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Liminal Aspects of the Hero's Journey in the Major Works of Neil Gaiman

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Introduction

Neil Gaiman is known as a hugely popular bestselling English writer. Some readers know him as the author who turned a relatively unpopular graphic novel into *The Sandman* (1988–1996), which everybody knows as a bestseller and worldwide streaming Netflix series. Others first discovered Gaiman's works on the stage of London's National Theatre or while reading his collaborative works, such as *Good Omens* (1990), written in co-authorship with Terry Pratchett. Gaiman's works are diverse in many respects and cover several genres, from fantasy to children's literature. However, the most prominent works are predominantly defined as the Weird. Gaiman himself has confirmed this in many interviews, including, for instance, his conversation with Weird Fiction Review in 2011, in which he speaks of the influence H.P. Lovecraft had on his early works.

The Weird Literature genre is a complex and at times ambiguous phenomenon as it incorporates various elements. The very definition of the Weird provided by H.P. Lovecraft in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927) allows for many possible interpretations, but with one unalterable quality: "The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers" (Lovecraft 2012, 28). The sense of encountering unknown places and realms can be explored through the lens of liminality – a space of transition, uncertainty, and the breakdown of conventional boundaries. This in-betweenness manifests itself both thematically and structurally: characters often find themselves trapped between realities, exploring realms in which natural laws dissolve, or confronting entities that exist beyond human comprehension. The setting may embody this instability as well, whether through dreamlike landscapes, shifting geographies, or environments where time and space collapse and it becomes difficult to interpret the events, actions and even words or thoughts of the hero.

The ambiguity of the Weird manifests itself at many levels – linguistic, thematical, and even structural. Following the steps William Empson proposes in the introduction to his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1961), it becomes clear that the reader can easily

get lost between meanings and possible interpretations. From a linguistic perspective, the issue can be resolved by identifying how a single detail can simultaneously be effective in multiple ways or create a synergy between two seemingly unrelated meanings (Empson 1961). In the context of the Weird, linguistic ambiguity often remains unsolved, as words and phrases carry a multiplicity of meanings that refuse to settle into a single, stable interpretation. The Weird frequently employs paradox and contradiction, forcing the reader to confront language as something fluid and unreliable, so that language itself becomes a site of tension.

From a thematic standpoint, however, ambiguity in the Weird becomes more elusive, as it is not merely a byproduct of language but an integral feature of the narrative itself. For a better comprehension of an unconventional narration, it is necessary to define the purpose of such an authorial choice. This in-betweenness extends beyond setting and atmosphere – it also shifts the very structure of the narrative, extending the comprehension challenge beyond linguistic ambiguity and blurring the lines between reality and illusion, making it difficult to preserve a clear perception of space and time. Contemporary authors such as, for instance, Neil Gaiman, create a space for their characters to get lost and wander without any obvious direction or even cause. Such moves provoke not only ambiguity but make the reader wonder about the nature of the character's journey. Due to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of readers, characters and events can be interpreted in multiple ways. This can affect the reader's perception of the very nature of the character's journey, and whether the understanding will be reached depends on both the writer's craft and the reader's skill.

This paper explores the ambiguity and the eerie tension inherent in the in-betweenness, the space between worlds and meanings in the selected works of Neil Gaiman, through the lens of structuralist analysis. By examining the hero's journey as a fundamental structural element, the study focuses on the liminal aspects that disrupt conventional narrative trajectories. Rather than adhering to clear, linear progressions, these liminal spaces introduce fractured realities, unresolved tensions, and disruptions in the expected flow of storytelling. Such narrative shifts challenge traditional understandings of plot coherence and reader expectations, as well as broadening the scope of storytelling by highlighting the transformative power of ambiguity.

Additionally, the work suggests that embracing these structural ambiguities can foster a more open and fluid literary framework, allowing for fresh interpretations and engagement with previously underexplored themes. By challenging conventional narrative closure, the Weird creates new pathways for comprehension, encouraging a shift in the reader's interpretative approach. In doing so, the text emerges as an intermediary space, bridging the reader's perception with the other space – an unsettling, unfamiliar

realm that resists easy categorization. This approach may contribute to the overall quality of comprehension, inviting a shift in interpretation and understanding of the role of text as an intermediary between the reader and the other space.

The role of liminality in the monomyth structure

When it comes to a character's journey, to achieve a comprehensive understanding it is essential to seek assistance in structural analysis. Knowledge and understanding of the structure and its meaning is a useful framework given by the structuralist approach, and in the context of fantasy and Weird literature can be encapsulated in the famous "there and back again". The cycle is also known as the hero's journey or monomyth, described in detail by Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949/2008), where Campbell divides the adventure of the hero into the stages, carefully examining each of them and their significance for the understanding of the narrative. The heroes of the selected novels happened to all be men, whose experience with the world is drastically different compared to women's experience, simply because for thousands of years women did not have such basic personality-shaping liberties as autonomy, sovereignty, parity, or equality. Nevertheless, the common ground of liminal spaces can be beneficial for both the hero and the heroine, and are of interest for the latter, though the notion of the heroine's journey is still under discussion in academic discourse. Even when such ideas were presented by researchers, such as Maureen Murdock, the authoritative scholars, Joseph Campbell in particular, omitted the idea as fallacious. Campbell reminded his student that a woman does not have a journey, and in all the possible aspects is a goal of the hero's journey, a subject to it as she is a subject to a husband or to a culture, but certainly not a sovereign human being who can undertake a journey of her own. Murdock quotes Campbell's interview from 1981 in her The *Heroine's Journey* (1990):

> In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she's not going to get messed up with the notion of being pseudo-male.
>
> (Murdock 1990, 2)

This one-sided view, however, can be challenged first of all by referring to certain shared aspects that can be revealed while exploring liminality in the hero's journey. Campbell describes myth as a secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation (Campbell 1949/2008, 1) and the

hero as a man of self-achieved submission. Paraphrasing this, the hero is the one on the mission to explore the world so as to continue living and avoid oblivion by answering the call, crossing the threshold into the unknown, and surviving the space between two worlds, so he can reach the point which Campbell calls "recurrence of rebirth" (Campbell 1949/2008, 12) and return to the world he left, carrying gifts of knowledge and other assets. Campbell also emphasizes that the adventure starts after the threshold is crossed and the hero enters the space of in-betweenness. This liminal space is where the most crucial moments of the journey unfold, as the hero is tested and reshaped by the unfamiliar forces at play. Expanding on this idea, Tzvetan Todorov in his *The Fantastic, a Structural Approach to the Literary Genre* (1970) underlines the role of threshold in myth-cycle structure and as it signifies movement to the world where laws are totally different from what they were in the world previously known. The importance of the threshold had been previously given special attention by Campbell, who calls it "the entrance to the zone of magnified power" (Campbell 1949/2008, 71). This "zone of magnified power" is also known as liminal space, where the most important moments of the journey become possible due to the nature of that space in between two stages of the adventure. In this way, each threshold is pivotal for the myth-cycle structure, based on the premise that the progress of the narrative is built on the hero's attitude to the passage, whether they do or do not intend to cross it and set out on the adventure.

Consequently, the structure of the journey comprises three stages: crossing the threshold for a journey, crossing the threshold back, and dwelling in the space between the two. According to Campbell, this short formula can be applied to both micro- and macrocosm. For instance, he represents the cosmogonic cycle as a circulation of consciousness through the three planes of being:

> The first plane is that of waking experience: cognitive of the hard, gross facts of an outer universe, illuminated by the light of the sun, and common to all. The second plane is that of dream experience: cognitive of the fluid, subtle forms of a private interior world, self-luminous and of one substance with the dreamer. The third plane is that of deep sleep: dreamless, profoundly blissful. In the first are encountered the instructive experiences of life; in the second these are digested, assimilated to the inner forces of the dreamer; while in the third all is enjoyed and known unconsciously, in "the space within the heart," the room of the inner controller, the source and end of all.
>
> (Campbell 1949/2008, 227)

A journey of such kind may resemble what Kathleen E. Dubs in her *Harry Bailly: Chaucer's Critic* (2011) defines as "pilgrimage": the concept of pilgrimage – for the Middle Ages – was a journey to a holy shrine, but at the same time represented the journey of the soul to God. Like life itself, the pilgrimage was a one-way journey, not a return trip (Dubs 2011, 37). The hero sets out on a journey with no prior knowledge or guarantee of return, unfamiliar with the place they are going to enter, a place that serves more as a passage than a destination. Spending extended time in these spaces can feel unsettling because they are designed for transition, not permanence.

In scientific discourse, this theme is commonly referred to as the concept of liminality and liminal space, thirdspace, or heterotopia. The most comprehensive exploration of liminality was offered by Victor Turner in *Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology* (1974), where he defines liminality as a space of transformation and transition (Turner 1982, 24). Turner's ideas echo those of Arnold van Gennep, who, in *The Rites of Passage* (1960), discusses liminality within the framework of rites of passage, describing it as an intermediate space between two states, where a decision must be made (van Gennep 1960, 28). Consequently, those who cross the threshold enter a liminal space of uncertainty, where established concepts can shift, ultimately influencing and reshaping the traveller's perception.

Turner further develops this concept in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969) by introducing *communitas*, a sense of deep social connection and equality that emerges among individuals undergoing liminal experiences together (Turner 1969, 96). Within this framework, liminality is often temporary, a transitional phase that leads to reintegration into a structured reality, albeit in a transformed state. However, in Gaiman's works, liminality frequently becomes a permanent condition rather than a fleeting stage in a rite of passage. Many of his protagonists do not fully reintegrate into their original worlds or establish a new, stable identity within a structured community. Instead, they remain liminal *personae* ("threshold people") wanderers in the liminal realm (Turner 1969, 95), existing between worlds rather than fully belonging to any one of them. For instance, in the novel *Neverwhere*, Richard Mayhew crosses the threshold into the world of London Below, where he undergoes trials that should culminate in his transformation and reintegration into his former life. However, when he attempts to return to London Above, he finds himself unable to fully reconnect with his past existence. Instead of reintegrating into the mundane world, he chooses to embrace permanent liminality, re-entering the space of London Below.

Apart from liminal spaces, there are two more concepts dealing with space and time that are of interest for this article: the concept of thirdspace, introduced by Edward W. Soja, and the concept of heterotopia, introduced by Michel Foucault. Edward W.

Soja in his *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996) defines thirdspace as a space that transcends the physical (firstspace) and the mental or perceived (secondspace), integrating both to form a simultaneously real and imagined, physical and metaphysical space. This concept aligns closely with the narrative structures in Gaiman's works, where characters frequently navigate liminal spaces that blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. For instance, in the graphic novel *The Sandman*, Dream's realm, The Dreaming, operates as a thirdspace – both a literal place and a manifestation of collective unconsciousness, shaping and being shaped by the dreams of mortals. Similarly, in *Neverwhere*, London Below exists as a thirdspace where forgotten and discarded aspects of London's history and mythology merge into a surreal, lived reality.

The term heterotopia was introduced by Michel Foucault and developed in his text *Of Other Spaces* (1984), a rather brief summary of a lecture he originally delivered to a group of architectural students in 1967:

> Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror.
>
> (Foucault 1984)

In this lecture, Foucault challenges conventional ways of thinking about universal constructs such as time and space by exploring the opportunities heterotopia can offer: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent" (Foucault 1984). According to Peter Johnson's arguments in *The Geographies of Heterotopia* (2013), liminal spaces are linked to the "notion of 'alternative ordering' in suggesting that these spaces allow 'the other' to flourish" (Johnson 2013, 794), enabling life to be experienced differently by establishing a complex relationship between time and space. These spaces manifest in real, tangible locations within society but remain distinct due to their layered meanings and functions. Examples include hallways, waiting rooms, stairwells, and rest stops – ordinary places that nonetheless evoke a sense of separation from everyday life. Johnson defines liminal spaces as sites embedded within different aspects and stages of human life, which "somehow mirror

and at the same time distort, unsettle, or invert other spaces" (Johnson 2013, 790–91) and "dissolves binary oppositions, uniting dualities whilst simultaneously cherishing unlikeness" (Johnson 2013, 800). This aligns with Michel Foucault's original concept presented in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1984), where he argues that heterotopias reach their full potential when individuals experience a significant break from their traditional perception of time, marking a break from the familiar and structured rhythms of existence (Foucault 1984). Both theorists emphasize how these spaces, through their fluid and transformative nature, allow for the flourishing of "the other" by disrupting traditional perceptions of time and space. Johnson's view that liminal spaces function as sites of alternative ordering aligns seamlessly with Foucault's notion of heterotopias, highlighting how these spaces offer opportunities for reflection, redefinition, and even escape from the previously learned rhythms of life. Together, their ideas reveal the power of liminality to alter perceptions, provoke introspection, and foster new forms of understanding in a world defined by the interplay of time, space, and even identity.

Expanding on the latter, it is important to mention that the alteration of time and space is not the sole characteristic of liminality. As Peter Messent discusses in his article "American Gothic: Liminality and the Gothic in Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter Novels" (2004), the concept of the threshold – the space between two spaces – captures liminality's association with provisionality, instability, and intermediate forms; it exists between the known and the unknown or the other (Messent 2004).

The difference between the three notions may seem vague at first glance, but there are specific aspects to be emphasized. Liminality and liminal spaces focus on transitional states and thresholds, emphasizing moments of transformation and uncertainty within a structured process. Liminality, as theorized by Victor Turner, is an in-between phase in rites of passage, where individuals exist outside of their previous identity but have not yet assumed a new one. Liminal spaces, such as doorways, crossroads, or dreamscapes, serve as physical or metaphorical zones where these transitions occur. In contrast, thirdspace (Edward Soja) and heterotopia (Michel Foucault) describe spaces that are not simply transitional but function as layered, hybrid realities. Thirdspace merges real and imagined dimensions, creating spaces where multiple meanings coexist, as seen in mythological realms or fantastical cities. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are spaces of otherness – cemeteries, museums, or prisons – that exist within the real world but operate by their own distinct rules, challenging conventional spatial and societal structures. While liminality is a phase and liminal spaces are temporary, thirdspace and heterotopia endure as complex, alternative realities that resist fixed interpretation.

Liminal Thresholds in Weird Fiction: From Lovecraft to Gaiman

Applying the notion of liminality to the Weird, it is important to define the genre, as the term "Weird literature" can be applied to a broad range of works. H. P. Lovecraft has simplified this task by providing the aforementioned definition in his "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (1927). The definition served H.P. Lovecraft himself and his readers as a guiding principle in presenting, understanding, and interpreting Weird fiction. In a series of novels known under the name *The Dream Cycle* (1918–1932), Lovecraft even exceeded mere contact, letting the hero decide if he wants to cross the threshold of a journey or not. The first attempt us unsuccessful, as using Rudolf Steiner's terminology proposed in his work *Through the Gates of Knowledge* (1912), Lovecraft's hero is stopped by the Guardian of the Threshold and for some time no further steps are taken. However, shortly after Randolph Carter sets out on the journey and after a while returns, keeping his mind clear and enriched by the adventure. Unexpectedly, *The Dream Cycle* takes an unpredictable turn at the very end; the last threshold, that of "unknown spheres and powers" (The H.P. Lovecraft Archive 2009), is reached and crossed with no possibility of return. The story is told in "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" (1932–1933), written by H. P. Lovecraft together with E. Hoffmann Price. At least then, "a gate had been unlocked – not indeed the Ultimate Gate, but one leading from earth and time to that extension of earth which is outside time" (The H.P. Lovecraft Archive 2009). Unfortunately, there is no information on the hero's further life and adventures.

Providing a more contemporary perspective on Weird fiction, Gaiman explores the fluidity of time and space through his multilevel narratives and complex characters. His works, such as *Neverwhere* (1996/2021), exemplify the essence of his approach to the Weird, in which the boundaries of reality are bent and broken, and the journey of the hero is triggered by encounters with the unknown. In the novel *Neverwhere*, the hero's adventure "starts with doors" (Gaiman 1996/2021, 3) – not just a literal passage but a symbolic threshold that leads the protagonist into a world previously unknown. This theme of entering new realms appears in Gaiman's earlier graphic novel *Sandman* (1988–1996), as well as in his collaboration with Terry Pratchett in *Good Omens* (1990), and finally in his later novel *American Gods* (2001). Despite the varied settings of these works, they share a common trope: the hero is introduced to a pivotal threshold, either through a transformative event or a guide, setting them on their journey. While Gaiman's writing is deeply rooted in mythical motifs, his exploration of altered dimensions of space and time offers a fresh take on the genre of Weird fiction.

Gaiman's works stand at the crossroads of mythology, fantasy, and the uncanny, weaving narratives that challenge conventional storytelling structures. Gaiman embraces ambiguity and nonlinear storytelling, often structuring his stories in a way that re-

sists linear progression, reflecting the fluid and unstable nature of liminal spaces. In the graphic novel *The Sandman*, for example, the narrative spans vast stretches of time and space, interweaving myth, history, and personal transformation without adhering to a single, cohesive storyline. Rather than a traditional arc, the series operates as a tapestry of interconnected tales, reinforcing the idea that stories themselves are ever-evolving and never truly complete. Gaiman does not simply retell myths – he actively reshapes them, merging folklore, literature, and modern sensibilities to create something new. The novel *American Gods* dismantles traditional mythic structures by presenting gods as entities that survive only through human belief, forcing them to adapt or fade away. This fluidity challenges the idea that myths are fixed narratives, instead portraying them as dynamic and responsive to cultural shifts. The stories often leave readers in a state of uncertainty. His protagonists may not achieve closure, and their journeys frequently end in open-ended ambiguity. In the novel *Neverwhere*, Richard Mayhew chooses a path that does not lead to a clear resolution – he neither fully returns to his old life nor settles permanently in his new world. This subversion of finality challenges the expectation that stories must provide a definitive ending, instead embracing the idea that transformation is ongoing and unresolved. As a result, Gaiman's exploration of liminality – spaces between the known and the unknown – reshapes the traditional hero's journey, offering a more fluid and dynamic approach to Weird fiction. By embracing continuous transition rather than rigid progression, Gaiman creates stories that defy strict categorization, making his works both unsettling and deeply immersive. Compared to Lovecraft, whose characters often approach the threshold of the unknown only to retreat or vanish from the narrative after crossing it, Gaiman's protagonists remain active and aware beyond the boundary. Rather than being passive observers or losing themselves to the mercy of the unknown, they navigate and interact with the unfamiliar realms where human presence is neither expected nor welcomed. In Gaiman's stories, the crossing of the threshold is not the climax but the true beginning of the adventure – his characters engage with the strange, shape their own fates, and influence the worlds beyond. At the same time, Gaiman implements the concept of liminality to go beyond the traditional mythical structure of the hero's journey and push the existing boundaries of Weird fiction. The distinctive feature of the selected works can be defined as the continuous journey, in which liminality creates the environment where a more open structure is possible. Four major works have been chosen for this article, the graphic novel *Sandman* (1988–1996), the novel *Good Omens* (1990), written in collaboration with Terry Pratchett, and the novels *Neverwhere* (1996/2021) and *American Gods* (2001).

Sandman, or Dream of the Endless, as Neil Gaiman describes him in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, is not merely a protagonist but rather a host and a guide

for others, facilitating their journeys through his realm (Gaiman and Sturridge 2022). He is both an entity and a space – his existence is inextricably linked to the Dreaming, a realm that he is said to have created and over which he holds dominion. This space is not static, it embodies the collective unconscious and is in a constant state of flux, shaped by the dreams, fears, and desires of all who enter. Because of this, Sandman himself can be interpreted as an archetype of liminality – simultaneously a gatekeeper, a threshold, and the very liminal space through which others pass. It is he who grants access to the realm of dreams while also personifying its fluid and ever-changing nature.

Géza Róheim in his *The Eternal Ones of the Dream* (1945), calls dream a personalized myth and myth a depersonalized dream (quoted in Campbell 1949/2008, 18). He further suggests that mythology and dreams are deeply interconnected, with mythological symbols emerging as spontaneous productions of the psyche. This aligns with Gaiman's portrayal of Dream as a force beyond individual consciousness – both an autonomous being and a manifestation of the collective human experience. According to the interview given by Tom Sturridge to Popverse in 2023, Gaiman himself calls Dream "a voice in your head" (Sturridge 2023) emphasizing his intangible yet omnipresent role in shaping stories, myths, and inner realities.

Beyond Sandman, the graphic novel introduces the Endless, a family of timeless beings who embody fundamental aspects of existence: Dream, Death, Destiny, Destruction, Desire, Despair, Delirium (formerly Delight), and two mysterious others. Neither gods nor mortals, they are eternal forces shaped by and shaping human consciousness. Though immensely powerful, they are not static – their identities evolve with humanity, reflecting their liminal nature. Rather than merely ruling over their domains, their existence is inextricably linked to those who experience them.

The opposing force to the Endless in *The Sandman* is Lucifer, the fallen angel who abdicated his angelic nature for the throne of Hell. Lucifer's defiance of the predetermined role imposed upon him adds another layer to the theme of transformation, choice, and liminality. By rejecting his initial position and becoming the ruler of Hell, he challenges the notion of an immutable identity, reinforcing the idea that even the most powerful entities are not bound by a singular path. This dynamic interplay between change, identity, and perception draws an intriguing parallel to Géza Róheim's concept of dreams as personalized myths and myths as depersonalized dreams. The Endless, much like Róheim's mythological constructs, exist in a space that is neither fully tangible nor entirely abstract – their own realms where transformation occurs as a result of their interactions with human consciousness. This mutual influence suggests that the properties of liminality allow for a two-way exchange: while the Endless shape the experiences of mortals, they too are shaped by the evolution of human thought, culture,

and belief. It is within this ever-shifting, fluid space that the true essence of the Endless emerges – not as fixed entities, but as evolving manifestations of the human experience itself. This phenomenon aligns with John Mapham's argument in *The Structuralist Sciences and Philosophy* (1973), in which he discusses the necessity of re-evaluating both the relationships between entities and the very nature of the entities themselves:

> Not only may relations between entities need to be re-evaluated in the light of theory but it can also happen that the entities themselves need to be identified differently. The interest of this lies in the fact that there is often something so compelling about the way in which our experience of the world is organized that this can actually constitute an important epistemological obstacle to the development of theories or to their acceptance. Distinctions or identities may be so deeply embedded in our discourse and thought about the world, whether this be because of their role in our practical lives, or because they are cognitively powerful and are an important aspect of the way in which we appear to make sense of our experience, that the theoretical challenge to them can be quite startling.
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> (Mapham 1973, 115)

Therefore, the kingdom of Sandman, the Dreaming, which is also Sandman himself, can be considered an intermediary space between the Endless Family and humanity, allowing for communication between the two. As this communication takes place within the dream, or personalized myth as it was suggested earlier, this intermediary space can become a source for new myths to appear. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Structural Anthropology* (1963), puts together the most prominent ideas on the nature of myth, including interpreting myths as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of aesthetic play, or as the basis of ritual, while mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinized heroes, or fallen gods (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 207). This connection between the two realms provides an opportunity to observe the change of the Endless Family that was initiated by humanity. For instance, Delight becomes Delirium, and Despair and Dream are killed in a struggle for humanity's attention. Dream, however, is reborn, which may signify his indispensable nature as an intermediary and in-between space, that has a double structure and, while being a part of present events, remains Endless (timeless), shaping this way the third structure, or the thirdspace.

The novel *Good Omens* (1990) resembles the Bible as "it begins where time begins, with the creation of the world; it ends where time ends, with the Apocalypse" (Frye 1990, xiii). In other words, the novel expands on the well-known narrative of the Bible or, in the words of Terry Eagleton in his *Literary Theory* (1983), passes from

myth to irony and then reverts to myth. Such resemblance makes it possible to trace the hero's quest within the traditional, predetermined myth-cycle structure and identify when it goes outside of it.

One particularly striking departure from the conventional mythic structure lies in the novel's handling of its protagonists. In the early drafts, the two central figures – Aziraphale, the angel, and Crowley, the demon – were created as a single character. However, in the final version, they were split into two distinct entities, a decision that fundamentally reshaped the story's exploration of free will and predestination. By existing as separate beings, Aziraphale and Crowley are able to embody opposing yet complementary perspectives on good and evil, revealing the intricate and often blurred boundaries between divine order and human agency. Moreover, their dual existence allows us to go backstage[1] and have a look at the cosmic machinery that governs the world, exposing the interactions between the realm of archetypal forces and the realm of human action. This interplay highlights how these two dimensions are not only interconnected but also constantly influencing one another.

What makes *Good Omens* particularly radical is that it does not conclude in the way one might expect from a myth-based narrative. Instead of a neatly resolved, predestined ending – where prophecy is fulfilled and history follows a predetermined course – the novel crosses the threshold of predetermination. The expected conclusion, where the world meets its end, is no longer there. By rejecting the finality of the apocalypse, the narrative resists closure, instead embracing an open-ended structure that denies the reader the certainty of an ultimate resolution. This effectively transforms the story into an ongoing one – one that expands beyond the novel itself.

In this way, *Good Omens* becomes both synchronic and diachronic. Synchronic in that it exists as a self-contained narrative drawing from established mythic structures, and diachronic in that it extends beyond its own limits, continuing to unfold in the mind of the reader. The novel's refusal to provide a definitive ending invites the audience to carry its themes and unresolved tensions into their own lives. The boundaries between fiction and reality blur as the reader, having engaged with the world of *Good Omens*, returns to their own, now subtly altered by the journey. The narrative does not simply end, but rather lingers, suggesting that stories – like myths, dreams, and reality itself – are never truly concluded, only perpetually reimagined. This way, the reader is brought back to a life where they now exist within two realms, their life and the realm of the novel, which then continues into the reader's reality, blending the borders between the two.

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[1]   Backstage, a term proposed by Neil Gaiman in his book *American Gods* to refer to the realm of archetypes.

The journey unfolds in a similar way in the novel *Neverwhere* (1996/2021), which initially represents the hero's journey as it is usually seen – departure, initiation and return – within the previously unknown realm. After this threshold is crossed, the hero finds himself in the so-called "London Below", which possesses certain traits of the well-known world, or "London Above". From this moment, he belongs to neither of the two Londons, but travels the space in between. In other words, the hero is confronting liminal space, where nothing can be predetermined and the space is reacting to the hero's actions in an unpredictable or seemingly chaotic way. The new space interacts with the hero, reacting to his choices as if it had a consciousness of its own.

> And then they set foot on Night's Bridge, and Richard began to understand darkness: darkness as something solid and real, so much more than a simple absence of light. He felt it touch his skin, questing, moving, exploring: gliding through his mind. It slipped into his lungs, behind his eyes, into his mouth …
>
> (Gaiman 1996/2021, 102)

Whenever it is not possible to omit personification, there appear a number of characters impersonating the space and also interacting with the hero, leading him to the final goal of his quest. As soon as the thirdspace is not defined by anything and can become anything, it serves the creative purposes of the writer, which in Gaiman's case is to create a volatile space filled with nothing but what the character brings with them. This idea resembles a labyrinth, or at least one of its interpretations, a space where nothing hunts the traveller but the demons they had brought with them. It is a place where the hero meets with the part of their own self which used to be hidden and, surprisingly enough, it did not exist in a vacuum. The thirdspace allows the hero to embrace their personality in its wholeness and let it interact with the space in all its manifestations, whether that is a character or a circumstance. In comparison to the familiar stories, in the thirdspace we do not simply observe the adventure while waiting for the hero to return to "normal", we are put in circumstances where no return is actually guaranteed. Gaiman innovates within the Weird tradition by extending beyond traditional cosmic horror or dreamlike ambiguity to create a space where reality itself is actively rewritten by the characters who traverse it. Rather than simply exposing protagonists to the unknown, as in Lovecraftian horror, Gaiman's Weird landscapes are almost interactive and participation-requiring – they do not merely challenge the hero but respond to them, shaping and reshaping according to their actions, fears, and self-discovery.

One more journey of a weird nature is taken by Shadow Moon in the novel *American Gods* (2001). In the novel, the space of ordinary and the space of sacred, where

gods can usually be encountered, are put together as if there is no difference between daily life and the sacred space. As those spaces are normally separated from each other, the novel can be considered the thirdspace. While one may note the resemblance to the double structure of *The Sandman*, the journey of Shadow Moon goes even further and introduces the thirdspace as a setting for the whole narration, allowing for occurrences impossible in other circumstances and making the novel myth-like, eventually suggesting a paradigm shift, just like *Good Omens*. The narrative as the thirdspace is also said to stretch the known reality and reveal its white spots: "For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a representation of the thing, and not the thing itself" (Gaiman 2001, 100). The journey of the protagonist, who is known to be "not dead <…> not alive either" (Gaiman 2001, 472), refers to rituals of becoming, in which a person is neither one nor the other and this way is moving through the liminal hallway, where the transition between mind and matter has been demolished (Todorov 1970, 113). The hero is communicating with the archetypal impersonations as if they were a part of his ordinary world. The space allows a new interpretation of the known archetypes, not least because they are no longer static but acting on their own and interacting with the hero, who himself is acting without knowing but with a certain sense of direction, the nature of which represents interest in terms of the hero's journey myth interpretation.

Conclusion

Examining the underlying mechanisms of personal transformation – both psychological and mythological – it becomes evident that the ability to embark on a journey is not inherently gendered. It is possible to say that when it comes to higher mental functions, certain aspects are shared. For instance, consciousness as a state of awareness of self and the environment produces cognition and declarative memory as one of its forms. Cognition also allows for an executive or higher-order cognition, with abstract thinking and construction abilities as its manifestations, such as, for instance, imagination. These functions shape the ability to perform a journey in the space where no other body can serve for further motion.

Rudolf Steiner, in *The Gates of Knowledge* (1912), names four types of knowledge: material, imaginative, inspirational or "knowledge of the nature of Will", and intuitive knowledge. Imagination deals with ego, in which, according to Steiner, the union of images and ideas is accomplished (Steiner 1912, 6). Together they generate what is called individual memories and "It is obvious that the life of the soul would be impossible if we could retain the image of a thing only so long as the thing itself stood before us" (Steiner 1912, 7). Assuming the liminal space is a space where collective

unconsciousness is stored and where individual unconsciousness can at times find it-self, an individual unconsciousness needs individual memories that are carried by an individual consciousness to individualize itself and later personalize into an individual soul or, in the context of narration, the hero.

The thirdspace, or liminal space, of the selected Gaiman novels allows the hero to travel beyond generally acknowledged space and time, where they are confronted by the necessity of adjusting their reality to the common one, to the space where the archetypes of personal and collective myths are impersonated by the characters who interact with the hero, helping him to apply his personal experience to the collective, producing new ways for the character themselves and, consequently, for humanity. Therefore, the aforementioned "certain sense of direction" is an application of the personal to the collective experience, or in relation to the liminal space, an application of an individual case of consciousness aligning unconsciousness while the hero still retains an ability to create individual memories and, therefore, take the result back to their ordinary life.

In the selected novels, Neil Gaiman makes these usually invisible phenomena manifest, and lets the reader trace their actions. For instance, the transformation and subsequent rebirth are lived through by the hero as if they were happening with his physical body and not his soul as it was experienced by Shadow Moon when he was hanged on the tree above his father's body:

> His feet were five feet above the ground. The tree was leafless and huge, its branches black against the grey sky: its bark a smooth silvery grey.
> They took the ladders away. There was a moment of panic as all his weight was taken by the ropes, and he dropped a few inches. Still, he made no sound.
> The women moved Wednesday's body, wrapped in its morel-sheet shroud, to the foot of the tree, and they left him there.
> They left him there alone.
>
> (Gaiman 2001, 488)

Later in the text, his dead wife, who should be able to recognise death, offers to cut him down, arguing that he is dying: "You're dying up there. Or you'll be crippled, if you aren't already" (Gaiman 2001, 499). This scene and the following resurrection of the hero show particular resemblance to the realm of dream, as dreamers usually believe that they partake in the events that affect them physically and interfere with their lives. In other words, they do not differentiate between what exists as a thing and what exists as an image, travelling in the realm of dream, they lose the inner sense allowing for

recognition of an image as such (Sartre 1972, 3). In the novel *American Gods*, such a transition goes unnoticed and again creates the thirdspace.

> There was nothing to see. The place was deserted. It was an empty battlefield.
> No. Not deserted. Not exactly.
> <…>
> And the Shadow knew where the battle must be taking place.
> <…>
> It was like pushing through a membrane, like plunging up from deep water into air. With one step he had moved from the tourist path on the mountain to …
> To something real. He was Backstage.
>
> (Gaiman 2001, 571–72)

The events of the gods' gathering scene take place in a space which one can reach by consciously restoring one's memory of it, and imagination allows for commuting between two realms. Imagination is a space where things exist as a mental image (Sartre 1972, 3), put together with individual experiences, or memories, and applied consciously. Imagination allows for a unique journey beyond the scope of shared human experience. However, visualisation is not enough for a passage between the realms, as perception only occurs when a sensory apparatus comes across the properties of a visualised object, which reminds us again that an image is not a thing (Sartre 1972, 5). Therefore, the space Shadow Moon calls "Backstage" is something other than the physical realm and the realm of imagination, as the hero also names it "something real". The thirdspace appears as a liminal hall connecting individual and collective experiences, or memories, in a similar way to how an image was presented by Spinoza: as a thought of a man, who is a finite mode, and as an idea, a fragment of the infinite world which is the totality of ideas. Another analogy can be found in the effort of Leibniz to establish the connection between knowledge, image and thought (Sartre 1972, 9–10) or in reference to the sublime in terms it was described by Cassius Longinus in *On the Sublime*.

In the examined works of Neil Gaiman, the liminal space – the thirdspace – emerges as a crucial structural element and conceptual framework, allowing the hero to cross the boundaries between personal experience and collective unconsciousness. That can result in the discovery of new properties, which can only be revealed if personal experience is applied to collective experience and individual unconsciousness to collective unconsciousness. Additionally, it may be possible to identify a new archetype or discover new traits of the old ones as well as the effect they have on humanity and

separated individuals. The novels demonstrate that mythic structures are not static but rather fluid, capable of transformation through individual journeys that integrate memory, imagination, and cognition. By engaging with archetypal forces, Gaiman's protagonists redefine their existence and the nature of storytelling itself. Their journeys challenge traditional mythological conventions, moving beyond linear progressions to cyclical and open-ended narratives that continue beyond the narrative, extending into the reader's reality. By making the invisible processes of transformation visible, Gaiman's Weird fiction underscores the power of storytelling and the text as its instrument and as a liminal hallway – one that bridges the personal and the universal, the temporal and the timeless, ultimately reshaping the reader's understanding of self and narrative. Gaiman reshapes Weird fiction by shifting its focus from existential horror and terrifying otherness to an interactive, mythopoeic experience where the unknown is not just encountered but negotiated and transformed. Traditional Weird fiction, particularly in the Lovecraftian vein, presents characters as powerless in the face of vast, indifferent cosmic forces. Gaiman, however, reinvents the Weird by making it deeply personal and mutable – his protagonists do not merely witness the strange, they engage with it, shape it, and in many cases, find a way to exist within it.

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