (along with the most widely shared cultural codes from the intermediate level) accounts for the content which everybody understands (constructs, really) in the same way. This is where our biological endowment, laws of physics (and other general principles, like computational efficiency) and our shared culture and education cause our reactions to be similar. However:

When we use more complex, not widely shared, ideas, we construct differently. At the highest level, we apply our individual needs, concerns, and memories to achieve a purely personal “content.” But at all these levels, it is we who construct content, it is a reader-active model that will explain that “content,” and it is we who create the illusion that the “content” is “in” the literary work. (Holland 2009, 186)

The processes described above would be mostly automatic, as is the case in other models of cognition, and largely not experienced (perceived) as discrete or deliberate. In understanding the literary transaction through this model, “we do not have to divide our experiences into an objective part and a subjective part. Rather, we can think of a subject using objective things, things-out-there, things widely shared like the words on the page, the image on the screen,” using the internalized “codes by which we read or see movies, the canons of our interpretive communities, and the prevailing scripts and metaphors of our culture” (Holland 1992, 230).

While we can adopt this model instead of the vague and naïve folk-psychological process of “signification,” it still does not solve the problem of what should be the object of enquiry in literary research. The study of Holland’s lowest level of feedback would be best served by cognitive neuroscience, while sociology, linguistics or anthropology could focus on the intermediate level. The highest level and its integration with the intermediate ones seems most suited for psychology—but the study of the human mind and its functions is quite a broad discipline, where literature plays only a tangential role. It falls to reader response literary criticism, then, to bring into foreground those features of human

psychology which pertain to the unique phenomenon of experiencing literature in all its forms.

3.1.1 Defenses and Fantasies

One of the points of greatest interest to Holland was the explication of factors which enter the process of how a given reader's identity theme and its variations bear on that person's reading. Holland and other reader response critics have repeatedly demonstrated "that individual readers will shape and edit what they see, hear, or read to suit their own inner psychological needs, 'misreading' as need be. If readers cannot succeed, they cannot enjoy the work, and they reject it" (Holland 2009, 163). Enjoyment is identified as the primary motivator, and it appears to be one of the most important measures of the success of a literary transaction.

The primary means, postulated by Holland, of actualizing the literary work to suit one's psychological needs are collectively labeled as DEFT: defenses, expectations, fantasies, transformations. In my practical study, I have identified *defenses* and *fantasies* mechanisms as the most readily accessible to scrutiny, and the responses pertaining to these mechanisms as the most informative. In Holland's neuropsychanalytic ⁴³ understanding, *defenses* are actions (originally motor actions, like flight) "mentified" (Holland 2009, 158); defenses take shape as early as the age of 12 months, and operate with "perception of patterns, cognitive judgement, and reactions to interpersonal situations." These coping mechanisms become an integral part of what we might call "character" or "ego" (ibid.), and, remaining automatic and unconscious, they play into our perception and interaction with the world, which, naturally, includes works of fiction. "We perceive a work of literature as one that requires our defenses so that we can bring our defenses into play. . . . We perceive the work in such a way as to use our own defenses to guarantee our pleasure" (Holland 2009, 159). It is satisfying to experience our defenses as

⁴³ "Neuropsychanalysis looks at brain systems that might correspond to traditional psychoanalytic ideas like id, ego, and superego, repression, regression, impulsivity, and compulsivity as well as psychiatric disorders like depression or schizophrenia. . . . tracing the ways brain systems correspond (approximately!) to long-applied and, sometimes, well-demonstrated psycho-analytic concepts" (Holland 2009, 19).

successful, helping us make emotional sense of the work, overcoming situations which would cause us displeasure or threaten our ego in any way.

The other mechanism from Holland's framework I focused on are *fantasies*. They are what colors our perceptions, virtually constituting the content we put into the text, if we can find a plausible and coherent way for them to do so. In Holland's own characterization, "when we are really 'into' a work of literature, then, we use the materials of the text to imbue it with our own wishes. . . . We project unconscious, wish-fulfilling fantasies, clusters of wishes, into works of literature. . . . these projections will be our own fantasies, which may be more or less connected to what we take to be the plain sense of the text" (Holland 2009, 192). These fantasies grant us a particular kind of reading pleasure suited to our character or our brain-circuitry, having us interpret various "literary" and even "plain" language devices accordingly (209). "As we go about the world," be it real or fictional, "SEEKING⁴⁴ what we wish for, our pasts bias our present perceptions, because we remember what gave us pleasure at an earlier time and, as we go on living our lives," reading novels, etc., "we seek that thing" (208).

⁴⁴ Holland uses the term "SEEKING," adopted from Panksepp, to label a "basic quasi-emotional brain process" through which "we give narratives and poetic language coherence and significance." It entails bringing in "our personal unconscious concerns" (Holland 2009, 7), and it "translates correlations in environmental events" or literary texts, for that matter, "into perceptions of causality" (86). This concept, in its emphasizing of the reader-active model of the literary transaction, reminds us that it is us who "make 'meaning' or 'sense' from literary works, gratifying our wishes and fantasies in imagination" (7).

3.2 Defenses and Fantasies in Neil Gaiman’s “How Do You Think It Feels?”

*I don't want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really.
What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever
wanted, just like that, and it didn't mean anything? What
then?*

—Coraline⁴⁵

The story used in the present reader response study, “How Do You Think It Feels,” (Gaiman [1999] 2005) is a first-person narrative of a man in his late twenties, a successful businessman in the media industry, who is having an extramarital affair with a younger woman, an attractive would-be actress with beautiful blue-green eyes called Becky. Their relationship makes the protagonist appreciate parts of life he scarcely noticed before: silent movies, flowers, music, clay modelling—“I loved her, and I loved whatever she loved” (309). However, when he finally decides to leave his wife and children for his lover, Becky breaks up with him, stating he ceased to be “fun,” and is just “moping around all the time” (310), stating much later, while giving her reasons for breaking the affair off, that she “wasn’t a homewrecker” and was put off by her lover’s seriousness (313). On the night of the break-up, Becky having locked herself in her bedroom, the narrator suffers a mental breakdown, gets drunk, pleads and cries—to no avail—for her to reconsider, and in his desperation creates a figurine of a gargoyle from Becky’s plasticine and his own semen, placing it on his chest and falling asleep. He “baptized it with the last drops of Johnny Walker,” his “own little gargoyle to protect [him] from beautiful women with blue-green eyes and from ever feeling anything again” (311).

After the break-up, he lives a successful but emotionally impoverished life, closed off to any more liaisons—more content than happy—imagining the stone-cold gargoyle protecting him from heartbreak:

But when I did think of her, when, unbidden, memories of her smile or her eyes came to me, then I felt pain: a sharp hurt inside my rib-cage . . . And it was at these times that I imagined that I could feel the little grey gargoyle in my chest.

⁴⁵ See Gaiman 2002.

It would wrap itself, stone-cold, about my heart, protecting me until I felt nothing at all, and I would return to my work. (311)

He and Becky meet again by chance after many years, rekindling their relationship, picking it up where they left off, negative emotions and concerns apparently forgotten. They spend the night together, falling asleep after professing love for one other. Having an ominous dream vision of the gargoyle coming out of his chest and then disappearing back inside, gripping long black hair (presumably Becky's), the protagonist eventually finds himself alone in bed, feeling a complete emotional blankness, a purple flower resembling an orchid (and smelling "salty and female"; 314) lying on the pillow next to him; he does not care if he ever sees Becky again.

3.2.1 Parameters

The participants in the reader response experiment included 16 females and 14 males aged 19–35, predominantly native speakers of English or non-native speakers of C1 proficiency level or higher, college educated (students and graduates). All of them were active readers and seven of them were familiar with Gaiman's other works. After reading the story they were asked to fill in an open-question survey form (see Appendix A) comprising 20 questions, its completion reportedly taking anywhere between 15 and 120 minutes depending on the respondent's thoroughness.

In these self-report accounts of the readers' experience, respondents answered [1] whether they enjoyed the short story; [2] whether they identified with any character or situation portrayed; [3] whether they could identify any fantasy of theirs in the text; [4] whether anything caused them any degree of anxiety, shame, offence, or other form of displeasure—and, if so, [5] what were their attitudes to and thoughts about the elements causing the feelings listed. The scale of the survey and the number of questions allowed for a single point to be enquired about multiple-times, using a different phrasing or angle, reaching the final answer by means of cross-referencing.

The points of interest were, respectively: [1] enjoyment, or level of engagement in the reading process; [2] if empathy was employed and in what fashion; [3] projected content which the story accommodates, as identified explicitly by the reader or implied by their self-reported enjoyment of certain passages in the story; [4] situations in the reading

experience which are problematic with regards to the reader's identity, ego, or self-awareness; [5] mental defenses employed in these situations, usually expressed as a comment or criticism.

3.2.2 Results

20 out of 30 (65%) respondents enjoyed the story, and 4 of these (13.5%) enjoyed it to a great degree. Having assessed the responses, I identified the following factors correlated significantly with the self-reported enjoyment of the text:

- (a) *identification* with characters and/or situations
- (b) accommodation of *projected fantasies*
- (c) relevance of *employed defenses* to anxiety-evoking elements central to the story

Another finding was (d) the even greater degree of self-reported enjoyment in cases where no apparent defenses were employed. While results (a), (b), (c) were predicted by Holland's model, (d) was not.

The finding that (a) readers who identified with the characters and scenarios in the story enjoyed it more, evidenced by responses such as

- I did [enjoy it] . . . ----- I could feel the man's pain like it was mine own.⁴⁶
- I partly enjoyed it . . . ----- It was not intense enough that it would make me re-live these exciting parts [of my life] and emotions that I have experienced before.
- I like the story, made me think of some life situations and how would I act in the position of the main character.
- I didn't exactly enjoy it, I had no real interest in the characters.

⁴⁶ The typographical sign "-----" indicates that the two parts of the response are taken from two different questions.

came as no surprise. In only 3 (10%) cases did the respondent identify with some central element⁴⁷ but did not enjoy the story. There were just two cases (6.5%) of enjoyment without identification. In all the other cases enjoyment corresponded to identification.

A more instructive result, as to the validity of predictions based on Holland's model, was the (b) correlation of the reader's enjoyment with the text's apparent ability to seamlessly accommodate the reader's fantasy (projected content), as seen in these example responses:

- The beginning was very romantic (they met and immediately fell in love) and I want to experience such a kind of passionate love.
- The initial paragraph describing the brief moment of absolute calm between waking up and becoming fully aware . . . reminds me of the Wordsworthian mood of "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" . . . [also] the way presence of a loved one changes one's view of the world.

Again, as in the case of identification, the element into which the readers project their fantasy-content should be sufficiently "central," i.e. it must be identified on a substantial scale "in" the text. In the case of one reader who found her fantasy reflected "just [in] the [career] success [of the main character]," a rather peripheral motif divorced from the central drama and emotional dynamics (serving mostly as a conversation point for the protagonist's and Becky's meeting-cum-reunion), she did not enjoy the story and "wished [the protagonist's] wife dumped him."

Among the respondents who enjoyed the story, 80% were apparently able to utilize the text to accommodate their fantasies in some of its central aspects. As could be seen in table B1, 10% did not provide any projection, and the projection of the last two participants in this group was deemed peripheral to the story:

⁴⁷ Identification with some peripheral element (such as "having trouble at work," which could be relatable to the protagonist's business suffering because of his love affair—a motif so minor I did not include it in the short summary) which did not seem to be connected to any strong feelings on part of the reader was not considered as "identification" for the purposes of this study.

Table B1: Centrality of projected content for respondents who enjoyed the story

Fantasy	Centrality	Fantasy	Centrality
vengeance (Becky's demise)	yes	personal and sexual maturation, "leave or stay" relationship dilemmas, falling in love	yes
true romance, purity, tranquility, nostalgia	yes	experiencing passionate love	yes
falling in love with a "manic pixie dream girl"	yes	creating the gargoyle and pushing it to one's heart, resolution, vengeance (Becky's demise)	yes
romance with an interesting man, hair appreciation	yes	reuniting with one's former love (and having six kids, two cars, a cat, and a mortgage)	yes
good inter-personal relationships, nihilistic fatalism	yes	listening to one's emotions, not wanting to live in a traditional family	yes
happiness	yes	the atmosphere of coziness at Becky's apartment and in their relationship	yes
supernatural interventions, understanding things, emancipation	yes	n/a	n/a
rare occasions of absolute romantic bliss against the everyday, strength of feeling	yes	n/a	n/a
punishing the man's contemptible behavior, love, sex	yes	affectionate family harmony	no
personal maturation	yes	sex	no

By comparison, only 30% of those who reportedly did not enjoy the story provided a projection which could be deemed central to the story. The rest identified mostly sexual or

erotic content, which, if compared to the text itself, could be explicitly accommodated only by a few remarks on the protagonist's and Becky's sex life in the beginning, and a short sequence before the end (constituting some 10% of the text when combined). While the question whether the theme of sexuality and its depictions is indeed peripheral to the story remains, of course, open, it is worth to note the uniformity of the first half of the responses in table B2. Of the 5 readers altogether who identified purely sexual fantasies 4 did not enjoy the story.

Table B2: Centrality of projected content for respondents who did not enjoy the story

Fantasy	Centrality	Fantasy	Centrality
depravity, sexual emancipation, graphicness	no	n/a	n/a
oral sex, vaginas	no	n/a	n/a
dumping cheaters, career success	no	romantic spring walk in Hyde Park, Becky dumping him (he deserved it for wanting to leave his wife)	yes
oral sex, lewdness	no	making up, reunion, respite from problems	yes
sex with a girl one barely knows, graphicness	no	guarding oneself	yes

The third finding pertains to the (c) relevance of employed defenses to anxiety-evoking elements central to the story. Below, a passage which readers identified as evoking feelings of displeasure was paired with what could be regarded as a defense meant to provide a satisfying resolution to the element perceived as threatening to the ego. This defense is expressed in the form of an evaluation (of a character, situation, or the writing itself) or some other relevant (ethical, aesthetic) attitude:

- The most discomforting scene is probably the night of the break-down of the affair. The self-humiliation of a man is always a painful sight. ----→ [In] the

climax of the story . . . the ungrateful Becky is defiled and defeated. The old pain of the dumped lover is finally killed.

- I was surprised by the panty sniffing scene because it was the first time I read about it in fiction. ----→ The narrator of this one is a big drama queen. And I didn't like that.
- I didn't like the passage when Becky told him she was leaving him and then he was sitting naked on the floor . . . he seems to me so desperate and completely devastated. ----→ This [is a] story full of dark feelings . . . he was much more devoted to her and it seemed to me a bit exaggerated and too much.

In the first and last example above, we can see how a problematic feeling arising at some point in the reading is potentially resolved by a mental defense, expressed as an evaluation or attitude.

In the first example, it is the self-humiliation of the protagonist, his inability to deal with his feelings “like a man,” which was perceived as “discomforting” by the respondent. The reader deals with the problem by first projecting his vindictive fantasy of Becky’s destruction by the gargoyle (thus activating the magical-fantastic—rather than the realistic—reading of the story’s resolution) and then by remarking that the reason for the initial humiliation has been disposed of. In order to resolve the threat to the ego, the blame is shifted to Becky, as evidenced by the reader’s characterization of her as “ungrateful,” apparently taking satisfaction in her being “defiled and defeated.” The defense mechanism here could be described as externalizing the shortcomings or perceived failures of the male character, whom the reader identifies with, and placing the blame for them on Becky. The female scapegoat is conveniently punished, and the feelings of balance and fairness and “manly pride” can be re-established.

The third response refers to the same scene of the immediate aftermath of the break-up. The conduct of the protagonist, described by Gaiman as “a place of drunken, horny, angry madness,” his wandering around the apartment “sniveling” (310), is again deemed problematic or disconcerting. Rather than judging the protagonist, trying to explain his actions, or shifting the blame, the reader makes an evaluation of the story as a work of

fiction, remarking on its dark tone and then criticizing it as an exaggeration. The defense mechanism here, then, is not a moralizing rationalization concerning the characters, but an attitude towards the mimetic function of the story itself.

The middle response is the only one of three taken from a reader who did not enjoy the story. The problematic point identified here is a brief, one-sentence scene of the protagonist sniffing Becky’s underwear during the post-break-up passage. While it isn’t clear whether the reader felt discomfort or just surprise, there was nothing in the rest of her response which could be considered relevant to this scene. She voices her dislike of the main character and makes an evaluation of his character, but in doing so, she does not seem to address any point of the reading experience which may have caused her feelings of discomfort—indeed, no such point is identified. The protagonist’s conduct, while deemed reprehensible, failed to pose a threat to the ego and engage the reader’s mental defenses.

The same pattern can be identified in the responses more generally:

Table C1: Appropriateness of mental defenses to problematic content for respondents who enjoyed the story

Threat	Defense	Match	Threat	Defense	Match
humiliation, heartbreak	manly pride, shifts the blame	yes	fear of gargoyle threatening or killing Becky	n/a	no defense
conflict between responsibility and happiness, explicit sex, immaturity	reasserts responsibility, scorns sexuality & immaturity	yes	finding one’s partner no longer interesting, protagonist’s hysterical and pathetic behavior	asserts happiness of reader’s own relationship, criticizes protagonist for his treatment of Becky, feels bad about wrong decisions	yes
conflict between responsibility and happiness, disruption of harmony	expresses pity about disruptive turmoil	yes	gratuitous depiction of masturbation, pain, emotional emptiness, not being able to love, heartbreak, betrayal (break-up)	masturbation scene was just shock value, Becky was “not very nice,” feels sorry for protagonist	yes
humiliation, powerlessness in failure, disappointing people	n/a	no defense*	heartbreak, emotional emptiness, protagonist’s desperation, dark feelings, sad mood	expresses preference for more positive stories, criticizes exaggeration	yes

messiness, lack of communication	criticism of rushed irrational decisions of the characters	yes	protagonist separating from wife with no regret, repulsive break-up scene	n/a	no defense*
breach of privacy, messiness, explicit sex, relationship trouble	suspicion of wishes-come-true	yes	protagonist's cheating, Becky leaving, gargoyle coming out of his chest	criticizes cheating, rationalizes break-up: they had attraction but no consonance, the protagonist is ultimately a failure	yes
explicit sex, protagonist's desperation	disagrees with extramarital affair	no	different expectations in relationships	criticizes protagonist's not caring about Becky & disingenuity of his love & Becky's inconsistency	yes
explicit sex, explicit depiction of female genitals	doesn't condone cheating, criticizes blocking off of feelings, protagonist lacks backbone and is passive & bland	no	Becky's insensitivity, protagonist's overreaction, lack of communication	hates ambiguous endings, dislikes protagonist's readily leaving his wife and kids; characters acted unreasonably; protagonist was needy and childish	yes
hardening of heart, hidden pain	n/a	no defense*	passivity, masturbation, sex made repulsive in anticipation of foulness, self-destruction	shallow characters, cliché, too bleak, protagonist did not struggle against gargoyle, rejects explicit scenes	yes
leaving his children for sexual gratification, man getting undeserved wish-fulfillment, being shallow	loathes the protagonist: he has no integrity & is shallow & feels self-contempt & idealizes Becky	yes*	being slave to one's emotions, protagonist being completely desperate and drunk, uneasiness about the calculated end-sex	generalization: "it's relatable"	yes

As is apparent from table C1 above, only 10% of respondents who liked the story failed to report an attitude or evaluation which could be considered as a manifestation of a mental defense appropriate or relevant to the problematic passage given; in other words, their *threat* and *defense* mismatched. Interestingly, four other readers (20% of respondents in C1) reported no defense whatsoever, and three of these were among the four readers in total who reportedly enjoyed the story to a great degree (marked with an asterisk).

While the positive correlation between reported enjoyment and the ability to engage problematic passages by appropriate defenses is quite clear in readers who enjoyed the story, no such tendency can be discerned in those who did not. Still, the proportion of those

who failed to express a relevant defense is higher in C2 (30%), while there are none who manifested no defense at all:

Table C2: Appropriateness of mental defenses to problematic content for respondents who did not enjoy the story

Threat	Defense	Match	Threat	Defense	Match
selfishness, lack of communication	snubs idealization & moderation & timid or irrational behavior	yes	depression, being rejected, lies, lack of foresight	thinks story was predictable, romantic, boring, girly; Becky was right to dump him	yes
fetishism	rejects unhappy love, negative emotions	no	too much sex	thinks story was short, characters superficial	no
lying and cheating on one's wife	anger at unfaithful men & fickle men and women	yes	sadness of a broken heart	points out lack of understanding	yes
pursuing lust & one's egoistic illusion at expense of family, inability to find respite from love and passion	detests emotional roller-coasters, mistrusts depicted emotions & idealization & the belief that one is unable to purposefully shape one's fate	yes	sniffing panties and masturbating was gross	protagonist cheats without us having background info on his marriage, Becky is fickle	no
Becky playing & pretending, irresponsibility and naivety, Becky's success, disillusionment about oneself	despises weak, naive, unfaithful men & manipulative irrational women, snubs hysteria, tells about her maturity and preparedness	yes	becoming a cheater, marriages not working out, problems of any kind	believes cheater's life is miserable and wrong, criticizes hero's temper tantrum	yes

The data suggests that identification with characters, accommodation of projected fantasies, and relevance of employed defenses are all crucial factors in the enjoyment of a character-driven narrative such as the one used in the present study. The importance of these factors for enjoyment appears to be descending in the order listed, if their descending level of correlation with enjoyment is to be indicative in any way. However, due to the inherently intertwined natures of these categories (it is difficult to imagine, for example, projected fantasies without identification, or a complete disconnect between

fantasies and elements problematic to the ego), it is doubtful they can be considered in isolation.

The study presented here does not presume to be considered a part of “naturalistic” enquiry—it’s methodology is too loose to satisfy even the standards of many social disciplines; much of the collection, processing, and evaluation of the data relies on my subjective judgement calls. This is, after all, a literary study, not a psychological or neurocognitive treatise. However, my hope is for it to contribute to shifting the field’s attention to the actual, empirical readers and their experience; the experience which constitutes the place where the bulk of “literary” interaction takes place.

3.3 Between Dream and Reality: The Fantastic-Realistic Dialectic

The day of "the" reader is over—at least for those of us who have looked at actual readers.

—Norman Holland⁴⁸

The inquiry into concepts such as empathy, projected fantasies, and mental defenses informs us about the processes in the reading experience which are emotionally rewarding to the reader. However, the part of the study presented in the previous section does not shed much light on how the readers make sense of the ambiguous ending of the short story “How Do You Think It Feels?” Does the plasticine gargoyle come to life to protect the protagonist from heartbreak, or is it just a psychological construct used by the disappointed man to visualize his disengagement from emotional entanglements? Is the flower left on his pillow a keepsake from Becky, or a magic transformation of her remains, the physical Becky having been literally consumed or hauled inside the protagonist’s chest by the gargoyle? Is this magic realism, symbolism, or fantasy?

Rather than looking for “textual evidence” and proposing a more or less straightforward and “likely,” or intricately sophisticated, possibly “far-fetched,” interpretation (likely or far-fetched in what context, exactly? Gaiman’s apparent intentions? genre conventions? cultural and historical background? some political or personal agenda we deem worthy of furthering by our reading?), I consider it much more instructive to examine responses and interpretations of various readers, and evaluate the story and its effects as functions of the mind.⁴⁹ Backed by sufficient empirical evidence, we can attempt to hypothesize about the “literary object,” broaden the analysis of various themes and other aspects of Gaiman’s writing, as manifested in the minds of his readers, to encompass a wider body of his works.

⁴⁸ See Holland 1992, 86.

⁴⁹ The empirical data for such an evaluation was gathered as part of the same survey presented in the previous section, and its analysis was published in the 2016 article “Mystery or Not? Quantum Cognition and the Interpretation of the Fantastic in Neil Gaiman” in the journal *Ars Aeterna*. The following section is a lengthy edited excerpt from the article (Čipkár 2016a, 25–29; “From a structuralist . . . both realistic [uncanny] or fantastic [marvelous].”).

From a structuralist point of view, “How Do You Think It Feels?” and many other stories in Gaiman’s oeuvre fall neatly under the category of “the fantastic,” as defined by Tzvetan Todorov in his famous treatise (1975). Todorov defines the fantastic as a hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation of unfolding extraordinary events:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know . . . there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. . . . The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (Todorov 1975, 25).

The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described . . . [and the reader] will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations (33).

We can identify a number of problematic points in Todorov’s definition. First, as is inherent in the structuralist approach, it presupposes a particular kind of reader response based on an idealized reader. What may look extraordinary, singular and shocking to some readers may leave others unfazed. To push this point even further, could a ghost story be regarded as fantastic if the reader actually believes in the existence of ghosts in the real world?

Secondly, the definition attributes undue agency to the text—see expressions such as: “the text must oblige the reader to hesitate.” What if the reader chooses to ignore the supposedly supernatural element in the text, or opts out of the decision process altogether? In what manner exactly does the text oblige them not to? The metaphorical attribution of agency to text in this case (as in numerous other cases) appears to create more questions than it elucidates. I argue that these and other ambiguities can be resolved

by a strict focus on the reader and the processes that play into their reception of the literary work.

If we utilize Todorov's definition of the fantastic as genre definition in its strictest sense, we are inevitably left with an extremely limited number of works—a fact that Todorov himself is well aware of, so he broadens the category to encompass more than the liminal genre of the true fantastic. The hesitation that is crucial for the domain of the fantastic tends to be resolved in favor of either the supernatural or natural. Then we find ourselves in the domain of “the marvelous” or “the uncanny,” defined by Todorov thus:

[In the uncanny], events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected. (Todorov 1975, 46)

If we move to the other side of that median line which we have called the fantastic, we find ourselves in the fantastic-marvelous, the class of narratives that are presented as fantastic and that end with an acceptance of the supernatural. (52)

As we can see, there is space left for the reader to decide which reading to adopt—marvelous or uncanny—and a question of degree arises: how far is the reader willing to go one way or the other? Thus the concept of the genre is problematized in practice, should we use the abovementioned two modes as classifiers. And yet, Genre-based division is certainly an important guideline in areas such as book retail, where customers need to orient themselves. Neil Gaiman more recently proposed a definition of genre which stresses the role of the reader (audience), at his Julius Schwartz Lecture at MIT:

[Genre contains things] that if they weren't there, you, as a member of an audience, would feel cheated. You've gone to a musical and nobody sings—what kind of musical is this? . . . If you take out the gunfights from a western, then you don't have the thing there that the person came to see. . . . If the plot is a machine that allows you to get from set piece to set piece, and the set pieces are things without which the reader or the viewer would feel cheated, then, whatever it is, it's genre. . . . Subject matter doesn't make genre. (Gaiman 2008)

The problematic point of this rather pragmatic definition is the difference between “set piece” and “subject matter.” My own intuitions tell me that “set piece” is an immediately recognizable—and thus somewhat conventional—element, while “subject matter” is more abstract—say, a principle which unifies the particular set pieces. Nevertheless, if we are to decide whether readers feel cheated or not by the absence of some expected element, we ought to ask them. We need to examine how readers actually experience the hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous, and how they decide (if they decide) to adopt one of the two interpretations, or, alternatively, opt to leave the experience unresolved and stay in the mode of the true fantastic.⁵⁰

I explored this question in the reader response study of “How Do You Think It Feels?”; I asked the participants whether they understood the story as “fantasy” or “realistic fiction” (in Todorov’s terms: marvelous or uncanny). Was there any hesitation experienced because of a supernatural element and, if so, was it resolved? The readers’ understanding of the story as realistic or fantastic was checked against their interpretation of the two prominent items/symbols crucial to the plot: the gargoyle and the flower.

Reviewing the responses of the participants yielded two prominent interpretive branches. In the first one, the readers opted for a symbolic understanding or psychological explanation of the gargoyle, stating that it stood for “love turned hate,” “an artificially/semi-consciously created defensive mechanism tinged with a strongly repressed sexual desire” or “[the protagonist’s] emotional and sexual involvement with women he’s not ‘supposed’ to be with, but at the same time he wants to” or that it was “a talisman intended to protect the narrator from pain; in the end proving too effective.”

In what I identified as the other interpretive branch—the fantasy or marvelous reading—the readers understood the gargoyle to be some magical “protection against the beautiful woman that almost ruined his life,” and “the narrator’s resentment and hurt jealousy made real,” that is, “a literal creature who lives inside the man’s chest.”

⁵⁰ This is not a matter of mere classification; the inquiry into the readers’ interpretation of ambiguities touches upon one of the constitutive aspects of reading pleasure. In Holland’s words, “being able to make sense of the imaginary world of a work of literature also confirms [us] in [our] characteristic way of making sense of [our] own everyday world, and that feels good. It gives [us] a sense of mastery and being in control” (Holland 2009, 238).

Responses pertaining to the flower were correspondingly distributed: on one hand, there were responses claiming “the flower itself can . . . perhaps symbolize [Becky’s] expression of being ‘ready’ for such a relationship, a strange expression of matured love . . .” or that the flower “was probably left there by Becky, so that the main character would never forget about her, as she was probably never coming back.” While even in this category of responses there was quite a variation as to Becky’s attitude, the crucial point is their distinctiveness from the responses claiming the flower was in fact “the girl because the gargoyle took her” or that it was “Becky’s sexual organs—the only thing that the demon left [the protagonist] to enjoy.” Another less magical but still quite supernatural explanation read: “I think it could mean that Becky was trying to leave in the middle of the night—leaving a flower before sneaking out. That could explain why the gargoyle ate her.”

To summarize, some readers understood the gargoyle as a purely symbolic device or a phantasm that could be explained by the psychological state of the protagonist. For them, the flower was mostly an unimportant detail with at most symbolic significance that could maybe tell us something about Becky’s attitude. These readers opted for the realistic reading and if they had experienced any hesitation as to the supernatural elements, they resolved it in a way that rendered the story “uncanny.” A substantial subgroup here disregarded the supernatural quality altogether and read the story as realistic fiction.

The other group registered the supernatural element and resolved the ambiguity of the story by accepting the gargoyle and sometimes even the orchid as elements of a magical or otherwise reality-transgressing narrative, opting for the marvelous interpretation. Still others simply remained undecided.

When asked, the first group claimed with confidence that the character of Becky remained alive—she was never in any real peril in the realistic interpretation after all—while the others argued there was satisfactory evidence that the gargoyle had indeed devoured, or snatched and dragged into the protagonist’s chest, or otherwise disposed of Becky. The handful of respondents familiar with Gaiman’s other works noted that it was probably the author’s intention to create this ambiguity of interpretation and thus both scenarios were viable.

Putting the conclusions of the previous sub-chapter aside, if we look into possible correlations between reported enjoyment of the story and the two opposite interpretive branches, we find that all of the readers who interpreted the story as fantasy enjoyed it,

while those who read it as straight realistic fiction were fairly evenly divided. Furthermore, 75% of those who were aware of the dual interpretation of the story enjoyed it, including half of those who enjoyed it to a great degree.

Table D: Genre Perception and Enjoyment Distribution

Interpretation	Enjoyed	Not Enjoyed
realistic	9	7
fantasy	5	0
both	6	2
couldn't answer	0	1

According to table D, the greatest number of respondents who reportedly did not enjoy the story was among those who opted for a realistic reading. In this subgroup, their enjoyment seemed to be strongly predicted by the degree of emotional investment in the characters which had to do with identification, empathy, and finding projection space for their fantasies, as well as the ability to resolve points in the reading problematic to the ego (analyzed in the previous chapter). On the other hand, the readers interpreting the story as “fantasy” enjoyed it comparatively more, presumably owing to being more intellectually stimulated or because of the fulfillment of their genre preference. The apparently greatest self-reported enjoyment was tied to the awareness of the ambiguity or multiplicity of the interpretations.

Ultimately, the decision most readers faced in the reading process was between two mutually exclusive plot outcomes: with Becky dead or otherwise seriously imperiled, or Becky being alive and unharmed. There is always the position of opting out of the whole conundrum, but if the possibilities readers “find” in the text are to be realized, we are still left with the question: is Becky dead, or is she alive? The “most correct” answer to it seems to be a simple “yes,” a reply transcending (in a Hegelian manner) the dual framing of the question itself. In other words, I argue that the most engaging option is to reflect the

hesitation inherent in the decision by admitting that Becky is both dead and alive at the same time, just as the story is both realistic (uncanny) or fantastic (marvelous).⁵¹

The “intellectual” enjoyment, i.e. the process of making sense of the text should not be underestimated. As the results of the present study indicate, readers who read the story as fantastic or were aware of the duality and the tension between the “realistic” and “magical” readings reported a high level of enjoyment even without identification, projection of their fantasies, or engagement of their psychological defenses.

⁵¹ My proposition to reformulate Todorov’s definition of the fantastic as a series of prerequisites along cognitivist lines is as follows: “1. The reader attends to a presumably supernatural element; 2. The element is understood to be able to change the significance of other important aspects of the story, leading to a plurality of mutually exclusive interpretations; 3. The reader interacts with the plurality by a way of hesitation between superposed scenarios, some of which violate the laws of nature and some of which leave them intact.

This set of three rules views the concept of genre as a set of reader’s assumptions and mindsets that influence their enjoyment of the text. In this conception, the fantastic is then not a structural feature of the text but a state of mind reliant on a decision-making process where all conceivable options have some potential for being expressed” (Čipkár 2016a, 31–32).

3.4 The Process of Reading Neil Gaiman

All criticism of literature originates in our personal experiences of individual works, and all criticism is a transformation of those experiences. This seems obvious, yet, implicitly or explicitly, it is the most frequently denied or avoided aspect of the professional study of literature.

—Murray Schwartz⁵²

In this chapter, I briefly describe the key points of the reader response dynamics as posited by Norman Holland, using the present study of Neil Gaiman’s short story as an example, and explain how an analysis framed in this fashion could be instructive in a broader analysis of Gaiman’s novels and other prose works, which (due to their length and other concerns) do not readily lend themselves to empirical reader response study.

Holland, following neuropsychology, identifies the enjoyment of literature as “self-stimulation system,” which could be described by four distinct processes, characterized by “SEEKING and consummation, wanting and liking,” mimicking the same processes which occur in our “real” life (Holland 2009, 235). Picking up the text of “How Do You Think It Feels,”:

1. Readers construe the literary work as “a piece of a three-dimensional world ‘out there,’ separate from” themselves (236). They enter the reading experience with a variety of expectations. They don’t expect to act on it, and they generally hope to enjoy it. They recollect similar texts and imagine in what ways the short story could reflect their other experiences, be it real-life or literary.

They may have expectations about genre, if they realize that the collection of stories the piece belongs to is conventionally categorized as fantasy or magic realism. If they are familiar with Neil Gaiman, they will expect themes and style encountered in his other works. The readers “build more focused expectations about this particular text” (ibid.) when they encounter information about setting, period, etc., having read the first few sentences.

⁵² See Schwartz 1975, 756.

Moreover, a young urban audience presumably immediately identifies with the story's London setting (and the set pieces) and, indeed, uses their familiarity with similar settings to imbue it with life, as the one respondent who was in turn able to take particular pleasure in the little details about "Becky's flat," which he perceived as "nice and welcoming and easy." The ages of both protagonists (narrator 27, Becky 20) fall within the age range of the respondents, and so raise expectations of relatability to the various problems they deal with at this particular stage in their lives. "These expectations," Holland writes,

color our perceptions and ultimately our whole experience of the work. Declarative memory tells us what is new, and our brains' attention systems focus us on that new thing or, for a literary work, that sequence of new things. For each of us, our preferred balance of the expected and the unexpected will be the gateway to having a literary experience. If we cannot fit the literary work into our ongoing expectations, we will put down the book . . . If it ceases to be novel, we will become bored and leave it. We need a balance: new but not perplexingly so. (Holland 2009, 236)

The determinants of a positive "literary experience" which Holland speaks of are reflected in characterizations of the story such as the one given by one reader:

Most parallels [with my own life] are in details—the story itself is pretty common (the climax excluded) and reflects a pretty common situation of a married man falling for a woman. The way the story is told is what makes it believable—not turning away from showing true despair and the very low of the main character; sexual life, little facts about his life only he views and understands (his wife not singing . . .).

As is the rule with most of Gaiman's writing, the readers of "How Do You Think It Feels" find its setting, its topics, and its characters immediately accessible and recognizable. Indeed, even though Gaiman's novels share shelf space in bookstores with genre writing (fantasy), they feature very little traditional world-building in the vein of Tolkien or Le Guin. His stories take place largely in contemporary British and American settings, and when supernatural elements are introduced, they utilize classic mythologies and well-known

fairy-tale motifs (or popular franchises). Before such an “incursion” into the everyday is presented, though, the reader has already identified the familiar setting and acquainted themselves with the “Alice” character before her initiation into the “Wonderland”—be it the underground city of London Below in *Neverwhere*, the pantheon of deities in *American Gods*, the Other Mother’s domain in *Coraline*, or the Faerie in *Stardust*.

2. Throughout the reading process, the brain requires that the readers “pay attention to what is new, and it mobilizes [their] habitual defenses (or ways of coping with [their] inner and outer worlds) toward this new thing” (Holland 2009, 236). What these “new” and problematic elements are can be glimpsed from readers’ response: by and large, these accounts are dominated by the break-up scene and the ending (see response above: “true despair” referring to the former, “climax” to the latter), i.e. moments eliciting the most emotions and polemics. The readers’ “inner defense mechanisms” are employed in these moments, enabling them to “achieve whatever emotional goals” they have in relation to the story (ibid.).

The interest in intimacy, sexuality and human relationships, recognizable in this story as well as other works by Gaiman, is but one of the devices with which the author challenges his reader and engages their mental defenses. In *American Gods*, infidelity and abject sexuality is one of the ways in which the relationship between the main protagonist, Shadow, and his wife Laura is problematized. Parent-child relationships are also a source of unease: both in *Coraline* and in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. While in the former the protective parent figure—the Other Mother—is a perversion of an alternative reality and is later demasked as a fabrication, in the latter the protagonist’s father becomes a source of horror when he punishes his “misbehaving” son in a bath, but while the source of this horror appears to be the influence of the supernatural evil being posing as the boy’s governess, the good and the vile is not as neatly delineated—the reader can’t be certain where human character ends and supernatural wickedness begins.

Helplessness, feeling of betrayal and abandonment, inability to communicate— in Gaiman’s stories, all of these work hand in hand with the fantastic and phantasmal adversaries to challenge the reader’s ego.

3. To make sense of the text, readers “use schemas to fill in the” perceived “gaps in the work.” They “infer things unsaid like motives, causes, happenings offstage, or the look of a character in a book,” (Holland 2009, 237) building upon their initial perceptions and

expectations. In other words, readers structure the bits of information provided by the author to form a coherent story, then embellish and expand upon it, attributing a variety of characteristics and relations to the mental constructs occasioned by their interaction with the written words. This gives rise to evaluative judgements such as the one provided by this respondent:

The way the narrator presents himself, one can hardly avoid the impression of a rather hysterical, immature, self-centered being (after all, there is a reason she points out the narcissi during their walk in Hyde Park, not mentioning his “original” way of distinguishing between his twin daughters, or the despicable way he behaves following her breaking up with him).

Similar evaluations can be understood as the external manifestations of mental defenses which readers have to deploy to resolve anxiety-evoking or otherwise problematic “new” elements in the story in order to enjoy it. The present reader response study suggests that the degree of success with which such defenses are brought to bear on elements perceived as central to the story could be predictive of enjoyment. Alternatively, as the results indicate, a complete lack of expression of evaluative attitudes—indicative of a lack of any employed defenses—could be even more strongly predictive in this regard. When readers accept their own vulnerability vis-à-vis the feelings of displeasure arising in the process of reading and open themselves to them, they can potentially find even more space for accommodation of their projected content (discussed further below).

“Goal-directed, wish-fulfilling fantasies fill in, adding ‘unconscious content’ to the ‘plain sense’ of left-hemisphere meanings. The ambiguities of literary language allow the right hemisphere’s normally suppressed meanings to express unconscious wishes and so enter into our literary experience” (Holland 2009, 237), as evidenced by the variety of fantasies identified in tables B1 and B2. Readers of Gaiman’s short story project their “conscious and, especially, unconscious goals onto the events portrayed” (ibid.). They want the protagonist to reunite with Becky, his true love; or, they want to see him punished for his immoral behavior. Alternatively, they are just curious about how the relationship is resolved. Consciously or not, they “wish to see this or that outcome represented in the literary work. Perceiving a satisfying outcome gratifies wishes, some of which we have carried forward from infancy. We have goals embedded in our character. And these wishes,

like our characteristic expectations and defenses, color our perception” and our enjoyment of the story (ibid.).⁵³

Gaiman’s heroes are torn from their stress-free mundane realities and are thrown into challenging new lives where they have to fight for their survival, wellbeing of their loved ones, or a sense of purpose—but at the same time they are on the lookout for happiness, they are presented with opportunities to grow as personalities, and there is ample space for the reader to use them as proxies for their own pursuit of happiness. The main protagonist of *Coraline*, Richard in *Neverwhere*, Shadow in *American Gods*—all of them set out on a quest to reestablish their homes and their harmonious domestic existence against a background of sensational and fantastic events. These quests are resolved differently: Coraline saves her parents and wins the safety of her home and hearth back; Richard discovers there are things more attractive than stability and domestic comforts and continues his adventures in “Wonderland”; Shadow attains closure in his relationship with Laura, letting go of the past and opening himself up to possible happiness in the future.

4. Finally, readers find closure “at an intellectual level” for the various interactions which constitute their perception of the text. Once they feel that they have “made sense” of the story, they feel satisfied; ideally, they feel they have made the story their own. It becomes part of their “regular making sense of the world,” coping with it the way they cope with any kind of new experiences in life, and, in turn, it confirms them in their characteristic way of making sense of new experiences (Holland 2009, 238).

The readers decide and answer for themselves such questions as: what happened to Becky; what was the meaning of the protagonist’s visions of the gargoyle coming to life; what was the significance of the flower left beside the sleeping protagonist, etc.; or, alternatively, leave such questions unasked, or not consider them at all, and make sense of the text—more or less satisfyingly—in some different way. As indicated by the result of the present study, the reading of the story as a fantasy (marvelous) piece featuring actual

⁵³ Holland gives a neurobiological account to back up this hypothesis: “These wishes and impulses, partly conscious, partly deeply unconscious, involve dopaminergic SEEKING systems that run from the brain stem up into the limbic system and express all over the frontal and perceptual lobes. It seems clear that dopamine (indeed, one particular receptor for dopamine) modulates this exploratory behavior, this SEEKING” (Holland 2009, 238).

supernatural elements proved to be satisfying for all who opted for it. Alternatively, realizing the inherent ambiguity of the fantastic in Todorov's sense may have proven even more rewarding.

It is precisely this ambiguity which could be considered a staple of Gaiman's oeuvre. Many of his works feature a degree of "toying with the reader's sense of what is real, what is magical and what is imagined," making use of "a tension between the mundane and the magical, the everyday and the weird," leaving the reader "with a sense of wonder." By taking mythological or fairytale motifs, recontextualizing them in a manner which makes them feel "relevant and close to our day-to-day experience" he realizes the full potential of the genre as identified by Todorov. "The remarkable popularity of his books is a testament to the effect his style has on readers and it makes for a worthwhile subject to explore in a reader response context" (Čipkár 2016a, 29).

Another story from the volume *Smoke and Mirrors*, "Murder Mysteries," (Gaiman 1999) presents an even more sophisticated conundrum than "How Do You . . ." A homeless person tells the narrator—who is on his way back from a meeting with an old crush—a story of the original murder in Heaven (a crime of passion), intimating that he is, in fact, a fallen angel who used to investigate said crime, bringing the offender to just punishment, but who now regrets his own lack of leniency. Later, the narrator encounters a news story about a brutal murder, details of which seem vaguely familiar and may lead the reader to believe that the narrator has murdered his old lover, although he has no recollection of it. Either the homeless person is really an angel who, in an act of forgiveness, wiped the narrator's own crime from his memory, or else he is a mere hobo after all, and the narrator hasn't killed anyone.

Although Gaiman has written only a handful of such perfectly ambiguous stories, the principle of hesitation about the nature of the portrayed reality is a fundamental principle of his writing. The deities populating the pages of *American Gods* maintain a double existence: living the immigrant lives of little people, trying to make ends meet as butchers, hustlers, taxi drivers, prostitutes, etc., while at the same time commanding powerful and ancient forces; it can't be said, however, that one side of their lives is more genuine than the other. Shadow—and the reader with him—eventually figures out the mythological identity of his enigmatic employer Wednesday and his acquaintances, and their supernatural nature probably cannot be discounted in most conceivable effective readings,

but the hesitation is retained as a symbolic device of philosophical reflection: it's not any supernatural manipulations on part of Wednesday which play the integral part driving the plot forward, it's rather his perfectly mundane, if brilliantly clever, shenanigans. Human belief is understood not only as a sustenance for the supernatural, but, more importantly, as the driving force behind the basic functioning of our cultures, our everyday realities.

4 Aesthetic Universals in Neil Gaiman's Post-Postmodern Mythmaking

4.1 Harmony and Dissonance as Means of Aesthetic Effect

This affinity between the mythical and the abstractly literary illuminates many aspects of fiction, especially the more popular fiction which is realistic enough to be plausible in its incidents and yet romantic enough to be a "good story."

—Northrop Frye⁵⁴

In his essay on the significance of poetry, H. G. Widdowson talks about the two conditions which need to be satisfied in order for a poem (or any piece of literary art for that matter), to be aesthetically effective. "The first is that it disperses meanings and disrupts established ideas, or what T. S. Eliot referred to as 'stock responses.' This we might call the destructive or divergent condition" (Widdowson 1992, 61). In plain terms, Widdowson talks about the elements of artistic expression which give rise to surprise or defy expectations. The more a work of literary art is incongruous and "difficult to accommodate within accepted structures of reality," the greater its aesthetic potential. We find many examples of works within the traditions of the postmodern and high modernism which have garnered critical acclaim based partly on the satisfaction of this condition. However, this has also led to the reputation of incomprehensibility of many modernist and postmodernist authors from the point of view of the general public, a sentiment that is echoed by Paul B. Armstrong in his book on neuroscience and literature: "No matter how often I read *Ulysses*, it remains more difficult and resistant to comprehension than some novels in the realistic tradition that I nevertheless also value highly—novels that have their own subtleties and complexities, to be sure, but that facilitate integration more than puckish, rebellious James Joyce does" (Armstrong 2013, 46).

⁵⁴ See Frye (1957) 2000, 139.

Since it is more than dubious to equate pure obscurity and incomprehensibility with aesthetic quality, Widdowson introduces the second, “convergence” condition: “The incongruity of the poem and the disruption it causes have to be made congruous, the disorder reassembled into a different order. The more patterning that one can discern . . . the more integrated the patterns, the greater its aesthetic potential” (62). Again, this condition alone would not suffice, otherwise regularity could be equated with quality. It is only through a delicate balance of the two that a work of art can function as an effective aesthetic experience: “patterned” enough so as to “facilitate integration” in the reader’s mind, but also retaining its originality—its dissonant features—which would make it worthy of such integration.

In cognitive science, this balance has an analogue in the concepts of prototype approximation vs. violation of expectations. If modernist experiments rely mostly on the latter, the former is constitutive of kitsch.⁵⁵ In a study exploring the brain’s reaction to music, Vuust and Kringelbach indicate that “anticipation/prediction could act as some of the fundamental mechanisms underlying musical structuring and that this taps into the way that the brain works on different levels with a capacity to evoke pleasure in humans.” Familiarity of structure and predictability of outcomes of musical sequences activating the reward system of the brain could thus conceivably account for the success of much of the contemporary popular music output.

Hogan claims that this principle, which may be construed as a form of prototype approximation, holds true more generally. He also points out that predictability and repetition causes us to lose interest, and he contrasts the *anticipatory* principle with *violation of expectations*: “It seems that aesthetic pleasure is more likely to derive from partial unexpectedness that, within some window, allows for retrospective pattern recognition” (Hogan 2016, 26). Hogan proposes a synthesis of the two contrary principles and coins the term “non-anomalous surprise,” explaining that “it is surprise because we do

⁵⁵ The list of defining elements constitutive of kitsch, given by Tomáš Kulka, is comprised of: 1. strong emotional charge [giving rise to] immediate non-reflexive action, 2. simplicity, and 3. stereotype (Kulka 1994, 115). He quotes Milan Kundera’s definition of kitsch as a “categorical agreement with being” (116). Kitsch does not pose questions, it gives an answer; it’s incompatible with irony and doubt (117), which makes it the antithesis of the avant-garde (including modernism and postmodernism, which, while it can utilize kitsch, never does so whole-heartedly).

not specifically and self-consciously anticipate the outcome, at least not with confidence. However, it is not anomalous because we are able to recognize the pattern once it occurs” (27).

Similar views can be found in works of other contemporary cognitive scholars. Armstrong points to the disagreement between Roman Ingarden, the trailblazer in phenomenological aesthetics, and the later Wolfgang Iser’s and Hans Robert Jauss’s school of reception theory, concerning whether aesthetic pleasure stems from “a harmonization of felt values” or “a disruption of the reader’s expectations.” Instead of taking sides, he decides to examine the bigger picture, claiming that “neuroaesthetics should ask how these accounts of the pleasures . . . of having expectations met or thwarted are related to the brain’s processes of comprehension.” Studies of the importance of harmony for aesthetic pleasure would be concerned with neurological functions responsible for pattern recognition, while the neurological correlative to surprise should be identified in the systems of the brain which process and integrate unfamiliar experiences (Armstrong 2013, 23).

If we ponder the problem of how the principle of non-anomalous surprise applies to literary analysis, there arise practical questions pertaining to the functioning of this balance between surprise and familiarity when considered in the context of a particular literary work. Hogan tries to answer this question by attributing complementary distribution to the two principles, or “by positing different sorts of aesthetic processing for focal and non-focal aspects of the aesthetic target. Focal aspects would then be pleasurable to the degree that they foster non-anomalous surprise, whereas non-focal aspects would be valued primarily for predictability” (Hogan 2016, 27). The goal of a literary researcher would then be to assess, in the process of close reading, the “focality” of the aspects comprising a given piece of fiction or poetry. To this end, lacking a more precise, neuroscientific form of enquiry, they could conceivably arm themselves with one of the structuralist, narratologist, reception, cognitive-poetic or other theories honed by the instincts of scholars who came before them.

4.2 Gaiman's Hero's Journey in *Neverwhere*

*I invented old African oral legends; I created cat myths,
which cats tell each other in the night.*

—Neil Gaiman⁵⁶

Neil Gaiman is widely considered as one of the modern mythmakers who, rather than create fantastical worlds from scratch, utilize both Western and Eastern mythologies, adapting them to the present-day readers' sensibilities. His adoption of motifs from myth, folk and fairy tales or even bodies of work by modern authors which have acquired a quasi-mythical status (like those of H.P. Lovecraft or Arthur Conan Doyle) feature in stories with relatable contemporary characters dealing with mundane troubles. While keeping the topics relatable, the author manages, at the same time, to tackle timeless topics, echoing millennia of storytelling tradition.

Gaiman, who has consciously avoided reading Joseph Campbell's influential monomyth theory,⁵⁷ nevertheless succeeds in fitting into its precepts. A striking example of this is Gaiman's first single-author novel, *Neverwhere*, a seminal work of urban fantasy, in which Richard Mayhew, an investment analyst, finds himself on a journey through the bowels of "London Below," an alternative reality both perilous and wonderful, located in the sewers and the subway system of the actual city of London (Gaiman 1996). Richard, in whom the reader finds a complacent, middle-class, generation X member of the post-modern society (in other words: someone whom the model reader can readily identify with), is to rediscover the timeless truths concerning a man's place in the world—not by the means of institutionalized, ritualized proxy, but by literally going through the actual trials of a mythical hero.

⁵⁶ See Gaiman 1999d, 78.

⁵⁷ "I think I got about half way through *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and found myself thinking if this is true—I don't want to know. I really would rather not know this stuff. I'd rather do it because it's true and because I accidentally wind up creating something that falls into this pattern than be told what the pattern is" (Gaiman and Oglive 2007b).

The fact that Gaiman has been asked about Campbell by journalists in interviews, and that fans and scholars alike connect him to Campbell's work⁵⁸ informs us of two things: the first one being the readiness with which Gaiman's readers are reminded of Campbell's theory; the second one being the undying popularity of this American scholar, who managed to combine insights from folklore, anthropology, comparative religion and literature to create an appealing universal narrative framework—indeed, appealing enough not only to produce innumerable productive analyses of stories both traditional and modern, but also serve as a productive prescription for contemporary screenwriters guided by *The Hero with a Thousand Faces'* central idea of a universal narrative structure, rendered by one of its modern proponents, Christopher Vogler, in a slightly updated form, as the claim that “all stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies. . . . [elements] known collectively as The Hero's Journey” (Vogler 2007, xxvii). At the very least, the terms of Hero's Journey could be used to structurally describe the novel and draw parallels with a body of world mythic storytelling tradition. It is also worth investigating whether this structure succeeds in conveying the pivotal narrative points in Gaiman's less “regularly shaped” novels, such as *American Gods* (2001), which Gaiman consciously composed as a “book that you'd have problems filming,” lacking “a nice three act structure,” characterizing it as “misshapen” (Gaiman 2005b).

Reading Gaiman through the lens of Campbell is hardly a novel idea, and the fact that the Hero's Journey is often applied in analysis of his texts (see Rauch 2003; Delahay 2009) is indeed no coincidence. Gaiman shares with Campbell a deep interest in myth and the same goal of “excavating,” out of mythologies, some timeless elements. He does this intuitively, as a part of embarking on his story-building projects, not as a scholar, but an artisan. Gaiman is quite conscious of his designation as a modern myth-maker, which is to a great degree self-appointed. In his essay on the role of myth in our lives, he writes that his comic-book tour de force “*The Sandman* was, in many ways, an attempt to create a new mythology—or rather, to find what it was that [he] responded to in ancient pantheons and then to try and create a fictive structure in which [he] could believe as [he] wrote it. Something that felt *right*, in the way that myths feel right” (Gaiman 1999d, 77). Before we

⁵⁸ For a Campbellian reading of Gaiman's comic book opus *The Sandman*, see Rauch 2003.

ponder the reasons while certain structures “feel right” while others do not, let us demonstrate that the scholar’s and the artisan’s intuitions about universality in mythic narratives coincide.

The first stage of Campbell’s universal hero’s journey is the “call to adventure” (Campbell [1949] 2004, 47), which is defined as the crisis brought about by the appearance of “the herald.” The herald appears as “a preliminary manifestation of the powers that are breaking into play” and, in *Neverwhere*, is represented by the Lady Door, a wounded girl Richard stumbles upon, as she is lying collapsed on a sidewalk. She comes from a lineage endowed with a supernatural ability to open portals between any two places which are removed from one another by almost any physical distance. At this stage, however, the scruffy, homeless girl is merely a messenger, the unassuming frog of fairy tales, which the outside world (represented by Richard’s uptight, pragmatic, higher-middle-class, fiancée) views with repulsion and contempt. Their meeting is “a blunder—apparently the merest chance” and it “reveals an unsuspected world,” and as Richard offers Door his assistance, she opens for him the doorway to a world of adventure and danger. The protagonist is thus “drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (46).

As he takes the first steps on his mythological journey, it appears that destiny has summoned Richard and “transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (Campbell [1949] 2004, 53),⁵⁹ which is, in this case, the underground realm of London Below, a place fitting Campbell’s characterization of a setting “of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight” (53). And, eventually, Richard acquaints himself with instances of all of the above. Before that, however, he “refuses the call” (Campbell [1949] 2004, 54) by letting Door depart from his home after her recuperation and leave his life, and seemingly gets back to his day-to-day affairs.

Campbell notes that the refusal of the call “is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one’s own interest” (55), in Richard’s case the stability of his middle-class life, the relationship with his girlfriend and his white-collar career. “This refusal of the summons

⁵⁹ Campbell notes that “this fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state” (Campbell [1949] 2004, 53).

converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or 'culture,' the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved" (54). The repercussions of his inaction are quite severe for Richard: his dealings with the Lady Door and other denizens of London Below have caused the everyday reality to reject him as if he has never existed. His friends and colleague, his girlfriend, as well as random strangers in the street no longer acknowledge his existence. He has, as many vagrants, outcasts, victims and lost souls before him, "fallen through the cracks" (Gaiman 1996, 126) and is unable to resume his normal life. The stereotypical social observation on the homeless as "invisible" to society uncannily translates into a new, literal reality for the protagonist.

An alternate reading of this "social and fantastic" invisibility is provided by Sandor Klapcsik as a necessary period of seclusion. The protagonist has to go through a "liminal stage," which is characterized by exclusion from the every-day activities of the community—a pattern to be found in myth and modern fantasy stories alike (Klapcsik 2012, 78). After the crossing into the world of London Below, however, he remains similarly cut-off; while the denizens of this fantastic realm are able to perceive normally, his lack of experience and social integration into this society makes him a "novice," and he just gradually integrates into this new reality over the course of his adventures (78).

On his quest of getting his Londoner, investment-analyst life back, Richard encounters a number of supernatural helpers. "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure" (Campbell [1949] 2004, 64). The first ones to offer their aid are the rats, which can not only understand human language, but, as it turns out, have quite a leverage on the politics of the London Below. They direct the so-called Rat-speakers, a tribal group of homeless scavengers, to release Richard after his "crossing of the first threshold" (71) into the bowels of London Below and onto adventure. The feral tribesmen also serve as the threshold's guardians and represent the first trial the hero has to face.

According to Campbell's monomyth, the next step on the hero's journey is the stage dubbed "belly of the whale." It's "the idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth . . . The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died" (Campbell [1949] 2004, 83). For Richard this stage takes place on a mysterious abandoned

bridge below Knightsbridge station, where a supernatural darkness takes toll from those who dare cross it. It is appropriately called the Night's Bridge. As Jódar observes in his paper, "the hero has to suffer a personal loss in order to prove his worth. However, instead of himself being wounded, what the darkness of the bridge does is to take [one of his companions]" (Jódar 2005, 170).

A number of challenges follow, comprising "the road of trials," when Richard "moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell [1949] 2004, 89), which include experiencing a bizarre trade-fair with its anachronic stalls put up on the premises of an actual Harrod's store, or negotiating with an earl that holds court inside a tube train (not only) at the station of Earl's Court. Meanwhile, Richard reunites with Door and realizes the true aim of his quest—to obtain the Key to All Realities from its custodians, the Black Friars, which would enable him to return home to the "real" London. This is the much desired elixir, the "ultimate boon" (Campbell [1949] 2004, 159), for which the hero has to suffer a martyr's death by crucifixion (177). Such a death, albeit only symbolic, does take place during an "ordeal" prepared for Richard by the Black Friars. At this time, Richard is, in his mind, briefly transposed into the "real world," where the very existence of London Below and his own sanity are put into question.

Andrés Jódar makes an interesting elaboration on this point: during the ordeal, Richard meets his nemesis, a Jungian shadow, according to whom suicide "is the only escape from a materialistic world where there is no place for fantasy," resists its temptations, thus having "gone through his own metaphorical death and [being] reborn as a new hero. He [accepts] his natural drive towards fantasy ... thus *Neverwhere* offers an escape towards the world of the imagination" (Jódar 2005, 172). The second part of Richard's transformation from a novice to a full member of his new reality takes place when he kills the Beast of London Below—he receives honorary titles and becomes "utterly initiated into the fantastic realm and obtains the possibility to choose between the primary and secondary world" (Klapcsik 2012, 79).

The abovementioned examples sufficiently document how the novel's narrative could fit into the hero's journey monomyth. Yet, it is the final stage, which follows hero's return, when a possible discrepancy problematizes the symbolic effect of the entire journey. ". . . the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through

the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing [the trophy] . . . back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community . . .” (Campbell [1949] 2004, 179). Upon his return, however, Richard fails to find any useful outlet for his newly-acquired potential and experience; there is no way he can reconcile the two worlds, London Below and London Above, which would prove meaningful to the community, and, ultimately, feels that he no longer fits in.

Nevertheless, Campbell himself predicts such an outcome in his closing comments of *The Hero of Thousand Faces* and hints at the probable cause: “The democratic ideal of a self-determining individual, . . . the development of scientific methods have changed human life . . . Once the whole meaning lay with the group and the great anonymous forms . . . now the whole meaning lies with the individual. But in there the meaning is unconscious. . . . The communication channels between the conscious and unconscious domains of the human soul have been severed and we are split in two” (Campbell [1949] 2004, 358). This split is reminiscent of the duality of London Above and London Below, the latter representing a junkyard and a sewage drain for all the discarded gods and dreams of our ancestors—the last remaining place where the myths are still alive and afoot. Banished from the center of our attention, the myths survive only in fantasy.

Richard’s inability to reconcile the transformative experience with his former life appears as a subversion of the mythological pattern. Instead of trying to reintegrate in the community, Richard eventually abandons the “real world” and adventures on, in London Below. It appears that Gaiman develops the universal pattern in a way which is more appropriate for the current era and its sensibilities. Jódar concludes his essay on Gaiman’s book by stating that the novel’s ultimate goal is to subvert the mythological pattern, attempting to mark the changes and developments in the structures of our society (Jódar 2005, 168). And it is Campbell himself who predicts similar twists towards individualism, remarking that “the modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call . . . cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding. . . . It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal—carries the cross of the redeemer—not in the bright moments of his

tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair" (Campbell [1949] 2004, 362). Although pessimistically formulated, this prospect does leave room for the transformation of the mythical hero. Richard's ultimate victory in *Neverwhere* is not that he manages to save and revive the society, but that he attains personal salvation and is revived as an individual by the imaginative powers inherent in myth.⁶⁰

4.2.1 The Limits of Campbell

The popularity of Campbell's books among the general readership as well as among various Jungian theoreticians appears to be rivalled only by the dismissiveness on part of researchers in the areas of psychology and folklore. Norman Holland sums up the gist of the criticism coming from the former, stating that "Campbell freely reads in, but he abandons the text or rewrites it so that he can bask in his favorite ideas, the transcendent, the spiritual, the Force," while basing his psychology on a duality of the conscious and the unconscious, which he sees as strictly separate, the unconscious being "a free, creative, inner [part of the] mind. The inner part is for some reason realer or more authentic than the outer part" (Holland 2010).

The prominent folklorist Alan Dundes used his 2004 plenary address at the American Folklore Society to give a scathing criticism of Campbell's theories. Apart from the technicalities of Campbell idiosyncratically labeling select expression of the folk imagination as "myth," he questions the very premise of the Campbellian monomyth: "On the universality issue, the empirical facts suggest otherwise. There is not one single myth that is universal, a statement that runs counter to Campbell's view" (Dundes 2004, 395). This point appears to express a misunderstanding of the concept of universals, or, more precisely, the confusion of the so-called Greenbergian universals with Chomskyan universals.⁶¹ Just as particular vocalized expressions of thought produced by our human

⁶⁰ The word "myth" is, here and throughout the chapter, used not in its strict technical sense, but in the fashion Campbell himself uses it—a creative expression of a culture; including legends, folk-tales, even modern forms of creative writing. For criticism of Campbell's misuse of the term, see Dundes 2004, 395.

⁶¹ Joseph Greenberg presented a number of universal linguistic "rules" based on an empirical study of surface features of a few dozen languages. These are not true universal and should be understood as similarities. Generative grammar postulates universal rules which determine all possible human grammars and their

faculty of language are apparently infinitely varied, so must the human myths or their offshoots in legend (or any other language-based creative expressions, for that matter) be vastly diverse, and limited in their variation only by a set of constraints dictated by our human biological endowment, as well as the laws of our physical and mental world; giving rise to what is sometimes called a “discrete infinity,”⁶² in this case a discrete infinity of possible mythologies.

Nevertheless, Dundes’s critique identifies a profound problem in the Campbellian approach. He points out that when one consults the actual collected data, the supposedly universal motifs in myth are many times rather rare and limited; for instance, there are no records of the motif of virgin birth or the deluge in Sub-Saharan Africa. This leads Dundes to allege that “Campbell plays fast and loose with folklore data to illustrate his so-called hero pattern” (Dundes 2004, 396).

Campbell’s goal is to try and “demonstrate that many recurrent themes and plots [are] part of the human psychological inheritance,” but he can succeed in constructing a monomyth of the hero “only by citing those stories which fit his preconceived mold, and leaving out equally valid stories . . . which [do] not fit the pattern” (Toelken 1996, 413). Norman Holland recollects his initial enthusiasm when he first came across Campbell’s method:

I was fresh out of grad school when I first encountered Campbell, and I began happily finding triple goddesses and deaths-and-rebirths and hero's quests in all kinds of literary works. It was great fun! But was I really in touch with some psychological and/or anthropological truths? I think not. (Holland 2010)

features. These are more abstract than Greenberg’s universals and determined by our biological endowment (faculty of language) and some other general laws, such as effective computation. For a comparison and discussion of various types of language universals, see Howe 2012.

⁶² Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch understand the notion of discrete infinity to capture the “one issue that many regard as lying at the heart of language: its capacity for limitless expressive power. It seems relatively clear, after nearly a century of intensive research on animal communication, that no species other than humans has a comparable capacity to recombine meaningful units into an unlimited variety of larger structures, each differing systematically in meaning.” (Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch 2002, 1576)

The reason for Campbell's sweeping, unsubstantiated conclusions and liberal handling of evidence is dictated by his mission statement: in a sense, instead of looking for the "Chomskyan" underlying structures, he bases his claims to the existence of common, shared mythical patterns on Greenbergian universals, which are easier to spot but, due to their very nature, virtually impossible to integrate in any universalist theory presuming to extend beyond a collection of vague statements about plurality, multiplicity and variability. Dundes illustrates this problem with one of the central universal categories which Campbell inherited from Jung—the archetype:

Quoting Jung: "Sometimes the child [archetype] appears in the cup of a flower, or out of a golden egg, or as the center of a mandala. . . . the child motif is extremely variable and assumes all manners of shapes, such as the jewel, the pearl, the flower, the chalice, the golden egg, the quaternary, the golden ball and so on. It can be interchanged with these and similar images almost without limit." The critical methodological question is How can one possibly recognize this archetype when it appears in so many guises? How do we know when we come upon a "golden egg" in a folktale that it is a manifestation of the child archetype? (Dundes 2004, 397)

This leaves Campbell with little more than wishful thinking and Jung's mysticism, including the concept of collective consciousness and the perpetuation of Freud's "error . . . of trying to make psychology into history" by claiming that, in an individual, any lacking "symbol or fantasy will be provided through the ontogenetic recapitulation of phylogeny" (Dundes 2004, 398).

We can find an earlier contending syntagmatic approach to the study of narrative in Vladimir Propp's influential work *Morphology of the Folktale*. With its corpus limited to Russian fairy tales, Propp manages to create a tailor-made formula for the formal description of the stories (Propp [1928] 1968). While more focused, it is susceptible to the same pitfall as Campbell's work is a few decades later—modelled after structuralist linguistics, it suffers from the same philosophical deficiency. In the same way as an early 20th century linguist might observe common grammatical rules and other superficial similarities between natural languages more or less genealogically related, so the narratologist, too, may come up with a number of categories which describe the "grammar"

shared by the corpus selected by him or her. While we wouldn't deny its merits for a study within a particular cultural scope, this descriptive approach can't possibly tell us the whole story about how language or narrative actually work outside the given scope, on a universal level.

Another scholar who famously attempted to devise a universal scheme of description for mythological narratives, albeit based on thematic similarity rather than some shared sequence of formal units, was the seminal anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. While highly influential (e.g. for the later development of narratology), his work is criticized, similarly to Campbell, for its arbitrariness. As Pavel points out, given that Lévi-Strauss analyzes mythological motifs without regard to any narrative syntax, "there is little methodological justification for preferring a certain arrangement of the events of a myth . . . over other possible arrangements; independent socio-cultural evidence, for instance, is not allowed to have a say. Therefore, the descriptions remain intuitive and often arbitrary." And while "pre-structural description of the object [should be] univocally predictable from the structural description plus the grammar," this is not the case in Lévi-Strauss, where, in his description of e.g. the Oedipus myth, "due to the elimination of many episodes from [his formal arrangement of motifs in the myth], the pre-structural description of the myth is irrecoverable" (Pavel 1985, 89).

Due to the nature of narrative as something which manifests in many forms other than natural language (figurative painting, cinema, etc.), Greimas posits the need to distinguish between two levels of analysis: "an apparent level of narration, at which the diverse manifestations of narrative are subject to the specific requirements of the linguistic substances through which it is expressed, and an immanent level, which is a kind of common structural trunk where narrativity is located and organized at the stage preceding its manifestation" (Greimas 1987, 64).

In search for the common underpinning of mythologies old and modern, we must look for the "simple invisibles," rather than try to cram all the varied complexity of human imagination out there into superficial boxes.⁶³ As Hogan wisely remarks, drawing a parallel with linguistic theory, "literary universals do not occur in every work of literature, just as . . . linguistic universals do not occur in every sentence" (Hogan 2003, 99). Many times a certain

⁶³ For a comparison with a similar approach undertaken in linguistics, see Chomsky (1997) 2000.

common-sense approach does better than a recourse to the formative but outdated postulates of the last century, as shown by the observation that, in Campbell's accounts, "the constants are not archetypes, but human relationships. There are parent-child relationships in all cultures, and hence there are parent-child struggles in folklore around the world" (Dundes 2004, 400).

4.3 In Search of a New Monomyth

Why shouldn't the truth turn out to be something utterly different from anything we imagine, with no gods or men or reasons why? Why shouldn't it be something that we can't even conceive of not conceiving, a mystery from another world entirely? Why shouldn't we—men, gods and world—be someone's dreams, someone's thoughts, marooned forever outside existence?

—Fernando Pessoa⁶⁴

In a search for universality, we are faced with numerous difficulties, certainly not limited to the ones stemming from the realization, recently reasserted by the folklorist Jeana Jorgensen, that “archetypes are, of course, culturally specific” and cannot be taken out of their cultural context if we want to understand them correctly (Jorgensen 2017). The basic structure of stories itself might vary considerably as well, and the research endeavor becomes even more byzantine when we try to study the “modern mythmakers,” such as Gaiman. Decades ago, when the efforts to analyze the structure of myth and folk tale were peaking, Teun van Dijk observed that “more sophisticated forms of narrative, like the modern novel, have proved to show much less clearly the typical action patterns discovered in the analysis of primitive narrative, but it cannot be denied that there is considerable methodological advantage in first studying the structure of less complex narratives” (Van Dijk 1976, 289).

Taking a step back, we can identify human emotion as one of the universal elements which play into comprehension, dissemination and creation of myth, legend, as well as modern reinventions thereof. Indeed, these narratives might be particularly suited as a resource for the more general research of emotional concepts. “The fact that some stories are highly esteemed in any given culture suggests that those stories are particularly effective at both . . . representing the causes and effects of emotion as understood or imagined in that society and giving rise to related emotions in readers” (Hogan 2003, 1). It

⁶⁴ See Pessoa (1932) 2010, 162.

is arguably the case that archetypal images such as the child, the mother goddess, the belly of the whale, etc., give rise to emotional response in Campbell's model reader, but this begs the question about the underlying elements encompassed by these images, as well as the process of their construction—so that their capacity to generate emotional responses could be formally expressed and generalized. In the search for a “new monomyth,” we need to look for a framework utilizing both anthropological evidence and contemporary cognitive studies of narrative.

Patrick Colm Hogan opens his treatise on narrative universals and human emotion on an encouraging note, asserting that “there are extensive and detailed narrative universals” and that they are “the direct result of extensive and detailed universals in ideas about emotions that are themselves closely related to universals of emotion per se” (Hogan 2003, 2). The centrality of human emotions for the category of narrativity was asserted also by Monika Fludernik in her search for a more natural narratology, wherein “the emotional involvement with the experience and its evaluation provide cognitive anchor points for the constitution of narrativity” (Fludernik 1996, 13).

Hogan suggest the concept of “prototype” be central to the study of emotion and narrative. He defines emotion concepts “in terms of what are in effect mini-narratives, seeds of stories” (Hogan 2003, 83) and proposes that “we should understand narrative too in terms of prototypicality” (86):

Like birds, there are some narratives we consider to be “more standard” cases than others. For example, the story of young lovers overcoming obstacles to be united is a more “standard,” which is to say, prototypical narrative, than the story of how a furnace operates. There are no doubt many properties that tend to characterize prototypical narratives. For our purposes, the most important of these is emotional interest. In other words, one difference between prototypical narratives (for example, stories about lovers) and nonprototypical narratives (for example, stories about the operation of appliances) is that the former engage our feelings, or at least address and appeal to feelings. (Hogan 2003, 86–7)

An interesting point to raise, with regard to the literary dialectic of pattern recognition vs. violation of expectations, would be the question of how to distinguish between prototypes

and stereotypes in a cultural/storytelling context, and whether such a distinction would be necessary. “Whereas prototypes connote relatively veridical representations of typical category instances, social stereotypes connote error and bias” (Holland et al. 1989, 194). Taking into account the emotional basis for “error and bias,” the possible muddling of the two categories of prototype and stereotype becomes even more apparent when we consider one of Hogan’s core arguments, which is that “the purpose of our storytelling is, in part, emotive, that storytelling will be bound up with emotion prototypes. These emotion prototypes will help guide our decisions as to what sort of story is tellable, what is of interest, what is valid, and what is effective and engaging” (Hogan 2003, 88).⁶⁵

In his cross-cultural analysis, Hogan comes up with “two prominent structures of literary narrative: romantic and heroic tragi-comedy,⁶⁶ derived respectively from the personal and social prototypes for happiness” (Hogan 2003, 98), arguing that “reading in various traditions reveals these structures over and over in such clear forms” that he does “not see how anyone could read the material and not find these structures” (99). It should be stressed that these are what he considers “prototypical narratives,” not universal models for all conceivable narratives. Still, prototypical stories seem to be a useful starting point for any enquiry into more universal rules governing the conception and reception of literature as such. While Hogan denies that he sought to create a new “monomyth,” characterizing his finding rather as a widespread salient structure “deeply consequential for our thought and behavior” (101), the important lesson of this endeavor might be that, rather than identifying an universal structure for narratives, the focus in a search for universality should be placed at the emotional responses elicited by these structures. “The importance [the structures] do have is primarily the result of the prototypes for happiness.

⁶⁵ In case there is a need to delineate the difference—it is possible to think of stereotypes as prototypes loaded with particular contingent cultural baggage: “Stereotypes are the instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories; they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form” (Tompkins 1986, xvi).

⁶⁶ “The most common plot structure across different traditions is almost certainly romantic tragi-comedy, the story of the union, separation, and ultimate reunion of lovers” (Hogan 2003, 101). For the definition of the latter (heroic tragi-comedy), see next section.

In fact, these prototypes are arguably far more significant than the story structures they generate” (101).

4.3.1 *Neverwhere* as Heroic Tragi-Comedy

Revisiting *Neverwhere*, we can, instead of Campbell’s monomyth attempt to read it through the lens of one of Hogan’s prototypical structures, i.e. heroic tragi-comedy: “The fullest version begins when the rightful leader of a society is displaced from rule or prevented from assuming rule, most often by a close relative. He/she is exiled or imprisoned” (109-10). Now, this opening needs a minor reformulation if it is to apply to narratives set in contemporary societies—but, foregoing feudal social relations, we see how the model could apply to Richard’s predicament: losing his job, his partner and the complete network of social relations turns him into a virtual exile. This later translates into a physical reality, when he is forced into the realm of London Below. Yet the identity of the agency that displaced him to begin with is not immediately apparent—while his exile is the direct consequence of his encounter with Door, there is indeed a mastermind behind the scenes, responsible for her flight from home: the exiled angel Islington, seeking to reclaim his place in Heaven, and thus possibly posing a dire threat to both London Below and Richard’s “real-world” society.⁶⁷

“This exile or imprisonment is linked with death – imagery of death, the threat of death, and so on” (110), and this illustrates quite well what awaits Richard when he crosses the Night’s Bridge as well as in countless other subsequent situations. “While he/she is in exile or imprisoned, the kingdom is threatened by some outside force, typically a (demonized/bestial) invading army or, less often, a demonic beast,” in this case Islington and his two murderers-for-hire, Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar. “The hero defeats the threat to the kingdom. He/she then battles the usurper, and is restored to his/her proper place as leader of his/her society” (110). Only, we know this is not quite where the story ends. Hogan points out the very widely occurring phenomenon, wherein after the protagonist

⁶⁷ Richard and Islington are motivated by the same desire to return from exile, reclaiming what they regard as some form of lost paradise. Yet only Richard is successful—paradoxically so, because he comes to realize that the paradise, once lost, remains just an illusion, and his success lies solely in his assuming of a new identity shaped by his adventures in London Below.

“wins,” there is an excess in the ending of the heroic tragi-comedy structure, “an ‘epilogue of suffering’ in which the story continues beyond its expected conclusion. This epilogue is focused either on the misery of those who are vanquished or,” as is the case in *Neverwhere*, “on the anguish of the victorious hero, who surrenders the domination he/she has won, suffering remorse or undergoing some punishment” (Hogan 2003, 150).

After coming back to London Above and being restored to his former place in society—his job, his girlfriend, and his social ties reestablished as if the adventure in London Below never actually happened—Richard finds his life devoid of purpose. His experience in the “magical realm” has made his former life seem tedious and meaningless and there is nobody in the “real world” who could benefit from his experience. Eventually, he manages to reconnect with Door and find his way back to London Below again. Hogan explains the presence of this excess ending as necessitated by ethical concerns. “Specifically, heroic plots regularly manifest a conflict between two ethical prototypes, one based on *group* protection, one on *individual* compassion” (150, emphasis mine).⁶⁸ While internalized societal pressures, conventions and personal craving for a safe, predictable life push Richard to stay in the “real world” (apparently following the *group* ideals), there is a part of himself (which could be accounted for by some “true calling,” a new-found identity, or

⁶⁸ In the original context of the martial-oriented stories which Hogan talks about, this conflict would be between following the group interest (by eliminating the group’s ethnic, national, ideological, etc., enemies) and taking pity on the enemy. Due to the nature of such stories, Hogan argues, the conflict arises post hoc (when the enemy has been already vanquished) and leads to the abovementioned excessive ending of reflected suffering (the victorious hero might be pondering the woes of the defeated, etc.). In *Neverwhere*, however, Islington and his lackeys are no Trojans: their departure is sudden, complete and “clean,” and their fate remains unknown, when Door sends them off to an unspecified, awesomely dangerous, far-away place (Hell, event horizon of a black hole, or something else along these lines). The vanquishing of the enemies being an act of self-defense (and not even conducted by the protagonist himself) means that the pity in this case surely cannot be directed at them. Here, it is virtually self-pity, constitutive of the protagonist’s pursuit of happiness. The individual compassion becomes, in a post-postmodern context (and the context of *Neverwhere*), directed at self; the group interest becomes the superego’s injunction to enjoy. For a further discussion of this “updated” conflict, see section 5.2.2.

the affection for the various folk⁶⁹ of the endlessly surprising London Below) which compels him to continue his adventures in the “magical realm.”

The crucial point here is that what stands for the “group” in the story shifts, towards the end, from the “real world” to the community of London Below, so as to allow to resolve the excess ending harmoniously.⁷⁰ Richard, motivated by a selfish goal of reestablishing his former life (in line with the real London’s group expectations, but not staying true to his true, individual yearning), having come back above ground, violates the ethical concerns of the denizens of London Below, who in a way have come to rely on him,⁷¹ as well as the concerns of his individual yearning, which goes beyond superficial happiness imposed by the original group/superego (real London). “The epilogue of suffering is, in effect, a reparation for that choice,” (Hogan 2003, 150) and its eventual conclusion (Richard’s return to London Below with Door) is a precursor to further adventures. Here, Richard’s goal as an individual finally aligns with the ideals of the community—but no sooner then he manages to realize where this community is really located (physically and symbolically: in the space of adventure of London Below). While less transparent than in classical narratives, the same structure and the basic conflict are present in *Neverwhere* as well.

The structure of the novel could be reformulated using more abstract terms. Both Hogan and Keith Oatley refer to their scholarly precursor, the “Indian Aristotle” Bharata Muni, who gave one of the first formal accounts of the workings of narrative structures (in Sanskrit theatre). The role of emotions in his *Natyasastra* is emphasized even more than it is in *Poetics*. Adapting this antiquated mode of analysis, the structure of the novel could be rendered as follows:

1. Happiness—or “love,” which Bharata Muni characterizes as having “pleasure as its basis, is caused by Determinants like seasons, garlands, unguent, ornaments, dear ones,

⁶⁹ In whose lives he as a heroic individual could make a great difference, as opposed to playing his consumerist, cog-in-a-machine role imposed on him by the much less symbolically transparent and less comprehensible “real world.”

⁷⁰ This is a notable difference from the excess ending in classical narratives: traditionally, the vanquished enemies are not, as a rule, resurrected by the merciful hero, the ending can only be resolved symbolically. See the prior footnote beginning “In the original context . . .” and Hogan 2003, 150.

⁷¹ To be fair, the interests of “Londoners Below” are largely represented by Door, a potential love interest, as well as the readers of the novel, who do not wish the adventure to end.

enjoyment of a superior residential house and absence of opposition [from anyone]" (Bharata Muni 1951, 121)—describes the initial state.⁷² It is important to note that happiness here is understood as a purely formal category, and psychological or philosophical consideration do not necessarily enter the picture. It can be argued that Richard's life at the onset of a story wasn't "true happiness" according to, e.g., Kierkegaard's existential stages.⁷³ For the present purpose, it suffices to list prototypical examples of narratives and establish the category on the basis of "family resemblance" which can be identified therein. Happiness/love, used to describe one of the "dominant states" represented in Sanskrit theatre, was defined in relation to its practical application on stage, by a list of gestures actors could utilize to represent it.

2. Sorrow—"is caused by Determinants such as death of the beloved one, loss of wealth, experience of sorrow due to any one's murder or captivity, and the like" (Bharata Muni 1951, 122). Hogan highlights the natural narrative progression from happiness to sorrow, pointing out that "prototypical stories most often incorporate some version of the prototype conditions for sorrow, placing them in the narrative middle or progression. In some cases, the narrative ends with the permanent establishment of these sorrowful conditions" (Hogan 2003, 121). If the fortunes do turn and the state of happiness is re-established, there is the third stage:

3. Happiness again—when the antagonists are defeated and Lady Door's position in London Below is re-established, allowing Richard to go back to his former life.

⁷² "In prototypical stories, the complex process of narrative construction is guided and organized by the expansion or elaboration of the micronarratives that define the prototype eliciting conditions for happiness, whether or not those conditions are ultimately achieved in the narrative" (Hogan 2003, 118).

⁷³ The superficial happiness would belong to Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage. In the dialectical progression of existential stages, "the first is the aesthetic, which gives way to the ethical, which gives way to the religious. The aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by the following: immersion in sensuous experience; valorization of possibility over actuality; egotism; fragmentation of the subject of experience; nihilistic wielding of irony and skepticism; and flight from boredom. . . . Ethics represents 'the universal,' or more accurately the prevailing social norms. These social norms are used as reasons to make sense of, or justify, an action within a community. . . . The aesthetic and the ethical are both annulled and preserved in their synthesis in the religious stage. As far as the aesthetic stage of existence is concerned what is preserved in the higher religious stage is the sense of infinite possibility made available through the imagination" (McDonald 1996).

4. The excess ending—Richard’s decision to continue his adventure, as discussed above.

The prevalence of this structure in both old and modern narratives could be accounted for by cognitive theory. An emotional progression as outlined above is presumably one which the reader can recognize and identify with. Roger Schank and Robert Abelson’s theory of scripts posits similar cognitive constructs as a means of understanding the world—it associates expressions used to describe reality with narrative situations. Their claim is that “stories are understandable because they make reference to frequently occurring scripts. . . . A story understander must fill in parts of each story that were left out” (Schank and Abelson 1977, 39). Scripts help in this process of filling in the missing information by providing “connectivity.” The reader is able to utilize them to fill in the gaps in the story by their own knowledge of the world. While Hogan’s prototypes appear to be more general than scripts (indeed, they could be conceived of as structures into which a multiplicity of various scripts would fit), they are presumably subject to the same, or similar, rules of conceptualization.

Keith Oatley points out that “scripts are not just cognitive components of understanding. They can also be sequences that are deeply rooted in a society’s beliefs and values,” (Oatley 2012, 46) and thus are reflected by the stories such societies tell and pass down through generations. These scripts are thus one of the primary motivators giving rise to theories of narrative universals such as Campbell’s, and they made it possible for both Bharata Muni and Aristotle to pin down the basic workings of drama. While their various forms change with the time as societies change, there always remains the immutable component—our brains, our shared biological endowment—which puts constraints on the ways and the degree to which this change is possible.

4.3.2 Gaiman between Archetype and Divergence

There is a crucial point to be made about how a given story affects a given reader. As both Hogan and Widdowson argue, familiarity stemming from pattern recognition is a fundamental part of a “successful” aesthetic experience (see section 4.1). Since literature is necessarily anthropocentric, particular care should be ascribed to the study of empathy and processes which enter the act of identification or “feeling into” a literary character. We

can hardly talk about any emotional connection between the fictional reality and the reader, if the characters' action don't make sense to him or her; and, in turn, "the actions of others," regardless whether the "others" in question are real or fictional, mentally construed characters, "make sense only insofar as they are part of a stored pattern of actions that have been previously experienced" (Schank and Abelson 1977, 67). This would underline the strong connection between prototypicality, narrative structures which have cross-culturally stood the test of time, and aesthetic effectiveness. Schank and Abelson warn us that "deviations from the standard pattern are handled with some difficulty" (Schank and Abelson 1977, 67), but, as was noted previously, it is these deviations which are necessary for a creation of an original and aesthetically effective work—which brings us back to the other one of Widdowson's conditions: divergence. The problem of the delineation of the two conditions should be understood as a delineation of domains which make up a literary work—in terms of structure, style (voice), etc.

The narrative structure of *Neverwhere* adheres to Hogan's structure of "heroic tragic-comedy." As shown in numerous examples above, there could be identified familiar patterns and traditional storytelling tropes, whether we adapt Campbell's or some different universalist analysis. This is the side of Gaiman's novel which utilizes prototype approximation and gives rise to the feeling of harmony, convergence and regularity. Reader's expectations are met and their projected desires satisfied. The potential risk of tedium is averted by the other side—facets including the originality of the setting, or Gaiman's unmistakable penchant for turning the timeless into the topical, the uncanny into the homely, and the mythological into the intimate, many times utilizing irony and playful intertextual referentiality.

An apt example of this playful ironic approach is a character featuring prominently throughout the story of *Neverwhere*: Marquis de Carabas, a man who guides Richard on his journey through the undercity, dispensing advice and sarcasm alike. He is first described wearing "a huge dandyish black coat . . . and high black boots" and walking "restlessly up and down the alley . . . like a great cat" (Gaiman 1996, 46), reminiscent of Perrault's Puss in Boots, the fairy tale character that helped a young miller to fame and fortune. He later admits that, indeed, "he had named himself from a lie in a fairy tale . . . and created himself as a grand joke" (Gaiman 1996, 239).

Another example of divergence from expectation is the novel's treatment of the real-world London setting and how it is utilized to build a parallel reality, much in the same fashion as the Marquis constructs his identity through a joking reference. Richard's trip through London Below takes him to places with familiar names—they are mostly the stations of the London Tube—but there is always present a certain twist which endows the location, in its "magical" rendition, with a new meaning. Such revelations evoke the feeling of the uncanny⁷⁴ by making the various real-world locations' names literally tied to an existence of a character or place revealed in the story. These include places such as the Night's Bridge (a play on the name of the tube station "Knightsbridge"),⁷⁵ Earl's Court (referring not to the station, but, in a humorous twist, to a number of train cars moving around the subway system, magically hidden from the sight of ordinary Londoners, occupied by the Earl and his courtiers), Islington (being the house and prison of the angel Islington), Blackfriars (the etymology of which—derived from an old Dominican priory—is actualized by the presence of an underground monastery occupied by friars dressed in black sackcloth), Old Bailey (referring, rather than to the London's Central Criminal Court, to a peculiar character inhabiting the "other London's" rooftops), etc.

In this fashion, Gaiman reinforces the notion that things we have grown accustomed to may not be what they seem, and, by the juxtaposition of the wondrous and the commonplace, he draws attention to the symbols underlying our millennia-long experience with the world. It can be said, in words of Susana Onega, that Gaiman uses "parody, pastiche and metafictional undermining of realism-enhancing mechanisms to suggest the fragmentation . . . of the self, while simultaneously attempting to transcend this isolation and fragmentation in mythical and archetypal terms" (Onega 1997, 187). The notion of "fragmentation" should be understood here in two ways. First, a fragmented person, such

⁷⁴ For the definition of the uncanny, see Freud 2003, 120–62.

⁷⁵ In an interview, Gaiman talks about how conscious he is of his various audiences (mainly along the lines of the English-American cultural divide) and how this is reflected in jokes and references between the different editions of his books: "In the English [edition of *Neverwhere*] one there is a joke which is at one point, one character says "We're going to this market but it's in a really nasty area of London." And the hero says, "Where's that?" And she says, "Knightsbridge." Which is very funny if you know London, then you know this is the nicest area of London. But people who haven't been to London merely know that they are missing a joke there" (Gaiman 1999c).

as the Marquis, or a location, such as one of the sites of London Below, should be understood as a collection of figments, modulated (in a very postmodernist fashion) by the point of view—they can unexpectedly show themselves to be their own antithesis, or prove to be more literally themselves (thesis: Blackfriars is named after actual friars living there; antithesis: it's just a name; synthesis: the friars are really there after all). Second, this implicit fragmentation can foreground the questions of reality: What is the true nature of the thing? Could its fakeness make it somehow more genuine—something “more than true?” Gaiman's answer appears to be: that which is more “mythical and archetypal,” i.e. more aesthetically satisfying, is the “truer” thing.⁷⁶

A different, more straight-forward way to account for these creative choices would be to point to the author's sheer love of stories and of all kinds of embedded narratives—and to his readiness to share this love with his audience, which creates the context for his sustained reflection on the art of storytelling and on the importance of *narrative understanding of the world* in our lives—a theme which has entered the focus of cultural inquiry (in academia and elsewhere) with the coming of postmodernism.

Gaiman's affinity with the postmodern is persuasively demonstrated in Sandor Klapcsik's treatise of liminality in fantastic fiction (2012). He points out that *Neverwhere* “demonstrates contemporary Foucauldian theories, emphasizing that visualizing, narrating, and rendering visible are always controlled by psychological, cognitive, historical, and social factors”(56). This is most manifestly represented in the passage in *Neverwhere* where Richard becomes invisible to the denizens of the “real” London, who are unable to detect anyone belonging to London Below or keep them in their consciousness long enough to accomplish any meaningful social interaction. “The isolation of the protagonist . . . from London Above is of cognitive origin: people living in consensus reality simply ignore him, in the same way as they ignore everyone who belongs to the (under)world of homelessness or that of the fantastic” (77).

⁷⁶ In this context it could be instructive to consider a quote by Gaiman's wife, Amanda Palmer, talking about their relationship: “I married him because he believed in me, and I was feeling like a fiction, and I married him even though he didn't think he was real himself, even though I didn't know if I could believe in him if he didn't think he was real” (Palmer 2015).

The above posits Gaiman firmly among the contemporary postmodern storytellers of the speculative genre, each of them reflecting “postmodernism’s self-consciousness about storytelling and employing its typical disruptions of genre and violations of textual boundaries,” features we see in the works of writers such as Alan Garner, Jeanne Larsen, Molly Gloss, and Ursula K. Le Guin (Attebery 2014, 8). Still, formal experimentation in Gaiman and his counterparts remains modest, and their style certainly cannot be lumped besides textbook postmodernist like Barthelme and others who are so reminiscent of the great masters of modernism such as Eliot and Joyce. At the end of the day, as Gaiman himself has expressed in the past, the primary consideration for him has always been to satisfy the audience reading, viewing, or listening to his storytelling by providing them with (at least an opportunity for) a meaningful narrative conclusion (Gaiman 2009).⁷⁷

And, indeed, it might be these readers’ satisfaction which can make a literary work stand the test of time, as Jane Tompkins argues in her work on popular 19th century American fiction, against the “modernist demands for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication” . . . etc. (Tompkins 1986, xvii), or, more significantly (and more relevantly, since this is fantasy literature we are talking about), despite its “excessive reliance on plot, and a certain sensationalism in the events portrayed” (xii). Tompkins emphasizes social and historical context as the factors of the making of a great novel; factors, we might add, in which certain universal tendencies might be reflected, thus accounting for a given work’s lasting value. “For a novel’s impact on the culture at

⁷⁷ Gaiman comments on his encounter with one of the most enigmatic and surreal filmmakers of our time, David Lynch. Debating a possible collaboration, Gaiman’s and Lynch’s different approaches to narrative art quickly became apparent. Gaiman remembers: “David Lynch and I were once put together on a project. It began as an idea for an audio series for the web and then David decided he wanted it to be a movie and I was going, ‘This is so exciting! I’m going to write a David Lynch movie. He’s one of my heroes, oh my god!’ [When we meet in his house], he says, ‘Okay Neil, I think I’ve figured out the whole shape of the story. The first part is going to be the stuff we talked about, with the family vanishing and a guy goes looking for them. And then in the second part of the story, we’re going to be somewhere completely different, with another family driving through Europe and we’re going to follow them through Europe.’ And I’m thinking, ‘Okay, how is this going to tie it together?’ And he says, ‘And in the third part, we now follow the detective who’s gone to Europe and who’s now back at the original house. He walks through it and it’s completely empty. Then he comes out, and we pull back and we are . . . on the moon.’ And that was the moment I said, ‘This is not going to work’” (Gaiman 2009).

large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form” (Tompkins 1986, xvi). The point about “typical and familiar” form might well be contended—as was shown by noting the importance of the “divergence” principle for aesthetic satisfaction and recounting some aspects of postmodern writing style, utilized by writers such as Gaiman to great effect.

Tompkins’s “embrace of the conventional” led her to value “everything that criticism had taught [her] to despise: the stereotyped character, the sensational plot, the trite expression” (Tompkins 1986, xvi). This trinity of “low-brow” literary satisfaction warrants a breaking-down. First, let us consider the stereotypical hero.

The character of Richard is certainly an everyman character, an inconspicuous member of the middle class white-collar echelon; even the fact of his Scottish origin is little more than a superfluous detail. He is made great by what he does—his role in the grand scheme of things, accomplishments of his hero’s journey—not by what he is. He doesn’t possess any unique traits which would predestine him for his journey, and this is precisely what makes him so appealing and readily identifiable with.⁷⁸ He is Neil Gaiman (whose middle name is, interestingly enough, Richard) after you have removed everything which makes Neil Gaiman stand out among his peers (his identity as a well-read, erudite, original, skilled, fanciful, successful creator).⁷⁹ But *Neverwhere*’s protagonist need not be an artist or a scholar—a varied and deep psychological world of his (and the author’s) mind is supplanted by the wondrous and delightful circumstances of the fictional world he finds himself in.

⁷⁸ Gaiman admits this himself, when he quotes, in an interview, C. S. Lewis’s maxim concerning heroes and Everyman—the idea that a hero in a novel should not be “too odd,” since “how odd events strike odd people is an oddity too much. [Lewis] pointed out that in *Through the Looking Glass* that Wonderland would not have been anywhere so interesting had Alice not been so dull, so plain. If Alice had been in any way interesting herself, it would have been a much less interesting book. I wanted a hero who . . . was a little bit everybody, someone who was not the kind of person who would make the list if you were putting together a hero roster, but who was going to get by on essentially a good heart and good intentions, which were going to get him into deep trouble, but perhaps get him out again as well” (Gaiman 1999c).

⁷⁹ “For me, one of the tricks to writing is to base all of my characters on me. Which means that when I want a villain I tend to start with me. Just as when I want a hero I tend to start with me.”(Gaiman 1999b).

On the other hand, there is another character present in the novel reflective of the author's self: Marquis de Carabas, the "grand joke," his identity a metafictional play, self-constructed the way a master storyteller, informed by a lifelong love of books, spins a tale. Then there is Hunter, the warrior-huntress who has come to London Below to hunt down the legendary beast which lurks in the sewers, catacombs, forgotten cellars and abandoned WW2 shelters which comprise the undercity. She is an overt representation of her role, a prototype made flesh, with little more than cosmetic attempts (being female rather than the more stereotypical male) to hide it. Then there is the Lady Door, who, while playing the role of the damsel in distress, is in need of saving not because of any incapability of hers, but because of the awesome forces seeking to do her harm. Even the antagonists, Vandemar and Croup, are written with Gaiman's writer maxim of creating characters one would enjoy talking to at a party.⁸⁰ While Gaiman arguably utilizes prototypical character roles, his characters are far from stereotypical.

When it comes to "sensationalism" of plot, there can be hardly any argument against its presence in a book filled with magic, angels, deathless assassins, giant boars, intelligent rats and many other wonders. Finally, as have been demonstrated earlier, Gaiman's "expression," while at times deceptively straight-forward, shares features of both great traditional storytellers and postmodernist works. Could this peculiar mix of the postmodern, the Victorian, and the fantasist currents within modernism be symptomatic not only of Gaiman's particular style, but also represent a sign of times which are replacing the dominant postmodern paradigm? Gaiman's stellar rise in the late 80s and early 90s coincides with what could be called the beginning of a new era—politically, of course, but

⁸⁰ "It's not hard to write a sympathetic villain, it's not hard to write a fun villain. You just have to see what they're doing and why. And I love my characters. The nicest compliment that I ever got on my characters that I can remember was somebody who once said that the best thing about Neil Gaiman characters was if you met one of them at a party, you'd want to carry on talking to them. I remember once reading a novel by a brilliant novelist, I mean, a far finer class of person than I could ever be. And I'm reading this novel and, I mean, the author's a good friend of mine and I'm halfway through it and slogging on and then suddenly realized that if I met any one of these characters at a party I'd make my excuse and head for the kitchen. I wouldn't want to meet any of these people. The thing about good characters and any character, actually, good or bad, funny or not, is you should want to spend time in their company. It should be a little bit sad when you have to take your leave of them" (Gaiman 1999b).

also culturally—“the contemporary period—starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and gathering momentum throughout the 1990s and beyond—is often said to have a distinct intensity:”

Indeed, in place of postmodernism’s cool detachment, its anti-anthropomorphism, realism is once again a popular mode. Emotions, furthermore, are again playing a central role in literary fiction, as authors insist on our essential relationality – our connectedness as humans to one another in the globalizing world and with fictional characters as representations of our selves. (Gibbons 2017)

Without going too deep into a discussion of postmodernism itself, we can draw some preliminary conclusions about the coming paradigm if we identify the features of postmodernism which the new cultural current responds to. The crucial aspect of postmodernism, famously formulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard, is its distrust of grand narratives and universal truths. Lyotard defines postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” pointing out that “the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (Lyotard 1984, xxiv), i.e. exactly the features by identification of which Campbell founds his theory and which serve contemporary cognitive literary scholars as indices of narrative universals.

4.4 Gaiman between the Modern and the Postmodern

Myths are compost.

—Neil Gaiman⁸¹

If Neil Gaiman’s generation of fantasists pushes against the de-stabilizing, de-legitimizing, relativizing forces of the postmodern, there surely must be a principle of unity and universality to be identified in their work—above, I have tried giving an approximation of an account of where the search for such a principle should begin. If the modern and the post-modern truly repeat themselves as alternating phases in cultural history, one always responding to the other (see Lyotard 1984, 79), there ought to be parallels between the coming paradigm and that of modernism. In fact, Brian Attebery readily identifies a point in modernism where such a parallel could begin; in his attempt to make sense of the role of the apparently anachronistic Inklings within the paradigm defined by Eliot, Pound or Joyce, he argues that, far from J.R.R. Tolkien’s or C.S. Lewis’s work standing for a rejection of the modern, it represents, rather, one of its defining facets (Attebery 2014, 42). Here Attebery points to Eliot’s essay about Ulysses, and his proposed idea of the “mythic principle:”

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we

⁸¹ See Gaiman 1999d, 78.

may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art . . . (Eliot [1923] 1975, 177-8)

Of course, Eliot espouses the mythic principle in his own poetic work as well. For Attebery, whose second chapter of his comprehensive search for the essence and roots of the contemporary fantasy genre explains the debt the genre owes to modernism, the crucial mythic source in “The Waste Land” is Arthurian legend:

Eliot uses both the pagan and Christian aspects of the [Grail Quest] story to construct a guide through and a commentary on a set of scenes from contemporary life. To represent the latter, Eliot combines pastiche and parody with imagistic detail and wistful lyricism (deliberately roughened up by Ezra Pound’s editing). The myth appears mostly in the form of oblique allusions (reinforced by the notes) and Janus-faced characters: modern types who are also degraded versions of gods, magicians, and heroes. (Attebery 2014, 44)

It is striking how the same description could be used to characterize Gaiman’s work. While the particulars in the selection of mythical and religious sources may differ, the method of using these “inherited” frameworks “to construct a guide through and a commentary on a set of scenes from contemporary life” can certainly be identified in most of Gaiman’s work. The reverse could also be argued: in *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, we might also find evidence of Gaiman making a commentary about mythic (or otherwise timeless) topics using the scenes from contemporary (British and American, respectively) life.

We have already noted how (e.g. in the playful utilization of the names of the London metro stops and other place-names) pastiche and parody play an important role in *Neverwhere*. Another striking characteristic that expresses the essence of Gaiman’s brand of contemporary fantasy is the characters, “Janus-faced . . . degraded versions of gods, magicians, and heroes.” This is not only the fundamental idea behind *American Gods*, it is also a method widely utilized by Gaiman in the entirety of his imaginative work. In *Neverwhere*, the break between the magical, anachronic world of London Below and the “real” world is rendered clean by the limits Gaiman puts on the interaction between the two (exemplified by Richard’s sudden invisibility to the inhabitants of the “real” London after his dealings with the magical realm take place), while elsewhere (*American Gods*), the

two are intricately enmeshed—which appears to be truer to Eliot, more closely espousing his mythic method.

Attebery wonders how “The Waste Land” would look like if it were, instead of a “densely allusive and cryptically fragmented poem,” a novel. He conjects:

Such a novel would juxtapose the Holy Grail and sterile urban life; there would be charlatans masquerading as real prophets and vice versa; characters would undergo spiritual crises and transformations; there would be sinister Easterners and scenes of sexual degradation; visions of hell would be counterpointed with moments of redemption; the desired and forbidden other would be expelled. Novelistic discourse could fill in the gaps left in Eliot’s poem, or at least seem to, with realistic settings, dramatic scenes, internal monologues, and a plot. It would not matter too much what sort of plot: the function would be to carry readers along and perhaps distract our attention while the symbols did their work. The novel could be a romance, an adventure, or perhaps a detective story. (Attebery 2014, 46)

One of Gaiman’s short stories, “Chivalry” (1999), features a retired lady (a stereotype of the grandmotherly English middle-class pensioner) buying an old chalice at Oxfam, which turns out to be the Holy Grail when an entirely anachronistic Arthurian knight appears at her doorstep to solicit the legendary relic from her. As to “real prophets” masquerading as “charlatans,” the powerful characters and keepers of profound knowledge or awesome magic in Gaiman’s writing usually assume the form of the unassuming, the inconspicuous, and the easily overlooked. The most typical instance of this would be the domesticity which covers up the unfathomable power of the Hempstock family in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. *Neverwhere* drives the point to its extreme by rendering its varied cast of characters, many of whom are endowed with wondrous abilities, by portraying them as—or very close to—vagrants, the invisible class.

What Attebery designates as “spiritual crises and transformation” is conveniently broad to incorporate any number of situations; let us name at least Richard’s “falling through the cracks,” his trial at the Black Friars, or his facing and defeating the Beast of London—the important milestones on his “hero’s journey.” Where this meta-interpretative comparison diverges, however, is the “sinister Easterners” and the Freudian

precept of the expulsion of “the desired and forbidden other;” and it is hardly surprising that we can’t find equivalents of Eliot’s anti-Semitic undertones in Gaiman, who is descended from East European Jewish emigrants. On the contrary, instead of expulsion we find integration, albeit this integration is never complete, as could be demonstrated by the shadowy inhabitants of London Below, whose existence is not known or acknowledged in the “real” London, or by the various deities living in the *American Gods*’ United States—integrated, but not able to live up to their full potential. Gaiman’s stories are stories of the people at the margins. Where Eliot’s sinister Jews are reminiscent of the anti-Semitic reading of *Dracula*, Gaiman’s “vampires” (in a more general sense of any wondrous creature) are humanized, although not completely domesticated—they maintain their “liquid” characteristics (see Čipkár 2014, 33).

Following Attebery’s thought experiment a little longer, we see that he argues for a variety of genres to be conceivable if Eliot’s method in “The Waste Land” is utilized in prose—indeed, if aspects of it are rewritten as a novel: a romance, an adventure, or a detective story. Even though they usually occupy shelves of the fantasy section in bookshops, we can certainly find all of the above-mentioned genres in Gaiman’s novels and collections of short stories. Romance is ever-present and, as is the case with most works in the fantasy genre, everything is centered around an adventure (the only caveat being that in Gaiman this adventure might be implicit, taking the form of a more mundane set of scenes from everyday life). The usability of the mythic method for the detective genre can be demonstrated by a number of stories in which Gaiman borrows the A.C. Doyle’s classic character of Sherlock Holmes, or by the very title of the story “Murder Mysteries,” (Gaiman 1999) which portrays an investigation of a crime—the original crime, in fact—in heaven.

Gaiman’s push for reflection and highlighting of marginalized voices, as seen in his utilization of homelessness as a constitutive theme and metaphor in *Neverwhere*, his smattering of ethnic narratives and indigenous mythologies in *American Gods* or *Anansi Boys* (2005), or his lesbian romance twist at the end of *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014) are certainly elements the analogues of which could be found elsewhere in the postmodern tradition—vis-à-vis, for example, Eliot’s authoritative, unifying vision, or C.S. Lewis’s religiosity, or Tolkien’s straightforward boyish fantasy. But while postmodernism is “overlapping in its ends and means with feminism and postcolonialism, as well as with queer, race and ethnicity theory,” it is “by no means interchangeable” with them

(Hutcheon 2002, 166). Hutcheon hints but never goes as far as to assert how postmodernism could be complicit in legitimizing the prevailing modes of control, “fully institutionalized” with its “canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories” (Hutcheon 2002, 165), becoming more and more enmeshed with the enterprise of global capitalism. Far from liberating, the relativizing, self-deconstructing cacophony of contending voices has served to obfuscate universal emancipatory goals, and lead to “an ensuing disillusionment with the project of neo-liberal postmodernity” (Gibbons 2017). Hutcheon points to the postmodern’s “lack of a theory of agency,” reflecting one of the major objections on the part of feminist theoreticians and practitioners, a dimension “so crucial to the interventionist dimensions of working for change” (Hutcheon 2002, 171). It would seem that the reign of the postmodern has created a new need: something to use to orient oneself by, as opposed to the postmodernity’s feeling of “dis-orientation” (175); and this, precisely, is where the mythic principle can enter, bringing with itself a “rehabilitated ethical consciousness” (Gibbons 2017).

4.4.1 Gaiman between the Postmodern and the Pseudo-Modern

A decade ago, Alan Kirby proclaimed postmodernism “dead and buried,” noting how “the people who produce the cultural material which academics and non-academics read, watch and listen to, have simply given up on postmodernism” and lamenting the level to which “postmodernism has sunk; a source of marginal gags in pop culture aimed at the under-eights” (Kirby 2006). Even a cursory review of the traditional mainstream media and the new Internet media, including social networks, reveals that the most substantial postmodernist production currently takes place in Facebook groups and on Internet message boards, and consists mostly of teenager-produced commentaries on a range of topics, from various pop-cultural events to everyday adolescent experience, mostly in form of stock images combined with ironic or jocular captions added by the creators. At the same time, the primary cultural material (movies, TV shows, music records) which these contemporary young “postmodernist” reference remains formally conservative, and its postmodern character is preserved only in the occasional nostalgic wink to the audience.⁸²

⁸² Examples from television would include the 1980s nostalgia in the show *Stranger Things* (2016) or the Lovecraftiana of the first season of *True Detective* (2014). It is worth to mention that the TV adaptation of

Even such a brief evaluation demonstrates what Kirby predicted to be the defining characteristic of the postmodern's successor—the pseudo-modern—i.e., interactivity (most noticeably exemplified by the rise of the Internet, reality TV shows, and videogame culture).

One of the uniquely pseudo-modern phenomena, which Kirby overlooks in his analysis (probably because its interactivity is more oblique than the one in computer games and reality shows), belongs to the literary world, or, at least, to its margins; it is fan fiction, a unique form of creative interaction where the role of author and reader are displaced. Neil Gaiman has called fan fiction an activity useful for “honing writing skills,” but he ultimately thinks of it as “training wheels. Sooner or later you have to take them off the bike and start wobbling down the street on your own” (Gaiman 2003). He has repeatedly claimed (Gaiman 2012)—excepting legal and commercial considerations—not having a strong opinion on fan fiction, both in general and regarding imitations of his own works. In contrast to his view of fan fiction as “training wheels,” something an author outgrows over the course of becoming a professional, many of his own works could be classified as fan fiction⁸³—except, they are done in collaboration with the copyright holders or on commission (as is the case with Gaiman's various short story and screenwriting excursions into the world of *Doctor Who* or the various DC universe franchises), or using material in the public domain. The latter includes his stories featuring Sherlock Holmes, “The Case of Death and Honey” (2015) and the Lovecraftian crossover “A Study in Emerald” (2007), the former the *Doctor-Who*-episode-shaped adventure story “Nothing O’Clock” (2015). In the market-oriented, digital era of the pseudo-modern, this age-old⁸⁴ creative practice becomes more explicit: literary fans become writers, and writers are often writers of fan

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2017) needs not resort to any such crutch, and that it manages to stand on its own with just a few updates to its 16 years old source material. There is arguably an element of timelessness which allows it a smooth transition into the era of smartphones, while many postmodernist works, i.e. “texts which are just coming to grips with the existence of rock music and television” (Kirby 2006), seem dated.

⁸³ Not, of course, fan fiction in the technical sense of the term, as it is usually used. However, I find the distinction between *fan fiction* and writing within a certain franchise *professionally* purely a matter of social or cultural sanction.

⁸⁴ After all, one could think of the *Aeneid* as a proto-fanfiction.

fiction. As Kirby notes, in the pseudo-modern, forms of enjoyment and creation which were always there but at the margins, begin to dominate.⁸⁵

A notable event in Gaiman's creative life illustrating the manner in which various cultural endeavors of the current age generate the "pseudo-modern illusion of participation" (Kirby 2006) was his *A Calendar of Tales*. In February 2013, Gaiman, in collaboration with BlackBerry, as a part of BlackBerry's "Keep Moving" promotional project, asked Twitter users twelve questions about the months of the year; then he selected one answer for each month, utilizing them as inspirational hooks for twelve short stories (Gaiman 2013b). Having written the twelve short stories, he invited artists to illustrate them. It should be noted that, while at its heart this was a collaboration of a professional writer and a group of his talented semi-professional artist-followers, the accompanying hubbub on the social networks (as of mid 2018, the number of Gaiman's Twitter followers adds up to more than 2.7 million) created an air of "being a part of something greater." Thousands of people whose actual input might have been minimal (limited to a single tweet), maybe not greater than the usual level of activity of those partaking in reality-show-style entertainment or sports events, had a sense of participation. The utilization of Twitter (an outlet the significance of which for the contemporary global culture could be summed up in the sole fact that it is the communication channel of choice for the current most powerful man on earth) as a platform for creation is indicative of what Kirby claims to be the defining aspect of the pseudo-modern: "the pseudo-modern text, with all its peculiarities, stands as the central, dominant, paradigmatic form of cultural product today . . . the activity of pseudo-modernism is electronic, and textual, but ephemeral. . . . it forms the twenty-first century's social-historical-cultural hegemony. . . ." (Kirby 2006)

The reason why Kirby's analysis, when applied to the subject of popular contemporary writers such as Gaiman, comes short, however, is twofold. The first one is

⁸⁵ Some of Neil Gaiman's Holmes, Lovecraft and *Doctor Who* "fan fiction," while derivative, could be considered superior to the original material both in style and complexity of ideas. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of fan fiction in general is comprised of mostly forgettable, expendable wish-fulfillment fantasy, which is to be used, savored by the fanbase, and then lost in the ephemeral digital reality of the Web. It is a part of "a storm of human activity producing almost nothing of any lasting or even reproducible cultural value—anything which human beings might look at again and appreciate in fifty or two hundred years' time" (Kirby 2006).

his concentration on the most popular and “vulgar” expressions of pseudo-modernism (TV reality shows, pop music, literary bestsellers, pornography), the importance of which is highlighted by the conspicuous technological changes of the media used to distribute and consume them.⁸⁶ The second part of the reason is Kirby’s formulation of the pseudo-modern in almost purely antithetical terms with regards its predecessor, which is valuable in order to highlight and isolate the specific characteristics important for a better understanding of the cultural changes which are now underway, but could, in a context of actual textual analysis, resemble (as was the case with much of literary theory throughout the ages) pushing an intricate and largely amorphous cultural reality through a convenient cookie-cutter.

Whatever the characteristics of the pseudo-modern turn out to be, it would be safe to assume they include a hearty dose of whatever defined its predecessor. Thus we can remain skeptical to assertions such as: “Whereas postmodernism called ‘reality’ into question, pseudo-modernism defines the real implicitly as myself, now, ‘interacting’ with its texts. Thus, pseudo-modernism suggests that whatever it does or makes is what is reality, and a pseudo-modern text may flourish the apparently real in an uncomplicated form” (Kirby 2006). While Gaiman himself claimed that one of the reasons for the rising success of the fantasy genre among the popular readership was a fatigue with the modernist formal experimentation (Gaiman et al. 1988), and while the streamlining of form appears to be a conspicuous characteristic of his own material as well (i.e. it is by and large written in uncluttered, limpid language, devoid of any formal experimentation), his work also runs contrary to Kirby’s idea about the pseudo-modern’s claim to reality—the here-and-now legitimized by the very reality of the reader’s interaction with the text.

A constitutive element of Gaiman’s writing is the constant re-negotiation of reality on part of both the characters and the reader. This includes Richard’s struggle to come to terms with the uncanny duality of all the places in London he previously thought familiar in *Neverwhere*, or the double nature of the gods and other magical creatures in *American Gods*. Neither the magical, nor the realistic reading of the events satisfies on its own—it is

⁸⁶ Kirby’s is the attitude of nostalgia after a bygone era—we can only imagine how many critics in every age lamented the apparent degeneration of their current burgeoning mass cultures. To use another analogy from the Augustan reign, Kirby tells us of the gladiators, but mentions no Vergils.

precisely the interplay of doubts and hesitation between the apparently conflicting ways of viewing reality which makes the reading experience memorable. The alternate realities feed off each other, provide commentary of one another, and evoke meta-fictional questions about narrative phenomena as such, much in the tradition of the postmodern questioning of reality and the text-reader interaction.

Kirby paints a bleak picture of a new, unified, infantilized, shallow reality, necessitated by certain social and technological developments, stating that it is increasingly “implausible for academics to tell their students they inhabit a postmodern world where a multiplicity of ideologies, world-views and voices can be heard” while “their every step” is “hounded by market economics,” their lives being “dominated by what amounts in practice to consumer fanaticism” (Kirby 2006). The waning of Grand Narratives was the constitutive aspect of postmodernism as described by Lyotard, but in the coming paradigm we witness “the ideology of globalized market economics raised to the level of the sole and overpowering regulator of all social activity—monopolistic, all-engulfing, all-explaining, all-structuring . . .” (Kirby 2006). While one could argue that pseudo-modernism equals neo-liberalism, the same could be claimed about futurism and fascism during modernity, but this identification would hardly be comprehensive or entirely fair.

In a later work (Kirby 2009), in which he relabels pseudo-modernism “digimodernism,” Kirby posits as the predominant sentiment of our age a mixture of a cultural technology-induced autism and a certain Fukuyamaist end-of-history attitude, arguing that while modernity and modernism consciously rejected tradition, and postmodernism “recycled and double-coded what [was] known to be definitively lost,” digimodernism remains blankly unaware of previous time to such a degree that “the past is not felt to feed into or inform or frame us; it’s regarded, if at all, with contempt (less clever or knowledgeable, certainly less moral than us) or self-pity (life was simpler then)—any notion that it might in any sense be superior to the sacred present is dismissed as mental sickness” (Kirby 2009, 226). Even a cursory glance at 2018’s social and cultural climate reveals that nothing could be farther from the truth: a U.S. president is elected who ran on a slogan which capitalized on a nostalgic, back-looking sentiment of a disenfranchised white middle class; Hollywood has now intensively bombarded global audiences with remakes, adaptations and reboots of old material for more than a decade; TV critics and audiences alike are transfixed by nostalgia trips induced by shows such as *Stranger Things* or *Twin Peaks: The Return*;

videogame developers increasingly embrace pixel art, utilizing as a deliberate visual stylization that which used to be a technological necessity in the late 1980s; movie geeks around the globe and around the Internet denounce Disney's *Star Wars* sequels in favor of the originals, even though the majority of them were not yet alive when these were first shown in theaters; etc.

This is not to say that Kirby's analysis is woefully misguided or that the world has changed so drastically over the last decade. Even a rudimentary knowledge of literary history reveals a similar paradox in an era which supposedly "consciously rejected tradition." Ezra Pound's famous proclamation "Make it new!," rather than marking an abandonment of tradition, indicated a heightened attention towards the old. Even if this attention is qualitatively different from the current nostalgic fascination by some bygone, "purer" age as witnessed today in digimodernism, it can't be plausibly held that the current age's relationship to the past is one of disregard. Postmodernism's and modernism's precepts are still present, if obliquely, in the digimodern's DNA.

Nostalgia plays an important role in Gaiman's works too—here it is an inevitable byproduct of his meditations on the role of memory (more generally) and the formative process of growing up as a young boy in the Southern England townscape and countryside (in particular). Both his early graphic novel *Violent Cases* (1987) and his later novel *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) feature a fictionalized version of Gaiman's childhood, which succeeds in resonating with adult readers of every age. Gaiman, as the NYT review of the novel puts it, "helps us remember the wonder and terror and powerlessness that owned us as children" (Percy 2013). Gaiman explores these themes of childhood terror and powerlessness also in his short works "Flints from Memory Lane" and "Closing Time" (2007), among others.

Whatever the nature of the current age turns out to be, it cannot possibly divorce itself from the legacy of postmodernity, as works of authors such as Gaiman demonstrate. If there has indeed emerged in this world, "so frightening and seemingly uncontrollable . . . [feeding] a desire to return to the infantile playing with toys" (Kirby 2006), a Grand Narrative of a trance-like autistic absorption into the here and now, supersession of the text by the reader-participant, all of this governed by the all-powerful global market, there also has to be its obverse. In due course, there ought to be a literature (or, rather, "literatures") identified as the counter-current to the bleak corollary painted by the

prophets of the postmodernism's demise. "This new literature can, in good faith, examine complex and ever-shifting crises—of racial inequality, capitalism and climate change—to which it is easy to close one's eyes" (Gibbons 2017).

Indeed, looking back at the postmodern era, the one-sided view of postmodernism as pluralizing and questioning any Grand Narratives which came its way leaves out the more paradoxical reality described by Linda Hutcheon, in which both the challenge of the "totalizing impulse" and the push for its inscription by art onto the social reality exist side by side. Hutcheon warns that this impulse "should probably not be regarded, on the one hand, either as a naive kind of deliberately imperialistic desire for total control or, on the other, as utterly unavoidable and humanly inevitable, even necessary" (Hutcheon 2002, 61). The lasting lesson taken from the paradigm shift bringing about postmodernism is that a given era should be understood in the context of the preceding one, or, even better, in the context of all the preceding *and* succeeding eras, posited as a possibility. And while no specific feature which a theorist can isolate and identify as *the* mark of the given cultural paradigm should be regarded as "humanly inevitable," we should consider how this feature has arisen from a certain field of possibilities—and consider how this field of possibilities might have been defined by what is, indeed, humanly inevitable.

In this chapter, I have theorized about precisely this kind of considerations, opting for the cognitive account of harmony (familiarity) and dissonance (surprise) as the universals shaping such a field of possibilities. I have made conjectures about features of Gaiman's writing which could be labeled "modern" or "postmodern" or "post-postmodern," falling back on P. C. Hogan's account of narrative prototypes centered around some basic emotions (happiness and sorrow). In the next chapter, I try to test, approximately, some of these conjectures—as well as Hogan's account—in a reader response experiment.

5 Reader Response Study II

5.1 Emotions of Reader Response: An Introduction

The astonishing variety of human responses makes irksome any too systematic scheme for arranging these extracts.

—I. A. Richards⁸⁷

It has been evident since the time of Aristotle's *Poetics* that the study of emotions can hardly be dissociated from any serious treatise on literature. With the onset of cognitive criticism, emotions and emotional response has become the center of interest for researchers in literary theory such as Norman Holland (neuropsychanalysis), Keith Oatley (emotions and cognition), Patrick Colm Hogan (narrative universals), or Lisa Zunshine (fiction and mind-reading), among many others.

One of the most persuasive contemporary accounts of emotional responses pertaining to artistic and literary experience has been given by Keith Oatley⁸⁸ in *Best Laid Schemes* and later reiterated in *Emotions: A Brief History*: "If we take four of the most basic emotions, we can see that in their reactive forms each is triggered by a particular kind of event in relation to a goal" (Oatley 2004, 79). In other words, Oatley sees emotions as feedback which helps us evaluate situations we find ourselves in, with regards to an overt or implicit goal we consciously, but more often subconsciously, set for ourselves. This view is not at all unique—as Patrick Colm Hogan asserts, it is a part of standard cognitive accounts, which "treat emotions as a form of 'appraisal'" (Hogan 2003b, 140).

The basic emotions that Oatley and Johnson-Laird consider in their paper "A Cognitive Theory of Emotions" are happiness, sadness, fear,⁸⁹ anger, and disgust (Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987, 41). Happiness is understood as the indication of progress being made regarding a person's goal, while anger arises when the goal is being frustrated.

⁸⁷ See Richard 1929, 12.

⁸⁸ Oatley's work is based on his and Johnson-Laird's theory of emotions and cognition, as expounded in their original article "Towards a Cognitive Theory of Emotions" (1987).

⁸⁹ "Anxiety" in their original paper. "Fear" is the designation from Oatley 1992, and it is also the term used by Hogan.

Sadness is the reaction to a “loss of an active goal” or a “failure of a major plan.” Fear indicates that a life-preserving goal is threatened, and disgust has to do with a “gustatory goal being violated.”

Oatley is more specific about when emotions occur. When the evaluation of likelihood of a given development pertinent to a person’s goal changes, this is indicated by an emotional response (Oatley 1992, 25). This is true for our emotional faculties as utilized in our daily life, but the same principles enter the process of reading fiction. Oatley explains:

In fiction, the first move is to put aside our own goals and plans, and to insert, instead, the goals, plans and actions of a character (as indicated by the author) into our own planning processor. In the second move, with the goals and plans we have taken on, we experience our own fresh emotions in the circumstances of the character’s actions and their effects. (Oatley 2011, 116)

Oatley’s account describes something every reader of fiction is intimate with: we “forget” for a while about our own goals and adopt, instead, the goals of the story’s protagonist(s). This is possible thanks to the phenomenon Norman Holland identifies as “transportation” (Holland 2009), i.e. “losing oneself” in the literary text. We forget about our surroundings and challenges of our real lives to temporarily partake of the fictional reality.

As with many other cognitive re-formulations of reception and reader response theories, these and similar claims appear both intuitively plausible and congruent with our own experience as readers, authors or teachers of literature—they seem generally correct. It is important to note at this point, however, that even naïve readers do not abandon their personal goals as readers completely—and this is arguably more important to keep in mind when dealing with more informed readers.

We approach literature with as many of our personal goals in mind as there are literary tastes or branches of literary analysis. Hogan sums up the process thus: “Our emotional experience of a literary work is a function of junctural evaluation of narrative events in relation to our own goals—specifically our preferred final outcome, a goal that need not be the same as that of the protagonist” (Hogan 2003b, 149).

5.2 Happiness and Sorrow in Neil Gaiman’s “Troll Bridge”

There comes a moment when the image of our lives parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little by little, begins to rule us.

—Milan Kundera⁹⁰

In Neil Gaiman’s short story “Troll Bridge,” we follow the life Jack, a little boy from South England countryside, and a series of his encounters with a magical creature from a parallel faery-tale reality. The text is formally divided into three distinct parts corresponding to three stages of Jack’s life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. At each stage, Jack is faced with the same challenge—to survive the encounter with the troll—but this happens against the background of Jack’s changing life circumstances and his self-discovery as a moral actor.

The first part is composed of scenes of carefree summertime exploration, and it’s here that Jack encounters the troll under an abandoned bridge for the first time, and talks his way out of getting eaten by promising to come back to the troll later in life. Jack stumbles upon the troll bridge a second time as a teenager on a date with his best friend and romantic interest Louise. He tries to save his life by sacrificing Louise to the troll. Finally, as an adult, after his marriage breaks down, having lived a life of failure and regret, Jack comes back to seek out the troll and fulfill his promise.

As for the style of the narration, the protagonist’s detached, matter-of-factly voice and a lack of introspection conveys little of his emotional turmoil. Instead, his states of mind are projected onto the environment, primarily the red-brick bridge, and reflected by the appearance and demeanor of the troll, who plays the role of psychopomp for the main character, reflecting his moral choices, remaining the sole persistent, if changeable, presence in Jack’s life.

The initial description of the bridge is indicative of both the mood of the first part of the story, and Jack’s mental world. Note the use of words such as “clean” and the impression of openness:

⁹⁰ See Kundera (2005) 1986, 126–7.

It was built of clean red brick, a huge curving arch over the path. At the side of the bridge were stone steps cut into the embankment, and, at the top of the steps, a little wooden gate. . . . The top of the bridge was paved with mud. On each side of it was a meadow. The meadow on my side was a wheatfield; the other field was just grass. (Gaiman 2005, 61)

The significance of the passage is better understood in the context of what precedes it, the point at which Jack describes his summertime exploration of the countryside: “I scrambled down a steep bank, and I found myself on a shady path that was new to me and overgrown with trees; the light that penetrated the leaves was stained green and gold, and I thought I was in fairyland” (Gaiman 2005, 60). From this point of view, the bridge is much more than a physical structure, it is a gateway to adventure, wonder, and infinite opportunities that lie ahead of the boy, and not just in the immediate sense but also with regards to the outlooks of his whole future life—provided he succeeds in retaining his adventurous, inquisitive and open mind, and stays true to the dreams of his childhood.

It is this mind that manages to find the magical in the mundane, transfiguring myth and dream and fitting them in the everyday reality with an unquenchable desire to uncover the wonder of “what may be” behind the layer of “what is expected,” much like the way readers and fans of Neil Gaiman have come to approach his stories.

When Jack discovers the troll waiting for him under the bridge, the stakes are high—he has all of his dreams and future to lose, after all—and this is reflected in the supernatural creature’s description:

He was huge: his head brushed the top of the brick arch. He was more or less translucent: I could see the bricks and trees behind him, dimmed but not lost. He was all my nightmares given flesh. He had huge strong teeth, and rending claws, and strong, hairy hands. His hair was long, like one of my sister’s little plastic gonks, and his eyes bulged. He was naked, and his penis hung from the bush of gonk hair between his legs. (Gaiman 2005, 62)

The boy needs to use all of his courage and wit to get out of what he sees as a potentially fatal situation. As in any adventure story, the reader is expected to be invested in the character’s wellbeing, fear for his life, and eventually rejoice in his triumph. At the same

time, the text maintains its ambiguity and builds upon it in Jack's future encounters with the troll. In the best tradition of the genre of the fantastic, Gaiman lets the reader decide the nature of the creature for themselves—or, rather, leaves the reader with the pleasant uncertainty of intertwining, competing, or outright exclusive interpretations (see Čipkár 2016a).

The interest and investment in the main protagonist is maintained by describing a variety of life events which most readers could identify with. The next time we encounter Jack, he is an adolescent dealing with his feelings towards the opposite sex. We learn that he is spending time with a friend, Louise, and we witness their budding romance against the backdrop of 1970s England. When the couple inadvertently wanders to the same place where Jack met the troll years ago, he is so preoccupied that the bridge gets only a passing mention. The sense of danger is retained, but the protagonist is no longer the same person as in the first encounter with the creature; now, he has responsibility for another human being and is faced with a more complex moral situation than just the minimal conundrum of saving one's own life.

In the third part of the story, Jack's failure to stay true to his potential and the downward spiral of his personal life eventually lead him to the final encounter with the troll. Just as the circumstance of his life have changed and his inner world has become a desolate place, so does change the description of the bridge:

There were graffiti painted on the side of the bridge: FUCK and BARRY LOVES SUSAN and the omnipresent NF of the National Front. I stood beneath the bridge in the red brick arch, stood among the ice-cream wrappers, and the crisp packets and the single, sad, used condom, and watched my breath steam in the cold afternoon air. (Gaiman 2005, 68)

His marriage a failure and his childhood dreams a long-lost fantasy, Jack finds himself facing a much different creature under the bridge this time. The ravages of real life, growing up, and of becoming disillusioned with oneself and one's place in the world take the bite out of the old childhood fears, and, indeed, undermine any instinct of self-preservation. The troll ceases appearing as a threat when there is no longer anything at stake, but starts mirroring the protagonist as a lost, pathetic, emasculated creature. No longer fearsome,

he evokes pity as much as Jack evokes disdain at this point, and thus becomes the focus of the reader's sympathy:

"I didn't think you'd come back," said the troll. He was my height now, but otherwise unchanged. His long gonk hair was unkempt and had leaves in it, and his eyes were wide and lonely. . . . "I'm a troll," whispered the troll in a small, scared voice. "Fol rol de ol rol." He was trembling. (Gaiman 2005, 68)

The mood change, comparing the above excerpts, is evident. This change, as reflected by the change of the environment as well as the evolution of the portrayal of the troll, is the primary vehicle of the desired aesthetic effect; it gives the reader necessary cues for undergoing a dynamic emotional experience as the story unfolds. The rest—the suspense, the desire to know “what happens next”—would not be nearly as meaningful without the emotional investment and a structure that enables the reader to undergo this journey towards its cathartic outcome.

It is possible to think of the above-mentioned stylistic vehicle in terms of Eliot's objective correlative, as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] *particular* emotion” (Eliot 1921, 92). However, the part of the term which the contemporary cognitive enquiries put into question is precisely the word “objective,” not in the structural sense, but rather in its gnoseological ramifications.

Let us consider the bridge as not only a representation of the act of transferring to the next stage of Jack's life, but, in the manner suggested above, as a figurative crossroads where he is presented with a given ethical choice which will determine his future character. The bridge, then, would be the “object” which is correlated to the notion of test or life-changing decision. This would be constitutive of the bridge's “meaning.” However, a plausible contending interpretation could designate the bridge as a pure expressionist element, where Jack's character is not constructed *per se*, but only revealed, laid open for scrutiny, his failing magnified by the dramatic, existential, out-of-this-world scenario.

Moreover, ambiguity of literary text, which is amplified in the genres of magical realism and the fantastic, effectively prevents any “object” within it to convey a “particular” emotion, as Eliot would have it. While it is without doubt the emotional engagement which makes the story appealing, it certainly cannot be reduced to a process of given formulas

operating over a set of signifiers, unlocking the appropriate emotional response according to either the authorial intent or a structural truth inherent, somehow, to the text itself.

Looking at “Troll Bridge” through the lens of Oatley’s model, Jack’s (and the reader’s) emotional journey should be organized around a number of “junctures,” points at which changes of evaluation of the likely outcome of plans occur (Oatley 1992, 52). Every such change is realized as an emotion. If the reader identifies with the character, they will adopt many of the character’s goals while retaining some of their own. Inevitable discrepancy between the character’s and the reader’s goals should lead to the emotions being elicited in the reader not mirroring the character’s portrayed emotions exactly, while the character’s emotions should influence the reader’s response, help them evaluate the situation, or even inform and shift their goals.

A close analysis of readers’ emotional responses to the story should indicate some universal points of how our cognitive processes bear upon fictional narratives, and inform us about how an inter-subjective “meaning” appropriate to the story in question is formed.

5.2.1 Parameters and Results

In order to test Oatley’s proposed model and analyze its ramifications, I prepared a reader response study. The participants, 24 female and 12 male, mostly undergraduate students of English, grad students, and college-educated professionals, were to read the short story and then answer a survey entailing seven open-ended questions (see appendix B). They were asked to list the instances when they felt the following emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, contempt, and surprise.⁹¹ They were also to list the points at which their mood had changed, instances where they identified with the characters or situations portrayed, and instances where they recollected a significant personal memory. They also answered whether they enjoyed the story or not.

⁹¹ Beyond Johnson Laird’s and Oatley’s basic five, contempt and surprise, among others, are also considered as candidates for basic emotions by Paul Ekman (1992). However, the emotions were not defined in the readers’ assignment for the present study, and the respondents relied on their common-sense understanding, often conflating contempt with disgust. For this reason, when analyzing the answers, I decided to use the terms as if they represented a single category.

The breakdown of responses is presented below. Only points where two or more respondents agreed are mentioned, discounting for outliers and idiosyncrasies.

Respondents who listed instances of happiness identified three main points which evoked the emotion. 55% of readers listed one or more scenes dealing with Jack's childhood exploration:

I wandered down the path. It was perfectly straight, and overgrown with short grass. From time to time I would find these really terrific rocks: bubbly, melted things, brown and purple and black. If you held them up to the light you could see every color of the rainbow. (Gaiman 2005, 60)

Almost a quarter of the participants (22%) listed scenes from the second part of Jack's life, his adolescence, where he is describing his friendship and budding romance with Louise:

We stood in the road outside her house, under the sodium-yellow streetlight and we stared at each other's black lips and pale yellow faces. We grinned at each other. Then we just walked, picking quiet roads and empty paths. (65)

Both of the above excerpts seem relatable; both represent a specific stage in everyone's life, and are tied to some of the most magical and exciting moments a person experiences growing up. First is the freedom and adventurous expectancy of discovering the world through child's eyes; second is the thrilling onset of one's life as a person who can form intimate relationships with others, and discover, with this intimacy, an exciting world of new opportunities.

These passages depict some of the happiest moments of Jack's life, and are indicative of his successful progress towards his personal goals; be it having some carefree fun as a child, or winning the heart of a girl he is attracted to as a teenager. The reader wishes Jack to succeed just as they wish (or would have wished) themselves to succeed in the general endeavor of finding their expression for imaginative freedom to explore and to love.

The third most significant instance of reported feeling of happiness (11%) has to do with the introduction of a supernatural element into the story, the appearance of the troll. This could indicate that certain genre expectations are met for readers who enjoy stories about the fantastic or the supernatural.

Contempt and/or disgust were listed by more than half of the respondents (52%), referring to the scene of the second encounter with the troll, where Jack tries to offer Louise to the creature to save himself:

I grabbed Louise, a taut zombie, and pushed her forward. “Don’t take me. I don’t want to die. Take *her*. I bet she’s much tastier than me. And she’s two months older than I am. Why don’t you take her?” (65)

This is the scene where the attitude of many readers towards the main character changes. Instead of identifying and rooting for him, a significant portion of readers who assessed this scene negatively effectively disentangled their own goals from the character’s. When asked when their mood changed, the most significant portion, 55% of readers, listed this scene. 27% of respondents also listed the feeling anger at this point in the story.

The second most “contemptible” passage according to 36% of respondents was Jack’s mention of cheating on his wife in the third part of the story, reflecting his blasé attitude towards infidelity, and a number of bad life decisions:

I was working in London, doing A&R for one of the major record companies. . . . I had to keep a small flat in London; it’s hard to commute when the bands you’re checking out don’t even stagger onto the stage until midnight. It also meant that it was fairly easy to get laid, if I wanted to, which I did. (67)

The infidelities and the absence from his family is what eventually leads Jack’s spouse to leave him one night, putting a symbolic coda after a life of pretense and lack of emotional fulfilment.

Finally, sadness was listed by 44% of readers referring to a scene between the second and third part of the text, where Jack meets Louise again, on a train, after many years:

“I really liked you, that night, Jack . . . I thought you were going to ask me out. I would have said yes. . . . You didn’t.” Her hair was cut very short. It didn’t suit her. I never saw her again. The trim woman with the taut smile was not the girl I had loved, and talking to her made me feel uncomfortable. (66)

The encounter makes apparent that the relationship is irrevocably over; not only was the promise of their date many years ago never fulfilled, this last encounter replaces the

original memory in Jack's recollection. With the preceding scene still in their mind, the reader realizes the goal of finding romantic love with the high-school sweetheart and experiencing something special is completely lost.

Another sadness-evoking point in the story, for 13% of respondents, is the scene where Jack finds out his wife saw through his double life:

I got back from a two-week jaunt to New York one winter's day, and when I arrived at the house it was empty and cold. (67)

Upon this discovery, Jack wanders off into the night, trudging through the countryside of his childhood, drawn to the inevitable third encounter with the troll. But the creature is changed:

"I didn't think you'd come back," said the troll. He was my height now, but otherwise unchanged. His long gonk hair was unkempt and had leaves in it, and his eyes were wide and lonely. (68)

At this point, the reader's sympathies have shifted and the troll becomes a figure of pity, a shift which is exacerbated in the context of Jack's failings. The contrast with the original, fearsome appearance of the troll made 22% of readers report the feeling of sorrow.

Lastly, only 13% have noted the feeling of melancholy present in the opening passages of the second and third parts of the story, where Jack describes the landscape of his childhood changing:

The fields started to go, as I grew older. One by one, row by row, houses sprang up with roads named after wildflowers and respectable authors. Our home—an aging, tattered Victorian house—was sold, and torn down; new houses covered the garden. . . . I moved to London, and then, some years later, I moved back again, but the town I returned to was not the town I remembered: there were no fields, no farms, no little flint lanes; and I moved away as soon as I could, to a tiny village ten miles down the road. (Gaiman 2005, 63 and 66)

As for the question of enjoyment, 77% of participants reportedly liked the story. Everybody in this group, as opposed to those who did not enjoy the story, also shared three common points:

Firstly, they all listed instances of sadness concerning the fortunes of the main character and his magical counterpart, the troll. On the other hand, the wider theme of passage of time and its impact on both the outside world and a person's maturing process—a theme that runs throughout the story as a strong undercurrent—was something that the readers who did not enjoy the story also responded to.

The feeling of sadness in readers who did not reportedly enjoy the story also seemed to be evoked by minor details which triggered a sad personal recollection, or inspired them to go on a philosophical tangent. Alternatively, they did not feel any sorrow at all, or, which is more puzzling, they felt sad throughout the entire reading session.

Secondly, the group which enjoyed the story listed changing attitudes towards the main character, as reflected in their answers about mood change and the feelings of sadness, contempt and anger. This would indicate they were invested in the character's goals and constructed goals of their own which were related to the character's fortunes and behavior.

Thirdly, at some point in the text before listing the feeling of sorrow, the readers who enjoyed the story also identified a passage which evoked happiness and often recollected their own happy memories which bore a similarity to either the incidents of Jack's childhood or his adolescent attempt at dating. The pattern of happiness-followed-by-sorrow was exclusive to the majority of the 77% who enjoyed the story, as opposed to those who did not enjoy the story and had either little or no emotional response, or the feeling of sadness permeated their whole experience.

5.2.2 Jack's *Hamartia*: Discussion of the Findings

It seems that a certain basic dynamic is at work in "Troll Bridge," a process of changing emotions according to a predictable formula. Not only the reader has to be invested in the challenges the main character faces, but they should also evaluate the outcomes of these challenges in a certain way to be able to enjoy the narrative. The results of the survey suggest that in order for the story of "Troll Bridge" to function and impress itself emotionally upon the mind of the reader, two critical evaluations must take place in a specific order:

First, an impression of movement towards a successful fulfillment of a goal within an implicit plan must be formed, and it must concern the main incidents of the plot. This could be either the idea of enjoying Jack's carefree childhood and maintaining a mind of adventurous expectancy towards the world, or experiencing the vicarious romantic thrills of his promising date.

Next, the protagonist's plans, which are the same as those formulated previously, or are logical extensions of those past plans, must be foiled along with the plans that the reader has established around the protagonist in the process of empathic identification. At this point, the reader may formulate new plans, which would assist them in making sense and enjoying the conclusion of the story—in other words, undergoing catharsis.

These two evaluations fit into Aristotle's classic formula of tragedy: "It is therefore necessary for the story that is in beautiful shape to be single . . . changing not into good fortune from bad but the opposite way, from good fortune to bad" (Sachs 2006, 37). The cause of the shift of fortune is *hamartia*, or "missing the mark" by the protagonist. "There is no tragedy, according to Aristotle, unless a characteristically good central figure is aiming at something exceptionally high. For there to be a *hamartia*, there must first be a mark to be missed" (Sachs 2006, 8).

While the fictional reality of the shift in fortunes is evident both from the text itself and the readers' evaluation of it, Aristotle's requirement of a "characteristically good central figure" warrants a moment of scrutiny. The story of Jack evidently is not that of a morally flawless person who is met with bad luck, as most readers find his actions objectionable. Aristotle warns that "decent men ought not to be shown changing from good to bad fortune (since this is neither frightening nor pitiable but repellent)" (Sachs 2006, 36). While the "Troll Bridge's" hero does not qualify as a moral paragon—for his actions provoke anger and contempt—he should not, conversely, be perceived as an "extremely bad character," becoming undeserving of the feeling of pity in the eyes of the reader.

While the link between experiencing happiness or sadness at various points in the story and the evaluation of the main protagonist's character is not entirely clear, it seems uncontroversial to assume that these emotions are either stemming from a more positive than negative attitude to the protagonist, or serve to ameliorate negative attitude. If Jack

is reduced to nothing but a selfish, cheating sociopath, the tragedy remains unrealized, which is reflected in the reports of readers who did not enjoy the short story.

However, what is the “exceptionally high mark” which is missed by the hero, so as to satisfy the requirement of *hamartia*? Again, the implicit understanding of this by the reader is crucial for the tragic arc of the story to function. The most obvious culprit is the scene where Jack offers Louise to the troll to save himself—it is the point at which most readers’ mood changes and the point where “good” fortune starts to be replaced by “bad.” Jack’s *hamartia* would then lie in the inability to do the chivalrous thing and put the other’s safety—indeed, the wellbeing of the girl he professes to love—before his own.

The obvious problem here is that the scene is mostly met with feelings of contempt/disgust (52%) and anger (27%), *not* sadness, so this moral failing on the part of Jack does not seem to be the cause of the story’s dynamic, evoking the shift from happiness to sadness. The critical point here is not Jack’s objective ethical failure, but the effects of his failure on the perception of himself, Louise, and their relationship.

This change of perception spelled the end to their romance and set the tone for Jack’s future life, which, the way it is portrayed, is simply “going through the motions,” without any genuine enjoyment. Jack’s career, his family life, even his infidelities are hand-waived:

I moved with my family—I was married by now, with a toddler—into an old house that had once, many years before, been a railway station. . . . I was getting older. One day I found a gray hair; on another, I heard a recording of myself talking, and I realized I sounded just like my father. . . . I thought that Eleanora—that was my wife’s name; I should have mentioned that before, I suppose—didn’t know about the other women. (Gaiman 2005, 66 and 67)

The way Jack describes his life in the third part of the story leaves the impression that anything of importance that could have happened to him took place up until his second encounter with the troll. In this light, his moral failure with Louise appears less like the initial reason of his downfall, and more as a contingency retroactively constructed as a precondition for his future life situation. “When a thing occurs as a result of a series of contingent conditions, it produces the retroactive impression that it was *teleologically* necessary, as if its development had been preordained from the very beginning” (Žižek 2014, 30). In other words, even though the second encounter with the troll was reflective

of what Jack was to become, it can be perceived as the cause only in retrospect, once the full context has been established.

However, if the second encounter is not the *hamartia* itself, but only its symptom, where does Jack really “miss the mark?” Even if we reject a strictly allegorical interpretation, Jack’s repeated bargaining with the troll appears to stand for the kind of decisions he will make in his “real” life, and it is representative of the attitudes he will hold. These attitudes remain in the background, and the magical encounters with the troll are the primary means for their observation. But it is precisely the context of Jack’s life and the trials he must undergo which resonate with the reader—whether these are trials imposed by society or the individual himself.

Thus, Jack’s *hamartia* is not the betrayal of his girlfriend (or, later, his wife); it is the betrayal of his dreams, and the dreams of the readers. “Troll Bridge” is a contemporary story for a contemporary readership, which is, in the case of the present study, composed exclusively of the millennial demographic. While Jack’s cowardice in face of danger still readily evokes moral outrage, the true tragedy is perceived in compromising one’s happiness—happiness not in the vulgar hedonistic sense of pleasure-seeking, but in a broad sense of living a fulfilling, enjoyable and ethically sound life.

Jack’s trials speak directly to the current generational cohort, and, more than before, are relevant “today . . . when we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the superego injunction ‘Enjoy!,’ from direct enjoyment of sexual performance to enjoyment of professional achievement or spiritual awakening” (Žižek 2006, 304). The readers’ responses reflect this perfectly: portrayals of enjoyment in scenes of Jack’s childhood exploration and adolescent dating are met with the feeling of happiness, while his inability to enjoy his career, family life, or even his affairs evoke sorrow. In short, Jack’s *hamartia* is his inability to enjoy.

This is confirmed at the very end, where the superego injunction becomes stronger than the instinct of self-preservation, and Jack gives up his life willingly to the troll. Aware of his failure to find happiness and owning up to it, he is redeemed in the eyes of the reader (the reader to whom, in a fashion, the role of superego is delegated)—through sympathy and sorrow, he becomes a cautionary tale, re-asserting us in our conviction to live our lives to the fullest.

6 Conclusion

Literary studies should move closer to the sciences in theory, method, and governing ethos. In the long view, this scientific turn represents the only responsible and attractive correction of course—the only correction with the potential to lift the field from its morass.

—Jonathan Gottschall⁹²

Human beings are hard-wired to appreciate simile and metaphor. . . . It is [this capacity] that allows us, I think, to understand and appreciate two contradictory things at the same time: that the story is a lie, and that the story is true.

—Neil Gaiman⁹³

This work is but one modest contribution among many which have suggested, over the last couple of decades, a possible approach which could serve as one of the ways forward and out of the crisis outlined in the introduction. Gottschall has pointed to “an emerging consensus that the dominant paradigm is spent, and that we are urgently in need of massive intellectual overseeding, if not a total break with the old modes,” pointing out some twenty-odd major publications of respected literary critics and theorists (Gottschall 2008, 6). The remedy proposed by Gottschall is one of consilience: of the humanities moving closer—in their principles, their ethos, and their methodology—to the natural sciences. He himself admits that such considerations have been present in the academic discourse since at least the time of wider acceptance of Darwin’s theory at the beginning of the 20th century; and, indeed, particularly since the 1960s, there has emerged the trend in the Anglo-American academic sphere to push towards the naturalization of philosophy (Chomsky 2000, 144), which also encompassed pursuing a goal of reducing the various

⁹² See Gottschall 2008, 3.

⁹³ See Gaiman 2015b, at 54 min.

fields of social and natural sciences towards what Stephen Hawking famously called a Theory of Everything.

However, this process might not be as straightforward and clear in its aims as the emergent orthodoxy would have us believe. One of the crucial step in this development of consilience would be the creation of hypotheses pertaining to the mind-body problem, which could be identified as the problem of how consciousness arises from the neural structures of the brain. The difficulties of even posing such a question at this point have been well delineated by Chomsky: the question “seems much like others that have arisen through the history of science, sometimes with no solution,” e.g. the problem of explaining the motion of the planets by (pre-Newtonian) mechanical philosophy; “the problem of reducing electricity and magnetism to mechanics, overcome by the even stranger assumption that fields are real physical things; the problem of reducing chemistry to the world of hard particles in motion, energy, and electromagnetic waves, only overcome with the introduction of even weirder hypotheses about the nature of the physical world,” i.e. those falling under the field of quantum physics (Chomsky 2000, 144–145). Chomsky’s point is that we should be wary of trying to solve the problem of unification of the disciplines by reducing the “high-tier” ones (psychology, linguistics) to the more “basic” ones (neurobiology), and the reason is twofold: first, their boundaries are purely arbitrary to begin with, a matter of conventional practices; second, historically, unification of the sciences has been mostly achieved not by reduction but some other form of accommodation—such as an introduction of a new conceptual paradigm, which may possibly show that the “high-tier” discipline has been the “more correct” one all along (as was the case in the unification of chemistry and physics; see Chomsky 2000, 111).

While pursuing a more naturalistic course in literary theory, we should resist the temptation of trying to adopt the technical lingo of the hard sciences without careful review; and we should take a measured approach to their tentative concepts (especially if we are dealing with the problem of consciousness and the brain, one that remains largely a mystery, and the understanding of which by the pertinent scientific fields is still very superficial), instead of using them as the hermeneutic “master key” to understanding literature and all the phenomena that relate to it. Perhaps, rather than trying to explain the behavior of the protagonists or the reception process of the readers of *Neverwhere* or

American Gods using concepts such as mirror neurons,⁹⁴ we could utilize a more intuitive approach, which would nevertheless be grounded in (or at least not outright contradict) sound theory and science. In Chomsky's words, "many questions—including those of greatest human significance, one might argue—do not fall within naturalistic inquiry; we approach them in other ways. As Putnam stresses, the distinctions are not sharp, but they are useful nonetheless" (Chomsky 2000, 19).

Let us linger on the point of *distinctions* for a while longer. I certainly do not argue for the abolishment of all the terminology, style and practices of the 20th century literary criticism—much of it has been instructive in ways the absence of which the neurosciences and their state-of-the-art brain-scanning technology would be hard-pressed to compensate for. Additionally, the manner in which we traditionally discuss literature (and culture, more broadly) may—certainly at this point in time when questions of any "naturalistic" inquiry might be very difficult to even formulate—be not only intuitive and practical, but also, to a large extent, inevitable.

And yet, it is of the utmost importance, in my opinion, to be conscious of the language we employ, as critics or theorists of literature. While pervasive stylistic phenomena such as the conduit metaphor might be difficult to avoid in "non-naturalistic" discourse (even in natural sciences, metaphors are employed liberally: evolution "selects for" this or that trait, or, to use Chomsky's favorite example, a comet "aims" at Jupiter, but "fails" to hit it, etc.), we should always keep in mind that they are just that: metaphors, figures of speech; not some mystic keys to repositories of semiotic treasures. In other words, we should be able to discuss, for the time being, matters of "greatest human significance" without "systems in which well-constructed symbolic objects are intended to pick out objects in the world [or the text]" (Chomsky 2000, 131), as is the case in physics, biology, etc.; but, at the same time, we should be aware of the limitations of our discourse and not confuse what amounts to everyday use of language with the aforementioned "systems of well-constructed

⁹⁴ "Mirror neurons are one of the most important discoveries in the last decade of neuroscience. These are a variety of visuospatial neurons which indicate fundamentally about human social interaction. Essentially, mirror neurons respond to actions that we observe in others. The interesting part is that mirror neurons fire in the same way when we actually recreate that action ourselves. Apart from imitation, they are responsible for myriad of other sophisticated human behavior and thought processes. Defects in the mirror neuron system are being linked to disorders like autism" (Acharya and Shukla 2012).

symbolic objects.” The failure to do so has led to a state of crisis of identity and marginalization of the field of literary studies discussed earlier. The disclaimer that we are talking about our perceptions—or own “mental representations” of given texts—is much more than a mere formality, it is a basic prerequisite which keeps us anchored within sound research, rather than epistemic dead ends. While virtually every critic following one of the 20th century traditions would argue that such a point is tacitly understood, they would also immediately proceed to state their subjective impressions as objective (or “intersubjective”) facts, apparent in “the structures out there/in the text,” or, as in the case of some poststructuralists, deny the very possibility of existence (or reliability) of any objective fact whatsoever.

In my own work, I attempted to stay firmly grounded in empirical research, which was in turn inspired by theories drawing from contemporary cognitive research. In chapter three, I utilized Norman Holland’s neuropsychanalytic model to describe how readers read and enjoy a short story by Neil Gaiman. I argued that a successful literary transaction is contingent on the *accommodation of readers’ projected content, engagement of their psychological defenses* and *making sense of the story’s ambiguous fantastic* plot. The fiction constitutes a place for readers to dream up their personal demons—or, should I say, dragons—and utilize their own mental defenses to beat them. Again, it is not the particularities of these “dragons” as appearing in the text which makes the stories “true,” it is the very fact of the readers overcoming them. My claim is that we can better understand how fiction of Gaiman’s oeuvre (and similar genre writing, more broadly) is operative in reader’s minds by extrapolating from empirical studies such as the one presented here.

In chapter four, I delineated a possible avenue of inquiry into literary universals, understood as intrinsically tied to our biological endowment. I applied Patrick Colm Hogan’s theory of narrative prototypes based on the basic emotions of happiness and sadness to Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*. I also allowed myself some speculation about genre and the significance of Gaiman’s work in our current cultural moment. While these and similar speculations ought to be always understood as subjective and reflective of a specific viewpoint or a set of concerns, they should not be completely abandoned—as one might come to understand to be my preferred course of action, having read chapter one of this thesis—they should be retained so far as they do not lose touch with the empirical reader

and keep reflecting the reality of the interpretive community. Without such “leeway,” the crucial dialogue in the humanities would be seriously impoverished.

Finally, in chapter five, I utilized Keith Oatley’s theory of *emotions as feedback from our evaluations of fictional challenges*. I demonstrated how the cognitive universals of happiness and sorrow (and universal narrative structures constituted thereof) are operative in the minds of readers of another one of Gaiman’s stories, following with an example of an interpretation, which, while still rooted in the interpreter’s (i.e. mine) particular concerns, reflected the data gathered from a cognitive engagement of real readers with their actual readings of the story, providing an example of how readers’ response can be utilized as grounds for a discussion of topics which traditionally belong to the center of interest of literary studies—topics such as theme, or style.

If we were to identify a unifying, over-arching identity-theme, or style, in Neil Gaiman’s writing, it would be the obsession with “story-shape,” with the importance of narrative, the story-ization of everyday life. In his public speeches, essays, in his online journal, and on social media, Gaiman explicitly states that which he conveys implicitly in his storytelling: his stories are, at the end of the day, stories about stories. This is apparent on a rather superficial level from his abundant use of references to other writers and works of literature ancient and contemporary, his metafictional embeddings and intertextuality. On a deeper level, his almost ubiquitous utilization of fantastic elements appears to, first and foremost, stress the fictionality—the quality “of being a story”—of his works; these elements make the *fictionality* of his short stories, novels, comics, and other creations *overt*, the ultimate message being: people (and Gaiman, the representative storyteller and story-reader, in particular) like things to be story-shaped. We process our experience narratively, and stories imbue our lives with meanings. Gaiman manages to covertly celebrate this principle in his subtle metafiction, creating stories which ultimately point to other stories: to the literary, the imaginative, and the fantastic, as a whole.

The juxtaposition of the mundane and the commonplace (in other words, that which would constitute the usual subject of *literary fiction’s* mimetic function) with the magical, the sensational, and the fantastic foregrounds the capacity of narrative thinking and human imagination to change our everyday experience into something extraordinary. In a circular yet uncannily powerful fashion, human experience is redeemed as it becomes a part of a story, while stories acquire a redemptive power because they pertain to human experience.

And still, all of the above could be summed up by one word: enjoyment. We might be biologically hard-wired for storytelling, but that doesn't mean storytelling has to serve a *practical purpose* (in some evolutionary or even metaphysical sense).

While Gaiman, in his ruminations about the importance of myths, or in his quoting Chesterton, strives to identify some extrinsic value of storytelling, his body of creative work tells a different story: literature needs no practical purpose, it is a value in and of itself. While it informs us about life, human relationships, history, or any other number of topics and phenomena of humane interest, its didactic or moral purpose is not what justifies or explains our propensity for narrative thinking, creation and reception—nor is it any Darwinian tale of adaptive success. While stories may bring us an enlightenment of sorts, what they mostly shed light on is other stories; narratives make us more perceptive to themselves and other narratives, and, ideally, change the way we look at the world and the way we process our experience of it. Understanding life in narrative terms, seeing the world as “storied,” waking up every day with what Lovecraft called “adventurous expectancy” (1933) may not make the world a better place, but it certainly makes it a more fun place. As Norman Holland concludes in his search for an “explanation to literature,” the “purpose” of narrative storytelling (and of any art form, really) seems to be to simply bring us enjoyment—more specifically, a kind of enjoyment unique to our species in this specific aeon of our development. While it may not sound as much, it might be just enough to make our entire *homo sapiens sapiens* experiment, some two hundred thousand years old, worthwhile.

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Appendix A: The Survey Form to “How Do You Think It Feels?”

1. Did you enjoy the short story? Did it clash with any of your ideas about life?
2. Do you think the story relates to your life? If so, how? Can you draw parallels?
3. Would you like the story to relate to your life? Why (not)?
4. Was there a particular passage/event that brought you discomfort (guilt, anxiety)? If there was more than one, write down all of them! What was the reason for the discomfort, you think?
5. Was there a passage/event that gave you particular pleasure? Which? Was this the most exciting part?
6. Was there something unexpected/disappointing? How did it differ from what you wanted to get from the story?
7. What was the gargoyle about? Explain in length.
8. What was the flower about? Explain in length.
9. If the above two items/symbols/things weren't that important for you, name the one that was important and explain its significance.
10. Was there any fantasy of yours represented/hinted at? Name it. (It can be any situation, event, dream, ambition . . .)
11. Was there a character or situation that you identified with? Who? What was the reason?
12. Whose fault was it that the relationship didn't work out?
13. Name at least two decisions that you think were important that the characters took and say whether you agreed with them or not.
14. What was the most important part, phrase, section in the story? Why?
15. What bit (bits) was (were) the most emotionally impressive? Were they also the most pleasing aesthetically? Why?
16. Was this a fantasy story or realistic fiction? How did you come to this conclusion?

17. Briefly describe your general feelings initially and how they developed.
18. Do you prefer this kind of stories, if so, why?
19. List at least three of your favorite writers (They can be authors of fiction, genre writing or non-fiction. You can list more than three.).
20. As a reader, do you prefer to get definitive answers?

Appendix B: The Survey Form to “Troll Bridge”

1. Was there any point or passage (or multiple points) in the text where you felt one of the following emotions (however weak)? If yes, identify the point(s) / passage(s) with a short quote or other reference. Identify strong emotion with an asterisk (*). One emotion can have more entries, and some emotions can be left blank, of course. Explain why you felt the particular emotion if you can, briefly.

HAPPINESS

SADNESS

FEAR

ANGER

DISGUST

CONTEMPT

SURPRISE

2. At what point(s) did the story catch your interest (if at all)? Why did it interest you?
3. At which points in the story did your mood change (if there were such points). How did it change and why?
4. Did you enjoy the story? Why (not)?
5. Was there any aspect of a character or situation in the story that you identified with or really related to, real or imagined? Write it down.
6. Write something from the story that you disagree with, or something that did not agree with you.
7. Was there any significant personal memory that you thought of while reading a certain passage? What was the passage and the memory?

Resumé

Název:

Víc než pravda: Kognitivní univerzálie v analýze čtenářské odezvy k dílům Neila Gaimana

Obor literární kritiky a teorie je už od dob počátků strukturalismu a americké novo-kritické školy ve stavu soustavné sebereflexe, která vychází z pocitu krize identity inherentně s oborem svázaným. Na to už počátkem padesátých let poukazoval např. Allen Tate; tedy ještě předtím, než se s nástupem postmoderny zformulovala palčivá otázka, jestli se literární teorie má zabývat textem očištěným od jakýchkoliv mimotextových vlivů, autorem, společenským a kulturním kontextem, „věčnými pravdami“ o člověku jak je formuluje například marxismus nebo psychoanalýza, nebo se zabývat popíráním sebe sama, jak požaduje dekonstrukce.

Jedním ze současných pokusů o překonání této krize, jak ji popisuje Jonathan Gottschall, a navrácení postmodernou pošramoceného sebevědomí je interdisciplinární spolupráce literárních a kognitivních věd. Kognitivní obrat, který započal již koncem padesátých let s prací Noama Chomského a pohřbil minimálně celé jedno odvětví výzkumu (behaviorismus), se v literární sféře etabloval jen velmi pozvolna a v evropském kontextu se začal rozvíjet poměrně nedávno. Dnes je toto odvětví bohaté a členité (uvedme například neuropsychoanalýzu Normana Hollanda, kognitivní výzkum emocí čtenářů Keitha Oatleyho, čtenářskou empatii a aplikaci „teorie mysli“ Lisy Zunshineové, nebo kognitivní poetiku), nicméně společným jmenovatelem všech jeho rozličných přístupů zůstává zvýšený zájem o čtenáře, jeho mysl a procesy, které vstupují do aktu vnímání, porozumění a intelektově-emocionální reflexe textů. S tímto zájmem se sice setkáváme již u fenomenologie Romana Ingardena a recepční teorie Wolfganga Isera, ale je to až propojení této tradice (jejíž počátky sahají k Aristotelovi nebo jeho indickému ekvivalentu, sanskrtovému učenci Bharata Munimu) s kognitivním přístupem, kterým se kognitivní literární teorie vyčlenila coby životaschopný a dynamicky se rozvíjející obor.

Paralelně s měnícím se přístupem v teorii literatury se vyvíjí také objekt jejího zkoumání – s nástupem postmoderny dochází jednak k navázání na tradici modernismu začátku 20. století, ale i k rozvoji různých forem realismu a romantismu, a to zejména v tzv. „žánrové literatuře“. Ruku v ruce s nástupem této doposud nevídané diverzity se objevuje

i postmoderní kritika, která si klade za úkol zpochybnit univerzální hodnoty strukturalistických teorií. Zatímco postuláty postmoderních teoretiků jako Derrida nebo Baudrillard zůstávají široké veřejnosti nepřístupné, únava čtenářů z formálních experimentů a obskurnosti mnohých modernistických a postmodernistických děl přispívá k rostoucí popularitě naivnější žánrové literatury, v posledních dekádách zejména fantastiky. Status ikon v popkulturním povědomí potvrzují spíše autoři 19. století, jako Poe nebo Austenová, nebo pozdější autoři duchovně spřízněni s obdobím před nástupem literární moderny, např. H.P. Lovecraft nebo Tolkien.

Tato „vzpouora“ čtenářů proti hodnotám moderny může být jedním z důvodů, proč se současní akademici snaží postulovat konec postmoderny jako kulturní éry a stále více sahají po pojmech jako „post-postmoderna“ nebo „metamoderna“. Dalším důvodem může být i selhání postmoderních teoretiků prosadit svůj politicko-společenský emancipační projekt nebo vybudovat robustní metodologii, která by posunula znalosti v humanitních vědách (zejména v literárních a kulturních studiích) výrazně dál od toho, co bylo známo snad již v dobách Aristotela. Akademie stále více přehodnocuje odkaz postmoderny. Jedním z projevů tohoto vývoje je návrat k Hegelovi a univerzálním hodnotám (jev, který vidíme i u dvou tak vzájemně rozdílných myslitelů jako jsou Slavoj Žižek a Ivan Blecha), dalším je právě výše zmíněný kognitivní obrat a snaha obohatit tradičně humanitní obory o principy výzkumu z přírodních věd.

Autorem notně těžším z touhy současných čtenářů po tradičnějších formách vyprávění, je britský spisovatel žijící ve Spojených státech, autor komiksů, povídek, románů pro děti i dospělé, filmových scénářů i kratších lyrických textů, Neil Gaiman, který už od osmdesátých let minulého století redefinuje vztah mezi žánrovou literaturou a „vážnou“ beletrii. Svou reflexí a odmítnutím modernistické tradice je někdy řazen k autorům metamoderny. Na jedné straně kombinuje postmoderní hravost a intertextualitu, na straně druhé nijak neskrývá svůj hluboký obdiv k předmoderním formám vyprávění, tradičním pohádkám a mytologiím. Jestli se naše doba skutečně dostává do nového kulturního paradigmatu, může nám pochopení úspěchu děl Neila Gaimana jako autora reprezentujícího její *zeitgeist* pomoci pochopit univerzální principy ve svých rozličných variacích a kulturních obměnách a ukázat, jak může být literární bádání stále relevantní a přispět v projektu exaktnějšího pochopení naší lidskosti tak, jak ji začali zkoumat kognitivní vědci.

Gaiman, namísto snahy komentovat úpadek „velkých narativů“ tak, jak to dělá postmoderna, hledá způsob jak tyto narativy přivést k životu a najít pro ně místo v současném světě bez toho, aby popíral cokoli z plurality lidské zkušenosti. Bohatě těží z mytologií, pohádek, Bible, historie; je poučen tvorbou současných hrdinů žánrové tvorby od guru moderního komiksu Alana Moora po první dámu fantasy Ursulu K. Le Guin, estetikou viktoriánských a edwardiánských autorů, od zapomenutých až po ty nejslavnější, Dickensem počínaje a Chestertonem konče. Kromě svých projektů převyprávění různých mytologií a pohádek se Gaiman rád vrací do fikčních světů stvořených Arthurem C. Doylem nebo H.P. Lovecraftem, čímž se vlastně stává součástí vlny obrody zájmu o tyto literární postavy formami různých literárních, filmových a televizních adaptací, parodií a pastišů. Za zmínku stojí také jeho úloha ve vytváření mytologií zbrusu nových, např. jeho spolupráce s DC Comics (pro jejichž subdivizi Vertigo psal osm let komiksový bestseller *The Sandman*) nebo scénáře ke kultovnímu britskému televiznímu seriálu *Doctor Who*.

Jedním z klíčových prvků Gaimanovy tvorby je otevřenost textu jako kompoziční záměr. V tradici žánru fantastické literatury, jak ji definuje Tzvetan Todorov (tj. váhání mezi módy „znepokojivě neznámého“ a „zázračného“ tváří v tvář zdánlivě nadpřirozené události), nechává čtenáře tápat mezi vícero interpretacemi—potvrzujícími nebo vyvracejícími přítomnost nadpřirozených událostí nebo postav. Jenom v takovémto zvažování vzájemně se vylučujících možností se plně vyjevuje Gaimanova poetika, směřující čtenáře k uvědomění, že i vzájemně se vylučující reality mohou být ve sféře literární fikce současně platné a ještě se vzájemně obohacovat. Gaiman tímto způsobem kultivuje jednak vidění světa, kde i ty nejobyčejnější každodenní situace, místa a předměty oplývají auroou zázračného a tajemného, a také schopnost snít s otevřenýma očima a rozeznávat nitky příběhů všude v realitě kolem nás.

Abych lépe pochopil a popsal způsob, jakým Gaimanovi texty působí na čtenáře, rozhodl jsem se aplikovat několik současných kognitivních literárních teorií v praktických experimentech zabývajících se recepcí textu, a to zejména v souvislosti s chápáním narativu a čtenářskými emocemi. Zajímalo mě, jakým způsobem se čtenářova identita odráží v interpretaci textu a jak jeho nebo její emoce ovlivňují čtenářský prožitek—jinými slovy, za jakých podmínek je text esteticky účinný. Z tohoto důvodu byla pro mě klíčová teorie DEFT (defenses, expectations, fantasies, transformations) Normana Hollanda, která popisuje několik klíčových jevů vstupujících do procesu emocionálního zpracování

příběhu. Formou otevřených odpovědí po dočtení povídky respondenti popisovali svoje pocity v souvislosti s různými částmi textu. Byla u nich zjištěna vysoká míra korelace mezi estetickým prožitkem a schopností příběhu přizpůsobit se čtenářově představám a fantaziím (přesněji řečeno: schopnosti čtenáře přizpůsobit aspekty textu svým představám a fantaziím) a také mírou, do které povídka dovedla aktivovat čtenářovy individuální psychologické „obranu,“ postulované Hollandem.

V hledání univerzálních prvků (kognitivních modelů, skriptů, apod., tak jak je definuje kognitivní věda) nebo vzorců v Gaimanově tvorbě se nemůžeme vyhnout reflexi teorií univerzálních narativů, například Campbellovu monomytu. Základním selháním Campbellovy a jiných podobných teorií je přílišné zaměření na povrchové projevy příběhů, místo jejich skrytých strukturálních zásad, které jsou pevně svázány s naší sdílenou biologickou podstatou projevující se mimo jiné formou rozličných emocionálních reakcí. Literárně-kognitivní badatel a spisovatel Keith Oatley charakterizuje emoce jako zpětnou vazbu, která lidem dovoluje orientovat se ve světě kolem sebe a vyhodnocovat dopady svých vlastních rozhodnutí. Tento proces by měl analogicky fungovat taky ve světě fikce— tj. vstupovat do procesu čtení, chápání a vyhodnocování literárního díla.

Další praktická studie obsažena v mojí práci se zabývá ověřováním Oatleyho konceptů čtenářových emocí coby zpětné vazby a směřuje k identifikaci univerzální emoční struktury příběhů. Z průzkumu čtenářské odezvy na další z Gaimanových krátkých próz vyplývá, že klíčovým bodem ve fungování prototypických narativů je střídání emocí—v tradičním „tragickém“ modu to je například posun od štěstí k neštěstí. A je to právě struktura založená na štěstí, kterou Patrick Colm Hogan považuje za společnou pro prototypické narativy „hrdinské tragikomedie,“ tj. jeden ze základních typů příběhů identifikovatelných v komparativním výzkumu děl rozličných světových literárních tradic.

Kromě zhodnocení metod kognitivních teoretiků a jejich aplikovatelnosti na žánr fantastična a literaturu obecně a Gaimanovu tvorbu konkrétně moje práce zahrnuje také zmíněnou praktickou část, kde formou dotazníků s otevřenými otázkami demonstruji fungování některých slibnějších modelů popisujících proces recepce fantastické narativní prózy. Konečně, v práci také zevšeobecňuji závěry z analýzy odpovědí z praktické části a aplikuji nabyté teoretické rámce na delší Gaimanovy prózy.

Jestliže existuje skutečně unifikující princip, který spojuje Gaimanovu tvorbu přes nejrůznější druhy médií, je to schopnost protkávat fantastické a mytologické prvky skrz

intimní vyprávění o živoucích postavách, se kterými není současnému čtenáři zatěžko se ztotožnit—svým způsobem tak autor každodenní zkušenost kouzelným, mění bezvýznamné na zázračné. Čtenář se tak ocitá obklopen „kouřem a zrcadly“ Gaimanovy rafinovanosti, v prostoru, který může prozkoumávat, přijmout, zavrhnout, nebo jinak konfrontovat a při tom se snažit porozumět vnějšímu světu i své vlastní identitě—protože svět i člověk jsou podle Gaimana nejen objektem vyprávění, ale jsou i sami objekty složenými z příběhů.

V tomhle prostoru imaginárna, jak by ho charakterizoval Jacques Lacan, se rozvíjí vztahy mezi egem a jeho zrcadlovými odrazy, nebo, jinými slovy, se zde konfrontuje a přetváří identita člověka. Tento proces, všeobecně přítomný v jakékoli lidské interakci, možná ve fikčním světě fantastické literatury nachází „bezpečnější“ útočiště než v realističtějších vyprávěních. Právě studie tzv. „únikové“ literatury a jejího účinku na publikum může přispět k hlubšímu poznání základních kognitivních procesů vstupujících (nejenom) do aktů tvorby, vnímání a porozumění narativního umění.

Annotation

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<i>Department:</i>	English and American Studies
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Abstract:

With respect to the construction of symbolic and imaginary realities, it can be of particular interest to study such literary worlds that cross the boundaries between the mundane and the weird, or, in Todorov's conception, hesitate between the uncanny and the marvelous. It is difficult to think of a candidate whose works would fit this definition better than the popular contemporary author of fiction for adults and children, the British novelist, comic book creator and screenwriter Neil Gaiman.

If there is a unifying principle that brings together Gaiman's varied works across all manner of media, it is his ability to interweave fantastic and mythological elements with intimate narratives of life-like, relatable characters, whose everyday experience Gaiman infuses with magic and turns the insignificant into the wondrous.

Academic works on Gaiman have so far operated with by-and-large postmodern text-active models, using poststructuralist approaches, the Campbellian mythological approach, or genre studies. Drawing on the perspectives of Keith Oatley, Norman Holland, and Patrick Colm Hogan, I try to open the rich universe of Gaiman's fiction to literary cognitivism.

Following Norman Holland, the choice of my method is rooted in a criticism of theoretical approaches based on semantic externalism, semiotics, and Saussure's structuralism. I argue for a shift towards empirical methods of literary inquiry rooted in sound linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science.

The overarching theoretical framework for the research into the topic are the cognitive theories of Norman Holland, a reader response literary theorist whose core premise establishes a multi-tiered system of feedback loops, wherein the reader applies their hypotheses (ranging from the most basic physiological responses, through cultural codes and canons, ultimately reaching the overarching identity, which both shapes the entire cognitive feedback process and is also shaped by it) to the engaged literary object.

In a practical reader response study, I utilize Norman Holland's neuropsychanalytic model to describe how readers read and enjoy a short story by Neil Gaiman. I argue that a successful literary transaction is contingent on the accommodation of readers' projected content, engagement of their psychological defenses, and making sense of the story's ambiguous fantastic plot.

I also delineate a possible avenue of inquiry into literary universals, which are understood as intrinsically tied to our biological endowment. I apply Patrick Colm Hogan's theory of narrative prototypes based on the basic emotions of happiness and sadness to Neil Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere*.

In a second reader response study included in this thesis, I utilize Keith Oatley's theory of emotions as feedback from readers' evaluations of fictional challenges. I demonstrate how the cognitive universals of happiness and sorrow (and universal narrative structures constituted thereof) are operative in the minds of readers of another one of Gaiman's stories

The aim of this thesis is to describe the interaction of readers' identities with the fictional space of Gaiman's stories (the "smoke and mirrors" of his artifice) and initiate the work towards a formulation of an universal model which could account for the most fundamental differences and similarities found in reader strategies. This model (or models) would, ideally, benefit future research in the field of cognitive literary studies.

Anotace

<i>Autor:</i>	Mgr. Ivan Čipkár
<i>Katedra:</i>	Anglistika a amerikanistika
<i>Název práce:</i>	Víc než pravda: Kognitívni univerzálne v analýze čtenářské odezvy k dílům Neila Gaimana
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Abstrakt:

V súvislosti s konštruovaním symbolických či imaginárnych realít je obzvlášť zaujímavé študovať také literárne svety, ktoré presahujú hranice medzi bežným a podivuhodným, či, slovami Tzvetana Todorova, stoja na rozhraní „tajomna“ a „úžasna“. Ťažko zvoliť kandidáta, ktorého tvorba by lepšie spĺňala túto charakteristiku, ako populárneho súčasného autora kníh pre deti i dospelých, britského románopisca, tvorcu komiksov, poviedok, básní a scenárov, Neila Gaimana.

Ak niečo spojuje dokopy rôznorodú tvorbu tohto autora publikujúceho v celej plejáde médií, tak to musí byť jeho schopnosť popretkávať fantastické a mytologické prvky pomedzi príbehy uveriteľných postáv, s ktorými sa je ľahko stotožniť a ktorých intímnu každodennosť Gaiman naplňa kúzлами a mení tak bezvýznamné na zázračné.

Akademické práce pojednávajúce o Gaimanovi doteraz uplatňovali hlavne post-štrukturalistickú kritiku, mytologický prístup Josepha Campbella, či žánrové štúdie, pospolu využívajúc tzv. „aktívny textový model“. Zaujímajúc perspektívu teoretikov ako Keith Oatley,

Norman Holland, či Patrick Colm Hogan, táto práca usiluje otvoriť bohatý svet Gaimanovej imaginácie literárnemu kognitivismu.

Nasledujúc Hollanda je výber mojej metódy určený kritikou teoretických postupov vychádzajúcich zo sémantického externalizmu, sémiotiky a štrukturalizmu Ferdinanda de Saussure. V svojej práci formulujem potrebu prechodu na empirické metódy literárneho bádania ukotvené v súčasnej lingvistike, psychológii a kognitívnych vedách.

Kľúčovým teoretickým rámcom tejto práce sú práve kognitívne teórie Normana Hollanda, teoretika čitateľskej recepcie, ktorého základnú premisu predstavuje systém spätnej väzby, v ktorom čitateľ aplikuje „hypotézy“ voči literárnemu objektu. Tieto zahŕňajú základné fyziologické interakcie, kultúrne kódy a kritériá, až celkovú zastrešujúcu identitu čitateľa, ktorá formuje čitateľský zážitok a sama je formovaná ním.

Hollandovu neuropsychoanalytickú metódu aplikujem v praktickej štúdii čitateľskej odozvy k poviedke Neila Gaimana. Poukazujem v nej na závislosť úspechu literárnej transakcie od schopnosti akomodácie obsahu projektovaného čitateľom, miery zapojenia jeho psychologických obrán a úspechu pokiaľ ide o porozumenie dvojznačnej fantastickéj zápletky.

Takisto načrtávam možnú cestu pre výskum literárnych univerzálií, ktoré chápem ako neoddeliteľne späté s našou biologickou podstatou. Aplikujem teóriu Hoganových naratívnych prototypov, založených na základných emóciách radosti a smútku, na Gaimanov román *Nikdykde*.

V druhej praktickej štúdii čitateľskej odozvy overujem Oatleyho teóriu emócií ako spätnej väzby k čitateľovým evaluáciám fiktívnych výziev. Popisujem, ako kognitívne univerzálne radosti a smútku pôsobia v mysliach čitateľov ďalšej z Gaimanových poviedok.

Cieľom práce je popísať interakcie čitateľských identít s literárnym priestorom Gaimanových príbehov a iniciovať snaženie o formuláciu univerzálneho modelu (modelov), ktorý by mohol zachytiť fundamentálne odlišnosti aj podobnosti v čitateľských prístupoch. Z tohto modelu (modelov) by neskôr mohli benefitovať budúce bádateľské pokusy v oblasti kognitívnej literárnej vedy.