Fantasy's Traumatic Take on the Bildungsroman:

Reading Neil Gaiman

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"Critics disagree over whether genres should be defined systematically or descriptively, as logical possibilities or historical facts. Both approaches pose the danger of tempting one to believe too strongly in one's own categories, and so genre criticism is rife with boundary disputes and definition wars. Still, by grouping similar texts together to see how they resemble one another and how far they may diverge without calling for a new category, we can begin to identify the pattern of expectations that allowed them to be written, that their authors drew upon and strained against to produce something unique and yet comprehensible." (Attebery, Strategies 11)

:: PART ONE :: INTRODUCTION & THEORY ::

Chapter 1: Introduction

> "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*"
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> (Campbell, *Hero* 30, emphasis in original)

In 1949, Joseph Campbell published *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* and introduced the influential idea of the monomyth. Arguing that "whether presented in the vast, almost oceanic images of the Orient, in the vigorous narratives of the Greeks, or in the majestic legends of the Bible, the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit above described" (35).[1] Positing that across all sorts of different mythologies, tales follow the structure Arnold van Gennep sees at the heart of rites of passage, Campbell attributes narratives with a decisive function:

> It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and 'unreal': they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs. (Campbell, *Hero* 29)

The monomyth can consequentially be understood as a metaphorical representation of humanity's fears and desires, their negotiation, and as an exploration of the collective subconscious.

Observing mythology's tendency toward happy endings after periods of trials and tribulations, Campbell draws on Aristotle's concept of catharsis, "the 'purification' or 'purgation' of the emotions of the spectator of tragedy through his experience of pity and terror" (26). Campbell links the monomyth to both tragedy and comedy, insinuating that an experience of the former is necessary for an appreciation of the latter:

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[1] Campbell observes that "there will be found astonishingly little variation in the morphology of the adventure, the character roles involved, the victories gained. If one or another of the basic elements of the archetypal pattern is omitted from a given fairy tale, legend, ritual, or myth, it is bound to be somehow or other implied – and the omission itself can speak volumes for the history and pathology of the example" (*Hero* 38). In the case of Gaiman's work, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* features one such significant omission in that it refutes the successful heroic return; for an extensive reading, see chapter 10.

> Tragedy is the shattering of the forms and our attachment to the forms; comedy, the wold and careless, inexhaustible joy of life invincible. Thus the two are the terms of a single mythological theme and experience which includes them both and which they bound: the down-going and the up-coming (*kathados* and *anodos*), which together constitute the totality of the revelation that is life, and which the individual must know and love if he is to be purged (*catharsis=purgatorio*) of the contagion of sin (disobedience to the divine will) and death (identification with the mortal form). (28)

Noting that the mutual existence of both comedy and tragedy within the monomyth is somewhat paradoxical, Campbell further argues that

> [t]he happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul, is to be read, not as contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man. The objective world remains what is was, but, because of a shift of emphasis within the subject, is beheld as though transformed. (ibid.)

Precisely because of this "emphasis within the subject", Campbell's formulation of one universal plot pattern far exceeds the narrow category of myth.

Campbell's pattern is perhaps nowhere more used and omnipresent than in fantasy literature, which generically borrows heavily from mythology. Stefanie Kadenbach links the presence of the monomythical pattern in contemporary fantasy to a renewed demand of great modernised mythological narratives (cf. 135).[2] The presence of the monomyth in fantasy literature also serves to formulate common expectations of the genre. Understanding genre as "a set of constitutive conventions and codes, alterating from age to age, but shared by kind of implicit contract[3] between writer and reader", M.H. Abrams points to the dual adherence to generic markers and the ensuing deviation from them in any genre's natural course of development (Abrams 77). This contract plays on the relationship between these conventions, the expectations the reader formulates, and of course, on the subversion thereof. This "set of expectations […] may be controverted rather than satisfied, but enable[s] the reader to make the work intelligible" (ibid.). Basic generic expectations must therefore be fulfilled in order to make the subversion thereof recognizable, or "intelligible", to the reader. The monomyth and its structure have come to be understood as one such basic generic expectation for fantasy literature.

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[2] Kadenbach applies the monomyth to Neil Gaiman specifically. In contradistinction to this project, she emphasizes Gaiman's work as a graphic novelist/comic book writer (her monomythical reading focuses on *Sandman*). Her much briefer analysis of *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* will be drawn upon in chapters 5 and 6.

[3] For more information on the contract between writer/reader, see Iser, Wolfgang. *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (1976).

Yet, where myths[4] are usually epic narratives consisting of a variety of smaller tales, much fantasy instead extends the pattern to full-length novels of several hundred pages. What happens when the monomythical structure finds not only quantitative expansion, but also a contemporary update that gives prominence to postmodernism? While I agree with Campbell that many a hero narrative draws on similar components, and while this is without a doubt exceedingly relevant a model for a genre that so frequently *embraces* heroic narratives, the following analysis seeks to review the use of Campbell's model within other works discussing universal plot configurations before then critically interrogating the effect of postmodernism on such metanarratives.

In a work that took more than thirty years to complete and spans over seven-hundred pages, Christopher Booker expands Campbell's notion of one universal myth into seven so-called "basic plot[s]" (*Seven* 5) and contextualizes this division with Jungian archetypes. Booker argues that most plots fit (at least) one of the following tropes and accompanying patterns:[5] the overcoming the monster plot (21), the rags to riches story (51), the quest narrative (69), the notion of the voyage and return (87), comedy (117), tragedy (173), and/or a tale of rebirth (204).[6] All plots but tragedy "naturally lead to a happy ending" (329). Interestingly, fantasy literature often combines several of them and Booker points to one of the foundational texts of the genre, *The Lord of the Rings*, as a prime example (cf. 316).[7]

Serving as a precursor[8] to *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), J.R.R. Tolkien's children's fantasy novel *The Hobbit* (1937) already subscribes to this pattern. It seems impossible to avoid talking about Tolkien when discussing fantasy since it was

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[4] Steven Swann Jones defines myth as "etiological narratives that use gods (divine, immortal figures) to explain the operation and purpose of the cosmos" (Swann Jones 8). In distinction to the fairy tale with its focus "on journeys of self-discovery, recognition and confrontation of internal anxieties and desires" (16f.), myths "focus on cosmic and cultural lessons" (16f.).

[5] Booker too notes that the plots often overlap or are stacked onto each other and share similarities (cf. 85).

[6] Booker tentatively offers an eighth plot, the mystery, often played out in detective stories. He does however not include it in the titular seven basic plots because its development is caused by the "psychological revolution" (505) of the last two-hundred years, while the other plots can be dated back further.

[7] Booker notes that this affluence of basic plots is also related to the length and scope of Tolkien's novel (cf. 694); this of course allows extending his observation to the many fantasy novels that feature a similar (and perhaps somewhat excessive) scope.

[8] The relationship between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is not a simple one of text and sequel. The former was written first, for children, then upon its commercial success and the publishers' suggestion further developed into the more expansive LOTR for adult audiences (even though that of course does not mean it is not read by younger readers).

"with the publication and popular acceptance of Tolkien's version of the fantastic, [that] a new coherence was given to the genre" (Attebery, *Strategies* 14). When the titular hobbit sets out on his journey "[t]here and [b]ack [a]gain" (349), he evokes Booker's voyage and return plot; when he accomplishes a quest, and overcomes not one, but several monsters, further basic plots are interwoven into the tale. Here Tolkien already alludes to something that will dominate his later work, namely the function of these monsters, which not only serve to generate plot, but to also generate character development. The Bilbo who, after his adventure has been completed, returns to the Shire, is not quite the same as the one who left. This particular amalgamation of plots is then not only continued, but expanded in Tolkien's magnum opus *The Lord of the Rings*, "a story which is not shaped by a single basic plot but which contains elements of all seven woven together" (316).

However, there is one significant change in the construction and plot development from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*, and one that is indicative of many fantasy novels that follow in the literary footsteps of Tolkien: Bilbo's nephew, Frodo, one of the many heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, does not recover from his journey. Having overcome a great many of monsters (the most challenging one arguably being himself under the ring's influence), he does not escape unscathed, and the aftereffects of the basic plot of tragedy take effect. Frodo leaves Middle-earth, too tortured, too damaged to remain. More poignantly phrased, he is too traumatised to stay beyond the point of eucatastrophe.[9] His former home can no longer offer him a suitable place to recuperate and Campbell's formulation of the successful heroic return is therefore challenged by wounds of a psychological nature.[10] This is the note that Tolkien ends on, a traumatised hero leaving for new shores,[11] and simultaneously, the point many contemporary writers use to begin their narratives. While the ongoing relevance of Campbell's monomyth remains undisputed, Booker's seven-part approach offers more room to accommodate several current trends in

[9] For a discussion of eucatastrophe in the framework of Tolkien's scholarly work on fantasy, see chapter 2.

[10] For an extensive reading of Frodo's trauma and its analogies to WWI and II, see Livingston (2006).

[11] Frodo's departure has also often been read as a metaphor for death. Jonathan Padley and Kenneth Padley argue that while he does not die on Mount Doom, his time on Middle-earth is drawn short, and they evoke the Christian theme of sacrifice in their reading (85). Booker finds that when Frodo departs, he is doing so "a hobbit rather than a man" (320), indicating he has failed to fully grow up because there is no other half, no light feminine/anima for him to unite with (Booker points out that this plot has been given to Aragorn instead, cf. 321). Instead, Frodo leaves with "Gandalf: the father he could never himself become" (ibid.).

fantasy literature and can be usefully drawn upon to contextualise not only the role, but also the specific placement of trauma in the nexus of the overcoming the monster and the voyage and return plot. These two basic plots can be understood as the corner-stones of fantasy literature.

When examining Booker's model, it however soon becomes apparent that *all* seven basic plots share the underlying structure Campbell too posited at the centre of the monomyth: that of a rite of passage. The universality of the plot is pointed out when Booker assures that "[n]o situation is more familiar at the start of a story than that its central figure is a young man or woman who is in the process of stepping out onto the stage of the adult world, but has not yet reached an established state" (290). Following a "road to self-realisation" (219), recognising and defeating a potential "enemy within" (222) and finally, completing a "maturing experience" (223) from "which the story thus ends on the sense of a final opening out into life, with everything at last resolved" (228), this underlying pattern can also be productively linked to the *bildungsroman*.

The *bildungsroman*, "that mystifying term" (Fraiman 1), refers to a type of novel made popular by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in the 18th century before spreading from Germany all across the world. These narratives concern themselves with formal and informal education and the all-important question of finding one's place in the world. While the *bildungsroman* was very popular in 18th and 19th century Germany, its popularity has waned from the 1920s onwards (cf. Wagner 99-100). In being routinely used as a plot pattern in genre fiction, the *bildungsroman*'s basic structure is however experiencing a renaissance. Alice Nuttall has observed that fantasy in particular seems to have a particular propensity for coming-of-age[12] narratives (cf. 88), which can of course be fruitfully explained by the *bildungsroman*'s use of what Campbell conceptualises as the monomyth and Booker sees as the shared feature of all seven basic plots.

The convergence of *bildungsroman* and fantasy often begins with the notion of a journey. As Susan Fraiman asserts in her work on the *bildungsroman*, "the classic developmental path" in the (male) *bildungsroman* "involves travel". She quotes Susanne Howe, who contributed early insights on the genre, and pointedly stated that

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[12] Coming of age stories and the bildungsroman are frequently used as synonymous terms speaking to stories in which a young protagonist's social and intellectual development makes up most of the plot. For a finer differentiation between the two, see chapter 2.2.2.

"[g]oing somewhere is the thing. And there – in all sorts of tempting variety – is your story" (Fraiman 6). This is echoed in many foundational fantasy texts: "There and Back Again" (349), muse the hobbits, one adventure before them, and one behind. Likewise, Dorothy's time on the yellow brick road is as much an adventure into Oz as it is about the desire to return home. Similar motifs can be found in nearly all key texts of the fantasy genre, whether one is looking at the formative texts that served to define it[13], or at their current postmodern disciples. Journeys are thus an essential part of canonical fantasy narratives. The heroes and heroines of fantasy narratives are always enveloped in a journey of some kind; this can be a literal journey from A to B[14] and/or a metaphorical one of growth and personal knowledge. In most texts, we find the literal journey combined with or leading to the metaphorical one (cf. Clute, "Rite of Passage" n.p.). This pattern is highly reminiscent of the first *bildungsromane*, wherein serious, but not yet wise young men attempt to find their way in the world.

While the *bildungsroman* and Booker's as well as Campbell's rite of passage focused plot pattern share structural similarities, they significantly differ in their narrative execution. As will be discussed in great detail in chapter 2, the *bildungsroman* revolves around a focus inwards (cf. Gutjahr 15, Shaffner 7 and 17): it is the narrated exploration of psychological development that weighs heavier than the actions leading to it. Where then does fantasy figure at this intersection?

The hero(in)es of a fantasy novel follow the same principal arc as the protagonists of the generic *bildungsroman*, but do so in a setting where nothing is impossible and the supernatural eventually becomes common-place. To date, there is only one monograph analysing the fantasy genre in the framework of the *bildungsroman*, namely Susanne Tschirner's *Der Fantasy-Bildungsroman* (1989). Tschirner was writing at a time when the fantasy genre was still considerably more of a niche product in academic discourses than it is today.[15] Her work on the subject has been largely unnoticed in the field, but serves as a useful background for the analysis presented here. My analysis concerns itself with the two decades following

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[13] Among these texts are the aforementioned Tolkien novels, Baum's contribution, but also Lewis Carroll's *Alice* novels, J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (the journey is equally important in both stage and novel versions of the text), and C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, to name just a few.

[14] And then of course, back to where we started because nothing is more satisfactory than bookend endings; see Booker's voyage and return plot.

[15] It has been argued that it has reached mainstream literature (and subsequently academia) with the immense success of *The Lord of the Rings* films, even though it is more correct to say that it was the joint success and popularity of both *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series of novels. Cf. Runte for a discussion of fantasy's journey into academic attention (and arguably, respectability).

Tschirner's work and the approaches further differ in that this project centrally analyses the way negotiations of trauma theory complicate the monomythical developmental narrative. Further, it does not follow Tschirner's sole focus on what has traditionally been called high fantasy. According to John Clute's entry in the excellent, but unfortunately no longer updated *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*, the subgenre denotes narratives "set in Otherworlds, specifically Secondary Worlds, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds" ["High Fantasy", n.p.]. Tschirner restricts her analysis to these texts, excluding those that do not feature stand-alone secondary worlds. While newer examples from high fantasy do exist (George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* or Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* come to mind), this thesis chooses to focus on the British author Neil Gaiman and his many explorations outside the pure Tolkienian secondary worlds. Gaiman mainly concentrates on fantastic forms that match a secondary world with the primary world. These mixed forms, often called "wainscot fantasy" (McStotts 69), allude to "invisible or undetected societies living in the interstices of the dominant world" (Clute, "Wainscots" n.p.) and are commonly associated with urban rather than high fantasy.

Centrally, I argue that the union of fantasy, trauma, and the *bildungsroman* has the effect of turning the question of becoming into a *quest* of becoming. [16] This *quest(ion)* then forms the core of most contemporary fantasy narratives of which the works of Neil Gaiman constitute paradigmatic examples.[17] More specifically though, this quest(ion) is formulated with the defeat of the antagonist no longer being the only end to the story, but instead emphasizing the psychological ramifications of heroic sacrifices and actions. This can be understood as a form of trial, which "in the *Bildungsroman*, is [...] an opportunity: not an obstacle to be overcome while remaining 'intact', but something that must be *incorporated*, for only by stringing together 'experiences' does one build a personality" (Moretti 48). Trauma entails the

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[16] The ubiquity of the quest further serves to support Booker's claim of it being one of the most common "basic plot[s]" (5).

[17] While this project focuses on Neil Gaiman's work, the observations made regarding the narrative pattern of the traumatic *bildungsroman* fantasy and the utilisation of fantastic creatures and beings as metaphors of trauma can be easily extended to a large number of texts. Examples include the aforementioned *Song of Ice and Fire* series, Rothfuss' work, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, Charlaine Harris *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, as well as Elisabeth Kostova's *The Historian* and Justin Cronin's *The Passage*. These titles are just a selection to indicate that the trend to be discussed in the following can be extended far beyond Gaiman's work, but this list could be significantly extended even further.

idea of impossible experiences that outstrip the realm of human experience (cf. the 1987 American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as quoted in L. Brown 100) and thus haunt its survivors. This haunting is then literalized in the depiction of supernatural ciphers prevalent in the many of the quest plots found in contemporary fantasy fiction.[18] Campbell too has discussed the effect of psychological suffering on the construction of hero's narratives:

> The unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, and deluding images up into the mind – whether in dream, broad daylight, or insanity; for the human kingdom, beneath the floor of consciousness, goes down into unsuspected Aladdin caves. There not only jewels but also dangerous jinn abide: the inconvenient or resisted psychological powers that we have not thought or dared to integrate into our lives. [...] These are dangerous because they threaten the fabric of the security into which we have built ourselves and our family. But they are fiendishly fascinating too, for they carry keys that open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of the self. Destruction of the world that we have built and in which we live, and of ourselves within it; but then a wonderful reconstruction, of the bolder, cleaner, more spacious, and fully human life – that is the lure, the promise and terror, of these disturbing night visitants from the mythological realm that we carry within. (Campbell, *Hero* 8)

He attributes the depth of the unconscious, with all the terrors it may house, with what Judith Butler conceptualises as a "strange fecundity" of loss (Butler quoted in Bolaki 36).

Fantasy is thus not mere blissful escapism (an accusation often levelled at texts written in this vein, and refuted by most scholars working in the field[19]; cf. Jackson 1-2, Tolkien "On Fairy Stories" 68f., Lewis 30, Baker 79, Manlove 11), but instead offers insights into the process of growing up and the role traumatic experiences may play in that regard[20]. Here, we can observe a notable trend towards a darker iteration of fantasy literature. When Dorothy in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* returns home, she is not at all bothered by having killed two witches and having watched her friends dissembled more than once. "Curiouser and curiouser" (Carroll 14), the same applies to Alice's return from Wonderland as she is equally unaffected

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[18] For more information on defining trauma in the context of fantasy, please see chapter 2.4.

[19] Littman has pointed out that "fantasy literature itself [...] often [being] looked down upon as an art form [...] is strange given that tales of the fantastic, and *especially* fantastic tales of the gods, are by far the *oldest* type of literature" (21). Nevertheless, Attebery observes that "fantasy is all too often ignored by serious readers of fiction" (*Strategies* x).

[20] C.S. Lewis also comments on accusatory idea that fantasy is mere escapism and wish-fulfilment, cf. *Other Worlds* 29-30.

by the strange events she witnessed. For every example, there is a counter example though and it can be easily found in Tolkien, the grandmaster of the fantasy genre. A war veteran himself, Tolkien shows how his hero Frodo is forever haunted by the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. After all he has been through, Frodo can no longer remain in Middle-earth, but leaves the continent, insinuating that the traumatisation observed in both him and the Elves are to be geographically Othered. Middle-earth is thus stripped of its traumatised hero, as he and the always ever so slightly melancholic elves take their leave at Grey Havens. In contemporary fantasy, and I am specifically referring to the 1990s and beyond[21], the attention lingers on this expression of melancholia. As Laurie Vickroy observes,

> Narratives about trauma flourished particularly in the 1980s and 1990s with increased public awareness of trauma and trauma theory. However, these narrative approaches have varied in their depth and purposes. Although popular culture has at times offered some insight into the psychology of fear, it has more often exploited such anxieties with tales of terror, suspense, or prurience. (*Trauma* 2f.)

In combination with the inward-focused *bildungsroman*, fantasy as a part of what Vickroy calls popular culture significantly contributes to the growing representation of trauma texts.

Rather than positioning trauma as an endpoint of a climactic Manichean battle, contemporary fantasy is inclined to locate the disruptive power of trauma as a starting point of its heroes' journeys. The connection between the popular fantasy genre, the canonical *bildungsroman*, and the haunting narratives of trauma is postmodern in that it not only elucidates the trend away from single-genre narratives, but also in the sense that the novels in question "problematise ideas about knowledge, epistemology, and representation" (Millard 72). By including trauma as an integral part in fantasy, these novels, despite their otherworldly content, address a globalised society that is more and more governed by crisis. Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo posit that "the increasing interest in trauma [is] a response to concerns about memory, politics, representation and ethics that became popular at the turn of the twentieth century" (1). With each trauma narrative though comes the hope of seeing it resolved in healing, a happily ever after for those who are so deeply afflicted.

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[21] This can be understood as part of a general societal trend. For an extended discussion of the growing prevalence of depression, see Blazer's *The Age of Melancholy. 'Major Depression' and its Social Origin*. For an exploration of trauma as a prevalent concern in literature and culture, see Kaplan's *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*.

Tolkien's notion of eucatastrophe however is a promise contemporary fantasy novels no longer necessarily seek to fulfil as endings move away from a simple triumph over evil, and instead render the challenges and experiences problematic and attest them a lingering effect that significantly influences the protagonist's development. The *bildungsroman* fantasy is used to express contemporary fears and anxieties by extensively drawing on the attempted representation of trauma. The following chapters will discuss how postmodern fantasy writer Neil Gaiman uses this plot pattern to express fears of both parental treachery and failure, anxieties related to complicated identity politics in a transatlantic setting, and concerns over societal issues such as capitalism and colonialism.

1.1. Meeting the Author

> "Our Postmodern moment is permeated with, is defined by, questionings of selfhood and self-reference and narrativity and closure."
> ~ Attebery *Strategies* viii

Neil Gaiman, born in Portchester in 1960, worked as a journalist in the 1980s before branching out into the field of fiction. He made his career in comic books with the never-out-of-print series *The Sandman* (1993—), wrote for both DC and Marvel, and in 1990, made the transition to novels and published *Good Omens* with Terry Pratchett. A number of solo novels followed, including (but not limited to) his magnus opus *American Gods* in 2001, the scary, Freudian all-ages novella *Coraline* in 2004, and his Kipling inspired *The Graveyard Book* in 2008. Since 2008, Gaiman published short stories, wrote screenplays, directed a short film and collaborated with musician and wife Amanda Palmer on a multitude of projects.

What makes his work so uniquely suited to analysis in this thesis is that at their core, all of Gaiman's novels feature the *bildungsroman* narrative, irrespective of their protagonists' ages.[22] Sandor Klapsik sees Gaiman as both a postmodern author and at the same time and for the same reason, as a traditionalist, whose knowledge of previous modes of storytelling and a deliberate engagement and subversion characterises his fiction (cf. *Liminality* 81, 83). Gaiman draws on familiar genre

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[22] Gaiman's protagonists usually fall into either a 20+ age category, or are children, while the supplementary characters cover all age groups. Except for *Coraline* and the fairy-tale centric works, Gaiman tends to work with male rather than female protagonists.

building blocks and uses them to forge a recognisable type of *bildungsroman* fantasy. The process of *bildung* in his novels is one of enlightenment, not one of physical maturation. *Bildung* is equated with an epistemological process that can only be fully realised through contact with the fantastic, thus indicating and resolving a lack that is manifest in the 'real' worlds. It is this contact that allows Gaiman to work within his "marked preference for traumatized and laconic protagonists" (Gooding 405 fn2) and to connect it to larger quest(ions) of identity.

Jerome Buckley posits "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" as central elements of the *bildungsroman* (18); elements, that, incidentally are also common in all of Gaiman's prose work. His protagonists, be they male or female, engage in developmental processes as people searching for their place in the world. His male adult characters (Richard, Shadow, Charlie) are strikingly displaced and are still looking to find where they belong. Family relationships seldom serve as a stabiliser, instead offering a "conflict of generations" that seems to play along Freudian notions as sons become their fathers' successors. The generational conflict is played out amidst growing isolation and "alienation", leaving the protagonists with plenty of room to embark on their quest: finding a "vocation and a working philosophy" that will not only bring them to peace with their complicated family history, but also unite them with the Other World they are to inhabit. Ortrud Gutjahr has observed that since the process of self-education at the heart of the *bildungsroman* is usually narrated via conflicts, the protagonists' development is not necessarily linear and straight-forward, but instead includes the potential for educative detours which further serve to position a character's individuality (cf. 14). The ongoing development of one's identity is often caused and challenged by trauma. Robert Mousseau finds that "travel [in particular may function] as the construct enabling [...] characters' development" (257) and further points out how the travel theme may contribute to a resolution of traumatic experiences.

The unlikely union of the *bildungsroman* as a plot pattern and the role trauma plays in it can be understood as part of Gaiman's writing as a postmodern author. While trauma looks back at a troubled past, the *bildungsroman* looks forward at an array of possibilities. In uniting these two contradictory concepts, Gaiman complicates the coming-of-age metanarrative and renders it postmodern. This is part

of what Brian McHale sees as postmodernism's embrace "of the populist pleasures of narrativity, reviving and recovering narrative – 'repleshnening' it, to use John Barth's term" (61).

1.2. The Scope of the Book

Gaiman offers two types of traumatic *bildungsroman* fantasies. For one, there is a group of novels that begins with the protagonist on a path to alienation that is then reshaped by traumatic influences. The other model positions the traumatic event at the relative beginning of the character's backstory (but only reveals it *after* the exposition of the novel) and it is the hitherto undisclosed trauma that sets all other engagements in motion in the first place. The applicability of trauma theory on Gaiman's work is not an overly risky endeavour as even the light-hearted narratives (such as *Anansi Boys*, for instance) contain elements that are both extremely violent and utterly incomprehensible, refuting easy recovery and categorisation. It seems that for all of his novel length texts, at least one sudden murder is requisite. Prime cases for a reading of trauma theory are the forebodingly called *The Graveyard Book*, the deeply psychological *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and the much touted *American Gods.* The first two novels to be dealt with, *Neverwhere* and *Stardust*, are the only ones where, once the *bildungsroman* quest has been completed, the respective protagonists choose to stay in the Other World rather than return to the primary one. Their journeys include the completion of *bildung* as a point of no return that makes them unsuitable for inclusion in the world they hailed from. This can be seen as a nod to Tolkien's treatment of his central character Frodo, who likewise was too traumatised for inclusion in what he knows as his normal world. Gaiman however connotes the transition into the Other Worlds as positive and as a triumphal conclusion of his protagonists' traumatic coming-of-age. In later novels, Gaiman's heroes more strictly follow the voyage and return pattern that sees them re-installed in their place of origin, albeit changed, grown, and educated. Especially in the complex *American Gods*, this positions the end of the *bildungs*-narrative less as a time of reward and more as a time of potential, alluding to future chances and uncertainties alike.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of different conceptualisations of fantasy, the *bildungsroman*, and the definition of trauma (and trauma literature). Both trauma and the *bildungsroman* have been previously discussed with regards to the fantasy genre, but the combination of all three in scholarship against the backdrop of a reconfigured postmodern variation of the monomyth has yet to be undertaken. I will argue that the fantasy genre presents the *bildungsroman* with a postmodern renaissance, highlighting the continuing trouble of finding one's place in an-ever changing world. In chapters 3 to 10, a combined reading of the three 'ingredients' (fantasy, trauma, and the *bildungsroman*) as a dominant mode of communication in Neil Gaiman's solo novels will be undertaken.

As an author, Gaiman is prolific both in the amount and the nature of the literature he produces. Tara Prescott, who has published two edited collections on Gaiman (one in 2013 and one in 2015) has noted that

> [i]n many ways, trying to cover the works of Neil Gaiman is like trying to plot out a European vacation: you could try to hit all the major tourist spots in six countries in six days, or you could carefully scrutinize the beautiful lichen on a stone stile in Cornwall. Both are lovely and interesting, but it is nearly impossible to have both experiences on the same journey. (2)

Fully agreeing with Prescott's astute observation that likens Gaiman's work to the concept of Romanticism's great tour[23], this project undertakes an analysis of a number of Gaiman's texts, but cannot discuss all of them, either at all, or in equal proportions. For this reason, I have made the choice not to engage with Gaiman's work within comic books and graphic novels and to instead focus on 'pure' prose. Necessarily, the core subject of analysis will be on the developmental potential of Gaiman's fantastic (yet ordinary[24]) protagonists and their connection to trauma as a motif. As an undercurrent in many of his novel-length texts, problematic parent-child relationships shape fantastic plots (Curry identifies "motifs of quest, exile and return, and parent-child separation" (21) as common). Gaiman's novels *Neverwhere* (1996), *Stardust* (1999), *American Gods* (2001), *Coraline* (2002), *Anansi Boys* (2005), *The Graveyard Book* (2008), and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) will find consideration. Books Gaiman has written for very young children, such as *Blueberry*

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[23] The educative possibilities of the great tour in the context of a rewriting of the *bildungsroman* will figure prominently in chapter 5.

[24] Ordinary here refers as much to the human origins of the characters (as opposed to being magical or supernatural creatures) as well as to the *bildungsroman*'s usual characteristic of a bourgeois everyman protagonist.

Girl (2009), *The Wolves in the Wall* (2003), the Chu series (2013—), or *Fortunately, the Milk* (2013) will not be discussed in further detail since they follow rather simple, action-oriented plots without delving too much into the field of character building and psychological depth. While Gaiman has also written numerous short stories (and has published three anthologies containing both short stories and poetry to date, cf. *Fragile Things*, *Smoke and Mirrors*, *Trigger Warning*), the focus will be on novels, and the short stories only drawn upon when necessary. To return to Prescott's simile, these countries simply cannot be included in the journey, but we might have a look at the travel guides anyway. The notable exception to the short story exclusions lies in the analysis of Gaiman's two "Snow White stories", which rewrite the classical fairy tale by drawing on notions of trauma, and in the two follow-up short stories to *American Gods*, "The Monarch of the Glen" (2006) and "Black Dog" (2015). The texts will be dealt with in roughly chronological order to trace the development of the traumatic *bildungsroman* in Gaiman's fantasies.

I will argue that Neil Gaiman's much lauded contribution to the fantasy genres is conscious of universal plot patterns rooted in myth and fairy tale alike, but makes use of them in a decidedly postmodern fashion. This mode of storytelling that both acknowledges literary history while deviating from its confines is paradigmatic for a current trend in fantasy. Taking as a premise the question of what has changed from Frodo's genre-manifesting journey in *The Lord of the Rings* to those envisioned by contemporary fantasy writers, I will analyse the construction of two variations of one new plot pattern. This pattern prominently figures the paradoxical combination of the repressive power of trauma as a motif conjoined with the developmental notion of the *bildungsroman*. Using trauma to discuss what has often been accused of being escapist fiction is not without problems, but this convergence of genres is one of the instances which "chang[es] our understanding of what is possible or permissible with [...] genre" (Millard 2). As such, this new narrative pattern unites seemingly contradictory narrative elements in introspective rites of passage, action-oriented storytelling, and extensive and metaphorically dense explorations of trauma to indicate a new type of fantasy literature.

Chapter 2: An Exercise in Definitions: Genres and Beyond

David Duff defines genre as "[a]recurring type or category of text, as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria" (xiii).[25] When analysing trends and changes in literature, the notion of 'genre' becomes both unavoidable and problematic since quite naturally, texts build on one another and are influenced by their predecessors. But when everything is merged or borrowed from, used in conjunction or as decisive influences, then how can a genre remain distinctive and recognisable? In the "Law of Genre", Jacques Derrida claims that

> [a]s soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: 'Do,' 'Do not' says 'genre', the word 'genre,' the figure, the voice, or the law of genre. (56)

He sees genre as an ordering principle (81), as a law unto itself. But with every boundary drawn, the possibility to exceed that boundary simultaneously becomes more graspable, leading Derrida to conclude that while "[t]he law is mad […] There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law. Madness is law, the law is madness" (ibid.). Only the formation of a rule can lead to its violation, can lead to observable change.

In the following, I will turn my attention to the "law of genre" and the history of fantasy, the *bildungsroman*, and trauma writing in order to lay the ground for an intersecting analysis of Neil Gaiman's contribution to the fantasy genre. Before advancing to this, it must however be noted as a precautionary measure that fantasy will be defined not primarily as a mental process in the psychoanalytical sense, but as the literary genre. While the dual understanding of the term, imagination on the one hand and genre on the other, will find discussion in Tolkien's seminal work, the general understanding of 'fantasy' here is that of a distinct strand of fiction. By drawing on Sigmund Freud's essay on "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming", the connection from fantasy as a mental faculty to fantasy as a type of writing can be forged. Freud discusses the role of fantasy as a mental faculty in fiction, finding that the latter lends a form of expression to the former. Both draw on childhood play, which serves as the basis from which adult daydreams and consequently works of

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[25] Duff also points to the double use of genre when he notes that "the term is often used, sometimes pejoratively, to denote types of popular fiction in which a high degree of standardisation is apparent: for instance, detective stories, historical romances, spy thrillers and science fiction. These are collectively known as 'genre fiction', as distinct from more 'serious', highbrow fiction" (ibid.). Needless to say, no pejorative reading of genre fiction will be undertaken in this project.

fiction stem. While everyone day-dreams (either of erotic or egocentric exploits) and thus harkens back to the childhood habit of playing and of make-believe, the writers of fiction uses these daydreams for their fictional story-telling exploits. The fantasies of day-dreaming are thus used to create fiction, and must be understood as their basic underpinnings.[26]

While this project thus emphasizes the fantasy genre, it also engages with the *bildungsroman*. The *bildungsroman* is indisputably a genre of its own, but this analysis makes use of it as a plot pattern that has proven highly successful and prolific across a variety of texts, genres, and ages. To borrow from Jack Zipes' work on fairy tales,[27] the pattern with which the bildungsroman operates has taken on a memetic quality that has spread far beyond its origin. The third component of this analysis is trauma. While there is much specific trauma writing, this approach is more concerned with the use of trauma as a motif in contemporary fiction. It is thus less about trauma writing as such and more about the growing representation of trauma in fantasy fiction and the challenges this poses. None of this is to say that I wish to take away from the *bildungsroman*'s status as a distinct genre of (particularly German) fiction or from trauma writing's very particular origins and challenges, but rather that this analysis seeks to acknowledge the way different strands of literature interact, expand and influence each other.

Necessary for such an undertaking is of course a certain degree of what Duff calls "genre consciousness", an

> awareness of genre displayed by a particular author or period: an awareness which has both a conscious component; manifest in the explicit use made of generic categories and terminology by writers, critics, booksellers, publishers, librarians and other cultural institutions; and an unconscious element, suggested by the attempts of many writers, readers and critics, especially in the modern era, to conceal or repress their dependence on genre. The norms which genre-consciousness takes, and the intensity with which it is experienced, are subject to both personal and historical variation. (Duff xiii)

Much of Neil Gaiman's fiction displays a high degree of genre consciousness, evident for instance in the road movie characteristics of *American Gods*, the fairy tale

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[26] Following this line of argument and in contradistinction to my earlier claim that fantasy is more than escapism, Freud's findings suggests that *all* fiction is some form of escapism as it tells the tales of "His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every daydream and of every story" ("Creative" 425).

[27] In *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006), Zipes argues that one of the reasons for fairy tales' continuing popularity and prolific nature is that they operate under easily remembered and distinctive parameters. This argument can be extended to the *bildungsroman* with its characteristic journey and development motif.

affiliation of *Stardust*, or the Gothic underpinnings of *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*. In the following, the markers and boundaries of fantasy, the *bildungsroman*, and trauma writing will find discussion so that in subsequent chapters, their complex interaction in Gaiman's works can be analysed. By drawing on both *bildungsroman* and trauma, two almost antithetical kinds of writing – one focused forward, the other forced to look back – contemporary fantasy is transformed.

The combination of fantasy, the *bildungsroman*, and trauma takes place on the level of what Alistair Fowler calls topical invention. Fowler offers a complex model for genre analysis, differentiating between many similar relationships between genres and often using the particular point of their combination to distinguish among the different types. Fowler proposes that a genre can be transformed in a number of different ways, by the aforementioned topical invention (170), by combination or aggregation (171), the change of its scale (172) or function (173), by offering a counterstatement (174), by including several genres into an overarching one (179), by presenting a generic mixture (181), hybrids (183), or by satire (188). The distinction between these different approaches may seem overly meticulous, but is necessary to explain in how far it is fantasy that is transformed here while the *bildungsroman* and trauma writing remain more or less untouched. Fantasy has enriched itself by drawing on *bildungsroman* and trauma, without in turn heightening the dosage of the supernatural in the realist *bildungsroman*. The relationship is of a unidirectional nature, with fantasy using the *bildungsroman* and elements of trauma writing, without affecting them in return. Were all influencing genres similarly affected, we could speak of genre hybridity, a common by-product of postmodernism. Hybridity in Fowler's understanding means that none of the included genres dominate the text (cf. 183), whereas topical invention allows drawing on several genres while maintaining an overarching one. Despite Gaiman's status as a postmodern writer, his novels are not so much hybrids as fantasy novels with easily detectable influences. All novels focused on here are first and foremost fantasy, easily attributed to the genre by their author, booksellers, readers and scholars alike, thus establishing a hierarchy of genres that is strictly maintained and that consequently allows for a reading of the *bildungsroman* as a plot pattern and trauma as a motif within Gaiman's narratives. Fantasy here clearly dominates the trauma and *bildungsroman* elements the texts feature and makes use of them to update fantasy

rather than the other way around. Fowler's notion of topical invention is thus most applicable, as "[g]enres change when new topics are added to their repertoire" (170). As previously mentioned, the focus on trauma is a relatively recent development in fantasy fiction, a "new topic", so to say, and serves to further develop and complicate the *bildungsroman* pattern that was used in fantasy fiction as early as *The Lord of the Rings*.[28] The topical invention used in Gaiman's contemporary fantasy thus combines paradoxical strands of fiction, those focused on the supernatural and those traditionally realist in tone, those of detailed expression and communication and those struggling to relate the unspeakable.

Topical inventions offer "a fresh approach to existing topics" (171) and are consequently a common by-product of genre's ever-changing nature. Since, as Fowler asserts, "the character of genres *is* that they change" (18, emphasis mine), the relation of a text to its generic relations may bring about "new states" (23) of writing all the while linking back to the awareness of the law of genre that Derrida proposes.[29] Analysing in how far a text practises genre "conformity, variation, innovation, or antagonism" (ibid.) in order to determine a point of departure from the acknowledged (albeit temporary) generic norms precisely requires a previous understanding of these norms and their history.

2.1. Defining Fantasy: Creating the Genre

Due to what is perceived as the genre's high degree of diversity, fantasy scholars often preface their research by pointing out how difficult providing a definition of the genre is (cf. Irwin 11, James and Mendlesohn 1, Bowers 1). Nevertheless (and without irony), a definition is then promptly presented. Some, like Colin Manlove's, are precise and aim to narrow the field, while others like Brian Attebery's are deliberate inclusive and thus more openly formulated. Johannes Rüster even goes so far as to call fantasy ideally postmodern, finding that what constitutes fantasy as a genre might

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[28] With regard to the introduction of the *bildungsroman* elements to fantasy, note for instance that Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as well as its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass* and Barrie's *Peter Pan* precisely operate without a deeper psychological development of their eponymous protagonists – Peter wishes to remain a boy forever more, refuting Wendy's invitation to return to the 'real' world with her, and Alice wakes from her dream, entirely unchanged. Tolkien's psychological development of Frodo's character thus seems all the more remarkable and is more in keeping with the general idea of the *bildungsroman*.

[29] Of course not every text is a deliberate or accidental generic development. Fowler points out that texts can also relate to genres by simple conformity (ibid.).

be simply what is read as such (cf. 292). While there is a certain validity in pointing to the difficulty of a finite definition of fantasy, this chapter will nevertheless make the attempt and discuss some of the most important overtures made in the theoretical advancement of the fantasy genre in the past 70 years because these investigations might ultimately lead us to a better self-understanding of the texts we are dealing with. In the following, attention will be paid attention to fantasy's fairy tale and Gothic origins, as well as to its more contemporary relations.[30] Among the scholars to be considered in more detail are J.R.R. Tolkien, who shaped the genre as scholar and author alike, Rosemary Jackson, who was among the first to undertake a psychoanalytical reading that builds on the dual meaning of the term of fantasy, Attebery whose contribution of fantasy as a "fuzzy set" and the subgenre of indigenous fantasy are of particular importance with regard to Gaiman's work, and Manlove, who provides one of the most well-rounded and accessible definitions of the genre. Further, Tzvetan Todorov's controversial reader-response theory will be considered to offer a discussion of one of the means to create tension in fantasy novels. A further overture in reader-response theory is Farah Mendlesohn's 2008 book in which she analyses how point-of-view is used to guide the reader in fantasy texts. The following overview thus aims to provide both an answer to the question *what is a fantasy narrative?* as well as the related issue of *how is fantasy narrated?*

Jackson, who sees fantasy as "an enormous and seductive subject" (1) with a signature "resistance to narrow categorization and definition" (2), alludes to the difficulty of absolute definitions. Instead, she sees fantasy as "a literature of desire" and finds that the works categorised as such can tackle desire in two ways: a text "can *tell of*, manifest, or show desire [...], or it can *expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity" (3f.). Her psychoanalytic reading of fantasy's potential to communicate desires and taboos can be read in conjunction with the wish-fulfilment the genre is often accused of.

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[30] Fantasy literature has received significant scholarly attention in the past 40 years, making it impossible to include all contributions to the field. Among those not considered here are for instance Kathryn Hume's *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984), which offers insight into the relationship of fantasy and mimesis as the opposites underpinning much literature dealing with the supernatural. C.S. Lewis too has written extensively about fairy tales and fantasy literature, but has unlike Tolkien not advanced much new theoretical and terminological groundwork and will thus not be featured extensively. His work as an author is much more significant to the genre than his academic explorations.

Jackson's definition of the genre is open to a multitude of text, and less exclusive than many other approaches.

Yet Jackson prefers to see fantasy as "a literary mode from which a number of related genres emerge" (7). The distinction between mode and genre is difficult: literary modes refer, according to Duff, "to the manner of representation or enunciation in a literary work (the three basic modes, in this sense, being the narrative, the dramatic and the lyrical – though the validity of this triad has been questioned)", yet mode is also used "to denote more strictly literary categories such as the tragic, the comic, or the pastoral which are thematically specific but *non-specific* as to literary form or mode of representation" (xv). There is an inherent contradiction in this approach: if a mode is the way something is communicated (as a novel, as a play, as a poem, or even as a film), then how can it be thematically focused, but non-specific in its representation? Returning to Jackson's issue with fantasy as a genre may prove helpful here. She argues that

> [t]here is no abstract entity called 'fantasy'; there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires. Through their particular manifestations of desire, they can be associated together. (7f.)

Matching this to Duff's definition of genre, namely it being "[a] recurring type or category of text, as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria" (xiii), or to Abrams' approach of "a set of constitutive conventions and codes" (77), then the iteration of desire may well be used as a focal point around which conventions and functional criteria be drawn. There are different modes of fantasy (fantasy novels, fantasy plays, fantasy films, etc.), and all of these share the common denominator of communicating desire, but their overarching and imperative element is not the desire itself, but that which embodies it, namely the supernatural creature or ability that takes centre stage. Desire is a common feature in a myriad of texts that have little to do with fantasy: to draw on some examples from the *bildungsroman*, Wilhelm Meister desires artistic license, the narrator in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1944) desires a spiritual awakening, and Jane Eyre (1847) desires respect and a place in the world.

So while Jackson's assessment of fantasy's enormity is of course correct, the size does not take away from specific elements that mark the genre. The key factor is the supernatural as a primary and affirmed means of expression. Both *Dracula* (1987)

and *Northanger Abbey* (1817) are Gothic novels that deal with desire, but due to the lack of supernatural presence in the text, *Northanger Abbey* cannot be understood as a fantasy while the vampire-infected *Dracula* certainly can.[31] While Jackson's observation of desire as a key element is astute, fantasy demands more precise markers and when these are provided, emerges as more genre than mode. Jackson's approach thus differs quite significantly from that of booksellers, publishers, and readers, who seem to have no problem understanding fantasy as an extremely marketable and lucrative genre in its own right, with various subgenres in active and passive use. This project too sees fantasy as a genre rather than a mode (even though I fully agree with Jackson about desire being at the very heart of it), and will treat it accordingly.[32]

Manlove assumes a rare position in fantasy studies as he is one of the few scholars who does not open his definitory work on fantasy by alluding to the difficulty of compiling a definition on an ever-growing subject. Instead, he asserts that "all that matters ultimately is the isolation of a particular kind of literature" (1). To that end, he observes "how far a work keeps to its own terms, rather than apply any external standards of what literature should be" (ibid.), meaning that the quality of text or its Secondary World or Other World should not be measured against other texts, but simply against its self-understanding. To Manlove, "a fantasy is: *A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which mortal characters in the story or the readers become* [sic] *on at least partly familiar[33] terms*" (1, emphasis in original[34]). He then spends the next twelve pages elaborating his definition phrase by phrase, leaving little room for uncertainty. His

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[31] At this point, it should also be noted that much of what is perceived as belonging to fantasy literature (for instance the copious amounts of current vampire novels) would have previously fallen under the terms Gothic or even horror novel. This is indicative of the changing nature and understanding of genres.

[32] For an extended discussion of fantasy in the context of mode, genre, and formula (fiction), see the second chapter of Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy*.

[33] The growing familiarity with the supernatural that many fantasy novels thus propound reduces a text's uncanny effect. This can also be understood as a key difference between the Gothic and fantasy. Whereas fantasy (in many, not in all cases) strives towards an epistemological and emotional familiarity with the unknown and imagined, the Gothic continuously stresses an uncanny potential that refutes ultimate familiarity.

[34] In the follow-up to *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, Manlove further offers the subcategories of Secondary World Fantasy, Metaphysical Fantasy, Emotive Fantasy, Comic Fantasy, Subversive Fantasy, and Children's Fantasy. He acknowledges that most novels belong to more than one category (cf. *England* 6). While the finer differentiation into subgenres or subcategories is interesting, it aids little in the analysis of the *bildungsroman* pattern and the negotiation of trauma in Gaiman's novels and will thus not be considered further.

approach of the "irreducible element" includes both fully realised Secondary Worlds along Tolkienian lines and fantasies that make do without "enclosed Other Worlds"[35] (Attebery, *Strategies* 128). It is however important that "the empirically known world [...] is either juxtaposed with or transfigured by the presence of the supernatural" (Manlove 3). Attebery proposes the term "indigenous fantasy" (*Strategies* 129) for these types of texts, since "like an indigenous species, [it is] adapted to and reflective of its native environment" (129). Indigenous fantasies are heavily influenced by the mimetic worlds they are set in and these texts thus chiefly assert Jackson's observation that "fantasy is never 'free'" (3), but always measured against the backdrop of history, sociology, religion, and so on.[36] Gaiman mainly writes indigenous fantasies, thus relying on the contrast between the wonder-evoking elements of the supernatural and the mimetically known to challenge his protagonists and to further their *bildungsroman* journey.

Attebery's much-cited *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) is considered as one of the "most valuable theoretical text[s] for taking a definition of fantasy beyond preference" (James and Mendlesohn, "Introduction" 1) since Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories". Writing in 1992, Attebery positions fantasy as "Other" and consequently outside "the culturally defined norm" (*Strategies* ix). While this position is now at least called into question due to the ongoing scholarly interest in fantasy literature and its growing inclusion in school and university curricula, his attempts to work towards a definition have lost none of their relevance. He proposes

> that we view fantasy as a group of texts that share, to a greater degree or other, a cluster of common tropes which may be objects but which may also be narrative techniques. At the centre are those stories which share tropes of the completely impossible and towards the edge, in subsets, are those stories which include only a small number of tropes, or which construct those tropes in such a way to leave doubt in the reader's mind as to whether what they have read is fantastical or not. (James and Mendlesohn, "Introduction" 1)

This is referred to as a "fuzzy set" (ibid.), putting forth that the genre is ultimately not defined "by boundaries but by a center" (Attebery, *Strategies* 12). The more "impossible" the events or setting of the text, the closer it is to the fantastic centre and genre allocation. Returning once more to Derrida's work on genre, the existence of

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[35] Counter-worlds is yet another alternative term to describe the same phenomenon (cf. Vanderbeke 141), but will be disregarded in favour of Other Worlds in the following.
[36] When presented in a city-centric setting, indigenous and urban fantasies overlap (for more information on urban fantasy, see Clute's entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*).

boundaries, however fuzzy they may be, centres and thus affirms the law if genre. In the precursor work to *Strategies of Fantasy*, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (1980), Attebery elaborates on how a text can "proclaim its fantastic nature", and points to supernatural or realistically impossible beings, items, and events "that violate fundamental assumptions about matter and life" treated "without hesitation, without doubt, without any attempt to reconcile them with our understanding of the workings of the world or to make us believe that such things could under any circumstances come true" (2). Attebery sees fantasy as a genre that at its core requires hesitation to be abandoned: the fantastic is the impossible become real. This approach allows including the aforementioned Gothic novels as outliers which share some of fantasy's key elements, but do not need to match all of them. In Attebery's understanding of the fuzzy set, fantasy thus links outwards to horror, Gothic fiction, magical realism and so on. Like Jackson's, Atteberry's idea cater to the understanding that fantasy is a large, diverse, and expanding subject. Yet, with the possible inclusion and presence of "dragons, flying horses, or shape-shifting men" (ibid.), which serve as stand-ins for many other common fantasy tropes such as wizards, witches, werewolves, vampires, hobbits, and so on, we have arrived at a definition both broader and more 'typical' and aligned with popular culture's approach to the genre. It is an approach that was coined by nobody other than by J.R.R. Tolkien, whose contribution to the genre stems from both his work as an academic and as an author of (genre) fiction.

2.1.1. Origins: Tolkien

Part of the definitory problem alluded to in discussions of fantasy comes from the genre's history and its relative youth.[37] Much of what is now categorised as fantasy would have been labelled Gothic fiction, horror, fairy tale or romance before fantasy as a genre was established in critical discourse.[38] When Tolkien wrote his seminal essay on the genre in 1947[39], the term fantasy was not yet in generic use, and instead

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[37] For more information on the history of the genre, see Mendlesohn and James's excellent *A Short History of Fantasy* (2012).
[38] A text can of course proclaim more than a singular genre affiliation. *Dracula* for instance can be seen as fantasy, horror, Gothic novel, vampire novel or epistolary novel, depending on the reader and time period.
[39] "On Fairy Stories" was based on the Andrew Lang lecture Tolkien gave in 1937.

the burgeoning genre, as well as the essay, was referred to as "fairy stories" by Tolkien (3). This label makes the genre's debt to fairy tales visible, but while both fantasy and fairy tales contain events that can be categorised as fantastic, supernatural, magical, or marvellous,[40] they significantly differ in narrative structure and scope. Fairy tales in their most common form are short narratives with relatively flat characters, a clear beginning, middle, and end (the latter more often than not being of the happily ever after variety).[41] Historically a genre aimed at adults, the fairy tale has become a staple of children's literature, and has recently been rediscovered for an adult, and in particular, feminist market. Perhaps due to this rediscovery and the influence of postmodernism, the schematic tales have been made more complex, and the world they are set in less generic. This then resonates with Tolkien's "avant la lettre" (Rüster 285) take on the fantasy genre with its development of fictional histories, maps, and family trees which are a far step away from canonical fairy tales' one-dimensionality.

For Tolkien, the term fantasy is reserved for the imagination of 'unreality' rendered in art and thus speaks to a writer's cognitive ability. When making use of this ability, a particular type of tale is created. These tales feature four specific elements that all true 'fairy stories' must demonstrate: imagination, recovery, escape, and consolation (cf. 46). Imagination speaks to the ability to imagine another world, recovery to the ability to see things with new, fresh eyes (cf. Clute "Tolkien", n.p.) and escape to fantasy's potential to free its readers temporarily out of the restrictions of modern life (ibid.). This book will trace how contemporary fantasy goes beyond Tolkien's four-part system to account for texts that develop further and further away from their ancestral fairy tales with their almost compulsory happily ever after.

Even though the genre's name and much of its composition has changed, Tolkien's academic work on it remains relevant. His demands on the genre are strict. Meeting the four key features is as essential as eschewing everything that takes away from creating the perfect illusion. That is why Tolkien excludes Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865); its "dream-frame and dream-transitions" (15)

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[40] Fantastic is here used as an umbrella term denoting everything non-mimetic. Supernatural is usually used to refer to creatures that exceed human powers and abilities, whereas magical may be used to describe the powers rather than the character yielding them. For the very specific Todorovian approach to the terms marvellous and fantastic, see chapter 2.1.2.
[41] For an extensive reading of fairy tales in the context of postmodern traumatic fantasy, see chapter 7. Also note that fairy tales are now also frequently rendered not only as short stories, but expanded to full-length novels and films.

disqualify it as a proper fantasy (this exclusion is later also taken up by Manlove, cf. 6). The demand the fantastic text should place on the reader is one of absolute immersion:

> It is at any rate essential to a genuine fairy-story, as distinct from the employment of this form lesser or debased purposes, that is should be presented as 'true'. [..] since the fairy-story deals with 'marvels', it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion. (14)[42]

Tolkien thus opens the discussion to a question of authenticity, which is an interesting undertaking in such a non-mimetic subject. Yet, he defines authenticity mainly by highly subjective elements such as the mood a tale must convey. This mood is linked to the kind of magic the text presents, which must be of "a peculiar" nature, "at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician" (10). Tolkien here presumably refers to the strange quality of fairies, alluding to the otherworldliness of their actions, while the stage magicians' attempts at magic are not only rooted in this world, but are also products of work rather than results of enchantment. For Tolkien, successful literature on the supernatural necessitates that the magic must "be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor laughed away" (10f.). This is a point that Manlove reiterates thirty years later, when he speaks of the supernatural being "irreducible" (7) by humour or rational explanations such as for instance dream frames.[43] It is a common marker of Gaiman's works, as that of many other writers in contemporary fantasy, that dreams are used as frequent features of the fantastic narrative where they serve as subconscious commentaries on trauma and identity. In these dreams, supernatural events are also often called into question, but following Tolkien's dictum, the fantastic is usually affirmed upon the protagonist's awakening.[44]

Tolkien in his demand for authenticity requires the "story-maker" to function as a "sub-creator", who "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (37). Without this immersion, Tolkien's

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[42] He also excludes any and all beast fables.

[43] An interesting counter-example can of course be found in humorous fantasy, written for instance by Terry Pratchett, where the narrator and some of the characters constantly jokes about the magic that governs their actions (for instance in the witches' discussion of 'headology' as opposed to flashy magic featured in – among others – *Witches Abroad*). Interrogating how the immersion into the fantastic setting is nevertheless maintained unfortunately does not fit the scope of this book's argument.

[44] See the explorations of Richard's dream sequence in *Neverwhere* for example (chapter 3).

requirement of imagination is unfulfilled. Secondary World has consequently become a key term in fantasy, but a fully realised Secondary World is only one of the many options to create the elusive 'irreducible element' that marks the genre. According to Tolkien, the Secondary World is not bound to what is known as possible (even though its creator must have a very clear understanding of it, cf. 55), but presents its own definitions of the possible and impossible. Tolkien explains that

> Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun.* [...] To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. (49)[45]

This elvish craft is the author's ability to weave a web of "Enchantment [which] produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside" (53). Tolkien's approach includes the creation of a world in which magic can believably reign, as opposed to presenting the empirically known world with infusions or intrusions of magic.[46] Other scholars have also used the term Otherworlds/Other World (cf. for example Attebery 128) to describe much the same phenomenon, with the difference being that while the Secondary World in Tolkenian understanding is not connected to a primary world (i.e. ours) by any other means than our imagination, an Other World *may* also feature a connection between a primary and Secondary World on a plot level, for instance via portals (cf. Clute, "Otherworlds", n.p., who uses Narnia and its connection to the primary world via paintings and wardrobes as an example). In the following, I will adhere to Clute's differentiation to discuss the different settings.

But what Tolkien sees as the most important component of the genre, even more so than the Secondary World or Belief, is the consolation it creates in the reader, which is brought about by what he calls the eucastrophe. He understands the

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[45] Linda Hutcheon compares this ardent imagination to narcissistic texts, finding that "[c]overt narcissistic texts share with all fantasy literature the ability to force the reader (not overtly ask him) to create a fictive imaginative world separate from the empirical one in which he lives. Tolkien's Middle Earth [...] is as real to the reader as his [sic] own world, but it is different, other, a creation of his imagination. Whereas in overt narcissism the reader is explicitly told that what he is reading is imaginary, that the referents of the text's language is fictive, in fantasy (and the covers forms of narcissism for which it acts as a model) the fictiveness of the referents is axiomatic" (32).

[46] The terms Primary and Secondary World have however also been used to describe wainscot fantasies, in which a magical and non-magical world co-exist in the same piece of fiction. Often, the protagonists travel from one world to the other, so from the Primary to the Secondary or back again, via a portal (cf. Pell Jones 208). For an example of this use of Tolkien's terminology, see Pell Jones. Wainscot fantasies often make use of secrecy, as one society is not aware of the other's existence (cf. McStotts 69).

eucatastrophe as the opposite of the dramatic catastrophe and finds that it serves as "the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function" (68). It refers to "the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'" (ibid.), which "when [it] comes, [gives to readers] a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears" (69). This passage shows the relation of Tolkien's early concept of the genre to its ancestral fairy tales most clearly. Hansel and Gretel *must* return home to a loving father (the (step)mother having died a convenient death), Sleeping Beauty *must* wake, the Beast *must* be returned to its human form, and finally, the hobbits *must* return to the Shire after Sauron is – of course – destroyed. Monsters, to return to Booker's plots, must be overcome, and the voyage must end in a return.[47] Tolkien's approach is notably prescriptive but his narratorial imperative finds itself oftentimes ignored in contemporary contributions to the fantasy genre. This is perhaps linked to fantasy's gradual development away from its fairy tale origins; the invocation of trauma as a key part of story and plot contributes to narratives that deal less with the happily ever after and are more concerned with the effects of heroic actions on the protagonist long after the antagonist has been – to use C.S. Lewis' words – soundly beaten (cf. 31). Consolation and eucatastrophe are thus variables in creating fantasy, while imagination and escape remain vital obligations.

2.1.2. Fantasy and the Fantastic

While fantasy was not a term used by Tolkien and Lewis to describe the genre they wrote in – the shift from "fairy stories" to fantasy occurring between Tolkien's publication of "On Fairy Stories" in 1947, and the release of the American pulp publication *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in 1949 (cf. Mendlesohn and Edwards "History" 66) – it was well established when W.R. Irwin was publishing his

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[47] A similar approach was undertaken by Tolkien's friend and contemporary C.S. Lewis, who worked as a writer of fiction and as an academic. Mostly known for *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, Lewis wrote fantasy literature for children, but strongly refuted that all fantasy was automatically better suited to children than to adults (cf. Lewis 38). Outspoken in his support of Tolkien's work on the genre, Lewis expressed hope that "everyone has read Tolkien's essay on Fairy Tales[sic], which is perhaps the most important contribution to the subject that anyone has yet made" (26). Writing fantasy bordering on Christian analogies, Lewis's own work too subscribes to notions of eucatastrophe. The difference between Lewis' and Tolkien's approach is that Lewis also situates eucatastrophe in the (again, Christian) afterlife, with the Pevensie children not only visiting Narnia several times, but further encountering a Jesus-like lion who eventually takes them on to the next spiritual adventure.

findings on the genre. Writing in 1976, Irwin has readily adopted the term fantasy to denote the genre, but elaborates on another terminological development. Irwin points out the difference between fantasy and the fantastic, arguing that "[m]uch of the confusion in literary criticism originates in an assumption that the fantastic and fantasy are identical" (8). For Irwin,

> the fantastic, that is, the factitious existence of the antireal, is actually material. It is not of itself a literary form; and its presence, even preponderance, in a narrative does not necessarily make a fantasy. Elements of the fantastic may be introduced, singly or in combination, into almost any form of imaginative literature from heroic epic to farce. (8)

All fantasy thus features the fantastic, but not all occurrences of the fantastic turn a text into a fantasy. Irwin consequently argues that "tincture does not make a fantasy" (10). Irwin's definition, which aligns with Manlove's in that the fantastic must be a "substantial or irreducible element" (1), proposes that the supernatural cannot be 'explained away' and instead dominates the text. To return to *Jane Eyre* once more, the telepathic call Jane receives from Rochester after Thornfield Hall burns down neither makes her psychic, nor the text a fantasy novel as it is a single isolated incident that has no bearing on earlier sections of the book.[48] While a text may feature occurrences of the fantastic such as this, it needs to *revolve* around them in order to fully qualify as a fantasy. Irwin defines fantasy as "a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into 'fact' itself" (4). Six years later, Rosemary Jackson reaffirms Irwin's statement (cf. 14), further arguing that "[w]hat emerges as the basic trope of fantasy is the *oxymoron*, a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis" (20). Fantasy relies on the empirically and mimetically known in order to delineate its point of departure: if we do not know what is possible, we cannot appreciate the fictional renditions of the impossible. While Jackson sees this as fantasy's subversive potential, it might however also hint at more conservative underpinnings.

Irwin's work lends itself to a combination with Attebery's concept of the fuzzy set: the more violations of possibility a story features, the higher the density of fantasy tropes, the closer a text moves to the genre's centre. Effectively, Secondary

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[48] This moment is also fantastic in Todorov's sense since it is ultimately impossible to tell whether it really occurred or was just a figment of imagination.

World fantasies are thus immediately classifiable as fantasy literature, whereas texts set in the here and now call for a closer inspection of possible violations against realism in order to determine their generic affiliation.[49]

Tzvetan Todorov's seminal *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975) presents a narrow definition that centres on the fantastic rather than on fantasy. Relating back to Atteberry's idea of the fuzzy set, the texts analysed by Todorov mainly appear on the outliers. Drawing on Gothic and horror literature, which can be understood, alongside fairy tales, as fantasy's related and ancestral texts, Todorov proposes a sub-genre he calls the fantastic. The fantastic is located on a scale with the marvellous and the uncanny. These three sub-genres can be used to interrogate the way a text engages with supernatural elements. According to Todorov, the uncanny occurs if a text presents what appear as supernatural phenomena that are then given a natural explanation, whereas the marvellous presents supernatural phenomena that are then confirmed to be supernatural. The fantastic however, materialises when

> In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, 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. (25)

When he speaks of a world like "our world", Todorov excludes Tolkien's Secondary Worlds from his analysis. In a discussion of fantasy literature as such, Todorov's approach thus works best for texts operating with Other Worlds or Wainscot fantasies, or those that Atteberry calls indigenous fantasies. There is a particular suitability for texts with Gothic background as Todorov's model hinges on a world that appears mimetic and is then destabilised. It is thus useful when analysing how narrative tension is created in genres that thrive on it, such as horror and the Gothic, but with regard to defining fantasy as a genre, it proves less useful. This destabilisation occurs in the aforementioned hesitation: once readers choose whether the event is either real or an illusion, the moment of the fantastic is over and we move

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[49] This leads to a closer connection between urban fantasy and magical realism than for instance between magical realism and Secondary World fantasies. For a detailed exploration of the relationship between magical realism and fantasy, see chapter 2.1.4.

into the uncanny or the marvellous. According to Todorov, "[t]he fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (ibid.). Todorov's approach is famously narrow and excludes most of the texts now commonly defined as fantasy. It does however serve as a useful precursor in that many gothic texts (such as *Dracula* for instance) have now been reclaimed by fantasy as one of its own, perhaps contributing to the conflated use of fantasy and fantastic as synonymous despite awareness of Todorov's approach (for instance, see Attebery 3, Jackson 6). I will use 'fantastic' not in the Todorovian sense, but to reference a quality of text that is connected to Irwin's notion of the irreducible element of wonder. When, in due course, Todorov's more specific tripartite model finds application (the determination as to whether an event is fantastic is frequently moved to the character level in Gaiman's work and serves as a test that designates the protagonist's state of psychological development), the difference will be made visible by alluding to it as *Todorov's fantastic*, specifically.

2.1.3. Reader-Response Theory

Approaches to what makes texts fantasy are frequently tied to the reader's response beginning with Tolkien's eucatastophe, but also spanning Todorov's hesitation between the uncanny and the marvellous, and Manlove's demand that a text has to evoke "wonder" (cf. 7) in the reader. In 2008, Farah Mendlesohn made a significant contribution to the reader-response approach of fantasy literature with *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, which operates on the assumption "that the fantastic is an area of literature [...] heavily dependent on a dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder, that it is a fiction of consensual construction of belief" (xiii). Mendlesohn is consequently concerned with the way the supernatural components of fantasy are communicated to the reader, finding that

> For many authors the task is to anticipate readers' strategies as part of their own poetics. The core rhetorical strategy of fantasy remains the same: fantasy is constructed *with precision* through point of view. Like a perspective puzzle, if the reader stands in 'the wrong place,' the image/experience will not resolve. (xviii)

By offering four different modes by which fantasy can be relayed, Mendlesohn's approach becomes particularly helpful in analysing in how far the fantastic elements are linked to trauma in Gaiman's novels.

Mendlesohn differentiates between the portal-quest fantasy, the immersive fantasy, the intrusion fantasy and the liminal fantasy. In a portal-quest, the protagonist steps through a portal and then begins to learn about the supernatural world, whereas in an intrusion fantasy, the supernatural upsets a given (often mimetic) order. It thus seems plausible that this intrusion is connected to the protagonist's traumatisation and used as a means to generate reader interest and plot progress. Immersive fantasies offer both reader and character (who in this mode assume the same point of view) a gradual introduction into the Other World, thus 'easing' them into it and reducing the upsetting potential of fantastical elements. This idea will find further exploration in the following chapters. While the portal-quest, the immersive and the intrusion fantasy all ultimately invite the reader and character alike to accept the presence of supernatural events, the liminal fantasy comes closest to Todorov's concept of the fantastic and is as such further removed from the centre of Attebery's fuzzy set. In keeping with this, it is also logical that there are significantly fewer liminal fantasies published than for instance the more conventional portal-quest or intrusion fantasies. Mendlesohn links her notion of liminal fantasy to "a more positivist construction" of Todorov's hesitation and argues consequently more in the direction of possibilities (a text can indeed be fantasy as long as irresolution can be maintained) whereas Todorov's rhetoric seems to veer more towards a the principle of exclusion. Mendlesohn observes that "anxiety and the continued maintenance and *irresolution* of the fantastic becomes the locus of the [liminal] 'fantasy'" (xxiii). The irresolution (does a supernatural event occur or not) serves to "maintain anxiety" and is presented as deliberately "unnerving" (ibid.). While there are a great many immersive as well as intrusive fantasies, and portal-quests published, the liminal fantasy is not equally well represented.[50] It deals with the fantastic in a way that rather than becoming known, or establishing readers and characters alike with "*at least partly familiar terms*" (Manlove 1, emphasis in original), remains strange. As such, it comes closer to the sister-genre of magical realism than to fantasy in its more common variations.

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[50] Mendlesohn offers Joan Aiken's "Yes, But Today is Tuesday" (xxiv) and Kelly Link's "Lull" (183) as examples of liminal fantasies.

As Neil Gaiman primarily operates with intrusion fantasies, the liminal fantasy will play only a subordinate role in this analysis. In most of his texts, the moment of irresolution is kept short as the fantastic nature of events is soon affirmed. The reader thus only hesitates as long as the protagonist, and since the protagonist is soon introduced and accepted into the new, non-mimetic world, the hesitation is momentary rather than permanent. One exception is offered with regard to Gaiman's fairy tale rewritings, which are universally immersive in nature. As Mendlesohn argues, "the immersive fantasy seems to be described in part by what it is not. We do not enter into the immersive fantasy, we are assumed to be of it: our cognitive estrangement is both entire and negated. The immersive fantasy must be sealed; it cannot, within the confines of the story, be questioned" (xx). In all of his novelistic works, Gaiman presents the element of questioning in his characters, which is then expanded to encompass the reader, while the short story fairy tales are immersive in nature and draw on the familiar pattern and setting of the fairy tale to create the immersive reader experience.

2.1.4. Subtle Differences: Fantasy versus Magical Realism

The genres of magical realism and fantasy are closely related, but differ not only in their origin, but also in their treatment of the impossible events portrayed and in the reception the genres receive. From a writer's (as opposed to a scholar's) approach, Neil Gaiman explains that the distinction is frequently negotiated through the setting:

> if you want to [...] define fantasy as genre you might get something like 'Fantasy: That branch of fiction dealing with magic, elves, quests for or to get rid of magical artefacts, not to mention witches, wizards and so forth,' [...] [S]et your fantasies in the here and now and then, if challenged, claim to be writing Magical Realism. (Gaiman "FAQ" n.p.)

Gaiman further points out that one is more is more critically acclaimed than the other;[51] he notes that literary critics "call some fantasies 'Magical Realism' to try and

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[51] In a conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro, Gaiman offers the following as an explanation why fantasy has a problematic critical reception: "I think it came from the enormous commercial success in the Sixties, when the hippie world embraced *The Lord of the Rings* and it became an international publishing phenomenon. At Pan/Ballantine, the adult fantasy imprint, they basically just went through the archives of books that had been published in the previous 150, 200 years and looked for things that felt like *The Lord of the Rings*. And then you had people like Terry Brooks, who wrote a book called *The Sword of Shannara*, which was essentially a *Lord of the Rings* clone by somebody not nearly as good, but it sold very well. By the time fantasy had its own area in the bookshop, it was deemed inferior to

lend them respectability, like a whore who wishes to be known as a lady of the evening" (Gaiman, "Jonathan Carroll" n.p.). Terry Pratchett, with whom Gaiman collaborated on *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, also takes a sceptical stance towards magical realism and "refuses to say he writes 'magical realism' – which is like a polite way of saying you write fantasy and is more acceptable to certain people" (*January Magazine* n.p.). Likewise, fantasy and sci-fi writer Gene Wolfe defines magical realism as "fantasy written by people who speak Spanish" (Wolfe and Baber 132). These (somewhat biased) statements from writers in the field shed some light on the reception differences between fantasy and magical realism. The two related genres are placed in competition with each other, with fantasy to this day assuming a more defensive position. Gaiman's, Pratchett's, and Wolfe's statement coincides with Maggie Ann Bowers' observation that "[w]riters have been distancing themselves from the term [magical realism] whilst their publishers have increasingly used the terms to describe their works for marketing purposes" (1).[52]

So is magical realism just fantasy in a more distinguished disguise, or fantasy that has been written in the Spanish language? Certainly, the origin of the literary genre is Latin America (while the origin of the concept is Franz Roh's criticism on art in 1920s Germany), where it rose to prominence in the middle to late twentieth century. But as Bowers puts it,

> [t]o suggest that magic(al) realist writing can be found only in particular 'locations' would be misleading. It is after all a narrative mode, or a way of thinking in its most expansive form, and those concepts cannot be 'kept' in a geographic location. However, it is true to say that certain locations and countries have become associated with producing magic realist, and later magical realist writing. (31)[53]

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mimetic, realistic fiction. I think reviewers and editors did not know how to speak fantasy; were not familiar with the language, did not recognise it. I was fascinated by the way that Terry Pratchett would, on the one hand, have people like A.S. Byatt going, 'These are real books, they're saying important things and they are beautifully crafted,' and on the other he would still not get any real recognition. I remember Terry saying to me at some point, 'You know, you can do all you want, but you put in one fucking dragon and they call you a fantasy writer'" (Gaiman and Ishiguro, n.p.).

[52] Kazuo Ishiguro's recent novel *The Buried Giant* is a case in point. As with *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro has once more produced a genre text of a decidedly literary nature, but shies away from using genre markers to describe it. For more information, see Gaiman "Giant", n.p.

[53] Bowers differentiates between magic and magical realist writing, seeing "'magic realism' as the concept of the 'mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it' (Roh 1995:15) and 'magical realism' [...] as the 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane' ([Rushdie]1982:9)" (2f.). When referring to attributes that apply both, she uses magic(al) realism as an umbrella term. My understanding and use of magical realism is aligned with Rushdie's definition.

Wendy B. Faris too does not limit magical realism to the Spanish-writing authors, but instead proposes that it is a postmodern mode of writing that "reflect[s] [...] the hybrid nature of much postcolonial society" (1). She asserts its cultural significance by calling it "perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction" (ibid.). But if, following both Faris and Bowers, magical realism is more than the location of its emergence, what exactly is its key characteristic and how does it differ from fantasy?

Faris's work proves most helpful: "Very briefly defined, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvellous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (1). Drawing quite clearly on Todorov, Faris therefore offers a definition that creates the hesitation that Todorov demands as a qualifier for the fantastic on the audience level, while the non-mimetic elements work as accepted on the character-level (=marvellous). In order for a text to be classified as magical realist (like Bowers, Faris sees it as mode rather than a genre, cf. 3)[54], it further has to adhere to five characteristics:

> First, the text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the efforts to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (7)

The component of the '"irreducible element" is one that Faris' definition of magical realism and Manlove's definition of fantasy have in common. In both cases, magic cannot be explained away. While Faris includes Todorov's hesitation and calls it "unsettling doubt[ ]", ultimately, the magical realist narrative requires a resolution towards the marvellous. The non-mimetic event cannot be explained away by rational thought. The reader may temporarily experience doubt, but the magical/marvellous[55] will ultimately dominate. A text therefore belongs neither to fantasy nor to magical realism if the extraordinary can be made ordinary via reason and logic. Both modes attest to the existence and acceptance of the supernatural in the fictional world. Yet, magical realism is more focused on the element of disturbance than fantasy at large

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[54] Arva too follows the categorisation as a mode (cf. 3).

[55] I believe it is not necessary to further differentiate between the words magical, marvellous, and supernatural, as all indicate the presence of what Irwin, Manlove, and Co. have called "the impossible". They are thus used as synonyms; exceptions only to be made when referring back to Todorov's more specialised concept where the fantastic and the marvellous are constructed as deliberately separate areas.

is. In magical realism, it is the magical that disturbs and often subverts, while in fantasy, its presence is key in making sense and returning things to order.[56]

Bowers points to the oxymoronic nature of magical realist writing (cf. 1), while, as previously discussed, Jackson attests the very same quality to fantasy. And yet, despite the apparent similarities in construction, Bowers is very much against reading magical realism as a subform of fantasy. This hard line is not maintained by Sharon Sieber, who postulates that magical realism is "[w]idely recognized as a genre of the fantastic that combines dream, magic and prosaic reality" (169), that it "is a branch of the fantastic" (177)[57], and affirming once more that "[f]antasy and magical realism belong to the same guild"[58] (ibid.). Indeed, the shared component of "irreducible elements" of magical or supernatural origin leads to such a conclusion. The distinction between the related genres is thus threefold: it rests in their genesis (fantasy stemming from, as both Attebery (1980) and Mendlesohn & James (2009) argue, the genre of fairy and folk tales), their setting (magical realism excludes Secondary Worlds), and the characters' possible reactions to the presence of magical events.

One way of looking at magical realism then is to see it as a subset or subgenre of fantasy which refuses a fully realised Secondary World and instead places its actions in – as Gaiman puts it – "the here and now" ("FAQs", n.p.). In this way, the contrast between the mimetically known world and the magical occurrences is heightened. However, the sub-genre of urban or indigenous fantasy also matches this setting. As for the characters' possible reactions to the presence of magic, magical realism seems to be more limiting. Faris argues that "irreducible elements [of magic] are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any commentary by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance for their readers" (8). Likewise, Bowers finds that magical realism "relies [...] most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings" (3), whereas in a fantasy, wonder and surprise are acceptable reactions and the supernatural is only gradually accepted as the characters deal with the suspension of

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[56] This holds true even for intrusion fantasies in which the supernatural disturbs one world by leaking in from another. Here, the supernatural is also needed as a counter-mechanism to bring about order once more, thus affirming Tolkien's ideas of recovery and consolation.
[57] She does not follow the Todorovian distinction between fantasy and the fantastic.
[58] Sieber's essay on "Magical Realism" was published in the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy*, thus perhaps forestalling her categorisation.

disbelief that is also required of the reader. The characters' surprise, delight, and fear mirror the reader's sense of wonder in the characters, especially in what Mendlesohn refers to as intrusion fantasies. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) serves as an excellent example. As Harry learns about magic and his ancestry, so do the readers. His surprise at and delight in owl, broom, and magic school is re-experienced, just as his fear of Fluffy, the three-headed dog, or ultimately, Lord Voldemort is. In a magical realist mode of writing, Harry's reaction would not be one of surprise, but instead, as Faris notes, a simple acceptance, thus losing much of both the text's charm and enchantment.

Sieber finds that "magical realism is tied to the dream world in that it represents the site where the conscious and unconscious worlds meet" (172), which brings us back to Jackson's approach of fantasy[59] as a literature of conscious and unconscious desires. Tolkien too notes the importance of imagination and argues that

> Fantasy [here referring to the mental capacity of imagining impossible worlds via art], the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desire dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood, intruding into my relatively safe world, in which it was, for instance, possible to read stories in peace of mind, free from fear. (41f.)

While both fantasy and magical realism create worlds in which the desired impossible can safely be placed without endangering the reader, one could argue that in magical realist narratives, because of their mandated "here and now" setting (it is optional in fantasy), the magic is more dangerous the more closely it relates to mimetic experiences, but less remarked upon because the narrator presents it as utterly ordinary. We might also note that the desire Jackson attributes to fantasy might in fact be applicable to all of speculative fiction. This is supported by Jackson's refusal to narrowly define fantasy as a genre. If magical realism, the Gothic, the fairy tale, science fiction, horror, etc. are broadly categorised by the umbrella term of speculative fiction, then the notion of desire is equally rampant in each sub-genre. Nevertheless, I would argue once more in support of a more exclusive genre theory and return to Fowler's notion of topical invention, postulating that while of course genres merge, there are markers that leave them distinct from one another, and that allow for a genre hierarchy in the text. Despite their similar inclusion of the non-

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[59] For criticism of Jackson's approach, see Attebery, *Strategies* 21-23.

mimetic, genesis, setting, and tone allow for a differentiation between magical realism and fantasy.

This distinction also becomes significant with regard to trauma: unlike fantasy, magical realism, has been frequently linked to trauma literature. Its ability to relay trauma narratives has for instance been extensively analysed by Eugene Arva in *The Traumatic Imagination*[60]. Arva argues that magical realism is not a merely postcolonial phenomenon, but also belongs "to world literature in all cultural contexts, especially those having experienced trauma of one kind or another" (Faris, foreword to Arva, ix). Arva's definition of magical realism is much aligned with that of Faris. Arva's approach centres on using and defining different "shock chronotypes" (26) and their negotiation in magical realist narratives as a means of grappling with a traumatic reality. These shock chronotypes are centred on historical events such as slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust, as well as "geo-historical frameworks characterised by extreme events" (ibid.). Arva proposes that by expressly dealing with these four chronotypes, magical realism exceeds literary escapism and instead functions as a means of "re-creating, transmitting, and ultimately coping with" traumatic events (5).

A similar argument can be extended to the fantasy genre, albeit not on the macro-historical level that Arva uses in his reading of magical realism, but on the micro level of personalised, character-driven and postmodern narratives. One of the standard models to narrate these highly personalised narratives that deal with a single protagonist rather than with a community-oriented trauma is the character-centric *bildungsroman*, whose origin, definition, and development will be discussed in the next chapter.

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[60] To date, there is no study explicitly focusing on trauma and fantasy as often conjoined genres, even though "trauma psychology frequently resorts to the gothic or supernatural to articulate post-traumatic effects" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 98). Some fantasy adjacent genres fare better. Luckhurst, in his exceptional *The Trauma Question* (2008), briefly touches on Stephen King's *The Shining*, which can be seen as at least borderline fantasy (the first genre associated with the text is horror). Cf. Luckhurst, *Question* 97-105. Recent contributions to the zombie genre find discussion in Avril Horner's "Apocalypses Now. Collective Trauma, Globalisation and the New Gothic Sublime" (in *Trauma in Contemporary Literature*).

2.2. Between Education and Image: The *Bildungsroman*

> "Daß doch die Jugend immer zwischen den Extremen schwankt!"
> Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* 44

It is impossible to discuss the *bildungsroman* in any iteration without paying homage to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre* (1795/96). In Goethe's expansive second novel, readers follow young Wilhelm from childhood to maturity as he embarks on a career in the theatre against his father's wishes and leaves his home and his former love Mariane behind. On his journey, he encounters the mysterious harper and young Mignon, whom he befriends, and falls in with the Society of the Tower, which seeks to educate and shape him according to their ideals. While Mignon pines for Wilhelm, he falls in and out of love with various women before finally marrying the noble Natalie, who too is associated with the Tower Society, thus uniting bourgeoisie and nobility in an Enlightenment tale of growth and education. Even though the novel has perhaps not held up as well as some of Goethe's other works – the perennially attractive *Faust* in particular comes to mind – its influence on the genre cannot be dismissed.[61] In *Season of Youth – The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974), Jerome Buckley calls the *Lehrjahre*

> a curious medley, without center or consistency; dull exposition and prosy asides jostle lively scenes from Bohemian life among the itinerant troupers; wit collides with sentiment, short dramatic ballads with long irrelevant interpolated tales and large tracts of cloudy occultism. (10)

Despite this rather acid commentary on the novel, Buckley admits that "whatever its structural weakness or ambiguity of tone, *Wilhelm Meister* has established itself in literary history as the prototype of the bildungsroman" (12). Some scholars even argue that not only is *Wilheim Meister* the prototypical German *bildungsroman*, it is actually the only one. Jeffrey Sammons argues that the bildungsroman is actually a "phantom"[62] genre ("Mystery" 25) of 18th and 19th German writing: much hailed, but outside of *Wilhelm Meister* seldom truly found. Sammons sees Goethe's novel as having a distinct Enlightenment idea about the *bildung* in *bildungsroman* that does not find a match in German writing until Hesse and Mann in the 20th century (24).

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[61] For an insightful evaluation of the novel's role in the *bildungsroman* genre at large, please see Steinecke, Hartmut. "The Novel and the Individual: The Significance of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in the Debate about the Bildungsroman".

[62] For more information, see also Saariluoma 35-42, who offers an overview of the debate, and refers to the *bildungsroman* as a "missing genre" (7), but unlike Sammons, ultimately points to its existence as a prominent literary category within German writing.

Positioning "the social and humanistic optimism without which the scheme of *Wilhelm Meister* collapses" (23) at the heart of the novel, he argues that "*Wilhelm Meister* leaves many visible traces in subsequent German novels, but that does not make them *Bildungsromane*" (12). In his influential study *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti however claims that the *bildungsroman* as a genre disappeared in 1914. He links this to the despair felt by young men during WWI and posits that there is no way to write a future-centric *bildungsroman* when Europe's youth is dying in the trenches (cf. 229, 233-234). Moretti thus argues that trauma effectively killed the late genre:

> The trauma introduced discontinuity within novelistic temporality, generating centrifugal tendencies towards the short story and the lyric; it disrupted the unity of the Ego, putting the language of the self-consciousness out of work; it dismantled neutralized spaces, originating a regressive semiotic anxiety. In the end nothing was left of the form of the *Bildungsroman*: a phase of Western socialization had come to an end, a phase the *Bildungsroman* has both represented and contributed to. (244)

This brief survey of the debate surrounding the genre leaves us with a number of paradoxes: *Wilhelm Meister* is the prototype of the *bildungsroman*, the bildungsroman never really existed as a significant genre in 19th century German writing, yet it died in the 20th century.[63] This begs the question: what does this genre with its somewhat troubled existence offer to current literary analysis?

In the following, I will attempt to isolate the peculiar characteristics of the *bildungsroman* and argue that it has proliferated in late 20th and 21st century writing outside its original realist scope, and in conjunction with other genres. This line of argument is in keeping with Elizabeth Abel's observation that

> [i]t has become tradition among critics of the Bildungsroman to expand the concept of the genre: first beyond the German prototypes, then beyond historical circumscription, now beyond the notion of Bildung as male and beyond the form of the developmental plot as a linear, foregrounded narrative structure. (Abel et al. 13f.)

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[63] The *bildungsroman* can be understood as closely connected to the time it was produced in: Wagner declares that "Noch mehr als der gewöhnliche Roman ist der Bildungsroman mit dem jeweiligen Leben der Zeit verflochten; er spiegelt den Strom der Gedanken, die Ereignisse, das Streben und die Wünsche der Zeit". (15)] Sammons argues in a similar direction when he points out that "the concept of Bildung is inherently bourgeois; it carries with it many assumptions about the autonomy and relative integrity if the self, its potential self-creative energies, its relative range of options within material, social, even psychological determinants. It may be that in the modern world it has become increasingly difficult, outside of sheer ideology and myth, to sustain these assumptions" ("Nonspecialists" 42). Fantasy here would then allow for a creation, reading, and setting of the novel within the *bildungsroman* frame even outside the temporal restrictions of the time of the genre's genesis. In this reading, fantasy then qualifies as myth according to Sammons.

In the spirit of this critical tradition, I seek to argue that the *bildungsroman*, the elusive phantom genre, offers a universal plot pattern suited to both expansion and adaptation.

2.2.1. Etymology, Translation, and (Inter-) National Application

When trying to determine a genre's existence, it seems prudent not only to engage with its prototype, but also with its name. Gutjahr offers an etymological approach, pointing out that the German *Bildung* originally derived from *Bild*, indicating the trajectory from image to education that many novels follow (cf. 9), whereas Fritz Martini, building on Morgenstern and Dilthey, who coined the term (albeit separately), focus more on *Bildung* in the sense of cultivation (cf. 5).[64] As James Hardin thus observes with regard to the multitude of meanings, "*Bildung* is a slippery concept" (xii).

Due to its obvious German origin, Gutjahr positions the *bildungsroman* as an explicitly and exclusively German genre, but allows for the translation and use of the "terminus technicus" (7) into other languages such as English and French (9f.).[65] Such a nation-centric reading would of course render an analysis of specific contemporary *bildungsroman* fantasies – written by an English author no less – moot and is one disputed by a number of scholars in the field. Randolph Shaffner for instance contests this restriction in *The Apprenticeship Novel. A Study of the "Bildungsroman" as a Regulative Type in Western Literature with a Focus on Three Classic Representatives by Goethe, Maugham, and Mann* and points out that "the English novelists, [...] have now gained an entirely respectable second position in the type's accumulative production" (30). In *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle likewise undertakes a reading of English and Irish modernist novels as *bildungsromane* and finds that the genre is "enormously elastic" (4) while maintaining a certain "resiliency" (5). He sees this resiliency not so much in a novel's country of

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[64] The term has also been connected to religious notions as outlined in Genesis (imago/dei, man created in the image of God), cf. Meyer-Drawe 162.

[65] James Hardin, in his introduction to *Reflection and Action*, claims that "[c]ertainly, no one these days would characterize the Bildungsroman as an exclusively German genre, though such an assumption was not uncommon in the Wilhelmian epoch" (xxiii). It should at this point be noted that Hardin published his edited collection sixteen years *before* Gutjahr's now commonly used textbook which maintains precisely this notion of national literary ownership, thus showing that the term is still highly contested today.

origin, but in the composition of a text which features "autobiographical narrative, problems of socialization, the influence of mentors and 'instrumental' women, [and] the problem of vocation" (Castle 4). If we can thus find ample evidence that the *bildungsroman* exists not only outside *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, but also outside Germany, the claim of a phantom genre can be put to rest for now, merely leaving us with the issue of the generic term and its difficult translation.

In his attempt to provide "a functional definition of the genre" (ix) and to claim and establish it outside German literary production, Shaffner finds that "[t]he English equivalent of the term 'Bildungsroman' poses a linguistic problem" and one that is also encountered here, namely that "the English language lacks an exact expression for the German concept" (3) of *bildung*. He reluctantly "accept[s] 'apprenticeship novel' as the nearest English equivalent", while pointing to "[t]he exact literal translation [...] 'novel of formation'" (4); terms which Gutjahr also offers as the aforementioned *termini technici*. Using the more general novel of formation, however, would take away from explicitly referencing what is generally identified as the genre's prototype, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (cf. 3-4) and reducing the allusion to images.[66] Hans Wagner, in his analysis of the English *bildungsroman*, offers the term "life novel", but like Shaffner, ultimately settles on "apprenticeship novel" (13). Life novels seems to broad a category to usefully describe this particular form of writing and has failed to garner traction in the field. It can therefore be disregarded in favour of the apprenticeship novel, or the now accepted German term Bildungsroman in English usage[67]. Nevertheless, the term points to a more liberal understanding of the age of the protagonist and moves away from the focus on early youth and instead sees *bildung* as a lifelong process.

The term educational novel has often been used as an umbrella term to describe the "two specialized German terms: 'Erziehungsroman' (educational novel) and 'Bildungsroman' (apprenticeship novel)" (Shaffner 9), but it makes sense to tease the two genres apart despite their many shared traits. Gutjahr further positions the *bildungsroman* between both the *entwicklungsroman* and the *erziehungsroman*, noting the great similarity between the three related genres. Hardin proposes that the application of the term *bildungsroman* has become too broad and that many texts

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[66] For an overview of the genre's canonical texts, see Gutjahr as well as Shaffner (31-35). For an overview that specifically tackles the English variant of the genre, see Wagner.

[67] The English usage consequently favours b̲ildungsroman over B̲ildungsroman (capitalised); a preference which is reflected in my own terminological use.

subsumed under it actually fall into the category of the *entwicklungsroman*, which encompasses all "novels that treat the confrontation of the individual with the world and the protagonist's maturation and development" (xvi). This is a valid contribution, but since the *entwicklungsroman*, as outlined by Shaffner, usually follows its protagonist to his death (12), many novels are disqualified. The age or rather life span of the protagonist thus seems to remain of vital importance in the theoretical approaches to this type of literature. While it does not necessarily trace the transition from teenager to adult,[68] even though it is common, a focus on younger years as opposed to middle and old age must certainly be observed.[69] In *The Adolescent Idea. Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination*, Patricia Meyer Spacks links this to the notion of desire within which adolescents exists: "They want intensely: want love, excitement, gain, supremacy, challenge – whatever" (293). Desire, she insinuates, makes for good storytelling with heightened narrative stakes. Yet, she finds that this poses a conundrum since the desirous youth changes its mind frequently, and decisions fail to make the same lasting impression as when carried out by an adult (15). But ultimately, Meyer Spacks postulates that "[s]omething in the notion of youth, clearly, supports the fantasies that make fiction" (ibid.). Perhaps this is due to three elements she sees as pivotal in the concept of adolescence: "exploration, becoming, and pain" (3), which serve as key ingredients in thrilling coming of age stories.

While the *erziehungsroman* is more aligned with the *bildungsroman* in terms of the age question than the *entwicklungsroman* is, its focus on a mentor and the dependence between teacher and student limits the philosophical meandering so characteristic of the genre's prototypical *Wilhelm Meister*. In the *erziehungsroman*, the young protagonist does not seek to teach himself, but is being taught instead (13). A formal education is at the centre if the *erziehungsroman*, whereas it is one of the many possible settings of the *bildungsroman*, which generally places a stronger "focus on self-development" (Shaffner 9, see also Wagner 14) in the framework "of all the influences that the world can offer" (11). In the Goetheian tradition, the *bildungsroman* charts the self-governed development of an autonomous character (cf. Saariluoma 200f.). This is not to say that this process is not influenced by other

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[68] Howarth has pointed out that this corresponds roughly to Erik Erikson's sixth phase, which spans what he calls early adulthood, i.e. the years from 20-40 (cf. 15).

[69] In the following chapters, I will also discuss in how far the confrontation with trauma and the supernatural mitigates the age question.

characters, as it is stems from a continuous exchange with surroundings and influences (201), but there is no one single authority figure decisively leading the way all novel long.[70]

Whereas the *erziehungsroman* is thus about adapting to the morals and social norms proscribed by the teacher figures[71], the *bildungsroman* is about finding one's own sense of right and wrong, learning to differentiate between good and bad behaviour, and being conscious of doing so (cf. Shaffner 11).[72] As such, a *bildungsroman* is therefore primarily about the "inner life" (Shaffner 9, see also Gutjahr 38) of its protagonist and stands in contrast with outward-centric plots of for instance adventure novels (cf. Gutjahr 43). Wagner goes so far as to argue that due to the focus on the protagonist's inner life, his external circumstances and the plot as such play only a subordinate role (cf. 15). I however argue that the fantasy *bildungsroman* as written by for instance Gaiman precisely unites these two modes of narration, the *bildungsroman*'s retrospection and the adventure novel's event-oriented plot. This is however not to say that the *bildungsroman* is only about introspection – it features elements of romance, adventure, biography, but what sets it apart from these genres is its strong focus on becoming rather than being (cf. Shaffner 7). Wilhelm Meister for instance embarks on a journey to join the world of the theatre, falls in love with Shakespeare's writing, meets and engages with mysterious characters of decidedly Gothic origins, joins a secret society, has numerous romantic dalliances, and unbeknownst to him, even fathers a child. Tschirner logically proposes that the *bildungsroman* is a synthesis of adventure novel and sentimental subjective novel (48) and that in the fantasy *bildungsroman*, the fantasy genre's often formulaic nature is enriched by the *bildungsroman* introspective and psychological elements (ibid.).

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[70] One can make an argument for the Society of the Tower, unbeknownst to the novel's protagonist, assuming precisely this sort of educating and governing role behind the scenes, thus calling Wilhelm's own and self-realised *bildung* into question. Following this reading, Wilhelm not so much educates himself, but is secretly educated by the Society of the Tower.

[71] This is not to say that the *bildungsroman* does not use any teacher figures; they are however encountered as part of the journey rather than in a prescribed institutional setting.

[72] Shaffner posits that the awareness of character formation on the level of the protagonist is what differentiates the *bildungsroman* and the novel of development (cf. Shaffner 12).

In the *bildungsroman*, the plot follows its protagonist from youth to adulthood, highlighting his (for the protagonists are traditionally male, cf. Gutjahr 8)[73] maturation as he leaves his home and embarks on a journey into the unknown. Howe summarises the plot as follows:

> The adolescent hero of the typical 'apprentice' novel sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work effectively. This is the apprenticeship pattern in the barest possible outline. Needless to say, the variations of it are endless. (4)

One of the variations is brought about by combining the pattern with the quintessential element of fantasy – the mimetically impossible, which poses new challenges for the protagonists and complicates the question of finding a place in the world. Through the conflicts and contacts *bildungsroman* protagonists encounter on their journeys, they slowly begin to form their own view of the world and may have to re-evaluate the events that have previously educated them on moral issues. This culminates in their arrival not only in a new place, but more importantly, in a new station in life where they can live according to the conventions of their time[74] and draw on the morals internalised on the journey (8).

Shaffner – arguing that "the apprenticeship novel restricts its scope to the duration solely of the apprenticeship" (16), thus differing from the developmental novel – proposes a structuralist approach and usefully subdivides the *bildungsroman* into three stages strongly evocative of Victor Turner's anthropological work on rites of passage.[75] The first stage posits the protagonists as individuals on a path that might lead to alienation, the second phase offering a reintegration into the community, and the third featuring a metaphysical challenge by confronting the protagonist with the topic of death, causing him/her to exceed their previous powers and positions (cf. Shaffner 109-10). In a realist *bildungsroman*, the confrontation with death means that

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[73] The *bildungsroman* began as a male genre, but has been reclaimed by women writers in the 19th century (*Jane Eyre* comes to mind). In today's use, the *bildungsroman* is no longer necessarily gendered.

[74] *Wilhelm Meister* for instance is strongly influenced by Enlightenment ideas of education and citizenship.

[75] For more information, see Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), and van Gennep, Arnold, *Les rites de passage* (1909). Turner builds on van Gennep's work and expands it.

someone is dying or close to it, in a fantasy novel, of course, it may also refer to re-birth scenarios.

> The three stages – in stressing the individual, social, and the metaphysical worlds – entail confrontations, respectively, with life's illusions, its values, and death [...,] each encounter proves necessary to a fully realized apprenticeship. (Shaffner 109f.)

This triparte model is used not only in the canonical and classical *bildungsromane* that Shaffner draws on (*Wilheim Meisters Lehrjahre*, *Der Zauberberg*, *Of Human Bondage*), but is also common in fantasy novels. Judith Dangel observes that protagonists in fantasy novels frequently embark on their developmental journey along van Gennep's lines by crossing borders and stepping through portals (cf. Dangel 445). Historically, this approach is also apparent in chivalric romance[76], which in turn can be seen as another of fantasy's ancestors, thus already intimating a close relationship between the *bildungsroman* and the fantasy genre via universal plot patterns.

Nevertheless, the *bildungsroman* is more complex than a tripartite plot division suggests. Working towards a more specific definition, Shaffner then proposes an astounding 23 (!) fundamental principles. These principles, which contain a few redundancies, include the aforementioned focus on inner life (17), as well as both "a striving for 'savoir vivre,' or knowledge of the world" and "a critical view" thereof, and naturally the quintessential "presentation of individual development".[77] One key

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[76] Following Abrams succinct definition, the chivalric romance was originally a tale in verse, but later also presented in prose. Revolving around a quest motif, it often deals with a knight's attempt to win a lady's heart by saving her from (supernatural) perils. In doing so, "it stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honor, mercifulness to an opponent, and exquisite and elaborate manners" (25). Most notably, the romance "shifts the supernatural [from the world of myths and gods] to this world, and makes much of the mysterious effect of magic, spells, and enchantments" (ibid.).

[77] The other principles are "the presentation of an individual who profits from the lessons of the world" (17f.), "a focus on the how and why of the process of development" (18), "an obligatory acknowledgement of both human and natural influences", "a self-formation according to internal purposes" (even though this point seems largely identical to the tendency toward contemplation Shaffner offers as the first principle), and "a consciousness in the attempt to achieve a recognizable typical goal" (even though Shaffner does not offer further specifications, marriage and the elevation of the protagonist's status from apprentice to master seem likely candidates). "[A] harmonious cultivation of a multifarious personality" is as important as "the attainment of the goal of formation prior to death", "a recognition of the formation as open-ended" (whether this is on the character, narrator, or reader level is not made clear), "an organic development according to inner capacity", and "a presentation of the universal within the process of a particular human life". All of this is communicated via "the portrayal of a gradation of successive stages or steps in the course of a human life", wherein "a striving for organic, ethical, and aesthetic formation accompanied by an attempt to reconcile oneself with reality" produces "the view of art solely as a partial means toward the unfolding of personality", "an archetypal conception of Man as the ultimate goal", and finally, "a special attention to the organization of the process and plot of the novel" (18).

element in the organization of the plot is that it presents the attainment of a previously established goal at its close (16), while simultaneously refuting narrative closure in the sense that the protagonist's life is not yet at an end. As Liisa Saariluoma observes,

> Das sinnvolle Ganze muss immanent und reflexiv, durch die Gegenüberstellung des Vergangenen mit dem Gegenwärtigen und dem zukünftig Geahnten gefunden werden. Das bedeutet, dass die Sinnbestimmung unumgänglich ein zeitlich ausgedehnter Prozess ist. (188)

Reaching the aforementioned goal takes time, and demands both reflection and action (see Hardin's similarly titled volume on the *bildungsroman*). Yet the attainment of the goal can be understood to merely set the stage for the life the protagonist has now been prepared for. Fantasy literature often conflates the success of the protagonist's personal development with the simultaneous defeat of the primary antagonist, thus including the adventure novel's orientation towards action into the established *bildungsroman* character development. Since the *bildungsroman* usually ends with its protagonist happily situated in a new and fitting environment, where he can prosper and make most of his positive qualities,[78] Shaffner consequently argues for an understanding of the *bildungsroman* as a kind of "forenovel" (27). Once the apprenticeship years have passed, the hero is equipped for the events of adult life and could theoretically feature in another novel that tracks what has become of him in his master years.[79]

Despite showing awareness that descriptive lists often veer into prescriptive ideals, Shaffner offers seven additional supplemental principles that he sees as being at the core of the *bildungsroman*. Incidentally, these are the ones that easily allow for the intersectional reading of the *bildungsroman* and the fantasy genre, as they for instance call for a "mastery of circumstances", which is a common trope in the fantasy genre, where the protagonist must face adversities, be they self-imposed or otherwise inflicted before attaining the success and control (over possible supernatural powers) that is so ardently craved. Further, "self-reliance" and "earnest, purposeful activity as opposed to dilettantism" are needed on the path of becoming, again aligning the *bildungsroman* with the frequent mode of quest fantasy wherein the young protagonist becomes a capable master. Attributed with an "insatiable yearning and

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[78] This matches that the fantasy novel's heroes are also commonly relatively young when the antagonist is defeated and eucatastrophe brought about.
[79] See *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821/29).

striving for life's meaning", "a deepening consciousness of human experience", and "a release from the bondage of false ideals", the hero sets out to complete his journey and in the process, frequently betters the society he is a member of. All of this is carried out via the "continuous trial-and-error development of the natural gifts incipient in man's essence", leading to a successful "self-expression" (18). For the purpose of this study, Shaffner's supplemental principles are certainly more relevant and applicable than the original ones, which seem to double many elements and could have easily been reduced. Nevertheless, in particular the stress on the "inner life" serves to explain how the hero figure (if one can call it that) of the *bildungsroman* is constructed.

The construction of the typical *bildungsroman* protagonist in the German tradition seems far removed from the heroes of high fantasy and more aligned with Tolkien's preferred protagonists, the refreshingly normal and characteristically unheroic hobbits who only develop from protagonist to heroes on their journeys rather than starting out as such. The *bildungsroman* protagonist is usually connected to (at least one) love interest, learns by trial and error (Gutjahr 46), and demonstrates a strong inclination to passivity rather than activity (47). The latter has partly to do with the aforementioned inclination of contemplation and reception, and partly to do with the circumstantial nature of the protagonist's journey in which the next developmental step is often caused by encounters with new allies or enemies, in short, people who then envelop him in new adventures. Drawing on Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg's early theories on the novelistic form,[80] Saariluoma argues that the protagonist's development must be of a causal and rational nature, while matching the spirit of Enlightenment (29)[81] that stands at the heart of *Wilhelm Meister*. Centred very much on the protagonist, the *bildungsroman* is thus a character novel that features the protagonist's development via his experiences and at least has to aim at[82] (if not provide) a harmonious outcome (cf. Saariluoma 31). At the end of the *bildungsroman*'s narrative, the protagonist "disappears from the book's view, a

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[80] von Blanckenburg makes the demand that novels need to depict their central characters' inner life so as to engage the reader, a notion that is strikingly similar to the *bildungsroman*'s key component. For more information, see Jürgen Jacobs' *Wilhelm Meister und seine Brüder. Untersuchungen zum deutschen Bildungsroman* (64-69).

[81] Meaning the quest towards reason, logic, and equality.

[82] Saariluoma discusses how research has treated the expectation of the *bildungsroman*'s happy outcome and the suggestion that the happy outcome need not necessarily be achieved, as it suffices to formulate the expectation of it and a desire for a *bildungsideal* at the novel's outset (cf. 8).

quiescent master in the art of forming his own life" (Shaffner 27). This is tied to the protagonist deciding on a world view and set of morals that allows him to structure his future life (cf. Wagner 13). The negotiation of the protagonist's passivity is an interesting conundrum in the action-heavy fantasy novel. As the following analysis will show, it is often connected to a previous traumatisation and as the protagonists engage with their traumatic past while on the road to a possibly heroic future, they slowly shift from passive to active and thus become agents of their own destiny.

The *bildungsroman*, other than the adventure novel, presents life not "as a succession of disconnected moments", but rather "as a series of interconnected links in a chain" (Shaffner 7). This idea of interconnection intimates the terms of fate/destiny, which form a common trope in the fantasy genre and thus further allow for a linked reading of the *bildungsroman* and fantasy literature. Many heroes in (especially contemporary) fantasy narratives are on a quest of becoming; it is the development and the ensuing potential for dramatization and conflict that render a narrative captivating.

While the application of the *bildungsroman* to the fantasy genre is, especially with regards to Shaffner's principles, fairly straight-forward, one nevertheless encounters a problem as "[t]he hero […] surfaces as no hero at all but rather an auspicious recipient of good fortune" (Shaffner 19). While this good fortune is prevalent in many a canonical *bildungsroman* (one need only think of Jane Eyre's fortuitous sudden inheritance), the fantasy novel as such does set out to create heroes who fight (be it literally or metaphorically) adversity and who have to attain their good fortune not by luck, but by often nearly fatal encounters with their antagonists, thus tying the genre even more closely to Booker's overcoming the monster plot. Where Wilhelm Meister advances unharmed, never really in danger (death being reserved for the female characters he encounters), the stakes in fantasy novels are usually higher as the hero/ine is exposed to death and danger.

So is this then the limit of applying the pattern of one genre to another? Here I would like to refer once more to Kenneth Millard and his assertion that a genre's development is a "dynamic process in which the rules of the game are interrogated and disputed by innovative texts that challenge their generic affiliations" (ibid.). These dissonances between the fate of the protagonist of a classic *bildungsroman* and that of a protagonist in a contemporary fantasy novel fall precisely into this category

and further attest to a readership's desire for heightened stakes in narrative prose that has become even more central since trauma has taken centre stage as a both a motif in the fantasy *bildungsroman* and as a motive for its protagonist's psychological development. It however also once more points to Fowler's notion of topical invention which allows for the inclusion of new elements without a necessary integration of all genre markers, thus evading a complete synthesis between the influencing and the influenced genre.

2.2.2. Coming of Age

Millard poises the question that is essential for the *bildungsroman*, namely "what […] a true and satisfactory achievement of adulthood consist of, and how can it be known or evaluated" (154). In the case of fantasy novels, this may be the simultaneous defeat of the so-called 'big bad', and the overcoming of personal issues that the hero confronted on the literal and metaphorical journey to the final battle. The generic conventions here make the identification of adulthood easier, but what also feeds into it is the slow mutation of the contemporary *bildungsroman* into the more generic coming of age story. The usage of 'coming of age novel' to describe contemporary variations/renditions of the classical *bildungsroman* is rather common.[83] Coming of age "is used to mean 'to reach full legal status', and is commonly seen in studies of the bildungsroman" (Millard 4). It is perhaps a question of emphasis that sets the two terms apart: coming of age is also more closely connected to the notion of physically reaching the legal age of adulthood, whereas the *bildungsroman* focuses more on the psychological development that has to take place before the ideal of *bildun*g and thus adulthood can be attained. Castle finely differs between *bildung* and coming of age, finding that *bildung* speaks to "self-development", "self-formation", "self-cultivation", whereas coming of age indicates "socialization" and "social mobility" (7). The peculiar contradictory characteristic of *bildung* "harmoniz[es] desire with history, reflection with action" (Castle 11). Coming of age thus seems a more general term, while *bildung* contains, in the same adventurous process of developing one's identity, a ponderous and reflexive element.

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[83] See Wightman, who evaluates the terms as having shifted in use over time, but essentially meaning the same: "The bildungsroman – also referred to at different times as the 'novel of development,' 'novel of formation,' and 'apprenticeship novel,' and more recently 'coming-of-age novel'" (74).

What Millard, discussing a host of American *bildungsromane*, also puts forward is that even though coming of age usually denotes adolescence[84], meaning the age from twelve to nineteen, age might not be the best qualifier to categorise novels as belonging to the genre (4-5). Wondering whether perhaps today some experiences that traditionally feed into a coming of age are made later in life, Millard carefully posits that "[p]erhaps, in fact, there is a trend in the bildungsroman of the early twenty-first century for characters to come of age in their twenties" (5). This is linked to the notion of a perennial youth which continuously postpones any kind of coming of age, instead clinging to the characteristics of pre-adult life, such as Meyer Spacks' suggestion of heightened desire. But despite the age margin shifting upwards, I would argue that the process at the heart of the *bildungsroman* is nevertheless completed and the developmental potential thus actualised.

Kent Baxter sees the coming of age novel as an umbrella category that encompasses what he calls "modern incarnations", "the bildungsroman, the novel of adolescence, and the young adult novel" (6). The distinction between the three sub-genres remains fuzzy, and Baxter is more concerned with outlining how all have in common that they "reference the fundamental transition from pre-adulthood to adulthood" (8), and, much like the classical *bildungsroman*, place an emphasis on "individuation and self-knowledge" (6). Baxter argues that the coming of age in novels occurs on three planes simultaneously, namely that of individual development, from a narrative standpoint, and from a cultural/historical one (3). His approach is thus strikingly similar to Shaffner's division into "individual, social, and the metaphysical worlds" (109f.) for the classic *bildungsroman*. Baxter proposes:

> From the standpoint of individual development, characters often come of age by overcoming an external circumstance or an internal character flaw; moving into adulthood in this case means finding one's place in the world or overcoming a flaw that is holding one back from living a fully effective life. From a narrative standpoint, the coming of age of an individual character or a number of characters often provides closure to a source of tension or conflict; it is not uncommon for the protagonist to encounter a 'blocking character' who demands evidence that the protagonist has grown up. From a cultural/historical standpoint, these coming-of-age moments are often signified by rites of passage that resonate with the readership of the text. (3)

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[84] The term adolescence as referencing a specific period of life with specific markers of behaviour was put to wide use by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904 (cf. Mintz 61).

This model is immensely helpful and will be used recurrently in this book to discuss how the different coming of age processes rely on and inform not only each other, but also the reader. Especially the notion of the blocking character, who provides a final test to affirm the protagonist's development, can be traced as a key component in fantasy literature.

Even though with regards to the age question, Baxter's model stands in interesting contrast to Millard's approach that largely disregards age as the determining factor and is more concerned with the general notion of development, it is helpful to keep in mind that the rites of passage undertaken by the protagonists are chosen to "resonate with the readership".[85] In the following, it will be shown that precisely because of the universality of the rites of passage[86], more broadly understood as the rites of becoming, they can be cut out of the strictly adolescent setting and be usefully employed as plot devices in novels for all ages.

2.2.3. Coming to Terms: the *Bildungsroman* Revisited

So where does this plethora of theoretical terms leave us?[87] I will base my approach on Millard's broader inclusion of age groups, combined with the *bildungsroman*'s essential notion of becoming rather than being. This book makes use of the *bildungsroman* not as a highly exclusive genre (be the exclusion based on age or nationality), but more as a plot pattern that can be traced in many contemporary novels. As such, it fuels the action-oriented plot rather than (as Wagner posited) substituting it. The term coming of age will in the following be used to further describe the process of becoming and to refer to the cultural-anthropological concept of the liminal state and the notion of inbetweenness. The *bildungsroman*'s English substitute term, apprenticeship novel, will only find application in the discussion

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[85] Langford further argues that coming of age narratives are particularly popular because their readers experience it vicariously; Langford here refers to Tolkien and his immense "popularity among adolescents" (4). While this is an astute observation, the doubling of coming of age (on reader and plot level) does not explain the large popularity of fantasy among adults.

[86] Baxter identifies "marriage, graduation, home ownership, and getting a full-time job" as "events that mark a movement into adulthood". So does "attaining various legal rights" (3).

[87] At this point, one must mention that many critics have argued against overextending the use of the term *bildungsroman*; if one applies a narrow reading, then this project is certainly guilty of doing so. However, the *bildungsroman* is a useful form to trace plot patterns that are becoming more and more common in contemporary fantasy writing. By consciously or unconsciously drawing on the *bildungsroman*, the patterns nevertheless help to elevate the schematic writing fantasy is often accused of into slightly more literary realms (literary here of course denoting what is called 'high brow' fiction).

pertaining specifically to novels that focus on a master-apprentice relationship, such as Gaiman's *American Gods*.

The appearance of the non-mimetic in Gaiman's novels is conjoined with the protagonist's developmental process, thus necessitating a journey plot that situates the characters in their new environment. Age thus becomes relative, while experience becomes paramount. As Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward propose, the *bildungsroman* is

> concerned with a protagonist whose development comes about in the following ways: by the influence of external forces, either God or the outside world; by the protagonist's imposition of innate potential on the world; or, most commonly, through a combination of both outward and inward shaping of the protagonist and his/her world. When perceived as a spectrum, the Bildungsroman's center can be identified as the point at which there is a balanced give and take or mutual exchange between individual and environment. (170)

This plot is by no means restricted to realist writing and underpins all of the novels analysed in the following. Rather than feeding into notions of blissful escapism, the combination of fantasy and the *bildungsroman* emphasizes the challenges of growing up and of being, becoming, and remaining an adult. One can be an adult in the primary world, with all rites of passage completed, and then upon the introduction of the fantastic, a second wave of development is necessitated. The introduction of the "irreducible element" is thus a rupture in the established world and poses the protagonist with new challenges that are often traumatic in nature. The particular combination of fantasy and the *bildungsroman* thus initially seems to chart a process of destabilisation.

2.3. Trauma and Trauma Narratives

> "I think you are wrong to want a heart. It makes most people unhappy. If you only knew it, you are in luck not to have a heart."
> Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* 116

The Tinman's desire to have a heart is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he thinks that it will finally equip him with the ability to love, but on the other hand, he is warned that it will also put him in danger of immense pain. While *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* does not follow through on this dire warning and in fact eschews any

extended discussion of emotional suffering, this short moment already hints at the danger of experiencing feelings beyond one's comprehension.

This is precisely what narratives of trauma concern themselves with. Etymologically, the term stems from the Greek, where trauma translates to "an injury inflicted on a body" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 3) "by an external agent" (Luckhurst, *Question* 2). While one still, particularly in medicine, where the term originated in English in the 17th century (cf. ibid.), speaks of physical injuries as being traumatic ones (such as head injuries being called 'trauma to the head'), the psychological use of the term has become equally widespread. Additionally, trauma has come to be used in cultural and literary studies (cf. Schönfelder 28), leading to some scholars to attributing it a "profoundly interdisciplinary" nature (Buelens et al 3). This interdisciplinary nature leads Gerd Buelens et al. to propose that trauma theory is less a field and more a common concern shared by many scholars from different fields (cf. 3).

But despite trauma's perceived omnipresence, its history is more than a little uneven (Leys 5) and needs to be placed in a broader discourse on mental illness.[88] Michael Rothberg points to the development of the term, arguing that "[t]rauma today is probably not the trauma of twenty years ago and certainly not the trauma of the twentieth century" (xi). Elisabeth Bronfen has linked trauma and hysteria (cf. *The Knotted Subject*), pointing out that while hysteria as a disease disappeared in the early 20th century, many researchers are arguing for a new or extended use in the postmodern setting while drawing on alternative terminology. There is a general consensus that outside of hysteria, the discussion of the phenomenon began with John Eric Erichsen's so-called "railway spine"; the term was then further developed after having been labelled 'shell shock' during World War I[89] and came to be known as trauma with the inclusion of PTSD[90] into the American *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980 (cf. Schönfelder 44-45). Ruth Leys defines PTSD as

> fundamentally a disorder of memory. The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or disassociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the

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[88] For a detailed historical overview of the disease's history (and the history of its classification), see Luckhurst, *Question* 19-77.

[89] In this context, Elaine Showalter for instance posits that "war shock [ ] could easily be viewed as postmodern forms of hysteria" (Bronfen, *Knotted* xi).

[90] Symptoms of PTSD include "flashbacks, nightmares and other re-experiences, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, autonomic arousal, explosive violence or tendency to hypervigilance" (Leys 2).

ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, disassociated, traumatic present. (2)

In her excellent *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Leys postulates that from the turn of the century to now, trauma has received multi-faceted, abating and surging critical interest. Using Freud as starting point, she charts the term's early medical history and traces its treatment to the early 21st century (cf. 5). Leys observes that much like the symptom it seeks to describe, "[t]he history of trauma itself is marked by an alteration between episodes of forgetting and remembering, as the experiences of generations of psychiatrists have been neglected only to be revived at a later time" (15).

Early work on trauma was often shrouded in terms of another mental affliction such as hysteria. Bronfen's *The Knotted Subject* deals with hysteria, but clearly outlines how traumatic events are at the heart of many a hysteric's diagnosis. Treatment of hysteria frequently involved hypnosis. Freud, whom Leys calls "an inescapable figure in the genealogy of trauma" (10) and Roger Luckhurst "the unavoidable foundation for theories of trauma" (*Question* 8), introduced the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (19-20), which still figures significantly in today's conceptualisation of trauma. Leys points out Freud's ambivalent and changing explanations of traumatic experiences (19f.), who alternately linked trauma to childhood complexes and stimuli as well as to external factors such as violence. Across his writing, it remains unclear what his stance actually was (ibid.). Leys points out that much of Freud's writing links traumatic experiences back to internalised childhood fears such as the fear of the loss of the mother or the castration complex (25)[91] rather than take the traumatic experience at face value and as defined in itself. I struggle with this, since a reduction of war trauma to the castration complex seems both simplistic and false. Yet Freud found it "'highly improbable' […] that a neurosis could come into being merely

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[91] Bronfen offers the navel as an alternative locus of separation anxiety and argues that rather than focus on the standard castration complex, it also makes sense to look at the navel as a sign of lost contact to the mother; as a castration/severance away from the mother that everyone has to undergo (cf. *Knotted* 12). She proposes that "the navel marks a double matricide: the bodily severing at childbirth and the psychic renunciation of the maternal body required by symbolic castration" (19).

because of the objective presence of danger, without any participation of the deeper levels of mental functioning" (quoted in Leys 28[92]).

> Leys observes that

> More specifically, according to the temporal logic of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*, or 'deferred action,' trauma was constituted by a relationship between two events or experiences – a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed. For Freud, trauma was thus constituted by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was intrinsically traumatic, and a temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation. (20)

This stands far removed from today's conceptualisations which clearly posit events of a severely disturbing nature at the heart of the traumatic experience (21). Nevertheless, "Freud's rejection of the notion of trauma as direct cause and his emphasis on psychosexual meaning involved a tendency within psychoanalysis to interiorize trauma" (Leys 21). It is the interiorisation as well as the idea that the repressed will return uncontrollably that still shape today's understanding of trauma. The mental defense mechanisms as outlined by Freud (repression, disavowal (*Verleugnung*), rejection, negation, splitting of the ego, primal repression, cf. Leys 24) have also retained their analytical relevance. Relying on the talking cure while using hypnosis, Freud revolutionised the treatment of mental illness.

Psychologists working after Freud however found that recounting the traumatic event under hypnosis was not enough to present a cure. Treating soldiers from the first world war, William McDougall and C.S. Myers emphasize not a mere "affective reliving but the conscious reintegration of the dissociated or 'repressed' memory into the patient's history", and insist that "the reappearance of the traumatic memory in the clear light of consciousness" (Leys 86) as opposed to the unconscious hypnotic reveal is the key factor in successful treatment.[93] A memory therefore needs

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[92] For Freud, "[t]he term 'traumatic' [...] has no other sense than an economic one. We apply it to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this may result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which energy operates" (Freud in Leys 23).

[93] This is in keeping with Jeffrey Alexander's distinction between Enlightenment and psychoanalytic trauma theory. Enlightenment trauma theory, as proposed by for instance Arthur Neal in *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, "suggests that trauma is a kind of rational response to abrupt change" and that in turn, "responses to such traumas will be efforts to alter the circumstances that caused them" (Alexander 8). Enlightenment trauma theory thus takes a highly pragmatic approach wherein "[m]emories about the past guide this thinking about the future" (ibid.). This leads to a reconstruction

to be made available to make use of it going forward. Within this strand of trauma therapy, there was some debate as to how factual these memories had to be; did they need to be entirely true to the facts or did it matter more that they expressed the core issue experienced at that time (cf. 22)?[94] The (in)ability to fully recreate or narrate an experience that exceeds understandings is one of trauma's key characteristics. According to neurobiologist Bessel van der Kolk, who proposed this particular hypothesis in the 1980s, the brain creates an imprint of the traumatic memory "with timeless accuracy [...] because it is encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory" (Leys 239). Because of this, van der Kolk argues that it is impossible to falsify a traumatic memory and that it is thus always factually correct (cf. 245). Van der Kolk's theory is hotly debated and controversial, but Leys finds that it actually shares some similarities with Cathy Caruth's approach.

Caruth, who is one of the most prominent scholars in trauma theory, favours a psychoanalytical approach that builds on Freud's earlier work. Her influence in the field is undisputed (cf. Alexander 11, Schönfelder 10, Rothberg xi, Buelens et al. 2, Luckhurst, *Question* 5, Kansteiner 205), but her work is by no means uncontroversial. Leys observes critically that both "van der Kolk and Caruth are commited to the widespread post-Holocaust assumption according to which any attempt to represent trauma [...] is distortive" (Leys 252).[95] Caruth bases her exploration on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*[96] (1920), wherein he suggests "that the wound of the mind [...] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4). Psychological trauma demands a different treatment than physical trauma and can be less predictable. Caruth consequently sees mental trauma as a "wound that speaks" (8)

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of society and environments by careful, analytical planning, which culminates in the subsiding of the trauma itself (ibid.).

[94] For more on the discussion about the authenticity of these relived and integrated memories, see the "debate between Brown, McDougall, and Myers over abreaction as emotional discharge versus abreaction as psychic integration in order to resolve it in favour of the necessity of integrating and working through the trauma by relivings that are held to uncover accurate memories of the past" in Leys (22).

[95] Leys observes two further similarities between van der Kolk's neurobiological and Caruth's psychoanalytical approach: For one, both argue that "traumatic symptoms, such as traumatic dreams and flashbacks, are veridical memories" and additionally, that both authors share "an epistemological-ontological claims, according to which those same symptoms are literal replicas of repetitions of the trauma and that as such they stand outside representation" (Leys 22).

[96] In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud concerns himself with the introduction of the death drive (Thanatos) in his already established model of the Eros, the sexual instinct. Drawing on both clinical and literary examples (such as Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated*), Freud explores the repetition compulsion in detail and in a context that would later be classified as trauma studies.

in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

The attempt to tell listeners about trauma is complicated by the fact that trauma is characterised by a repeated breakdown of language as the overwhelming experience cannot immediately be rationalised, but makes itself known belatedly. This makes voicing trauma an aporia, an unresolvable paradox (cf. Luckhurst *Question* 4). Trauma and trauma narratives are thus impossible narratives, since the trauma – according to Caruth – wants to speak, but at the same time the language of trauma "is always somehow literary […] [and] defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (*Unclaimed* 5). Despite the prominence of this hypothesis, recent studies have shown that "although the trauma initially was resistant to narrativization, with the passage of time a narrative of 'what actually happened' became feasible for all but survivors of child abuse", thus offering counter-evidence to not only Caruth's, but also to van der Kolk's approach (Leys 251).[97] For the project at hand, Caruth's assessment of traumatic memories as being "somehow literary" however lends itself to an analysis of the narrative strategies that create this effect. Literary here is perhaps best understood as a sense of estrangement as proposed by Terry Eagleton (cf. Eagleton 3), who argues that the idea of a "literary" language corresponds to "a 'special' kind of language", a "kind of linguistic violence" (4) that deals with language "made strange", "made unfamiliar" (3) by drawing on a high density of rhetorical devices.

In fictionalised accounts of trauma, the literariness of language poses a particular challenge as it may obstruct access to meaning while at the same necessitating it for a text to make sense. In one of her most famous statements, Caruth pointed out that "[t]he traumatized […] carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" ("Introduction" 5).[98] Narrating the impossible also places new demands on listeners and/or witnesses (10). Perhaps, they require a reading, a listening, a witnessing beyond linearity and empirical analysis; in short, a reading that is as

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[97] For an extended and very critical discussion on the conceptualisation of trauma as unspeakable, see Stampfl's exploration of Naomi Mandel's book *Against the Unspeakable: Complicitiy, the Holocaust and Slavery in America*.

[98] Caruth also attests to trauma's ungraspable nature when she notes that all traumata incorporate "the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself" ("Introduction" 7).

affective as the impossible narrative it seeks to consume. Marianne Hirsch has extensively written about postmemory as a form of witnessing that meets these demands. Postmemory describes the next generation's emotional and affective investment in their ancestors' traumatic histories, with events of the past affecting lives in the present (cf. Hirsch n.p.).[99] This need of passing down narratives, perhaps, might also be where fiction and art provide necessary outlets to avoid a re-traumatisation. Fantasy fiction can, despite the problem of escapism, be one of those outlets. While the paradoxical terminology of 'impossible narratives' has also been applied to fantasy (cf. Stockwell), the paradox is negotiated differently here. Where the fantasy genre narrates tales that are empirically impossible, trauma narratives centre on tales that are empirically true, but cannot be relayed in their entirety. I argue that many contemporary fantasy novels, retaining their inherent impossible elements, have now broadened to also include the impossible narrative of trauma and to use the supernatural as an extended metaphor for psychological wounds.[100]

Describing how trauma operates in the mind, Caruth frequently turns to antithetical images. Trauma causes an "oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (*Unclaimed* 7). Trauma positions its survivor between death and life, reinforcing the latter by referencing the former. Caruth argues that "the story of a trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (ibid.). Even though the shock of the attack and the ensuing injury represents a disruptive presence in the life of the survivor, the presence of the trauma affirms life, for

[99] Gibbs is sceptical of the notion of secondary traumatisation as a particular form of traumatic witnessing. He finds that "[i]t is clearly absurd to elide this categorical difference between the experience of a trauma sufferer, a witness, and the second-hand reader, but this is a major motivating force behind cultural trauma theory" (28f.) He further argues that "the notion that a reader can vicariously share the experience of the original suffer (even if it is 'analogous') cannot but appear as an overstatement" (30). Likewise, Modlinger and Sonntag argue that secondary traumatisation through witnessing may be something that can happen to psychologists in a therapeutic setting, "it becomes ethically problematic when transferred imprudently and without distinction to literature and literary and cultural criticism" (8). They concede that "[l]iterature can indeed engage with trauma" (8), as "[a]rt can mirror the nature of traumatic memories […] but thus […] should not be a claim to co-ownership of real trauma" (9). Balaev adds that secondary traumatisation's "attempt to include everyone as victims of trauma runs the risk of including everyone as perpetrators" (7).
[100] For further reading, see *The Fantastic in Holocaust Literature and Film: Critical Perspectives* (eds. Judith B. Kerman and John Edgar Browning).

(following Caruth's approach) only who has not died *can* be traumatised as traumatisation is not one mere moment, but also that which follows.

The sudden and unexpected shock at the root of trauma launches a repressal of the event along Freudian lines, but also causes its concomitant return through its very latency. Even if signs of the trauma are not immediately obvious, they lie dormant until the point of their (repeated) eruption. Caruth points to the form of trauma to define it, arguing that "the structure of the experience or reception" is paramount as "the event is not assimilated fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" ("Introduction" 4-5). Trauma cannot be fully understood, but its strong affective presence influences lives long past the moment of occurrence.

Christa Schönfelder is critical of Caruth's broad reading of the term as Caruth often almost seems to equate trauma with history (cf. Schönfelder 10, 11, 35, cf. Caruth *Unclaimed* 7, 71[101]), thus focusing on collective rather than individual trauma. Schönfelder instead proposes to turn to individual stories and discusses their narratability.[102] This stands in contrast to Caruth's well-established point of trauma's impossible narrative nature. Mindful that the term trauma can be overused in literary studies, Schönfelder nevertheless discounts alternatives such as crisis, conflict, or shock as having less of an impact, whereas the term trauma is "rich and powerful" (11). She contends that even though "[i]n literary studies, the clinical concept of trauma has been reduced to a cultural trope for postmodern attitudes to language and history […] [and] as a result, [ ] has faced the danger of becoming meaningless" (ibid.), it is a still a concept that should find application, albeit under much narrowed analysis. To that end, Schönfelder focuses on childhood and family trauma in particular, making a prolonged case for the visibility of personal trauma narratives over international/global/historical ones.[103] Historically, research on trauma has privileged historical events on a large scale (see Arva's previously mentioned work on shock chronotypes), such as war and genocide, and "it has taken much longer for the

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[101] Caruth argues against a conflated reading of individual and collective trauma, but rather proposes that it is necessary "to understand how historical or generational trauma is in some sense presupposed in the theory of individual trauma" (*Unclaimed* 136, note 32). This would then mean that each individual trauma also carries markers of preceding historical/generational traumata in it.

[102] For further criticism of Caruth (in particular with regard to how she makes assumptions rather than builds arguments), see Gibbs 6-9.

[103] Schönfelder points out that the first researchers in the field (Caruth, Fekman, Hartman, and La Capra) tended to focus on the Holocaust when talking about trauma (cf. Schönfelder FN1,S10). One notable exception not observed by Schönfelder is Judith Herman's work on rape trauma.

significance of individual, private trauma to be widely acknowledged" (44). Traumata on the individual, private plane often belong to the category of "insidious trauma", referring not to a singular event "outside of the human experience", but instead form a long history of abuse, particularly within the family (cf. L. Brown 107). These traumatic stories are unfortunately frequent, but not necessarily part of the trauma discussion in the same way the large-scale, transgenerational and transnational traumata are. Therefore, "literary approaches to individual domestic traumas still deserve more attention", she writes (12),[104] and this project also takes a look at precisely these scenarios. I contest that trauma's applicability in both personal and global narratives allows insight into the workings of society and its cultural products. All of the novels that are discussed in this volume broadly fall into the category of 'postmodern'. Schönfelder notes that postmodern and trauma literature share "the emphasis on a particularly complex and conflicted relationship with the past, including the sense that any access to the past is exceedingly difficult and that processes of remembering are fraught with instabilities and tension" (15). The instability and tension brought about by traumatic experiences leads, in the case of the novels discussed here, to a renewed coming of age process, causing a *bildungsroman* structure. Schönfelder, after a comprehensive overview of trauma theory and its history, defines the term as follows:

> The definition that I use as a starting point is that of trauma as a profoundly distressing, painful, or shocking experience that affects the individual so deeply as to cause a disruption in, injury to, or breach within the structures of the mind and the psyche and that, as a result, may have a persistent impact on an individual, especially regarding his or her relation to identity, memory, and the social environment. (20f.)

As objects of study, trauma narratives have received significant scholarly attention, but perhaps because of the seriousness of the subject, the analysis is usually not extended to extensive readings of speculative fiction.[105] An exception can be made for

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[104] Schönfelder notes that autodiegetic narration in particular serves to illustrate "the processes of experiencing, remembering, and narrating trauma" in a most immediate fashion (19). The novels analysed in this volume rarely make use of autodiegetic narration, but it should be noted that it has become supremely prominent in fantasy fiction, especially in the Young Adult sector, in the past 15 years. For traumatic bildungsroman fantasies that make use of autodiegetic narration, see for instance Sebold, Alice, *The Lovely Bones*.

[105] Volumes that undertake readings of trauma in literature include (but are not limited to) Schönfelder; Modlinger and Sonntag; Buelens, Durrant, and Eaglestone; Nadal and Calvo; Gibbs; and Jill Matus. Luckhurst, in "Future Shock: Science Fiction and the Trauma Paradigm", has written on trauma and science fiction, but the trauma/fantasy intersection is tackled comparatively seldom.

magical realism, which I argue has to do with the lingering difference and prejudice of fantasy as opposed to its sibling genre (see chapter 2.1.4.).

Trauma narratives are not merely concerned with the traumatic event, but more significantly with the victim's possible recuperation. One method of battling trauma is exposure therapy, whereby the traumatic event is either confronted *in vivu* (physically) or *in sensu* (mentally) (cf. Schönfelder 82). "Verbalization and narration are at the heart of many types of exposure therapy" (ibid.), making the production of art and writing a uniquely qualified place to negotiate trauma. Within exposure therapy, there is a question as to whether the traumatic memory is to be exorcised of integrated. Judith Herman, an important voice in the field, argues that a therapy's goal is to turn the traumatic memory into a narrative memory, and to consequently embed the traumatic event into the patient's/victim's life story (in Leys 105). Herman then speaks of integration of the memory as opposed to its exorcism (108-9), which Leys links to Pierre Janet's changing positions in the twentieth century.[106]

One question that remains is whether it is necessary to differentiate between a trauma novel or a novel that features trauma. While trauma novels share a certain aesthetic that often features a disarticulation of linearity, ghostly presences, and transgenerational transmissions (cf. Luckhurst, *Question* 89-91) – features far from uncommon in fantasy – a novel that features trauma may present a traumatic event and chart its occurrence and consequences in a linear fashion. While not every novel that tackles the subject trauma belongs to the emerging canon of trauma literature, the aesthetic is becoming more pervasive across genres; this however is also linked to – especially in the context of non-linear narration – the popularity of postmodern writing. "Rather than privileging narrative rupture as the only proper mark of a trauma aesthetic", Luckhurst proposes to examine the "narrative possibility, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma" (89). This is in keeping with Schönfelder's observation that "[t]he dynamics of fragmentation and restoration, disintegration and reintegration, disruption and healing are prominent topoi in most literary texts on trauma, and they are negotiated in different ways at the levels of plot, text, and narration" (76). In fantasy fiction, this may be undertaken by using supernatural creatures as metaphors for traumatic events and thus giving unspeakable events a physical form, or by relying on visions or dream scenarios that

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[106] Janet initially argued for the exorcism of the traumatic memory, before subscribing to the memory's identification and conscious reliving as a cure (see Leys 83-119 for more information).

subvert linear narratives. Alan Gibbs is also open to a less restrictive conceptualisation of trauma literature and thus critical of, for instance, Laurie Vickroy's narrower focus on an "experimental form" (Gibbs 29), especially if they exclude texts "that do not emphasize formal innovations, testimonial influences, or the symptoms and defences common to conflicted traumatic memory" (Vickroy, *Trauma* xi), all of which are genre markers for the trauma novel. Anne Whitehead too describes the markers Vickroy suggests but not in a prescriptive manner (cf. Gibbs 30). She does however also point out that "narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead 3), a point that will become exceedingly relevant in the analysis of the formulaic constructions of plot in the fantasy genre as a means to discuss trauma and bring about the *bildungs* narrative.

2.4. The Traumatic Fantasy *Bildungsroman*: Two Variations of One Plot?

Luckhurst has critically pointed out that even "[t]he OED a […] records a further drift into general usage of the adjective 'traumatic' for any difficult or untoward event" (*Question* 3).[107] This cautions scholars to be careful in their application of the term so as to not unnecessarily conflate it. In the following, *trauma* will be used to denote events befitting the "outside of the range of normal experience" (1), a qualifier proposed by both Luckhurst and Caruth. Normal, however, is an inherently different category when it comes to a kind of fiction that deals precisely in the unusual, the impossible, the supernatural.

Yet, not every presence of the fantastic or supernatural in a text is automatically traumatic. To use a popular example, when Harry Potter learns that he is a wizard in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), something that surely rests "outside the range of normal experience", he is by no means traumatised. When he watches Voldemort's resurrection in *Goblet of Fire* (2000), he certainly is. With each fantasy novel, "the range of normal experience" must therefore be determined on the basis of the created world. In a world in which wizards live, being one is not traumatic. J.K. Rowling's world however does contain a strict boundary between life and death; the dead do not return, a body once lost should remain so. Voldemort

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[107] For a critical reading of using the term trauma outside discussing the Holocaust, see Kansteiner, "Category Mistake". Kansteiner argues that "the growing body of work [on trauma] has created an aestheticized, morally and politically imprecise concept of cultural trauma, which provides little insight into the social and cultural repercussions of historical trauma" (194).

presents a violation thereof, hence leading to Harry's traumatisation. This violation of rules also links back to both Tolkien's assessment that for every fantastic work, the rules of the impossible world need clear outlining and to Manlove's demand that any fantasy should only be measured by "how far a work keeps to its own terms, rather than apply any external standards" (1).[108]

Trauma, either caused by the advent of an intrusive fantastical element or by a violation of established rules, thus sets a process into motion. This process is then tied to the aforementioned quest(ion) of be(com)ing, as characters in fantasy novels that draw upon the *bildungsroman* need to re-establish not only their sense of safety, but their identity in a world that is becoming stranger by the page. The *bildungsroman* and trauma literature intersect in that "[p]rocesses of narrating the self and trauma, as well as their potentials and limitations in aiding recovery, are at the core of much trauma fiction" (Schönfelder 84). The focus on the Self unites the seemingly different genres of the *bildungsroman*, fantasy fiction, and trauma narratives, as it is precisely this element Booker has postulated as being at the core of all fiction.

The confrontation with trauma may be understood as a temporary breaking up of the Self, whereas the *bildungsroman* strives for the opposite. As Summerfield and Downward propose, "[t]he process of Bildung also involves the putting together or building up of the ego, rather than the breaking up of the self into multiple parts" (170). Similarly, Moretti points to a lack of psychoanalytical theory on the *bildungsroman* and explains that this is due to psychoanalysis breaking up the psyche into its component parts, whereas the *bildungsroman* focuses on a person's (an ego's) formation (cf. 10f.). This is where the intersection of the *bildungsroman* as a plot pattern and trauma as a motif finds resolution, as the *bildungsroman* plot is used to piece the Self back together and to come to terms with the traumatic event.

In the following, I will base my analysis of Gaiman's work on two variations of Shaffner's tripartite pattern. The variable element here is the traumatic event the novels centre on, which is either placed a priori, thus leading to the *bildungsroman* plot in the first place, making the journey of be(com)ing also a journey of healing, while the second variation introduces its protagonist first, before then introducing

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[108] It should also be noted that with regard to fantasy literature specifically, trauma is not negotiated on a reader-level, but the character-level, thus decisively not feeding into the concept of traumatic witnessing that is particularly relevant for discussions of the Holocaust or war experiences.

the traumatic event in conjunction with the intrusion of fantasy. Here the traumatic event is one of the present, while in the first model, it is one that has already happened and thus one of the past. In both models, attesting to trauma's strong disruptive present, the traumatic event makes itself known once more and complicates the *bildungsroman* plot significantly within the final metaphysical challenge, which sees a return of the repressed as a necessary element leading to the protagonist's potential arrival and healing. Following Saariluoma's assertion that the *bildungsroman* traces a story from a formulation of a problem to the solution thereof (cf. 292), the following model indicates where the different strands of traumatic confrontation, character development, and problem solving overlap and culminate in the *bildungsroman*'s characteristic elevation of the character to a new and fitting position in life.
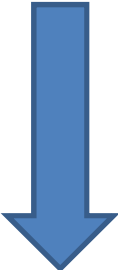
MODEL A: Traumatic Intrusion AFTER Novel's Opening

TRAUMATIC EVENT	**I) Alienation**	→ INDIVIDUAL STAGE	**PROBLEM**
TRAUMATIC supernatural **INTRUSIONS**	**II) Reintegration**	→ SOCIAL STAGE	
	III) Challenge	→ METAPHYSICAL STAGE	
HEALING	Arrival: *bildungsidee* realised	→ **NEW STATUS/POSITION**	**SOLUTION**

In this model, the novel opens with an introduction of its protagonist at a formative point of their lives. As discussed in chapter 2.2.2., this point may be adolescence, but it may also be another critical junction in life which anticipates the next rite of passage. In step I, the path to alienation, the protagonist is thus marked as someone ready for the next step and in some cases, as someone so Other to those around him/her, that a transition into a new world seems inevitable. This next step is then brought about by a confrontation with a traumatic event: this can be an intrusion of the supernatural along the lines of Mendlesohn's model, but it can also be a personal trauma that is accompanied by said intrusion. In either case, the protagonist is then launched into the second phase, which charts the journey of reflection and action that leads to reintegration. On this journey, the protagonist is continuously confronted with the

traumatic event, before a final metaphysical challenge will lead to a healing and arrival in new circumstances that allow the protagonist to draw on the lessons and morals learned on the journey.

MODEL B: Traumatic Event BEFORE Novel's Opening

TRAUMATIC EVENT	-- a priori --		**PROBLEM**
TRAUMATIC supernatural **INTRUSION**	**I) Alienation**	→ INDIVIDUAL STAGE	
TRAUMATIC supernatural **INTRUSION**	**II) Reintegration**	→ SOCIAL STAGE	
TRAUMATIC supernatural **INTRUSION**	**III) Challenge**	→ METAPHYSICAL STAGE	
HEALING	Arrival: *bildungsidee* realised	→ **NEW STATUS/POSITION**	**SOLUTION**

Model B follows a similar pattern, but places the traumatic event before the novel's beginning. It is then revealed and negotiated in the second phase, thus stressing Vickroy's characterisation of trauma as a "tyranny of the past" (12). As in modal A, the trauma returns once more within the metaphysical challenge. Model B, perhaps even more so than Model A, draws on trauma's characteristic "shifts between knowledge and its repression or suppression" (Vickroy, *Trauma* 8) at various points on the journey, leading up to a reveal of the traumatic event. Model B is also different in that is conflates two stages into one, namely the reintegration and the arrival/healing, giving the intrusive element of fantasy and trauma its own stage leading up to the great resolution.

      Both variations make significant use of Booker's voyage and return plot. In contemporary fantasy, the journey-centric *bildungsroman* (*The Lord of the Rings* is a case in point) is rather widespread. The notion of journeys, be they called "voyage and return" or "there and back again", is nothing new in fantasy literature, and neither is the idea that characters develop or solve a problem while undertaking it. However, with fantasy's turn towards the traumatic in recent years, the negotiation of trauma has now been frequently attached to the *bildungsroman* plot. The traumatic

event is not necessarily situated at the end of the novel, but is often placed a priori. When we meet our protagonists, the worst has either already happened or will happen in the opening pages of the book.

There are some cases in which the *bildungroman*'s characteristic happy end remains troubled, thus attesting to trauma's intrusive and persistent nature. These cases will find special discussion as they add a fourth element to the model, namely that of a persistent complication. It will be discussed in further detail in how far this element then negates the *bildungsroman*'s central idea of focus, psychological unity, and development.

Trauma is negotiated by a variety of strategies in the novels, from creatures used as extended metaphors, to visual disruptions in italicised, fragmented dream or vision sequences, or convoluted stream-of-consciousness passages, which stand in contrast to the self-aware reflections of the *bildungsroman*. Trauma, in its incomprehensible nature and with its impossible history, then functions as a challenge to reader, writer, and characters.

:: PART TWO :: POSITIONING THE ADULT PROTAGONIST ::

Chapter 3: "You got a long way to go…"[109] Quests, Beasts, and Potential in *Neverwhere* (1996)

"You got a long way to go…" (*Neverwhere* 3) as much refers to the plot of Gaiman's first solo novel as it does to the text's history. In the 90s, Gaiman was approached by comedian Lenny Henry with an idea for BBC show about "tribes of homeless people in London". At the time, "[p]overty […] re-emerged as a theme on the British book market" (Korte 75)[110] and while Gaiman was hesitant since he did not wish to portray being homeless as an adventure, he subsequently decided to move forward with the project. As a means to alleviate his concerns, he decided to "make [the setting] a metaphor. If I create London Below, if I create a place that doesn't exist and put tribes of people there, then I'm not going to have anybody running away to find" it (Gaiman in Campbell, *Art* 210). Fantasy thus ironically became the means to avoid an escapist approach to depicting London. London, which according to Dirk Vanderbeke, "is the ready-made location for narrations of urban anxieties, conflicts, contradictions, marginalization and strife, […] offers itself to fantastic visions and nightmares, to strategies of literalization and metaphorization, to realistic stories and tales of magic" (135). Vanderbeke links this to London's large underground, frequently employed by people commuting to work (ibid). The real city's underside thus serves as a canvas on which Gaiman maps his socio-critical narrative and with its dark and mysterious tunnels, offers ample room for discovery.

The show first aired in 1996, but while "[t]he TV series garnered a cult following, […] Gaiman himself admits it wasn't quite right" (Bowie-Sell n.p.). The reality of budgeting and the lack of available special effects led to a less than ideal realisation of Gaiman's eloquent idea of a subversive London Below and subsequently, to expanding the scripts into a novel. Gaiman has "recently explained that the show suffered because in the mid-nineties there wasn't the technology or the people, to realise his very colourful, eclectic and visually arresting ideas" (ibid). Since

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[109] *Neverwhere* 3.

[110] The other period in which the topic of poverty gained traction in literature was during Victorian times (cf. Korte 77). Korte has analysed the intersection of Victorian and contemporary England in *Neverwhere*, finding that "[s]ince much of the London underground is Victorian (such as the first Tube lines and parts of the city's canalisation), London Below and its assemblage of strange characters have many Victorian traits, while London Above seems entirely post-modern – with the exception of the protagonist who, significantly, shares his name with Henry Mayhew, the famous documentarist of the Victorian London Poor" (87).

the page knows no such constraints, the prose version of *Neverwhere* is far richer, and more credible as an Other World than the show.[111]

3.1. Entering London Below

N*everwhere* opens with the boyish protagonist Richard on the cusp of embarking on a fairly standard *bildungsroman*. Getting reading to leave his small Scottish home town for a London adventure (i.e. a career in finance), he has a farewell party in the local pub. Once he steps outside for some fresh air, the narrative becomes less conventional and takes a turn toward the fantastic when an old homeless woman reads Richard's palm. Informing Richard that he has "got a long way to go…" (3), the breadth and scope of Richard's ensuing adventures is already hinted at. Likewise, the quote serves to illustrate Gaiman's growing trend towards more complex, and more traumatised protagonists as the author's character composition became more advanced over the years. The prediction however also refers to Richard's *bildung*, which is not accomplished by a normal career path, an engagement, and regular London social life. Instead, Richard can only truly develop and reach his potential, can perhaps only truly *become*, when he enters the mysterious world of London Below.

Richard is the first in a long line of young male protagonists Gaiman eschews as the heroes of his narratives. Alice Jenkins argues that "[a]s in other Gaiman texts, *Neverwhere* uses a colourless protagonist so as to leave room for a quasi-Dickensian crowd of grotesque minor characters" (39), while Tanya Pell Jones adds that Richard is so well suited to the task at hand "because he is heroic enough – and possibly simple enough" (216) after having previously described him "as a rather dull and absent minded individual" (213). Barbara Korte sees Richard as a "protagonist from the middle class, i.e. with a centre of perception […] that is marked by class a-symmetry as regards the poor but symmetry as regards the majority of the novel's readers" (87). All three scholars point to the everyman nature of *Neverwhere*'s protagonist: Richard stands in for an unassuming, quintessentially British young man whose most defining quality is not his bravado (in the beginning of the novel, he has none), but his good heart and open mind. Gutjahr's observation that the protagonist

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[111] Recently, *Neverwhere* has also experienced a renaissance as a popular BBC Radio 4 radio play. It aired to excellent reviews (cf. Bowie-Sells, who argues that "[r]adio might prove to be the best place for *Neverwhere*".)

of a *bildungsroman* is often characterized by passivity rather than activity (47) also applies, as Richard initially seems to follow rather than lead – first he takes his cues from his fiancée, who seems keen on ordering his life for him, then from the various characters he encounters in London Below. When Richard is introduced, it also made clear that this is not a traumatised character – nothing bad has happened to him so far; he is optimistic and kind, his worst worry a forgotten dinner reservation.

It is Richard's good heart and basic human decency that allows him to interact with a London Below that Vanderbeke reads as a Foucauldian heteropia of otherness and deviance (cf. 148), and that makes him suitable to undertaking a hero's journey. In its acknowledgement of ethico-political questions of Thatcher's England, the novel however exceeds a generic fantasy plot and places its protagonist in the midst of larger moral issues. Interestingly, this setting and his good nature are also the elements that link Richard to the first step of the fantasy *bildungsroman*, the path to alienation. When discussing *Neverwhere*, *American Gods*, and *Stardust*, R. Lyle Skains observes that Gaiman's "protagonists are generally represented as characters in transition, someone who has lost something or been lost, or longs for something just out of their reach" (25). The transition at first seems to be that of someone about to get married, about to get promoted, about to advance in *some* way, but it soon becomes clear that Richard is not overly keen on moving ahead. At work, his collection of colourful plastic troll dolls marks him as too juvenile for the serious and rather humourless career he has undertaken and that his fiancée, the demanding PR executive Jessica, further pushes him towards. Living in consumer, post-Thatcher London (cf. Korte 87), Richard desires a place where he truly belongs. While Richard's middle-class London life can be connected to the *bildungsroman*'s bourgeois origins (see Moretti viii-x on an exploration of bourgeoisie in the *bildungsroman*) and to its desire to connect a bourgeois class with an aristocratic freedom (mobility, money, education), he must ultimately reject both his current status and the promises of a capitalist advancement. Richard, on his path to alienation, already understands that this will not lead him where he wants to be. He values emotional satisfaction and freedom over taking the next step in a class-ridden society. It seems that in his refusal to take the next logical step in the world he lives in, he anticipates what Rosi Braidotti sees as the "deathbound" nature of postmodern capitalist life ("Dying" 215). She argues that

> [c]apitalism has no built-in technological purpose, historical logic, or structure but rather is a self-imploding system that will not stop at anything in order to fulfil its aim: profit. This inherently self-destructive system feeds on and thus destroys the very conditions of its survival: it is omnivorous, and what it ultimately eats it's the future itself. (ibid.)

When placed in the context of Jackson's proposed treatment of desire in fantastic texts (Jackson 3f.), *Neverwhere* seems to initially expel Richard's subconscious and repressed desire for a more inclusive and less driven society, but soon switches to manifesting this desire in the more colourful world of London Below. While it seems as if Richard's unconscious desire for a different world "threatens cultural order and continuity" (ibid), the novel actually argues that the world, as ordered as it may appear, is actually already threatened and in chaos in its postmodern capitalism. It is only in the world that seems chaotic that Richard can find order and fulfil his desire of a more compassionate human interaction.

It is important to note that Richard is not keen on adventures (perhaps evoking the adventure-reluctant hobbits as unlikely heroes), but experiences "self-actualisation" (Skains 35) during his time in London Below. His self-discovery is however not prompted by a trauma of his own, but by that of the Lady Door. Having found her entire family murdered, Door is caught up in the traumatic "oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 7). As the only survivor to the brutal killings, her trauma disrupts not only her own life, but also Richard's and the narrative order of the novel overall. *Neverwhere* begins with a prologue that centres on Richard shortly before departing to London. The first chapter then switches to Door's flight from her family's murderers; seven lines that indicate her fear, the danger she is in, and the history she is running from. At this point, the novel circumvents narrating Door's experience in detail, in keeping with trauma's problematic narratibility. Instead, it switches the point of view once more to focus on the murderers on her trail, Mr Croup and Mr Vandemar, who advance slowly in London's tunnels before the tale changes its focus again and returns to Richard's reminiscences of the past three years of his London life. The first chapter switches its point of view eleven times in total, always refuting to linger on the traumatic memory of Door's for too long. Instead, the sense of danger is increased as the narrative of Door's traumatic past and present flight, Richard's

ordinary London day, and Croup's and Vandemar's hunt are interspersed. This is also maintained later in the novel, when Door dreams of her family's murder. Rendered in italics and as a flashback, the novel circles this moment:

> *There was someone floating in the water; trailing twin clouds of blood behind him, one from the throat, one from the groin. It was her brother, Arch. His eyes were open wide and sightless. She realized that her mouth was open. She could hear herself screaming.* (81)

The memory is not only embedded into Door's mind, but also into the walls of her family's house. When the walls are touched, the memories erupt, disrupting whatever else might have been going on at the moment. The walls thus make for a forced traumatic witnessing even as Door herself cannot utter what has happened to her loved ones. The novel offers one more italicised flashback to the killings later on (the murder of Door's mother and sister, cf. 88-89), which again disrupts the plot as it moves forward, and is again followed by a change in scene. A further attempted depiction of her family's murder is presented in the last message Door's father sends to her; the video message flickers and ends seconds before he is killed. Later, it is even revealed that his murderers have tinkered with the message, changing it from a warning of Islington into the advice to seek him out. Trauma thus disrupts on all temporal, logical, and emotional planes.

While Door flees in the beginning of the novel, she wishes for "[s]omewhere… anywhere… *safe* […] *Somebody*" (*Neverwhere* 23; italics in original). She lands, wounded, both physically and mentally, in front of Richard in London Above in what is the high and end point of chapter one. While people from London Above cannot usually see those from London Below (a metaphor for the invisibility of the homeless, cf. Ekman 68), Richard not only sees Door, but helps her. What he does not know at this point is that "[a]s her name suggests, Door is the source of ontological hybridity between the two opposed worlds of London" (Jódar 191) and thus leads to his inclusion in the world of London Below, at the price of his normal life in London Above. It is her trauma that will come to haunt him, and Richard is thus enveloped in a fantasy plot that costs him dearly and that sets him on his path to alienation.

Stefan Ekman argues that while *Neverwhere*'s London Below is "as foreign as Middle Earth", it is "bleaker and much less appealing" (64) and "is reached not by travelling physically, but by leaving the safety of everyday life" (66). The novel follows Mendlesohn's model of an immersive fantasy, as the readers' knowledge of

the world and plot is usually matched to Richard's, who is a stranger to these parts and lacks any specific guidelines about life in London Below. The decisive lack of teacher figures also points to the stark difference between the *bildungsroman* and the *erziehungsroman*: there is no Introduction 101 to life in London Below. Reflecting on the rapid (and literal) journey downwards,

> Richard wrote a diary entry in his head. *Dear Diary*, he began. *On Friday I had a job, a fiancée, a home, and a life that makes sense. [...] Then I found an injured girl bleeding on the pavement, and I tried to be a Good Samaritian. Now I've got no fiancée, no home, no job, and I'm walking around a couple of hundred feet under the streets of London with the projected life expectancy of a suicidal mayfly.* (*Neverwhere* 135, italics in original)

Now enveloped in the fantastic adventures of London Below, Richard has become a persona non grata in London Above. His colleagues and fiancée no longer see him when he stands right in front of them, his apartment is let because nobody remembers that he lives there, and the ATM does not recognise that his credit card belongs to an existing bank account. Within a few days, Richard has (unwittingly) become "part of London below" and because of that, "loses his home in the natural domain" (Ekman 66). This loss of all material things and consequently status is evocative of the liminal phase in rites of passage (see also Klapscik[112] 78). Rites of passage are rites that "accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner, *Forest* 94). While they are often connected to coming of age, they are not exclusive to that transition (there are also funeral rites[113], for instance, that broadly fall into this classification). Anthropologist Victor Turner writes that

> all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*), and aggregation. The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions ('a state'); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and 'structural' type, and is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards. (ibid.)

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[112] Klapscik is more concerned with liminal fantasies rather than primarily with liminality as a stage in rites of passage. Nevertheless, his work yields some interesting insights into Gaiman's writing style, especially with regard to Gaiman's categorisation as a postmodern writer.

[113] For a discussion of funeral rites in the context of Gaiman's traumatic fantasies, see chapters 5 and 6.

Richard's separation from London Above begins when – still fully immersed in that life and world – he sees Door. The liminal phase, that of being in-between, is jump-started the second he bends down to see that she is alright. One of the markers of liminal phases, and of people embroidered in one, is that "they have nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows" (98f.). This rather enigmatic state applies not only to Door, who as a displaced heiress to her family's role in London Below, is currently without means except for her fantastic heritage, but also to Richard, who, on the cusp of becoming not only something, but finally, *someone*, has to lose everything else first. Thus bereft, he soon follows Door to London Below and becomes part of the initiated side of the wainscot fantasy.

London Below is the locus of the fantasy *bildungsroman*'s second phase, offering the space for a re-integrative journey of reflection and action. The wainscot world is an uncanny rendition of London Above (cf. Zolkover 70, Korte 88) as it builds on the familiar structure of the city, but twists it into unfamiliarity, using the gruesome underbelly of the polished, (post)modern city to illustrate society's continuing struggle with class. Where "London Above is the affluent, capitalist and consumerist world of our daily experience" (Vanderbeke 148), London Below is the uncanny other that hints at forgotten secrets and repressed desires and that as such is a place to deal with and create trauma. The posh borough of Knightsbridge becomes the dangerous Night's Bridge, Shepherd's Bush is populated by murderous shepherds, and Earls Court station is actually the home to an old royal living on a tram, thus quite literally an Earl's court. The reality of London is thus Othered, and by encountering the Other, Richard is slowly coming into his own. Gaiman's London Below is an uncanny echo of the familiar London Above, resurrecting a literally archaic past of knights and shepherds in a decidedly Gothic script. Rather than following the trajectory of a successful urbanite's life, Richard is forced into activity in a mysterious secret world. Because he reflects on his own and Door's trauma (displacement and violence, respectively) and tries to act as her protector rather than being protected by Jessica's firm grip on his life, Richard undergoes a rather drastic development. As a character who however deals surprisingly well with the absurd and dangerous, he soon becomes a friend to the strange people in London Below.

Skains proposes that Gaiman's heroes grow not merely because of confronting Otherness, but because of accepting it (cf. 25).

The very nice and ordinary Richard paradoxically seems far more at home among the colourful inhabitants of London Below than he does among his workmate Gary and his fiancée Jessica. Interestingly, *Neverwhere* primarily deals in stock characters (cf. Gaiman, "Books Have Genders" n.p.) and Richard has yet to find a stereotypical role that fits. Designed as a "Boy's Own Adventure" story, its "everyman hero" has to grow into his role as the novel progresses and is aided by a variety of sidekicks. Gaiman commented on the functionality of the supporting characters, offering that "stock roles, such as the Dreadful Fiancee, the Princess in Peril, the Kick-Ass Female Warrior, the Seductive Vamp" are easily spotted in the text. While Gaiman expresses hope that "[e]ach role is […] taken and twisted 45% from skew" (ibid), readerships are familiar with the underlying structure of the character composition. The Marquis the Carabas serves as a trickster[114], Door as the damsel in distress (specifically alluded to in the novel when the Marquis pointedly tells Richard that "we have a damsel to undistress" (48)), Old Bailey as the Wise Old Man[115], Lamia as a femme fatale, and Croup, Vandemar and Islington as villains. While this eclectic set fulfils clear functions in the text, they are however at least given names that exceed their particular functions – not so for Hunter, the bodyguard the Marquis hires for Door.

Hunter has come to London to slay its great Beast, and her vocation and occupation is so absolute that it defies any other name, first or otherwise. This aligns her entire identity with Booker's overcoming the monster plot. Booker, no stranger to sweeping declarations, proposes that "[t]he realm of storytelling contains nothing stranger or more spectacular than this terrifying, life-threatening, seemingly all-powerful monster whom the hero must confront in a fight to the death" (22). As it happens, Hunter has even betrayed Door to the villainous angel Islington in order to defeat the monster and fulfil her destiny, but it is precisely because of this treason that she fails. Hunter also serves as Richard's "blocking character" (Baxter 3) who questions whether the *bildungsroman* protagonist really has advanced and developed; it is her treason that prompts Richard into action. The narrative refuses to

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[114] Gaiman is particularly fond of this type of character; for more information, see the discussion of Mr Nancy in *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*.
[115] Jódar reads Old Bailey as a wise old man in the Jungian sense (cf. 171 fn24).

reward a traitor (perhaps aligning it more with Tolkien's idea of eucatastrophe than otherwise suspected), and Hunter dies trying to kill the Beast. Instead, it is Richard who completes the task and thus takes her place as London Below's famed slayer. The great Beast, which evokes "the minotaur at the heart of the la[b]yrinth" (Jódar 174), stems from London Above. Having been abandoned in the sewers centuries ago and grown more dangerous with every slain hero and every passed year, it "reflects [London Above's] degeneracy and viciousness" (175), thus leading to Richard "fighting against the decadence of the real world" (176). Having slain the Beast, Richard assumes a new role, and consequently, a new name. A dying Hunter tells him "'[y]ou killed the Beast, she said. 'So now you're the greatest Hunter in London Below. The Warrior...'" (318). Richard is reluctant, and disputes this new title. "'I'm no warrior,' said Richard. The Abbot smiled gently. 'You killed the Beast,' he explained, almost regretfully. 'You are the Warrior'" (343). Richard has thus not only become a hero, he has also been *made* one by several, repeated speech acts. The conviction thus stems equally from action and speech. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin proposed that perlocutionary acts refer to "what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even say, surprising or misleading" (109). While the act of killing the beast has shaped Richard into the fantasy novel's heroic stock character, this event has to be continually reinforced and predetermined by direct speech acts, so much so that this development is hinted at several times before its realisation. When the Marquis is asked why Door insists on keeping Richard by her side, he claims that it is "'[s]entimentality on her part,'", but soon admits to himself that he "had begun to wonder whether there might, perhaps, be more to the Upworlder than met the eye" (208). Likewise, another inhabitant of London Below, the mysterious Serpentine, also points to Richard's function.

> "'Your hero is unable to hold his wine, I see,' observed Serpentine, dispassionately. 'He's not my hero,' said Door.
> 'I'm afraid he is. You learn to recognize the type. Something in the eyes, perhaps." (220)

This utterance[116] thus already makes Richard a hero before he completes the action that would categorise him as such. The speech act thus serves as foreshadowing to genre-savvy readers and wary characters like. While Richard's quest of becoming is

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[116] It should be noted that Austin is primarily concerned with performative verbs rather than general sentence so this reading loosely borrows from his approach in that it examines the effect of speech onto action and vice versa.

thus evident to both reader and most characters from the beginning, once more confirming the ubiquity of the *bildungsroman* as a plot pattern, it is realised by his successful completion of not only one, but two quests. The final battle against Islington, which serves as the novel's climax, is not seen as a quest of Richard's, but as one of Door's (cf. Jódar 177). Jódar argues that *Neverwhere* splits the idea of the Overcoming the Monster pattern, or rather the idea of the monomyth (both being very similar in terms of plot) into three quests (Richard, Door, the Marquis, cf. 164) and thus presents "a fragmentation of the monomyth [ ] [that] echoes the fragmentation of other contemporary metanarratives" (193), making the text highly postmodern.

But since Richard is the novel's main character, it is his journey that this analysis is particularly interested in. His own mission is of a dual nature: one is the destruction of the Beast, which follows Booker's overcoming the monster plot, the other the Ordeal of the Key. In his version of the overcoming the monster plot, Gaiman includes several dream-confrontations of Richard's and the Beast's before the battle takes place, quite heavily hinting at Richard's coming destiny. "'I had dreams about the Beast,' [Richard] said. The Marquis raised an eyebrow. 'What kind of dreams?'" Richard's reply is foreboding: "'Bad ones" (307). The dreams about the beast can be understood as traumatic flashforwards to a destiny Richard can neither understand nor change. In fact, the flashforwards carry the same function a flashback to a traumatic event would have, only that the moment has not happened yet: the flashforward to the traumatic moment is used to reflect that trauma itself an unresolvable paradox (cf. Luckhurst, *Question* 4), so its literary representation needs to match that.

For a former financial accountant, a subterranean life or death battle against a mythical beast in a secret part of London is certainly far from the norm, and transcends Richard's ability of understanding. Leys observes that Freud had discussed the repetition of traumatic experience in dreams (cf. 23); here flashforwards not only serve as irreducibly fantastic elements of omniscience, but also point to preconscious notions of trauma. The bad dreams of the Beast are about to turn into reality, but nevertheless, Richard goes forward, ready to save Door (Door will, by the way, save herself). Interestingly, it is not the battle itself which traumatises Richard, but rather the fear of it as generated by the dreams beforehand.

Richard's bravery in the fight against the beast is enabled by the other, and I would argue, more significant iteration of Richard's heroic development, which be found in the "Ordeal of the Key" (233), preceding his battle against the Beast.

3.2. Testing the Hero: The Ordeal of the Key

It is the Ordeal of the Key marks the third and final phase of Richard's traumatic *bildungsroman* fantasy as it encompasses the metaphysical challenge characteristic of this step. Much like the great Beast of London, the Ordeal of the Key has claimed many a hero. Rather than present a conventional battle or villain, the enemy that needs defeating in it is the disciple's own mind. The Ordeal, hosted by the Black Friars – another tube station turned character(s) – protects a magical key that allows changing the fabric of reality, thus turning it into a deus ex machina that can both free the villainous Islington from his prison, and return Richard to London Above as his regular, old self. Richard stumbles into the Ordeal more or less accidentally, and neither the Black Friars, nor Door and Hunter expect him to survive. In most cases, the Ordeal ends with the disciple's suicide, although some escape with their lives, but without their sanity. These traumatised heroes are then cared for by the Black Friars until they eventually die. During the Ordeal, Richard thinks he is in a tube station in London Above, and his experiences in London Below are nothing but madness. In this mad vision, he thinks himself a homeless man afflicted by mental illness, struggling against schizophrenic visions of his friends tempting him to kill himself. Here, Richard stands in for the Othered citizens of London Above, who have been marginalised and excluded. The Ordeal of the Key can thus be understood as an allegory of the return of the repressed and deals thus not only with Richard's own sense of displacement Above and Below, but also with that of the homeless outside a fantasy setting.

The aim of the Ordeal of the Key "is to undermine Richard's belief in the supernatural domain, to accept that he is insane and he would do himself and the world a favour by committing suicide" (Ekman 71). Skains finds that the Ordeal even

> raises the question: is this entire tale one of mental illness, of a man's descent into madness and homelessness? Is the fantasy merely a tined lens explaining away the more troubling mystery of how someone who seems to 'have it all' can suddenly abandon his societally-acceptable life?" (35)

Alas, Gaiman does not resolve the tale into a psychoanalytic reading and Richard survives the Ordeal, the existence of London Below doubly affirmed. Andrés Romero Jódar proposes that "[a]t this point, Richard has gone through his own metaphorical death and has been reborn as a new hero" (172), feeding into Booker's notion of the rebirth plot, which sees its protagonist "fall under the shadow of a dark power […] until the hero or heroine is imprisoned in the state of living death" (204). The "miraculous redemption" (204) is eventually brought about, and Booker notes that heroes are saved by female characters or children, and heroines by male ones. Richard, as an everyman hero, is saved not by Door or by Hunter, the only female characters he interacts with at this point, but by the memory of Anaesthesia, a girl from London Below he met earlier and who died while they were crossing the Night's Bridge together. Right before Richard gives in, he finds a bead from Anaesthesia's necklace in his coat pocket and chooses life and fantasy over believing it to be mere madness. Jódar proposes that Richard's affirmative belief in the fantastic is a sign that he has resorted to a childlike stadium of imagination and that

> Richard's quest is a process of deconstruction of his reality, of liberation of social chains; it is then, what can be called a *Regredierenroman*, a novel about the hero's process of regression, in contrast to the *Bildungsroman*, a novel of education and maturation. (180)

I could not disagree more, as Richard's tale begins much in the same way that many a *bildungsroman* does. A young hero, on the cusp of becoming, undertakes a journey during which he meets myriads of (different) characters who offer him a place in their world, only for his journey to present tests and tribulations before the arrival at his destination. This arrival is not marked by him turning into a new man, but into a grown and educated one, who has made his own decisions, formulated his own philosophy, and has matured beyond what seemed possible when the narrator presented him first. The groundwork for this development is Richard's essential good nature, made evident as soon as he interacts with the wounded Door while everyone else ignores her. This means that "in our world altruism already counts as deviant behaviour" (Vanderbeke 154), and it is this deviance that others Richard and leads him onto his adventures. The Ordeal of the Key then serves as one of the two quests that tests and ultimately, affirms the heroic potential that will win him a place in London Below.

The quest thus completed, Richard rejoins the group as a new man. Pell Jones argues that "[i]n London Below, the things Richard previously thought were important have little meaning, forcing him to turn inward to see what truly matters" (216); Pell Jones refers to all of Richard's time Below, but I would argue that Richard already knew what mattered before he lost everything and that his turning inward has more to do with being given the chance to grow beyond what was possible Above. The highly traumatic Ordeal of the Key has led to a completion of Shaffner's seven principles for the *bildungsroman* that the encounter with the Beast will further enforce and accord with a new status (he becomes the Warrior, and Sir Richard[117]) now that the transitional phase has been left behind. In besting the Ordeal, Richard demonstrates "mastery of circumstances", while drawing on nothing but his own "self-reliance" and "earnest, purposeful activity as opposed to dilettantism"; his "insatiable yearning and striving for life's meaning" leads him not to accept the madness of the Trial as real, but experience it as "a deepening consciousness of human experience" instead. Ultimately, this leads to "a release from the bondage of false ideals". These ideals are the belief in a mimetic reality, into a London without an Above and Below, and the lack of importance of people who have stranded in homelessness. This realisation leads to a successful "self-expression" (18) that is realised not only by Richard, but also by Hunter whose place he is soon to take.

> Richard looked different, somehow… Hunter scrutinized him, trying to work out what had changed. His centre of balance had moved lower, become more centred. No… it was more than that. He looked less boyish. He looked as if he had begun to grow up. (254, also noted by Klapscik, *Liminality* 79)

The Ordeal of the Key is Richard's own traumatic experience, featuring the push/pull of the return of the repressed. When stuck in madness, only the deliberation of the price paid for the journey (i.e. Anasthaesia's life) brings him back. Writing about trauma, Schönfelder argues that "[s]elf-reflexivity is of vital importance in this context because trauma is a subject that forces us to confront the foundations of our selves" (321). The continuous confrontation with lives at the margin and the disquieting power of mental disease can be understood as Richard's own form of confrontational therapy. Yet what Richard needs to do is to not only classify the

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[117] In the end, Richard is made into a Lord by the Earl of Earl's Court, but the Earl, an ancient and feeble-minded man, gets his name wrong and calls him "Sir Richard of Maybury" (347). While Richard has thus risen to the next rank, it is shown that madcap nature of London Below is still in effect, even for the initiated.

traumatic memories as narrative ones, but furthermore expel them, thus intimating that the Ordeal necessitates an exorcism of trauma rather than an integration.

Richard's trauma stands in for that of many who have lost their homes, a place in mainstream society, and the safety that comes with being part of it. *Neverwhere* is perhaps Gaiman's most overtly socio-critical novel, and Richard's trauma is used to make that clear. Trauma narratives "tend to be both fascinating and unsettling through their combination of disturbingly alien and uncannily familiar elements" (ibid); here, this effect is achieved by putting Richard in a recognisable situation (that of seeing the homeless) without him being fully able to realise not only that it is himself he is looking at, but also how he got there in the first place. While he was introduced into an Other World by Door's trauma, it is his own that sets forth his development into a hero. The Ordeal is precisely about generating experiences that are too much to comprehend. Likes disciples in rites of passage who are "ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life" (Turner, *Forest* 101), Richard is broken before he can become a hero.

3.3. A Strange Return: Refusing the Hero's Boon

Nowhere does this change, this transition, and also this belonging become more apparent than when Richard is safely returned to London Above, where he is not only seen again by colleagues and friends, but where he is even promoted, given a bigger flat, and the offer to have his fiancée back. It is not however this accumulation of riches, the classic hero's reward (see Campbell's *monomyth*), that signifies his change, but the treatment of the people around him and of his new status. This change is particularly evident in his confrontation with the real estate broker who let Richard's flat and lost all of Richard's possessions. Gaiman makes this development of Richard's character explicit: "The old Richard, the one who had lived in what was now the Buchanans' home, would have crumbled at this point, apologized for being a nuisance, and gone away" (358f.). The new Richard goes in for the confrontation, and successfully so. After the trials and quests of the Other World, the primary world holds no further challenges for Richard. He is able to navigate a consumer society with ease, threatening the broker with a lawyer, and stands up for his right and

personhood. All of this has been made possible by having slain a Beast with far more archaic weapons than legal advice. Yet, these new abilities do not translate to a happy reunion with his old life. When his former fiancée offers to return to him, he kindly refuses. As an explanation, he offers "I've just changed, that's all" (362).

This change however, while on the one hand making him ready to become fully successful in London Above, also makes him unsuited to staying there. Richard's refusal to unpack his recovered possessions already points to his growing dissatisfaction with his consumer-friendly urban life and expresses his desire to reconnect with London Below before he himself is conscious of it. Korte, who undertakes a socio-critical reading of *Neverwhere*, postulates (rightly) that Richard "discovers that his life in rags has been more rewarding in human terms than his new riches, and decides to return underground in a deliberate act of rejection of 1990s capitalist values" (Korte 88). This is not only Richard's revelation, but also the novel's central *bildungsidee*. Richard has developed humanist ideals that London Above refuses to engage in. In keeping with Klapscik's assessment that Richard has fully assimilated into London Below and has been "utterly initiated into the fantastic realms" (79), his rejection of the world above is that of the people from Below and calls back to Door's treatment at the hands of Jessica earlier in the novel. Where Richard was the only one to stop and help the girl, his fiancée saw Door as an inconvenience that might make them late for dinner with her boss. This is not the world Richard wishes to live in. Consequently, he once more tells his colleagues that "I needed a change" (*Neverwhere* 356), before opting for another one: the return to London Below.

While first banned to London's fantastic underbelly, Richard had always been hoping to get back to his old life in London Above, often inquiring when and how this could be brought about.

> "What about getting me back home?"
> The Marquis raised an eyebrow.
> Who you think she is – the Wizard of Oz? We can't send you home. This is your home." (343)

The Marquis words of dejection thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy and one that deftly subverts the voyage and return home plot as well as hero's return as part of the Campbellian monomyth. In his Campbellian reading of *Neverwhere*, Jódar argues that since the novel does not end with the hero returning to and transforming the world

he left (193), the myth's "final basic principle: restoration of the initial situation" is distorted (168f.). When Richard returns London Above, his erstwhile fiancée seems a little milder, but other than that, life goes on as he knew it. Flats, work, pubs – all accoutrements of a normal London life that he no longer knows what do with. Similarly, it can be understood as a subversion of the *bildungsroman*'s arrival in new settings. The protagonist's development and arrival is here complicated not only because Richard has no interest in the hero's reward, but because this reward based system of development is too simplistic for someone who gained enlightenment through trauamtisation. The Ordeal of the Key has shown Richard what matters, and it is not the gifts bestowed by a world that punishes Otherness.

In a final encounter with a homeless woman, the crone asks him what he wants.

> 'Nothing,' said Richard. 'I really don't want anything. Nothing at all.' And then he realized how true that was; and how dreadful a thing it had become. 'Have you ever got everything you ever wanted? And then realized it wasn't what you wanted at all?' (370)

This points to Richard's development both as a character and as a stock hero in a fantasy novel. "Unlike the traditional questing hero, [ ] Mayhew does not want to return home, or at any rate he doesn't want to stay there" (Irvine 204): the voyage was more important than the return can be, since it already led Richard to what he needs. I argued earlier that what Richard wants, even though this desire is never explicitly formulated, is a place where he truly belongs, and that is what the Other World offers him. Skains has observed that Richard does not really seem to belong to the real world he inhabits at first (32); he is much better suited to life in London Below. While "[e]very hero, in the Campbellian formulation, must journey to the underworld and return with a prize" (Irvine 203), *Neverwhere* ultimately proposes that the prize *is* the underworld, or rather the potential it presents "as an inversion and an imaginative reflection of our world, a satirical exaggeration and an alternative vision" (Vanderbeke 159). That it can only be accessed after confronting and fully witnessing trauma is indicative of Gaiman's request to not look away when confronted with everyday misery. In London Below, misery is not abject, it is a reality that requires and allows changing. Only in London Below can Richard not only "develop[ ] capabilities he never knew he had" (Korte 88), but that benefit a society keen on the same humanist ideals he has espoused in London Above. London Below is

thus the place his narrative of *bildung* not only takes him to, but where it finally finds completion.[118]

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[118] With its ending in particular, Irvine finds that "*Neverwhere* thus neatly encapsulates several of the urban fantasy's constituent qualities: the fantastic pocket universe, the sense of alienation from the city life that creates a desire that (in the urban fantasy) only the encounter with the uncanny can satisfy; and the flight from the city in the end" (204).

Chapter 4: "'Look at you,' she said. 'You became a man.'"[119] *Stardust* **(1999) and the Transformative Power of Faerie**

As previously mentioned, *Stardust* and its predecessor *Neverwhere* are the only two Gaiman novels in which the protagonist remains rooted in the just discovered Other World rather than return to normalcy. However, while Richard trades one version of the same city for another, *Stardust*'s protagonist Tristran Thorn makes a choice that takes him into a different world altogether as he exchanges the North English village of Wall for the allure of Faerie. *Stardust* presents a discourse that *American Gods* will continue in even more breadth and scope, namely that of destination versus destiny.

As a neo-Victorian text, *Stardust* borrows heavily from the period in which it is set. Originally published as a four-part graphic novel[120] with illustrator Charles Vess, whom Gaiman calls the "finest fairy artist since Arthur Rackham" ("Happily" n.p.), it has since been adapted as a film by Matthew Vaugh (2007). *Stardust* evokes Victorian fairy tales and fantasy,[121] distinct in style and genesis:

> the Victorian era was unique for fairy tales in England. The genre flourished on the British Isles much later than in other Western European countries, gaining in respectability and popularity with the creation of the literary fairy tale, a new subgenre. Many respected artists and authors created original fairy tales that were immensely popular with children and adults alike. (Collins, para 3)

Gaiman, who is known for his "deep knowledge of fantasy traditions, folklore and popular culture" (Curry 21), has firmly placed *Stardust* in the tradition of Victorian fantasy and fairy tales. The Victorian era was prolific in its output of fantasy, covering ground as diverse as Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Much like *Alice*, *Stardust* too straddles the line between fantasy and fairy tale. In using a hybrid genre that deals in fairy tale and fantasy (cf. P. Brown 216), the author aims for an enchanted text for adults.[122] Gaiman

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[119] *Stardust* 298.

[120] Scholars such as Collins find that the graphic novel with Charles Vess' illustrations is superior to the text-only version published later: "When *Stardust* becomes solely Gaiman's work, it loses a great deal of Victorian-ness, and thereby the interesting hybridity of the Victorian fairy-tale comic" (para 12). For the sake of its scope, the project at hand will only engage with Gaiman's prose and unfortunately has to disregard comics and graphic novels altogether.

[121] Collins finds that "[w]ith relation to the Victorian fairy tale, *Stardust*, in its political complexity and sophistication, is an especially appropriate companion piece to MacDonald's 'The Day Boy and Night Girl'" (Collins para 4).

[122] Brown points to *Stardust* on the one hand being placed in the tradition of the fairy tale, on the other hand being placed in the tradition of postmodern scepticism which is alluded to by prefacing the novel

explains that after reading William Goldman's *The Princess* Bride (1973), he was looking for *"*fairytale[s], intended for adult readers. It was a form of fiction I loved and wanted to read more of. I couldn't find one on the shelves, so I decided to write one" (Gaiman, "Happily" n.p.).

While Gaiman has drawn on well-known fairy tales for his short stories, Stardust, which can be considered as a "fairy tale novel"[123] (cf. Lehtonen 56), is a fairy tale more in the sense of a fairy story as defined by Tolkien. As such, it is a story set in Faerie. These kinds of fairy stories are "about the aventures [sic] of men in the Perilous Realm" (9f.), and the definition hinges "upon the nature of Faërie; the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country" (10). *Stardust* is a fantasy novel that draws on well-established motifs from fairy tales (witches, talking animals, enchanted humans) and chivalric romance (quest motifs and an encounter with the metaphysical) alike. While fairy tales in the vein of the Grimms are thus more defined by content and form, fairy stories in the Tolkienian sense are best approached by the atmosphere of their setting: they thus have to "touch[ ] on or use[ ] Faërie", presenting "magic of a peculiar mood or power" (10). Stardust, combining this rather circumspect mood with the concreteness of the Victorian empire as a reference, contrasts known particulars of English history with the unquantifiable nature of Faerie. Gaiman masterfully sets the scene for Tristran's adventure:

> A question like 'How big is Faerie?' does not admit of a simple answer. Faerie, after all, is not one land, one principality, one dominion. Maps of Faerie are unreliable, and may not be depended upon. (*Stardust* 84)

Faerie is thus established as a location that does not work along the rules of the well-mapped Middle-Earth (where readers trust the map presented at the beginning of the book to trace the hero's journey) or the methodologically expanding Victorian empire, but instead as unmappable, as mysterious, and as absolutely Other.

Stardust sets forth to tell the story of two men from the village of Wall, Dunstan and Tristran Thorn, father and son. Wall borders on Faerie, and while there

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with John Donne's poem "Song" which deconstructs the chivalric hero's ideals that are also often dominant in fairy tales (cf. P. Brown 216).

[123] Sanna Lehtonen defines these as "fantasy novels that employ narrative elements from fairy tales, including stock characters, motifs, settings, and beginning and ending formulas. A couple of texts draw on specific tales and myths but combine them with others. However, yet other novels in the data set do not employ any other fairy tale elements apart from the character of the witch or the exceptional woman able to work magic. While witches are stock characters in fairy tales, in these texts they occur as more complex persons that have a more complicated relationship to their magical abilities than simply waving a wand making things happen" (56-57).

is an eponymous wall separating the two realms, every nine years at market time, the two worlds connect when Faerie vendors come and set up stalls. Only on this day are humans allowed to interact with the fae. However, this prohibition is not enforced by the fairy people, but rather by the inhabitants of Wall. On market day, Dunstan goes into Faerie, meets a mysterious woman, falls in love with her, and unknowingly fathers a boy who is pushed through the wall into Wall almost a year later. This passage can be understood as a second birth, placing Tristran in the Victorian world of rules and regulations as opposed to the joyful chaos that is the perilous realm: he must be reborn a law-abiding, rule-governed Victorian Englishman. Tristran grows up believing that his father's wife is his mother, unaware of his Other heritage. However, and this is where destiny as a trope begins to make its first overtures, Tristran is different from the other inhabitants of Wall. The difference and his origin predetermine his adventurous journey, which, of course, takes the already familiar shape of the bildungsroman.

Gaiman sets this story in a time when Charles Dickens was "a young man, and beardless" and Queen Victoria "had apples in her cheek and a spring in her step" (5). The latter is important for more reason than one. Setting the text this overtly in the Victorian era means that not only does "Victoria give[ ] her name to the period; her disposition gives the nation and time an atmosphere" (Collins para 2). The atmosphere is thus one of excitement, in which first Dunstan, and then his son Tristran are caught up. The young queen is "unmarried, although she was very much in love" (5), setting the stage for a plot that centres on romance, growing-up, and eventually becoming an elderly statesperson much revered by its subjects, thus reflectng the historical Queen Victoria's biography. Evoking Victoria this early in the novel serves as a foreshadowing of Tristran's own royal destiny.

When the readers meet Tristran at his tale's beginning, he is however as far from fulfilling any kind of destiny, faerie or otherwise, as possible. The first forty-odd pages of the novel chronicle Dunstan's teenage years; his son only enters the narrative on page 43 as the baby is pushed through the wall. The novel then speeds through Tristran's childhood, while his young adulthood takes up almost the rest of the novel, ending with acceleration to his old age and death. Gaiman thus decisively sets the focus on the coming-of-age not only of Tristran, but also of his father. The doubled plot serves to reinforce the importance of this period of life. In the broader

sense, *Stardust* could also be understood as a life novel, but since the focus is so clearly on Tristran's formative years, the standard plot of the *bildungsroman* weighs more heavily than the brief references to the protagonist's birth and death. Aged 17, he is described as

> half the way between a boy and a man, and he was equally uncomfortable in either role; he seemed to be chiefly composed of elbows and Adam's apples. His hair was the brown of sodden straw, and it stuck out at awkward, seventeen-year-old angles, wet and comb it howsoever much he tried. He was painfully shy, which, as if often the manner of the painfully shy, he overcompensated for by being too loud at the wrong times. (*Stardust* 53)

Tristran's dreams at this point are those of a Victorian shop-boy who wishes to see the world, "all the way to London and Liverpool" (54), or perhaps, dreaming big, even to America (ibid). It is the lure of the unknown that is already evident here, but all the destinations mentioned are ones that Tristran will never see because

> there were times when the wind blew form beyond the wall, bringing with it the smell of mint and thyme and re-currants, and at those times there were strange colors seen in the flames in the fireplaces of the village. [...] And, at those times, Tristran Thorn's daydreams were strange, guilty fantasies, muddled and odd, of journeys through forests to rescue princesses from palaces, dreams of knights and trolls and mermaids. And when these moods came upon him, he would slip out of the house, and lie upon the grass, and stare up at the stars. (ibid)

The wind from beyond the wall is as much a harbinger of that which is to come as it is Tristran's call to action. In a display of dramatic irony, the reader already knows that Tristran is set on a path to alienation because of his secret fae heritage and thus primed for heroic development long before he displays any heroic behaviour.

Paula Brown argues that "rather than following the socially approved male path towards scientific discovery or practical action (becoming a respectable merchant, perhaps), [Tristran] takes *flight* into the world of feminine desire, the realm of fantasy"[124] (219). Brown thus links Tristran's desires to that of the young Queen Victoria, who too is at the beginning of her long life and reign. Victoria then is not "yet the black-clad widow of Windsor" (*Stardust* 5), she is young and passionate. It is this passion that governs the plot of *Stardust* as opposed to the spirit of repression that the Victorian Age is connected with and it is this passion that inspires Tristran to dream. For Tristran, the son of a villager from Wall and the trapped Lady

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[124] She further points out that "[i]t is during this flight that the hero undergoes transformations that call into question traditional associations of the heroic with *masculinity*" (Brown 219).

Una of Stormhold, the monarch of Faerie, has a destiny ahead of him that rules out London, Liverpool, or America – his destination is the impossible world of Faerie, and his destiny is to rule it. By contrasting young, awkward Tristran with the grand tale of Stormhold's succession (there is an extended subplot that sees Tristran's maternal uncles kill each to gain the crown), Gaiman adds some levity to his narration. Tristran is at the same time both suitable (he is the heir presumptive) and unsuitable to take the crown (he thinks he is just a civilian teenager in Victorian England). Before his call to action, to evoke Campbell's monomyth, Tristran is "a gangling creature of potential, a barrel of dynamite waiting for someone or something to light his fuse; but no one did" (*Stardust* 55). The charming village of Wall has nothing to offer him that will unlock his potential; without his journey, the "shop-boy" (62, 299), as he *is* often called, will never *be* called. He needs the faerie realm to become more than nerves and awkwardness, and it is his link to the faerie realm and the exploration of its space that connects him to the *bildungsroman*'s first step, the path to alienation.

Desperately and hormonally in love with the Queen's namesake, young Victoria[125] Forester, Tristran, inspired by "[t]he wind [that] blew from Faerie and the East, [...] suddenly found inside himself a certain amount of courage he had not suspected that he had possessed" (58) and asks to walk her home. This first effect of Faerie's influence on the novel's protagonist already offers a hint of the narrative of *bildung* that is to follow. Victoria, however much Tristran loves her, does not return the sentiment, and deflects his advances. This leads Tristran, who "attains a Don Quixote-like stature in his deeply rooted belief in chivalry as well as the promises and contracts associated with professions of love" (P. Brown 222) to making her all sorts of grand promises, from slaying animals to bringing her riches. Victoria does not take any of this seriously and instead tells him to bring her the star that just fell from the sky into Faerie. While she is teasing, Tristran is not, and sets of for the wall, effectively making her the "necessary catalyst for Tristran to discover the nature of true love" (218). His affection for Victoria and later the star links Tristran's behavioural pattern to that of Wilhelm Meister, who, as Saariluoma has observed, frequently makes life decisions based on his romantic interest at the time (cf. 292).

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[125] Other than alluding to the Queen, Victoria's name also has "a symbolic meaning which operates within the quest motif; the man who captures the star will win her heart and thus gain victory" (Glina 79).

This romantic entanglement is used to highlight which world Tristran must leave because he never really fit there, and which he must enter (since it was always waiting for him to return). Alice Curry, who undertakes an ecofeminist and postcolonial reading of the novel,[126] argues that "[s]et in the heyday of the British Empire, *Stardust* pits the imaginative space of Faerie against the conservative space of Victorian England[127]" and that consequently,

> Tristran's journey [...] situates the novel in the tradition of the nineteenth century boy's adventure story, a genre that emerged with imperialism and which relied on an inside-outside demarcation that posited the indigenous natives as inherently inferior to the colonialist explorers. (21)

Tristran however at no point Others the "indigenous natives" he finds behind the wall. Instead, he "accepts everyone and every strange thing with equanimity" (Skains 30) and thus evokes Richard's welcoming nature from *Neverwhere.* His path to alienation thus leads him directly into a society that is just waiting to integrate him. Since the reader already knows that Tristran is part fae, it is even more of a reintegration that he undergoes: he returns to where he was always supposed to be. His willing acceptance of the "indigenous natives" is thus a prefigured acceptance of his own heritage.

Largely concerned with a quest that is both "externally motivated" and "meaningless and inconsequential" (Curry 29) – because of course fetching a star will not make Victoria kiss, let alone marry him – Tristran's tale is about getting to know himself while travelling unknown lands. While the quest thus feigns at rite of passage, it is the actual passage through Faerie that will complete the rite. John Clute speaks here of two types of quest narratives in fantasy fiction, the external quest (fetching an item, slaying a beast, and so on) and the rite of passage quest, which he finds "has become increasingly popular; and defines the central plot structure of many fantasies" ("Rite of Passage" n.p.). This type of quest narrative *sees its* "protagonist, often an Ugly Duckling, move[ ] from childhood through puberty [...] to adult empowerment [...] from ignorance to bliss [...] invoking a pattern of Departure, Absence and Return" (ibid). Tristran's departure is, due his heritage, also automatically a return. Faerie is not only his birth place, but his birth right, and he must become a man to claim it. His *bildungsroman* arc thus leads him not only from

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[126] Since Faerie is located East, she finds that it also offers itself to an oriental reading.
[127] For an extended discussion of Victorian motifs in *Stardust*, please see Collins 2008.

teenaged boy to adult man, but moreover from civilian to royal, and from unknowing to enlightened.

4.1. A Fallen Star: Yvaine's Traumatic Journey

Other than *The Graveyard Book*, *Stardust* is the Gaiman novel that evokes the *bildungsroman* in the most straight-forward fashion. Tristran sets out for Faerie, the departure into unknown lands marking the first part of his maturation, but it is the confrontation and consequent journey with the star that sets up the second part of his developmental process. Tristran at first thought the star would be an item, but the rules of Faerie see the star tumble towards earth not as a rock, but as a person called Yvaine. Much as in *Neverwhere*, it is not the protagonist's own experience of trauma that sets off a development, but his witnessing of trauma instead. It is at this point that the question of whether *Stardust* is not actually Yvaine's *bildungsroman* rather than Tristran's must be dealt with. Susan Fraiman proposes in *Unbecoming Women. British Women Writers and The Novel of Development* that "the way to womanhood not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of a crossroads" (x). Yvaine's journey is however not self-initiated; she does not set out to realise a better, more educated version of herself, but is instead displaced from her home against her will. Fraiman argues that historically, it was much harder for women to be in a position to attain the kind of spiritual and formal education set forth in the *bildungsroman* (cf. x); while Yvaine too lacks a formal education (stars as metaphysical entities perhaps have no need for one), but by the time she is forced down to Earth, her spiritual journey already seems complete. Yvaine is at no point on a path to alienation, nor does she need to be on a journey of reflection and action. Her fall and her final position at Tristran's side are determined by her displacement rather than by any concrete *bildungsidee* or developmental dreams. Fraiman argues that female *bildungsromane* are "rewriting the heroine's rise to happy maturity as a history of obstruction, imposition, and loss" (10). So while Yvaine the star will eventually find a new home, a husband, and a role in Faerie, hers is not the story of a happy and freeing development that is so characteristic of the *bildungsroman*.

Where in *Neverwhere* the Lady Door thus functions as the key to the protagonist's development, it is Yvaine the star who does so in *Stardust*. Yvaine's

trauma is threefold and marks the present traumatic event that influences the novel's *bildungsroman* plot. Her traumatisation can be linked to Curry's ecofeminist, postcolonial reading of the novel: her experience is one of displacement when she is forced from the sky, one of commodification when Tristran seeks to gift her to Victoria and the witches want to eat her heart to maintain youth and immortality, and one of kidnapping when Tristran encounters and traps her with a silver chain at first.

Applying trauma to this novel in particular is not entirely unproblematic. Where *Neverwhere* discusses the real plight of homeless people in a fantastic text, *Stardust* offers no such overarching social criticism. Gaiman says that upon Stardust's publication, "[t]here seemed to be a general consensus that it was the most inconsequential of my novels" (Gaiman, "Happily" n.p.) and that

> [s]hortly after it was published, I wound up defending it to a journalist who had loved my previous novel, Neverwhere, particularly its social allegories. He had turned Stardust upside down and shaken it, looking for social allegories, and found absolutely nothing of any good purpose.
> "What's it for?" he had asked, which is not a question you expect to be asked when you write fiction for a living. "It's a fairytale," I told him. "It's like an ice cream. It's to make you feel happy when you finish it." (ibid)

Delightful simile aside, a novel whose function is to make you feel happy seems as far divorced from trauma writing as *The Lord of the Rings* from the Harlem Renaissance. Yet Yvaine's tale, its end in particular, hints at the darker side of Faerie. Where Tristran only witnesses trauma, but remains unharmed, Yvaine is forever displaced from her home (cf. Curry 28). This displacement is not brought about by her gently falling from the sky on her own accord. Instead, "[s]he is hurled from it by the eighty-first Lord of Stormhold when he tosses the topaz that confers power and authority over Stormhold high into the heavens, inadvertently toppling her from her place" (P. Brown 225). Since Yvaine never addresses returning home to the sky after she falls down and breaks her leg, the novel hints at a permanent displacement to the earth-bound part of Faerie. This geographical restriction is cemented when Tristran saves her life during their journey: "[N]ow that you have saved my life, you are, by the law of my people, responsible for me, and I for you. Where you, I must also go" (*Stardust* 228). At the very end of the novel, after Tristran has passed away, Yvaine remains behind to rule his kingdom, assuming the very same hierarchical position that initially lead to her forceful displacement: the one who was torn from the sky by the heir of Stormhold eventually becomes the heir of Stormhold after being bound to

another man from the same line. One could thus argue that Yvaine's personal freedom ends forcefully upon first contact with Tristran's line.

Mathilda Slabbert connects the novel's ending to "true postmodern idiom" in which Gaiman "does not leave the reader satisfied with a traditional 'happily ever after'" (70).[128] While Tristran's tale ends with a fulfilling marriage, the ascension to the throne after years of happy wanderings, and reaching old age until "Death came in the night and whispered her secret into the ear of the eighty-second Lord of Stormhold" (331), the novel pointedly refuses to come to a close at this point. Instead, it shifts its focus to Yvaine, who (must?) live on: the immortal star can neither follow her husband into death, nor return to her intangible family in the sky. In a subversion of the fairy tale's and love story's happily ever after, Yvaine climbs the castle's highest tower every night and "says nothing at all, but simply stares upward into the dark sky and watches, with sad eyes, the dance of the infinite stars" (333). The displacement is thus permanent and as such, unspeakable. Her nightly return is that of the repressed and her traumatic crisis of survival does not end on the novel's final pages, but is intimated to go on. Her presence on the tower, underneath the stars and the moon that no longer speak to her, thus make her both the survivor and the witness to her traumatisation. At an earlier point in the novel, the moon and the stars communicate with Tristran (cf. 183f.) and plead with him to keep Yvaine safe from the Lilim. They do thus have the ability to speak, but the absolute loss of Yvaine to the realm and line of Stormhold has silenced them. Her grief, the novel insinuates, is thus beyond comprehension and communication.

While the novel otherwise charts tales that ultimately unite longing and belonging, Yvaine's fate stands apart. Tristran longs for adventure, and finds an adventurous world in which he belongs. Victoria Forester longs for a solid marriage, and finds that her heart belongs to the respectable shopkeeper Mr Monday who happily marries her. Even the cat Tristran had as a boy, a small kitten from Faerie, runs away over the wall to reunite with its kin. His father then tells him (perhaps foreshadowing his own son's departure) that "[s]he'll be happier, over the wall. With her own kind" (46f.). Only Yvaine is exempt from these happily ever after reunions, indicating the darker undertone of the otherwise light novel that is also evident in its

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[128] Of course, not all fairy tales operate with a happily ever after; many of Hans Christian Andersen's tales being a case in point. The fairy tale's link to a happy ending is thus a strongly manifested audience expectation and a common narrative trope, but by no means a universally applicable rule.

title, for stardust is precisely what Yvaine will be reduced to if she ever sets foot outside Faerie.

The second factor of Yvaine's traumatisation rests in her commodification. Not only is she commodified by Tristran, who, even after learning that the star is not just a piece of rock, but a person, literally chains her and intends to drag her across Faerie to Victoria as a "colonial prize" (Curry 25);[129] she is also commodified by the Lilim, ancient witches that haunt the tale. Barbara Creed observes that "[t]he witch, of course, is a familiar female monster; she is invariably presented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts" (2). The monstrous act the witches in *Stardust* attempt to undertake is to eat Yvaine's beating heart. Since "the heart of a living star is a sovereign remedy against all the snares of age and time" (*Stardust* 161), its consumption will render them young and desirable once more. To them, the star is merely its function, and killing the star in order to attain "immortal life seems to go beyond a grudging willingness to perform a necessary evil in order to stay alive. They are enthusiastic murderesses and torturers" (P. Brown 223f.). This "intergenerational female conflict" (Cahill 59) is one of *Stardust*'s most prominent fairy tale motifs. Susan Cahill[130] calls it "endemic in fairy tales", and uses it to pinpoint *"Snow-White"[131]* as the novel's "main fairy-tale referent" (58). But where the conflict between Snow-White and her stepmother is a highly personal one, the witches are precisely not concerned with the star as a person or a destined threat to their beauty, but rather see her as a means to achieve that beauty once more. The lengths they will go to to obtain the star are evidenced when they kill a unicorn in the process: the unicorn, a common symbol of innocence and purity, must die because it attempts to defend Yvaine. In her their gluttonous desire to steal the star's heart, they stand for a complete disinterest in her character, history, and relationships. To them, she is nothing more than an object. The third party hunting the star are Tristran's maternal uncles, who need to find the topaz that their father threw at the sky, thus causing the star to fall in the first place. Ever since, she has been carrying the topaz across Faerie with her. The princes' quest is a straight-forward one, as "[t]he first of the princes to retrieve the topaz from the star will be the next Lord of Stormhold" (Brown 225). Eventually, the star will give Tristran the desired items, both the topaz, effectively crowning him, and her heart,

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[129] The kidnapping is another element contributing to her trauma.
[130] Cahill focuses on the film adaptation, but her points about gendered conflicts are equally applicable to the novel.
[131] For a detailed reading of Gaiman's "Snow White" tales, see chapter 7.

then freely given. Once both items are gone, and her silver chains lost, her commodification is finally at an end.

4.2. *Stardust*'s Bildung: Realising Personhood and Freedom

This change in his relationship to Yvaine is only possible because Tristran has completed his process of maturation on his journey of reflection and action. The developmental process takes place on several levels: identity, romance, and heritage. Tristran first has to move from "shop-boy" (62) to veritable fairy story hero. Beginning as someone whom the inhabitants of Faerie describe as "ordinary as cheese-crumbs" (104), Tristran soon develops into something more. While stepping into Faerie serves as a first act thereof, the change of clothes that occurs soon after is not only a sign, but an act that further cements this road to maturation. While Ferdinand de Saussure has pointed out that the relationship between *signifié* and *signifiant* is a random one (cf. Bieswanger and Becker 6), the relationship between Tristran's outward appearance and his behaviour is not. Shortly before Tristran is redressed in faerie garb, he is sitting in the forest half-naked, wrapped in a blanket, and is mocked by the "little folk" (129). This is still very much in keeping with his Wall-persona, who is used to being an object of ridicule, but the little folk already hint at his coming to development in one verse of their teasing song:

> *Incontrovertibly*
> *Journeys through Faërie*
> *Strip off the blanket to*
> *See who you are.* (128)

Who Tristran is, even though he does not yet know it, is a hero, an heir, and eventually, a king. Soon afterwards, he is redressed, both literally and figuratively. The narrator points to the significance of this moment in the novel's frequent mode of highly explicit characterisation and explains its effect in detail.

> While clothes do not, as the saying would sometimes have it, make the man, and fine feathers do not make fine birds, sometimes they can add a certain spice to a recipe. And Tristran Thorn in crimson and canary was not the same man that Tristran Thorn in his overcoat and Sunday suit had been. There was a swagger to his steps, a jauntiness to his movements, that had not been there before. His chin went up instead of down, and there was a glint in his eye that he had not possessed when he had worn a bowler hat. (131)

In this passage, Tristran is identified as a man rather than a boy for the first time. His speech pattern also changes and becomes more literary; Tristran finds that his descriptions "did not sound at all like the kind of thing that he would say at all, and he blinked with surprise" (132). Where *Neverwhere*'s Richard was usually unaware of his development, Tristran seems to be catching on, and reflects in a piece of well-placed free indirect discourse that "[t]he new boots fit him better than the old ones ever had" (130). Curry argues that "Tristran's appropriation of the clothes of Faerie is less the adoption of a new identity and more the growing into a true or destined selfhood" (28); destination and destiny are thus once more linked as one inevitably leading to the other.

The "new boots", as much metaphor as symbol, carry Tristran onto his adventures. In a further similarity to *Neverwhere*, the protagonist's true belonging (and thus eventual faerie identity) is evidenced by a superior orientation in the fantastic setting. As Richard knows the layout of the labyrinth after defeating the Beast, Tristran intuitively knows his way around Faerie even though he has no prior knowledge of the realm. Gaiman uses this kind of intuitive knowledge of Other Worlds as a marker not only of belonging, but also of heroic potential. Interestingly, unlike in many other fantasy novels in general and Gaiman novels in particular, the heroic potential is not connected to an overcoming the monster plot. It is neither Tristran's nor Yvaine's task to slay the Lilim, who come the closest to a monstrous presence in the text. As the eldest witch points out "[t]he squirrel has not yet found the acorn that will grow into the oak that will be cut to form the cradle of the babe who will grow to slay me" (163). Shortly afterwards, lest the reader think of this as a metaphor, "[a] red squirrel quested, hesitating a little, into the firelight. It picked up an acorn, held it for a moment in its handlike front paws, as if it were praying. Then it ran away—to bury the acorn, and to forget it" (165). Tristran, it should be noted, is at this point over 17 years of age and hardly in need of a cradle, thus eliminating him as a candidate for this particular heroic task.[132]

Instead, Tristran's tale is one of voyage and return only, and the journey itself does the deed. I have previously argued that Tristran's developmental process takes

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[132] The novel cannot entirely resist attributing Tristran with the conventional elements of a fantasy hero and thus presents a brief overview of his heroic accomplishments in the epilogue (cf. 330). Yet, by placing the commentary on those actions as an afterthought, the text clearly emphasizes Tristran's psychological development. The *bildungsroman* pattern thus here weighs more heavily than that of the adventure novel.

place on three levels: identity, romance, and heritage. Romance and heritage, which of course also contribute to the first level, are both effectively played out upon the return to Wall. When writing about the hobbits' coming-of-age in *The Lord of Rings*, Jonathan Langford has noted that "[i]t is important both literarily and mythically for the story to return to its origins, not only to show growth of the hero since the beginning of the quest but also to establish the community's status by how it treats the returning hero" (4). When Tristran returns, the guards at the wall do not recognise him and insist that "you look nothing like [Tristran], and you talk little enough like him either" (285), thus barring him from entering Wall. Tristran has become a stranger to his people, indicating which side of his heritage he belongs to more. By initially turning Tristran away, Wall reinforces its normality against the fae boundary and marks Tristran as Other. While waiting to be admitted to Wall, Tristran sees the faerie merchants set up shop for the market and has an epiphany (the last few pages of the novel are ripe with them, used as a frequent trope to showcase Tristran's development): "these might as well be his own people, for he felt he had more in common with them than with the pallid folk of Wall in their worsted jackets and their hobnailed boots" (286). Even without the romance portion of the plot neatly resolved, it is clear that Tristran will not stay in Wall, marrying Victoria.

This is further solidified by a perhaps even more important realisation, for it is only upon Tristran's return that he has the epiphany that will fully change him:

> he could no longer reconcile his old idea of giving the star to Victoria Forester with his current notion that the star was not a thing to be passed from hand to hand, but a true person in all respects and no kind of a thing at all. (*Stardust* 279)

This is the novel's central *bildungsidee* and hints at least at a subversive sociological criticism despite Gaiman's assertion to the contrary. In particular Curry's postcolonial reading of the novel lends support to this theory; Tristran needs to develop away from the Victorian empire that is characterised by the stark delineation between Self/Other and lean into humanist ideals that are more in keeping with the following centuries. Yvaine's commodification is at an end as Tristran, who previously explored Faerie "as a would-be coloniser" (Curry 24), acknowledges "Yvaine as subject rather

than object"[133] and thus "invest [Faerie] […] with ideological significance" (31). Brown has interpreted Tristran's epiphany about Yvaine's personhood as

> an ascent into a higher truth of the spirit rather than an escape into fantasy partly because his apprehension of his beloved as a *she* rather than as an *it* represents his formation or *Bildung* into an authentic being. (P. Brown 222)

His acknowledgement of Yvaine as a person must come with the refusal of Victoria as a potential lover,[134] who is "(as her name suggests) is a true product of Victorian England" and "firmly belongs within the confines of real Victorian England […] without the capacity, or the desire, to move out of frame as Tristran himself is destined to do" (Curry 24). In their final conversation, she comments on the change in him. "'Look at you,' she said. 'You became a man'" (298), and acknowledges that in her teasing, "I did not play you fair, my poor shop-boy… but you are no longer a shop-boy, are you?" (299). Tristran's transformation is thus noted by the person whose approval he craved so much.[135] As a narrative trope, it is of course precisely this approval that he now must no longer care for in order to show his growth. In line with Rosemary Jackson's approach, his desire for Victoria has been expelled in the fantasy world of Faerie, while it has at the same time deeply manifested his desire for equality. When Victoria apologises for her guilt in sending him off into the "Perilous Realm" (Tolkien 9f.), Tristran takes responsibility for his actions: "I think I am responsible for all that I have done, not you. And it is hard to regret a moment of it, although I missed soft beds from time to time" (302).

4.3. Of Lovers and Mothers

With Victoria (gently) cast aside, Tristran is free to pursue the star as a romantic partner. As Baxter has noted "marriage, graduation, home ownership, and getting a

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[133] Brown proposes that "Tristran's struggle to define the feminine other embodied in the star not as an *it* is the mirror image of Victoria's inability to see Tristran as anything other than an *it* himself: as a typical shop boy type rather than as an authentic individual capable of love and heroism"(P. Brown 222).

[134] Film and novel treat the dual love interests of Victoria and Yvaine very differently. As Brown observes, "[h]is beloved Victoria, the inhabitant of an earthly Victorian village who sets him forth on his quest, and Yvaine the star, native of the fantasy kingdom of Stormhold, are […] not represented as evil and good recipients of Tristran's love, respectively, as the 2007 movie version, directed by Matthew Vaughn, would have us believe in its depiction of Victoria as a heartless snob" (218). In the novel, Victoria feels honour-bound to marry Tristran after he has completed his quest, but he refuses and instead prefers to see her happily married to Mr Monday and himself setting off on further adventures with his would-be bride Yvaine.

[135] Note how this refusal of the love-interest mirrors the events of *Neverwhere*, in which Richard too rejects the woman from his old world.

full-time job" as well as "attaining various legal rights" serve as "events that mark a movement into adulthood" (3). In order to symbolise Tristran's maturation, the novel draws on two of these events. One is establishing Yvaine as a future wife, the other is acquiring the legal rights of kingship over Faerie. With all his uncles dead, Tristran is to ascend the throne. Rather than being shocked by the news of his heritage, Tristran accepts them with good grace, calling the feeling of revelation "astonishingly liberating" (*Stardust* 313).

His realisation that the star is not an item he can gift to someone is closely followed by Tristran's second epiphany when he realises the nature of his feelings for Yvaine. "He wondered how it could have taken him so long to realize how much he cared for her, and he told her so, and she called him an idiot" (316), the novel informs the reader in Austen-esque free indirect discourse. The relationship between Yvaine and Tristran differs greatly from that of Victoria and Tristran. Where the latter is characterised by passion and youthful impulses (cf. P. Brown), the former is "based on trust, respect and mutual love" (Glina 83). Brown goes so far to read it as platonic, arguing that

> Tristran has acquired a soul-mate who is so ethereal that she does not need to eat, and whose body is so dissimilar from his physical being that their union can never create biological children. Given this information, one even wonders at the possibility of sexual intercourse. (P. Brown 227)

Brown's reading of a merely platonic relationship defines platonic less as being based on the lack of sexual intercourse and more as caritas over amour (cf. 232), but the lack of passion in the fairy tale seems surprising. Natalie Glina too has pointed out that "Yvaine […] initially stirs no desire in Tristran" (79) while Curry offers a similar, but less absolute reading and speaks of "a union brought about by mutual love and respect" (32). In choosing Yvaine, and her "strongly counter-hegemonic voice, speaking up on behalf of the colonised, the nonhuman and the female" (Curry 21), Tristran showcases his development once more. Brown sees this as

> a perfect understanding between male and female that Tristran's quest finally provides. This understanding, achieved through disinterested, Platonic sentiment such as charity and friendship but not through the sentimentality of Victorian idealism or the vicious, grasping passion of the witches, confers real power against the forces of evil. (232)

Choosing Yvaine and all she embodies as his partner doubles as the *bildungsroman* pattern's third step, the metaphysical challenge that tests the protagonist's

development. In choosing the immortal Yvaine, Tristran not only confronts his own mortality, but also asserts his understanding of a life fully lived.

Tristran's final quest is (rather hilariously) a battle with his newly rediscovered mother in the first conversation the two ever have. His mother, who acts as his blocking character, informs him of his heritage (and ensuing destiny), thus marking of the final component of his *bildungs*-narrative in prompting his new station in life (Gutjahr 8). When informed that he is the Lord of Stormhold, he says that he has currently "no wish to be a lord anywhere" (318), refusing his destiny in favour of his freedom, insinuating that it is not necessarily a battle that makes a hero, but an assertion of one's own free will. While his mother's embodies the narrative conventions of the hero's journey as well as the voyage and return plot, Tristran stresses his right to personal freedom. His newly attained enlightened state is best embodied by moving freely about the realm he loves rather than by governing it from afar. This can also be understood as emphasising bourgeois values over aristocratic systems.

Serving as his mother's "agent of [ ] liberation and accession of the throne" (Sims 105),[136] Tristran therefore vehemently refuses to retire to the castle on Mount Huon, a "dreadful" (Camus 381) edifice that evokes Burkes' notion of the sublime (382). It is no wonder that Tristran, characterised as a happy and friendly fellow (remember Gaiman's ice cream metaphor), will not assume his position as the heir of Stormhold until he absolutely has to. When refusing his mother's wish for his imminent return to the castle (and thus also narrative convention), Tristran delays. His *bildungsroman* tries to evade the fairy tale's and fantasy novel's conventional arc from underling to king for as long as possible and instead deliberately positions him on the road as an eternal traveller. Moretti observes that "[f]or Schiller and Goethe, [...] happiness is the *opposite* of freedom, the *end* of becoming. Its appearance marks the end of all tension between the individual and his world; all desire for future metamorphosis is extinguished" (23). Following the Goethiean ideal, Tristran postpones the symbols of his happily ever after in refuting the throne at least temporarily.

His journey with Yvaine intimates more development in the spirit of the *bildungsidee* he has just developed, ultimately leading to him being a good king who is

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[136] Lady Una of Stormhold was entrapped in a curse that only ended because of her son's actions.

admired by his subjects. Tristran's manifold journeys however, did not return him to Wall as he "ultimately elects to leave the human world forever: it is not possible to live between the two realms or in both"[137] (Jenkins 29). Tristran's final decisions are a marker that he has to leave for a world in which he is appreciated; mocked as a "shop-boy" in Wall, he becomes a hero and eventually, a king, in Faerie. What the novel ends on though is not his success in not giving in to his mother, or his myriad quests, but Yvaine's lonely position up on Mount Huon, forever removed from the stars above her. *Stardust* as a fantasy novel thus deals with the trauma not of its hero, but of the woman who made him one.[138]

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[137] Jenkins observes that "[t]he same spatial prohibition holds in Gaiman's *Neverwhere*" (29).
[138] Slabbert argues that *Stardust*, particularly with regard to its ending, centres on female agency (and, I argue, its limitations). She connects this to Gaiman's "Books Have Genders" essay, in which Gaiman argues that *Stardust* is a girl's book despite its male protagonist (cf. Slabbert 72, Gaiman, "Books Have Genders" n.p.).

Chapter 5: The "ghost hurt"[139] and beyond: Meeting the *American Gods* (2001)

Gaiman's magnus opus *American Gods* is one of the most fitting examples in the author's oeuvre to discuss the interconnectedness of trauma, *bildungsroman*, and fantasy. Both an action-filled road trip and an exploration of belief systems, the novel positions its protagonist on a *grand tour* of personal discovery and development.

Drawing on Moretti's work on the *bildungsroman*, Summerfield and Downward engage with the importance of travel writing for the *bildungsroman* structure. They observe that "[i]t is quite impossible to discuss the eighteenth century without speaking of travel and consequently of travel literature. Travel narratives became one of the most popular and respected European literary genres during" that time (Summerfield and Downward 81). These travel narratives often dealt with the great European tours that spanned several countries and experiences. Summerfield and Downward consequently note that

> It is thus difficult to separate the accounts of the physical journey from a more psychological odyssey as represented by the Bildungsroman of the epoch. Material and spiritual progress, the concept and goal of perfectibility, male bonding, curiosity, civility, and social mobility became recurring themes of several literary genres and especially of the flourishing travelogues and Bildungsromane of the eighteenth century. (ibid.)

In constructing *American Gods* as a contemporary version of the grand tour, namely a road trip across America, Gaiman evokes the spirit of the type of 18th century writing that is both concerned with the notion of *bildung* and the central idea of movement. Summerfield and Downward identify "[t]he voyage of the eighteenth century [as] an odyssey of the soul, a rigorous self-realization through the attainment of knowledge of nature, of others, and of oneself" (83). *American Gods* too embarks on an odyssey rather than a joyride as it charters the long and strenuous journey towards self-discovery after trauma.

Where both *Neverwhere* and *Stardust* are decidedly English in setting and tradition, *American Gods* departs from Europe and takes its protagonist on a quintessential road trip of the American Midwest that culminates in a traumatic rite of passage. Gaiman has said that where "England has history; America has geography" (Gaiman in H. Campbell, *Art* 225), and it is this geography that is explored and functionalised in the novel. Gaiman builds his plot on the well-established notion of America as a melting pot of people and cultures, but turns the idea mystical when he

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[139] *American Gods* 544

includes all immigrants' belief systems and has old gods roaming the spacious land.[140]

Hayley Campbell summarises the novel as

> [a] road trip novel full of Americana in which the old gods of immigrants are abandoned in favour of the secular gods of technology, a novel tinged with horror, full of stories and myth, and how godlike needs can be satisfied in small ways in human life. (*Art* 225)

Keith Booker even argues that "Gaiman treats readers to the most memorable literary tour of Americana since that given to us by another displaced European, Vladimir Nabokov, in *Lolita* (1955)" (ix). Whether this assessment is justified or not, both Nabokov and Gaiman make ample use of the road trip motif to allow their readers more than a passing glimpse into the minds of their protagonists, the disconnect of representation and identification, and the soul of America. Where Humbert Humbert sees himself as a lover rather than a criminal, Shadow sees himself as an ordinary living human rather than a reborn Norse demi-god treading American ground. Their time on the road will lead them to both discovering themselves and being discovered.

> Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark point out that
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> [t]he road has always been a persistent theme of American culture. Its significance, embedded in both popular mythology and social history, goes back to the nation's frontier ethos, but was transformed by the technological intersection of motion pictures and the automobile in the twentieth century. (1)

The properties of the road movie can also be extended to the road as a dual setting and motif within prose fiction. Analysing the road movie as a key genre of American filmmaking, Cohan and Hark find that in

> Forging a travel narrative out of a particular conjunction of plot and setting that sets the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms, road movies project American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways. (ibid.)

Gaiman's use of the American topology is twofold: for one, its vastness allows the author to populate the narrative with gods from every corner of the world, as Shadow meets the Slavic God Czernbobog in Chicago, the old Egyptian Gods Bast, Anubis and Thoth in Cairo, Illinois, the Germanic goddess Ēostre in San Francisco, and African

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[140] Gaiman is more concerned with religions that are no longer observed than with still operating ones, but includes a passing reference to Christianity as the country's dominant religion. When Shadow dies on the World Tree, an act evocative of crucification, he meets Jesus in a dream sequence. The narrator is careful to never outright identify him by name (cf. *Gods* 503-505), but in combination with the man's beard, a discussion about wine, and Shadow's observation that the man's "fingers were etched with old chisel scars"(504), all markers pointing unambiguously to the man's identity.

gods such as Anansi the Spider in Florida. The return to the road and to the motif of travelling places Shadow between the deliberate chaos of gods old and new and his desire for peace in an unchartered and unmapped land. The other use lies in giving the protagonist not only the opportunity, but also the space to define himself anew after the sudden death of his wife. This process of self-discovery is placed against the "the rupture between the past and the future, between myths and media" which Emma James identifies as "[o]ne of the themes that divides American identity" (109).[141] In a subversion of the road movie's narrative conventions, Shadow however does not seek to escape "hegemonic norms", but is doubly expelled from them due to his status as widower and ex-con.

Shadow's journey is a traumatic one from beginning to end as he suffers a close succession of devastating events over the course of the novel: serving a prison sentence,[142] he is released only to learn he has lost his wife in an automobile accident. To make matters worse, he finds out she cheated with his best friend, and *then* witnesses her return from the dead. This comes to pass after he has just been employed as a thug for hire for the mysterious Mr Wednesday, and is almost killed while on the road with him. Shadow then does truly die to protect a man who was willing to sacrifice him all along, has to return to the living to end a battle between old and new gods, solve a centuries-long case of serial killing before finally starting afresh after having done his part. This is in keeping with the observation that the *bildungsroman* operates as a "perfect circle" in which the protagonist eventually realises his own potential for the greater good of a society (cf. Moretti 19, Summerfield and Downward 28): Shadow begins and ends the novel on the road,

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[141] Tally too reads the novel in this context, but even more specifically, in that of the so-called "Long Nineties" which were largely shaped by a discourse of the North American Free Trade Agreement and its potential ramifications and opportunities ("Grand Central" 358).

[142] At this point, Shadow's status as an ex-con needs contextualisation. Since Gaiman has made a convicted man the moral centre of his novel, the crime the protagonist was incarcerated for warrants some attention. At the beginning of the novel, Shadow, after completing three years out of a six year sentence "for aggravated assault and battery" (13f.), is released on parole after three years (3). Looking back, he thinks of his crime as "stupid" (8). The reader learns towards the epistemological climax of the novel that the assault originated in Shadow reaping the spoils from a bank robbery from the men he worked with. Shadow acted as a driver, while his wife is hinted at being the mastermind behind the crime ("he had done his part, done everything she had asked of him…" (514)). This positions Shadow as doubly harmless: he was only he the driver, and it was not even his own idea. The men he beat up were criminals and are thus (somewhat problematically) called into question as 'real' victims. Gaiman has however tried to make Shadow the least guilty convict possible: regretting his crimes and unwilling to repeat them, he has fully accepted his punishment and has been rehabilitated in prison.

missing his wife, but while he is traumatised in the beginning, he is nearing peace of mind at the end.

While *American Gods* presents trauma on an individual level, it also elevates the discussion to societal values at large and discusses key conflicts of a postmodern society. Recasting the advancements of contemporary life (mainly an intense focus on technology and media) as a variation of the postmodern cult of celebrity, the novel contrasts it strongly with a traditional religious exploration of cult as driving force. Keith Booker argues that supernatural elements in American pop culture "are designed to provide satisfaction within the status quo but also to address a (largely unconscious) dissatisfaction with the way things are" (x). *American Gods* inserts its protagonist into a battle between old, forgotten belief systems, and the idols of a (post)modern society. These idols – media, computers, and the stock market – are however unwittingly used as pawns by two of the old gods, Odin, who goes by the name Mr Wednesday in the novel, and Loki, the trickster. By showing the underlying presence and persistence of the old gods, Gaiman's novel subverts an idealisation of the advancements of the modern age[143] and links the novel to Tolkien's dictum of recovery, the quest of returning to something that was lost. This nostalgic element in Tolkien's work is mainly attributed to the idealised Shire and its positive depiction of preindustrial times, whereas *American Gods* focuses on the recovery of simpler times where a prayer or a ritualistic offering was believed to have a direct and positive outcome (as for instance displayed in the interspersed "Coming to America" tales throughout the novel).[144] The end of the novel sees the trickster gods Odin and Loki foiled, the new gods either deceased or retreating, and Shadow strangely disengaged from either party. This turn of events has left Lori Campbell positing that

> [i]t remains unclear even at the end of *American Gods* exactly what the author wants to lament (if anything at all): lack of spiritual belief, lack of belief in general, or something else entirely. […] I want to argue that belief is the story's

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[143] This is ironic since Gaiman himself maintains a strong internet presence via his tumblr, twitter, and blog.

[144] One of these tales is that of Essie Tregowan (104-113), a young woman from Cornwall who was sentenced to indenture in the US for her stealing. Essie brings the belief in kobolds and pixies with her (cf. 112f.) and as such can be understood as a link to characters such as Hinzelmann and Mad-Sweeney. Essie believes that by making small sacrifices to her gods – a fresh bread here, a cup of milk there – they will watch out for her. This belief is affirmed by the pixie that appears to her shortly before her death as an old and affluent woman (113). These interspersed tales be understood as stylistic links to postmodernism's refusal of grand narratives (cf. McHale 68): they 'break up' Shadow's monomythical journey and deconstruct the gods as absolute and all empowering entities that shape human life. Instead, the relationship between mythological creatures and the people praying to them is shown as reciprocal.

central motif but only as a foundation for a more specific issue Gaiman says he wants to explore. (189)

She identifies this specific issue as the "immigrant experience" (ibid.), to which Gaiman as an author can relate. Having lived in the states for decades, he has been called a "trans-Atlantic" writer (Curry 21), whose ability to tap into the American consciousness is brought about precisely by his semi-outsider position. Robert Tally links Gaiman's biography to *American Gods'* presentation of "the perspective of the transgressor, the border-crossser, who moves into a foreign domain while retaining a hybrid identity" ("Grand Central" 359). In *American Gods*, Gaiman turns the quest for making a home in a new country into a *bildungsidee*, upon which a character's development hinges.

Gaiman uses the novel's protagonist Shadow to shed light on this experience. In Shadow's arc, the journey motif connected to the immigrant experience is joined with the experience and (potential) recovery from trauma. The supernatural (the novel includes zombies and kobolds) and the mythical (old and new gods) are needed to introduce and set up a world in which Shadow can come to terms with his wife's death, his mother's death, and his father's life-long absence. The fantastical and the mythical he did not know existed offer Shadow the room to reintegrate into society. Among the pantheon of forgotten gods, Shadow can develop, both as a human and as a demi-god. In this new society, he experiences a second coming of age. To return to Castle's distinction between *bildung* and coming of age, the former speaking to "self-development", the latter to "socialization" (7): the novel makes a point of showing its protagonist's need of both. Coming of age is of course usually connected to teenagers and adolescence (Shadow is 32 at the beginning of the novel, cf. *Gods* 7), but in this case, Shadow is devoid of any social network upon his release from prison. His friend and wife are dead, as is his mother, he does not know his father, and there is no further personal connection of note. Shadow will therefore have to learn to build a social network of his own. In addition to that, he has to figure out which lines he is or is not willing to cross in his dealings with the morally flexible Mr Wednesday.[145] The exploration of morals and boundaries is also part of Shadow's *bildungsidee*, which finds full exploration in his return to Lakeside (see chapter 5.4.).

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[145] Mr Wednesday is happy to cheat waitresses out of tips, banks out of money, and Shadow out of his life. He is a consummate trickster whose sole objective is his own gain.

Shaffner's tripartite structuralist approach to the *bildungsroman* finds excellent application in the novel. His first stage posits the protagonists as individuals on a path that might lead to alienation; this is easily achieved in the prison-setting Shadow is first encountered in. Alienated from everyone outside the walls, his criminal past has wreaked havoc with his life. While Shadow thinks he is going to embark on what Shaffner sees as the second phase, the reintegration into the community with his wife, it is actually the reintegration into the pantheon of old and forgotten gods that propels his personal development. Shaffner's third phase, a metaphysical challenge in which the protagonist is confronted with death, and which sees him exceeding his previous powers and positions (cf. Shaffner 109-10), is doubly realised. One the one hand, it is Laura's death Shadow is confronted with, causing him to embark on a new life as Wednesday's hired hand. On the other hand, Shadow himself must face death, and, by the narrative conventions outlined in Booker's death and bebirth plot, actually die and return. This dual development of *bildung* and coming of age is necessitated because of a trauma that severely uproots *American Gods*' principal character: the death of his wife. In its conclusion, the novel connects trauma and consequent rebirth as the final stage of the protagonist's *bildung* and as the starting point of a (new) life.

5.1. "He's a hustler"[146]: Of Fathers and Sons

Much of Shadow's development takes place during his road trip with the mysterious Mr Wednesday when he slowly begins to learn about his own (mythical) identity. At the end of this process stands a confrontation with an abusive father and his own supernatural Self. While Shadow is an apprentice for most of the novel, his final confrontation with his father sees him growing into the role of a master, able and willing to make his own decisions, and aware of the consequences they will yield.

Meeting in an airplane that will take Shadow to his wife's funeral, the stranger seated next to him informs Shadow that he has a job for him (cf. *Gods* 22), thus intimating and foreshadowing a relationship Shadow is not yet cognizant of. The man continues to display his knowledge of Shadow's life and circumstances despite Shadow never volunteering any information. Soon into their acquaintance, Shadow is

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[146] *Gods* 40.

warned that the elusive Mr Wednesday is "a hustler" (40), but this is a warning that the shocked Shadow does not heed. Their road trip begins. Writing about the conventions of road movies, Timothy Corrigan argues that they "promote[ ]a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment" (in Cohan and Hark 3). Wednesday feeds into this stereotypical narrative and favours a new one-night-stand whenever the opportunity presents itself, fully relishing in the image of a debonair travelling salesman with no ties to any one place. His only constant is the well-muscled, but likewise solitary Shadow, who yearns for exactly the domesticity the road movie rejects. To Wednesday, the road and its freedom is a choice, to Shadow, it is the only option left.

As Thomas Jeffers argues, the *bildungsroman* often foregrounds a son's rejection of his father's negative attributes (cf. Jeffers 17). In the case of *American Gods*' protagonist Shadow Moon, this is negotiated in a roundabout fashion as Shadow does not know who his father is and therefore cannot reject any of his attributes, be they negative or positive. In fact, Shadow's paternal heritage is clouded in mystery and only towards the end of the novel does Gaiman reveal that the man Shadow has been road-tripping across America with is not only the god Odin, but also Shadow's father. As is the case with many of Shadow's epiphanies, he reaches it on the World Tree, which unites "moment[s] of clarity" (*Gods* 505) amidst "delirium" (502) before leading to Shadow's death and entering of the afterlife. There, he is given a choice between a path of "hard truths" or "fine lies" (513): Shadow chooses the former and is given a tour of memories, both of his own and of his mother's. Finally, he sees her, as a young girl, dancing with the father she refused to tell him about:

> Shadow was completely unsurprised when he recognized the man [...] He had not changed that much in thirty-three years. [...] Wednesday is not wearing a suit and tie, but the pin the shape of a silver tree he wears over the pocket of his shirt glitters and glints when the mirror-ball catches it. (517)

The memory ends with the departure of the couple, and Shadow, "unable or unwilling to witness his own conception" (ibid.), remaining behind, as isolated as he was during his young adulthood.

Jeffers points out that across literary history, be it German or Anglo-American, the male protagonists' of a *bildungsroman* have a common denominator in being

paternally disadvantaged: "They either don't have fathers alive or they have fathers who are tyrannical or feckless" (188). Wednesday is certainly both; willing to sacrifice his son's life for his own good and absent for Shadow's entire childhood, he is portrayed in a double negative. In keeping with the Anglo-American *bildungsroman* tradition of presenting the "the father-ache [...] [as] a prominent worry" (ibid.), Shadow's desire for a strong and reliable father is negotiated in his easy attachment to a number of father figures. These are Czernobog, Mr Nancy, or Mr Ibis, all of whom invest into the novel's protagonist emotionally and take care of him in ways that Wednesday refuses to. Czernobog and Ibis are also more stationary than Wednesday, and instead of being linked to the road and the image of renegades, they are linked to a business (Ibis) or even an extended family (Czernobog). Nevertheless, before Mr Wednesday's secret identity as Shadow's father is finally revealed, he too takes care of Shadow by elevating the ex-con to the position of his right hand man, or, differently put, his apprentice.

Meeting him at a time of need, Shadow relies on Wednesday to give his life another purpose. As Wednesday tricks people out of money and gods into compliance, Shadow follows him and re-engages with his own mythological powers, shifting the narrative slowly from Todorov's fantastic into his conceptualisation of the marvellous. While he is still firmly rooted in the ordinary, Wednesday takes Shadow on a con designed to rob a bank. As a means of diversion, Wednesday figures some snow would be opportune.

> "What we need," said Wednesday, suddenly, "is snow. A good, driving, irritating snow. Think 'snow' for me, will you?"
> "Huh?"
> "Concentrate on making those clouds – the ones over there, in the west, – making them bigger and darker. Think gray skies and driving winds coming down form the arctic. Think snow."
> "I don't think it'll do any good." (*Gods* 119)

Shadow, despite having already met his undead wife, still does not fully subscribe to notions of the supernatural and fails to discern how his thinking of snow can actually influence the weather. Under Wednesday's masterly mythical guidance, the apprentice nevertheless gives it a try, earning a headache as a consequence.

> *Snow,* Shadow thought. *High in the atmosphere, perfect, tiny crystals that form about a minute piece of dust, each a lace-like work of unique, six-sided fractal art. And the snow crystals clump together into flakes as they fall, covering Chicago in their white plenty, inch upon inch…* [...]

"I think that's enough, don't you?"

"Enough what?"

"Enough snow. Don't want to immobilize the city, do we?"

The sky was a uniform battleship gray. Snow was coming. Yes.

"I didn't really do that?" said Shadow. "I mean, I didn't. Did I?"

[...] "Good work." (*Gods* 119f.; italics in original)

Acquiring the ability to conjure snow in Chicago, Shadow then learns to communicate with others in his dreams in Lakeside, and how to manipulate people's memories in Madison, thus continuously expanding his divine abilities. While the first act of magic occurred under Wednesday's tutelage, the others do not and Wednesday scolds rather than praises him.

The novel insinuates that father and son, however unilateral the relationship might be at this point, need space to negotiate their relationship. This space is generated in the road trip motif which exposes them to new situations, locations, and people to engage with, thus providing Shadow with an extended look at Wednesday's personality. Soon, Shadow comes to reject his father's values, and in eventually defeating him, the apprentice becomes the master. Tellingly, the defeat is not a physical one, Wednesday already having been killed as a sacrifice to himself.[147] Instead, the trickster wants to be raised anew by the blood sacrifices of the battle between the old and new gods. Shadow's victory lies in convincing the gods not to participate in the battle. His final and convincing argument is the identification as Wednesday's child: "I am – I was – I am his son" (584). This testimony gives him the authority to stop the war and to thus put his father's ghost to rest.

However, unlike his father, who embraced the position at the top of the multi-pantheon, Shadow's involvement with the deities of America comes to a sudden end when he departs continental USA to instead embark on a journey to the old world, which is both a rejection and an affirmation of his father's heritage.[148] Shadow emphasizes his maternally-linked human side over this paternally-affiliated godly one. Summerfield and Downward offer another reading of family relationships in the *bildungsroman* and propose that

> protagonists of the Bildungsreise presents characteristics that are unmanly on one side and traditional, almost feudal to the way in which the continuity of

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[147] This echoes Odin's self-serving sacrifice of himself to himself in Norse mythology. For a translation and retelling of the Norse myths as recounted in the *Prose Edda* as well as the *Poetic Edda*, see Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* (2017).

[148] A rejection of Wednesday in the US, and an affirmation of Shadow's own Scandinavian mythological origins in his trip to Iceland, the land of Odin.

masculine identity is guaranteed, on the other side. The protagonists tend to be the only children of their parents who inherit materially and spiritually from their father or father figures, while separating from the mothers from whom they have inherited the unmanly attributes they are trying to rid themselves of. This is the masculine circularity, which corresponds to the feminine one grounded in the love of the mother. (84)

Shadow's mother, having succumbed to cancer when Shadow was still a teenager, was a regular human. Even though Shadow's normality is stressed in the novel (he plays the straight man to the gods' more exuberant natures, cf. L. Campbell 188), in the end it is his paternal heritage he discovers and claims. Yet, the legacy of Shadow's mother keeps him from falling fully into Wednesday's trap and Shadow lives while his father dies.

Shadow's mythological past is something the novel only touches upon, as it seems much more interested in his developing mythological present. Shadow is hinted at being a reincarnation of the Norse god Balder, but shows little interest in delving too deeply into his own mythology. Yet, the background Gaiman draws upon is explored in more detail in his version of *Norse Mythology*, wherein he shares the tale of Balder, the beloved. Having been tricked by Loki, Balder's blind brother Hod throws a mistletoe dart at his brother. Even though every other person, item, animal or plant has sworn not to hurt Balder, the mistletoe had been overlooked because it was considered harmless (cf. *Norse* 231-248). It is this oversight a jealous Loki then uses to his advantage. A throwaway mention of the mistletoe by *American Gods*' version of Loki ("I guess I'll sharpen a piece of mistletoe and go to the ash tree, and ram it through his eye", 569f.) and the confirmation of Odin/Wednesday as Shadow's father establish the mythological identity Shadow is rather uninterested in.[149]

While the past is steeped in the Norse pantheon *American Gods* takes its cue from, the present is linked to Native American belief, echoing the novel's assertion (cf. *Gods* 465, 473) that America is a bad place for (immigrated) gods. Gaiman thus asserts Native Americans' primary ownership, both ideological and otherwise, of the country, as opposed to strengthening the claim of the many generations of

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[149] Skains observes that in *American Gods*, Shadow's "true name is never revealed" (36); this is then only done in "The Monarch of the Glen": "'Hail!' called the men on the deck. 'Hail sun-bringer! Hail Baldur!' The name on Shadow's birth certificate was Balder Moon, but he shook his head. 'I am not him'" ("Monarch" 382f.). Instead, Shadow prefers to go by his evocative nickname and his present American identity (cf. 397).

immigrants that are chronicled in the "Coming to America" narratives. In the novel, the Native American deity Wisakedjak claims Shadow as his "cousin" (*Gods* 553), further strengthening the kinship to Native American belief in the land. This stands in stark contrast to Wednesday, who uses, but does not claim Shadow as kin. Shadow's inclination towards Native American belief, and his refutation of Norse myth, can be read as a form of traumatic repression: what Shadow is repressing is that Balder was killed by his beloved brother and that none of the gods could bring him back to life. Thus damned to a life among the dead, the betrayal echoes even in the contemporary setting of *American Gods*, where again, a version of Balder will be betrayed, and then live among the dead. The most important of them is his wife, the dearly departed Laura.

5.2. Beyond Death: The Zombie Wife as Traumatic Metaphor

In her analysis of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Saariluoma observes that the novel begins in medias res with Wilhelm's and Marianne's nightly tryst (cf. 177-179). Likewise, *American Gods* opens in the middle of events, with Shadow awaiting his release from prison and the highly anticipated reunion with his wife. In the case of both novels, the male protagonist is first introduced in the context of a female lover, whose main purpose is to be a tool for the hero's characterisation.[150] Marianne is an embodiment of Wilhelm's love for the theatre, while Laura serves as an externalisation of both Shadow's past and as a symbol of his future.

When Shadow, just released from prison, learns that not only did his wife cheat on him with his best friend Robbie, but that the two of them also died in a horrific car crash while Laura was performing a sex act on the driving Robbie, his world begins to spiral out of control. This is, within model A of the traumatic *bildungsroman* fantasy, the present traumatic event that sets the second phase of the plot pattern into motion. With regard to Shadow, the news of his wife's death requires him to develop a *bildungsidee* separate from reintegrating into 'normal' society as Laura's husband. Her death prompts Shadow's life to change significantly and thus forces him to enter in a coming of age process he thought he had long completed. Yet,

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[150] This utilisation and one-dimensionality is a frequent criticism of the novel (cf. for instance Maloney 2017) and one of the more poignant changes made in the current TV adaptation for Starz, in which Laura gets her own episode (*American Gods*, 1.4, "Git Gone") to narrate her side of the story.

the fantastic setting complicates this rather straight-forward arc: when Shadow tosses a magic coin into his wife's grave during the funeral, it sets off a chain of events that leads her to return from the dead as a zombie. His wife thus becomes a literalisation of Caruth's "wound that speaks" (*Unclaimed* 8), a constant reminder of her loss and betrayal which appears with complete unpredictability.

As previously mentioned, both *Neverwhere* and *Stardust* locate trauma not in the protagonist, but in the women they encounter. *American Gods* presents both the trauma of the victim and the trauma of the witness, and shows how closely the two are linked. Shadow, who "defines himself entirely in relation to" his wife (Skains 36), is confronted with her death. Since it was she who gave his life a purpose, her death affects him not only as the loss of a lover, but more importantly, as a loss of Self. It was his wife he went to prison for, it was his wife's hometown that he lived in, noting that he himself "didn't really had a life" there (*Gods* 80f.), and it is without his wife that he flounders and ends up alongside Wednesday. When asked by Wednesday why nothing supernatural seems to shock him, Shadow replies that since learning that his wife cheated, nothing has been able to. It is the cheating "[t]hat […] hurt. Everything else just sits on the surface" (369). And it is to the cheating that his mind flashes back when he wishes to remember happier times, obstructing good memories (cf. 476). Her loss can thus be understood as being doubly traumatic: he loses her as his wife before he loses her when she dies.

However, the incomprehensible nature of her loss[151] also finally sets of Shadow's individual development. In *Unsettling the Bildungsroman. Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*, Stella Bolaki draws on Judith Butler to discuss the way in which trauma and the *bildungsroman* can interact. She here deviates from Moretti's hypothesis that trauma necessarily signifies the end of the *bildungsroman*:

> How can loss be registered within the contours of the Bildungsroman in ways that point to different histories of trauma and that at the same time underline the creative potential of loss? Unlike Moretti's account in which trauma is anti-productive, Butler explains that loss has a "strange fecundity" (469). It is crucial to investigate "what is produced from the condition of loss": whatever is generated from loss "will bear the trace of loss," but, as Butler asks, "How will it bear it? In what form?" (468-469 […]). In her words, "full 'recovery' from

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[151] Towards the end of the novel, Shadow learns that his wife's death was actually not an accident, but caused and planned by Wednesday and Loki to make him a pawn in their war against the new gods (cf. *Gods* 578). This however does not renegotiate the emotional impact of her death for Shadow: just because there is a reason, does not mean that he has to understand her loss.

trauma is impossible," but the "irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency." This is what Butler calls "a melancholic (or spectral) agency" (467-468). (36)

Shadow's 'melancholic agency' begins on the cusp of his release from prison, when he is called into the Warden's office to be notified that he will be released two days early due to his wife's sudden death. Shadow's reaction is a nod (*Gods* 14), and even when one of the guards taunts him, it is noted that "Shadow said nothing at all" (ibid.). This silence is a reaction Gaiman's readers could already observe in Yvaine at the end of S*tardust*; some things bear no verbal expression. As Christina Wald argues, "[t]rauma is that which cannot be narrated; as a sudden and chance event, it breaks with narrative patterns of making sense of one's past and instead returns in forms that are distinct from narrative memory" (96). Shadow's (and Yvaine's) inability to lend words to their experience attests to the impact of the disruption. This impact hardly lessens, as *Stardust* makes clear that Yvaine will stand silently in the night until the end of time, while Shadow's quiet suffering stretches across the majority of *American Gods*' 635 pages. Shadow, who as a character is designed as very inward focused – the narrative frequently focuses on him in an authorial narration — yet reticent (even time in Shadow's head, so to speak, seldom yields long passages of narrated emotion), is perfectly suited as focal point of a trauma narrative.

At his wife's funeral, Shadow stands silently in front of the grave: "There was something he wanted to say to Laura, and he was prepared to wait until he knew what it was" (55). It turns out that what Shadow wants to say is "[g]oodnight" and "I'm sorry" (56), trivial parting words that do little to express both the intensity of grief and the degree of the preceding betrayal, thus hinting at the impossibility of fully expressing trauma at the time of its occurrence. The remainder of the chapter is characterised by Shadow's refusal to react; he is muted and incomprehensive. It is this state that pointedly resonates with trauma theory. Wulf Kansteiner writes that

> [f]or Caruth, as for many other theorists, the trauma victim exists in a state of temporal limbo caught between a destructive event that did not register at the moment of its occurrence, and the belated symptoms that unconsciously and obsessively repeat the injury to the person's protective shield without adding to the victim's understanding. (203).

Caught in precisely this "temporal limbo", Shadow is lead to accept the job as Wednesday's assistant. In prison, Shadow's adherence to rules and rituals indicate

that he is able to cope with difficult situations; he has constructed a 'protective shield' and works hard to maintain it. Only once does Gaiman hint at Shadow's inner turmoil before rules and rituals begin to operate as a protective shield for both reader and character: reflecting on the first days in prison, the narrator shares that Shadow feels "misery and the utter skin-crawling horror of incarceration" (*Gods* 4). But immediately afterwards, Shadow reassures himself that once you are locked up, the worst has already happened to you (ibid.) and activates coping mechanisms. His rules are few and simple: "do your own time", not "anyone else's", and "[k]eep your head down" (6). His rituals, given the sparse nature of prison, are equally simplistic:

> So he marked off the days on his *Songbirds of America* calendar, which was the only calendar they sold in the prison commissary, and the sun went down and he didn't see and the sun came up and he didn't see it. He practiced coin tricks from a book he found in the wasteland of the prison library; and he worked out; and he made lists in his head of what he'd do when he got out of prison. (5)

The polysyndeton here indicates both the repetitiveness of Shadow's inmate life, and the stability the highly regulated prison life provides. The latter is eliminated the second he hears about his wife's death. While thus able to cope with imprisonment, he is unable to cope with loss. Laura's death and betrayal show Shadow that there is no point in rituals and rules, as rituals can no longer distract him, rules are broken, and there are no more polysyndetonic lists to be made. All certainty is taken out the picture and will remain so until Shadow's death and rebirth.

While receiving the news of her death in prison, he is informed about the adultery during the funeral when his friend's widow spits on Laura's corpse. Yet again, his reaction is barely there as he merely checks whether someone has already wiped away the spit (they have). Shadow's emotional and verbal reticence has also been noted by Greg Littman, who finds that he "is so restrained in his emotions that he spends almost the entirety of *American Gods* hiding the extreme pain he is in over the infidelity and death of his beloved wife" (Littmann 26, see also Gooding 405 fn2). This pain is then literalized in a revenant wife, who bears witness to the suffering she caused. In her return, Gaiman exemplifies that "traumatic memory remains unaffected by time and cannot be recounted verbally" (Wald 97). Laura's presence

gives shape to Shadow's trauma, making her a metaphor of his grief. While Shadow cannot articulate his feelings, Laura can embody them.[152]

In the character of Laura, Gaiman combines trauma's "referential return" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 7) with the fantastic properties of zombies. While Laura is raised by Shadow's accidental invocation of Celtic magic, "[t]he figure of the zombie as a literally undead human, recently resurrected from its grave, originates in African myth and folklore that migrated to Haiti" (Boluk and Lenz 4). In "Love Your Zombie. Horror, Ethics, Excess", Fred Botting argues that while loving the vampire is commonplace as they promote a safely appealing erotic, loving or charging the zombie with erotic and romantic potential does not work in the same way: as he points out, "zombies are not the most prepossessing objects of desire, passion and sexual gratification" (cf. 19). This is linked to the infectious danger the zombie entails:

> Yet – almost as an incantation in every fiction or film – disavowal is repeatedly called for in every encounter: "forget that the walking corpse before you was once a brother, husband, friend," the warnings declaim because to remember or sympathise, even for a second, is to be vulnerable to the same bloody reduction. (20)

One of the key characteristics of zombies is their mindless appetite for human flesh, yet Gaiman's zombie is both articulate and in control. As such, Laura differs notably from most of her peers across film and literature. She is a zombie in form but not in behaviour.[153] Following Kyle Bishop's zombie typology, which differs between four different kinds of zombie (1. "the real world zombie of Vodou folklife"[154] (7), 2. the entrapped fictionalised zombie of films such as Victor Halperin's 1932 *White Zombie*

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[152] In the previous chapters, both Door and Yvaine were also read not only as linked to the protagonists' traumatisation, but as trauma survivors in their own right. The same will not be undertaken here, since for one, Laura is dead, and not a survivor, and further because she expresses that in dying, her emotional response to hurt has significantly changed. Reflecting on memories, she admits that now that she is dead, most things do not "matter as much" (68) and that even murder has lost some of its atrocity, since "it's easier to kill people, when you're dead […] it's not such a big deal" (164). Despite having supernatural abilities (Door) or being a supernatural being (Yvaine), these characters retain a human response to trauma, whereas Laura's reactions are minimised and linked to her dying state. Her only true desire pertains to her return to the living (as a human), or to her final death and escape from ennui.

[153] Botting describes standard representation of zombie behaviour as follows: "Zombies are the most human of fiction's monsters: without (super)heroic features or capabilities, undeath aside, they are neither individuals nor living beings, possess little conversation, have severely limited table manners or witty repartee, little fashion sense, no personal hygiene or intelligent opinions on matters culture. Without higher brain functions, speech, self-consciousness or sensitivity, they rot, chew, stink, occasionally groan, and lumber en masse towards their next meal of flesh and innards" ("Zombie" 20).

[154] The undertaker Mr Ibis, who is a version of the Egyptian god Thoth, discusses this form of the zombie with Shadow, pointing out that it is comparably easy to create, whereas a "to truly bring the dead back to life, in their bodies. That takes power", *Gods* 216). As a deity concerned with the judgement of the dead, Ibis/Thoth here takes on the role of a specialist on the (un)dead such as Laura.

(cf. 8-9), 3. the mindless and brutal masses (9-12), and 4. the zombie protagonist[155] (13)), Laura falls into the most recent contribution to the zombie oeuvre. She is articulate, remembers her past, makes plans for her present, but has in (un)death gained a physical strength and ruthlessness previously undiscovered. Her supernatural abilities are linked to her resuscitation from the dead, which is not brought about by a virus or environmental plague as is currently so *en vogue* in zombie lore.

It is, as previously mentioned, prompted by Shadow's parting gift: when the casket is lowered into the ground at the funeral, he throws a gold coin onto it. This coin, given to Shadow by the leprechaun Mad Sweeney, is "a souvenir from the hoard at the rainbow's end in Celtic Lore, [and] has the power to raise the dead. And this is exactly what it does" (Swanstrom 17). Soon after Laura's demise, she is thus resurrected and comes to haunt Shadow in his room in the quaintly called Motel America.

> She sat straight on the side of his bed. She was still wearing the navy-blue suit they had buried her in. Her voice was a whisper, but a familiar one. "I guess," said Laura, "you're going to ask what I'm doing here." (*Gods* 66)

Laura tells Shadow that she will be looking out for him (71) since he has gotten himself "mixed up in some bad things" (70) and proceeds to "shadow[ ] his journey every step of the way" (Swanstrom 17f.). Here, *American Gods* places itself again in a newer tradition of zombie lore, as the early Romero films in particulate embrace insular settings (mall, bunker, farmhouse), whereas later additions to the genre emphasize journeys over hiding (cf. Bishop 23) and consequently offer links to road movies. As Shadow embarks on a journey, his undead wife follows him. Contrary to established zombie plots however, he at no point has to hide from her since there is no danger of death or infection. As a zombie, Laura is thus physically 'toothless': her danger to Shadow's safety is of a psychological nature.

Jenn Prosser reads *American Gods* in the tradition of Homer's Odyssey,[156] arguing that both essentially follow Campbell's concept of the hero's journey and that Shadow "becomes an Odyssean hero in the mind of the reader" (11), while Laura

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[155] Bishop speaks of a "Ricification" of the zombie and links this new trend to narrative developments already undertaken for the vampire by Anne Rice in her 1976 novel *Interview with the Vampire* (cf. Bishop 13), which reimagines the vampire not as antagonist, but as long-suffering protagonist and anti-hero.

[156] In its combination of a dead wife and a living husband, one can also detect a nod to Orpheus and Eurydice.

serves not so much as a faithful Penelope (after all, she cheated), but as a flawed rendition of Athena (cf. 14-15) who "transcends the role of wife and becomes Shadow's mentor, bringing strength and guidance to his journey" (14) until it is no longer needed.[157] Once this point is reached, "she decomposes, gradually leaving Shadow to lead his own life" (ibid.).[158] In a surprising twist of conventions, the undead corpse is thus not there to consume the living, but to aid them. Her accidental resurrection "throws a wild card into Odin's masterful plan" (Swanstrom 17) as it gives Shadow a layer of physical protection he was never supposed to have. At the same time, it offers a beautiful paradox: her presence continuously confronts him with her loss. Being undead is after all not the same as being alive.

Laura's good intentions towards her husband however do not alter the course of nature: as the novel progresses, her undead body decomposes, attesting to trauma's harmful potential and to the fact that it cannot be ignored. Her decomposition can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as a warning: trauma cannot be filed away, there is no magic to counter it, no way to ignore it, no chance that it will just miraculously disappear. The ongoing decomposition despite Laura's wish to do good by her estranged husband also serves as poetic justice: her betrayal is most cruelly punished, not just by her untimely death, but by being forced to bear witness to her own putrification. On the other hand, the decomposition can be understood as a pointer towards trauma's eventual resolution: at some point, the process will be over and Laura, in a final *death*, can be assumed to find final *peace*. This reading is slightly more optimistic, but it should be pointed out that even so, it points to the raw and the ugly nature of trauma: the disturbing effect (all puns intended) remains.

Even though Laura does not behave like the zombies known to raid malls, schools, and hospitals, she is thus one in appearance. Botting describes the aesthetics of the zombie as follows:

> Decomposing, often broken bodies, ripped grey skin, a stench of decay and vile-smelling rags, they offer inescapable reminders of the fate of all human

[157] This leads Tally to observe that Laura is more faithful as a protector in un-death than as a spouse in life (cf. "Grand Central" 362).
[158] "By modernizing the tale [of the *Odyssey*], Gaiman renders the story relevant to a twenty-first-century audience" (Prosser 18). This observation is in keeping with my central argument about fantasy updating itself by drawing on other genres: the update is achieved via positioning the new text against tradition, yet evoking said tradition at the same time.

flesh, thrusting death's corruption in the face of a species that, contemporarily, does its best to look away. (Botting, "Zombie" 20)

Shadow however does not look away and instead closely observes the trajectory of his wife's change in their frequent encounters. By doing so, he attempts to make sense of what is happening and to file his wife's state into categories. When they first meet after her funeral, Laura still looks more alive than dead. As Shadow notes, "her movements were fluid and competent, not stiff. Shadow wondered, for a moment, if she was dead at all" (68). While visually very much the woman he knew, a close physical encounter affirms her death. Laura kisses Shadow and with understated revulsion, the narrator shares that her tongue feels "cold and dry, and it tasted of cigarettes and of bile. If Shadow had had any doubts as to whether his wife was dead or not, they ended then. He pulled back" (70). In their next encounter, Laura saves Shadow from the henchmen of the new gods. Having killed them with abandon and leaving herself spattered in blood, she shrugs it off and points out that "[i]t's easier to kill people when you're dead yourself". When Shadow comments on the blood spattering her like a "Jackson Pollock" painting (164), she assures him it is not hers. After all, she is "filled with formaldehyde, mixed with glycerine and lanolin" (163). This rational, chemical approach is linked to Shadow's observation that her skin is "cold as ice" (ibid.), an observation that is repeated a page later. While their first encounter is thus marked by ambiguity, their second meeting attests to the clinical side of death. There is no longer any doubt about her status, and it is thus particularly poignant that at this point Laura tells Shadow that she wants to be truly alive again, with her heart pumping and her blood moving (166). Only by first stating the absence of these two markers of living can the urgency of her wish be conveyed. Their third encounter takes Laura firmly into stereotypical zombie portrayals: she is smelling, rotting, and physically changing for the worse: "he smelled perfume, and under the perfume, the scent of something rotten" (393). Laura is aware of her decline and pleads with Shadow not to look at her. When he insists, she warns him that "[y]ou won't like it" (ibid.). As is to be expected, Shadow's reaction is understated: "Some things were different and some things were the same. Her eyes had not changed, not had the crooked hopefulness of her smile. And she was, very obviously, very dead" (ibid.). The telling pointer to her current physical state is not the explicit comment about her eyes and her smile, but rather that which goes unsaid and is merely implied

in his assessment of her as being "very obviously, very dead". The repetition of "very" in combination with the inclusion of Laura's smell speaks to advanced decomposition. If there was any doubt that there is a difference between being alive and being undead, it is now taken off the table. The only further explicit comment is Shadow's observation of Laura's "blue lower lip" (395). By focusing on small body parts (eyes, lips), Gaiman cleverly avoids describing the zombie in full. Since this part of the novel is again rendered through Shadow's point of view, it also speaks to his wish to see the familiar side of his wife, rather than to engage with her unfamiliar one. Focusing on her eyes and her smile allows him to see 'just his wife', and to hide from the reality of her as 'his zombie wife'. Subconsciously, however, he is unable to avoid her altered state, as is evident in his reflection that his recent stint as a helper in a funeral parlour makes it easier to be around her (cf. 394). It is not the 'wife part' that is normalised by the funeral parlour, but rather the 'dead part'. Shadow is able to cope with death, but not with Laura's death in general, and her undeath in particular.

Their final encounter before Shadow's own death finally and fully marks Laura as Other: "The wind let up and he could smell her now: a stink of rotten meat and sickness and decay, pervasive and unpleasant" (508). He can no longer comment on her familiar smile or her pretty eyes because death has made these secondary. Primarily, Laura is decomposing and her body is no longer only her own: she "spat a mass of white onto the grass. It broke up when it hit the ground and wriggled away" (508). Having finally become, crudely but accurately put, food for worms, Laura's decomposition is seemingly nearing its end at the same time as Shadow's life is. But just as Shadow will return from the dead, Laura is offered a temporary reprieve by drinking from Urd's Well (which restores power and life), effectively resetting her decomposition to an earlier point. Her body is brought back to those of the "freshly dead" (569), but it is made clear that she is still undead and the decomposition will start anew.[159]

Her ongoing decomposition also enforces a boundary that cannot be crossed: even though she returned from the dead, Shadow cannot go back to her. Her (un)death means that they can never continue their relationship and as a

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[159] In a piece of authorial exposition, the narrator clarifies that the water from Urd's Well is not that of life, but of time (cf. *Gods* 535), thus explaining why it is a temporary reprieve rather than a permanent solution. In Norse mythology, Urd's Well is at the root of the world tree Yggdrasil, where three norns live (*Norse* 39-41). It is where fates are decided. Gaiman evokes the norns in the three women who tie Shadow to the world tree, and later serve Laura the water at his behest.

consequence, that his development apart from her must continue. Even though Shadow treats Laura much like a human, she is abject. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Laura is all that: her body as reminder of the inescapability of death, her mind and presence a harrowing link to her life, she is precisely between subject and object. She is that which is "not an ob-ject facing me which I name or imagine" (1), but that which cannot be classified or understood. In the not only walking, but also talking dead, Botting sees a "pseudo-sacralisation of abjection, an otherness so other it must be unique" ("Zombie" 29).[160] Being around her serves to draw Shadow "toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2); in giving in to her, the Other, he would be abandoning his Self, and his *bildungsroman* arc would necessarily be at an end. Notions of experiencing *bildung* and giving in to abjection are consequently positioned as mutually exclusive. In his quest towards a realization of *bildung*, Shadow thus has to negate the abject. As Kristeva postulates, the abject has the subject "on the edge … of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (ibid.). If Shadow truly acknowledges his abject wife, he acknowledges trauma, and is to be overcome. During one of their final encounters, this is what he does: holding hands, the two take a walk, effecting an impossible normalcy that attempts to deny their past. This attempt proves fatal, for Laura, the dead, opaquely tells Shadow that it is him who is not really alive. Here, it becomes apparent that Laura is not merely uncanny, but abject. As Kristeva writes about the abject, it is "[e]ssentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (5). Shadow's mistake is thus enormous: thinking his wife Other, uncanny, he still talks to her, trying to seek out the familiar about their relationship, while Laura is actually abject – as the dead, she deconstructs their life together and shatters his already fragmented, traumatised Self when confronting him with the assertion that he never really seemed alive to her in the first place. His positive memories of their marriage, the only thing keeping him going, are thus irrevocably tainted. It seems that finally, the zombie infects his victim, but it does so with an abject melancholia. It is no coincidence that soon after, Shadow commits to

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[160] He further argues that "otherness is rendered attractive in that it delivers a curious specialness: pain and trauma mark out the individual's irreducible uniqueness, and authorise its right to speak against normative social pressures" (ibid.). This is realised in Laura's crucial role in the battle of the gods: as an outsider, she is able to kill Loki and thus disrupt the law of the father as laid out by Odin.

offering himself as a human sacrifice during Wednesday's vigil on the World Tree. Having confronted the abject, Shadow is ready to die.

Since "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 58), Laura's presence points out that Shadow has survived the loss of his wife and Self and still keeps going, harmed, but still alive. Laura too paradoxically survives, becoming an extended metaphor for the power of both love and guilt.[161] Caruth proposes that trauma must be understood as a paradox "between destructiveness and survival" and that this paradox attests to "the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (ibid.). Shadow is unable to understand why his wife cheated on him, and equally unable to fathom how it can be that she returned from the dead. The latter, however, does not seem to bother him as much as the former since he fits into the pattern Skains has established for the construction of Gaiman's protagonist as characters who encounter the Other without fear (cf. Skains 25). Another reading is that Shadow has surpassed the limits of human experience in the dual shock of his wife's betrayal and death; since her influence on him cannot be overestimated, her loss has shaken him to a degree that makes everything else seem trivial by comparison. This is in keeping with Caruth's assessment that "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis"(*Unclaimed* 9). On the World Tree, with his wife spitting maggots, and her death an inescapable reality, Shadow is deep in crisis, but true to the pattern of the *bildungsroman*, this metaphysical experience will finally free him and allow him to move on.

Earlier, *American Gods* already intimates Shadow's crisis of survival and how it leads him to consider suicide as the enduring pain becomes too much to bear:

> And then, as if someone else were holding his hand, he raised the straight razor, placed it, blade open, against his throat. It would be a way out, he thought. An easy way out. [...] No more worries. No more Laura. No more mysteries and conspiracies. No more bad dreams. Just peace and quiet and rest forever. One clean slash, ear to ear. That's all it'll take. (218)

Shadow's contemplations are brought to an end by godly interference. While he is observing the "the tiny smudge of blood" from a cut "[he] had not even noticed"

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[161] The text, with its strong presence of the power of vows and promises (Shadow vows to guard Wednesday and to stand his vigil, he promises to let Czernobog kill him because his life was at stake in a game of checkers), makes a betrayal of them an offense punishable by death, while rewarding those who uphold them with wisdom and survival.

(218f.), a cat strolls into the room. At this point, Shadow does not yet know that the cat is the American incarnation of the Egyptian goddess Bast who has taken a liking to him and serves as a convenient deus ex machina. Come morning, a humanoid Bast and Shadow will have engaged in a dream-tryst that sees all of Shadow's physical wounds healed, save for the tell-tale scratch marks on his back. In the dream,

> [s]omewhere in there, at the end of it, he took a breath, a clear draught of air he felt all the way down to the depths of his lungs, and he knew he had been holding his breath for a long time now. Three years, at least. Perhaps even longer. *Now rest*, she said, and she kissed his eyelids with her soft lips. *Let it go. Let it all go.* The sleep he slept after that was deep and dreamless and comforting, and Shadow dived deep and embraced it. (230)

Shadow's trauma, caused by one woman, is thus marginally alleviated by another, but Laura's influence on Shadow does not diminish past this point. It does however serve to give Shadow "a temporary reprieve" (247), the same way his time living under the fake identity of Mike Ainsel does during the Lakeside episode. The presence of various female characters who the protagonist engages with at various points of his journey has also been observed in the *bildungsroman*'s prototype, *Wilhelm Meister*. Its titular protagonist is accompanied by a "gallery of women" (Jeffers 21); one for each point of his journey. As Saariluoma has observed, Wilhelm often makes his decision based on erotic encounters and romantic moments (292). The same can be said of Shadow, who is aided by the Zorya sisters, by Bast, by Ēostre, Sam Crow, and of course, most notably, his revenant wife. While Laura seems to link Shadow to death and the abject, the other female characters he encounters serve to link him to life. Yet, it is only the abject and the giving in to its tempting annihilation that offers Shadow that which he really needs: a rebirth, and a new start.

5.3. A Hero's Journey? Birth, Death, Re-birth

Shadow as a character is both intriguing and mundane[162], and both for the same reason, namely that he plays all emotions close to the vest and shares experiences only sparingly. As such, he differs notably from the two male protagonists previously discussed. Both Richard and Tristran are rather effusive, while the protagonist of *American Gods* aims for "showing nothing on the surface. Shadow kept it all inside. It

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[162] This might be linked to the novel's need of having Shadow anchor the more eccentric gods he encounters, cf. L. Campbell 188.

was safer there" ("Monarch" 407). In the first of the two short-story follow ups to novel, "The Monarch of the Glen", Shadow is characterised perfectly by a man he has just met: "Never use five words if you can get away with one, eh? I've known dead men talk more than you do" (402). This presents us with an interesting conundrum for, as previously noted, a *bildungsroman* centres primarily on an intensely narrated elaboration of inner experience (cf. Gutjahr 38[163]), or, as Shaffner calls it, maintains "a focus on [the] inner life" (9) and stands in contrast with outward-centric plots of for instance adventure novels (cf. Gutjahr 43). *American Gods*, with a protagonist whose quiet nature is easily observed and who deals with his problems in silence, therefore seems more readily aligned in the adventure novel genre – after all, there are battle sequences, a fair share of fights, and a mystery to uncover. And yet, all of this only comes to pass because Shadow, Wednesday's chosen one, stands at the heart of the narrative. His lack of effusiveness is not to be mistaken for a lack of "inner life". Shadow's emotions are mostly negotiated in the various dream sequences Gaiman has inserted in the novel. As Steven F. Kruger notes in his exploration of concepts of dreams in the Middle Ages, "[t]he dream that presents its meaning dressed in obscure figures [...] serves as a middle term linking truth and fiction" (52). Gaiman's work is rife with such telling dreams as the author is "not interested in exploring the relatively straightforward idea that dreams are positive fantasies we have to escape reality" (Castaldo 109). Instead, Gaiman uses the dream sequences to create a focus inwards and to address anxieties and worries more so than desires and wishes. Tally observes that Gaiman "makes great use of dreams, as omens, portents, or merely vistas into times and places not always available to the waking mind" ("Grand Central" 364). In his dreams – and thus deep in his subconscious, quiet Shadow can mourn his wife, and perhaps even begin to hope for a future.

These dream sequences begin as early as chapter 1, when Shadow falls asleep on the flight to the funeral. For the first time, he dreams of the buffalo man, who warns him of the coming catastrophes (cf. 19). This dream, and its hints toward Shadow's past as a forgotten god, point to the unification of the uneasy bedfellows of *bildungsroman* and trauma. Shadow, who is unaware of the mythological past he has suppressed, is uncannily confronted with its dangers, thus already pointing to the *bildungsidee* of finding a new place for himself in an America strung between the old

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[163] Gutjahr here speaks poetically of the " Entfaltung des *inneren* Erlebens".

gods and the new. It however also points to the pain he suffered as Balder, the betrayal at the hands of Loki, and danger of death. The nine dream sequences (cf. 19, 65, 96, 176, 228, 263, 281, 324, and 468) all serve to link Shadow to mythology, both dominant and marginalised (cf. Kadenbach 109f., who understands the dream sequences as a constitution of Shadow's personal mythology). Gaiman uses them to have Shadow interact with different deities and in all cases, the dreams point Shadow towards knowledge forgotten or about to be discovered. They also allow the introverted man to voice his questions, express his bafflement at events, and grieve all that he lost. As Shadow tell the goddess Zorya Polunochnaya, "I've been having strange dreams since I got out of prison" (512).[164] Once the dream sequences are exited, and this applies to reader as much as to character, Shadow is once again "showing nothing on the surface", his introversion once more functioning like a badly operating protective shield. All of the sequences lead up to the great turn inward in chapter 15, which in its entirety is a an alteration between dreaming and waking (495-509) while he is strung up on the World Tree in Virginia. The dreams culminate in death, and significantly, Shadow not only shares his emotions with the reader, but also fills in the gaps of his own backstory while in the afterlife. The novel thus traces a trajectory from dreams to memories, and from the confusion and illogicality of trauma to the clear-headedness and reason of *bildung*.

After ending the battle of the gods, Shadow has only one more dream while staying at Mr Nancy's in Florida. He dreams of the buffalo man one last time, who praises him for his actions, and confirms that the hybrid creature is not a forgotten deity, but the land itself, thus further strengthening the link between Shadow and the American soil he treads (cf. 593). In the four dreams of the buffalo man, Shadow's link to Native American belief systems and the comfort that can be found in attaching himself not his (deceased) wife, but to the land as a caregiver, is heightened. Now that he is dead and reborn, the dreams of the buffalo man, the thunderbirds, Bast, Hinzelmann, and Odin's sacrifice to himself make sense and serve to steer him into the right direction. One example of this is his dream-gathered understanding that the only way to truly bring his wife back from the dead and into the fold of the living is to kill one of the thunderbirds, smash its skull, and take out the eaglestone contained

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[164] Kadenbach argues that because of the stark secular division between the everyday and the mythical, Shadow can only access the later in dreams. In doing so, he finds that he always had what is needed to complete a mythical hero's journey in the Campbellian tradition (cf. 132).

within. Rather than haunt, the dreams and memories then educate. Yet, because during his time on the road and both the dreamed and the experienced contact with Native Indian deities, Shadow is clearly unhappy with this solution. It would mean abandoning his newfound sense of identity (Native American belief) in favour of returning to the tainted one he left behind on the world tree (Laura and Odin). This also speaks to the dreams moving from imagination to reality, and from inward to outward focus. Shadow cannot and does not wish to look back to the abject; instead, with the dreams largely abandoned at this point, he moves from subconscious to conscious, seemingly leaving the chaotic nature of trauma behind.

Shadow's reticence towards long explanations is also shared by the author, as the elusive characterisation even includes Shadow's ethnicity, only hinted at as being part African-American (cf. Skains 36, cf. *Gods* 12) and occasionally even linked to Native Americans (cf. *Gods* 180, when Shadow is asked whether he has "Indian blood", which would explain his affection for their belief system). This hesitation towards discourse and answers is firmly grounded in Shadow's past, which is shared in a rare piece of character exposition in the novel's eighth chapter. Shadow, whose large and muscled frame is commented on as often as his name (cf. *Gods* 80, 182, 330 for name, and *Gods* 291, 381, 467 for size), "had [once] been small for his age" (224). As he moved around a lot with his mother, who worked as a secretary for American embassies before falling ill and dying of cancer, he had "never spent long enough in any place […] to make friends" (225). Outgrowing his small frame in one summer, "Shadow found that he had redefined himself: he could no longer be a quiet kid, doing his best to remain unobtrusively at the back of things. He was too big, too obvious" (ibid.). Shadow soon realised that he

> liked being big and strong. It gave him an identity. He'd been a shy, quiet, bookish kid, and that had been painful; now he was a big dumb guy, and nobody expected him to be able to do anything more than move a sofa into the next room on his own. Nobody until Laura, anyway. (225f.)

One could thus argue that Shadow undergoes a layered *bildungsroman*. The first one is from child to young man, where the gaining of physical bulk led to a change in both auto- and alterocharacterisation. While Shadow has retained many of his "bookish" qualities – he quite enjoys quoting Herodotus, Edgar Allen Poe (173), and is well versed in a number of pantheons long before realising that he actually belongs to one (172) – he hides them behind his overpowering physicality. As is revealed during

Shadow's time in the afterlife, Shadow's relation to literature is more complicated than a decision to fit in. It is actually linked to his behaviour during his mother's final days in the hospital, where she succumbed to cancer. As a sixteen year old, Shadow was unable to cope with the situation and fled into fiction as a means of escape. He reflects bitterly "so his mother died while he sat in the chair next to her, reading a fat book. After that he had more or less stopped reading. You could not trust fiction. What good were books, if they couldn't protect you from something like that?" (516).

Thus doubly motivated, once as a means of punishment for and repression of his mother's traumatic death, and once designed to provide an easier form of masculine identification that evades bullying, Shadow's abnegation of literature is a lie both to himself and his surroundings.[165] This conceit is only realised by two human women; his wife, which explains why he is so hopelessly devoted to her even past the point of death and betrayal, and the student Sam Crow, who hitches a ride with him mid-point of the novel. After having been on the road with him for a while, she bursts out:

> I don't get it. I don't get how you talk, or the words you use or anything. One moment you're a big dumb guy, the next you're reading my friggin' mind, and the next we're talking about Herodotus. (183)

Sam's realisation that there is more to Shadow than meets the eye foreshadows the next stage of his development. Here, the "predetermined mythic arc to [Shadow's] life" (Olesen 135) plays out and Shadow learns that he is more than a human widower. Only once this has been understood can Shadow let Laura go and develop outside the confines of his relationship. In a way, her betrayal prompts an individuation process evocative of that of mother and child. Shadow has to learn to see their connection as abject so that he can define himself as subject.

This is brought about by Shadow's vigil for Wednesday. Strung up on the mythical World Tree without food and water for nine days, Shadow refuses Laura's help in freeing him. This is because for one, "he only truly comes alive when he is

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[165] In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, Gaiman shares in how far he himself was bullied because of his bookish nature as a child: "**When I was 13 an English teacher** took me aside and said: 'Keep your head down. You know too much, you answer questions, you are going to be resented. Just try to blend in.' I spent the next five years desperately trying to blend in, trying not to be good at the things I was good at. It was appalling advice. Do not worry about keeping your head down. Raise your head up. Maybe they will shoot you, but they probably won't" (Campbell, "Cowboy" n.p.). The strategy employed by Shadow – keeping his head down, trying to intellectually not stand out – thus seems rooted in Gaiman's own biography. It also becomes a defining characteristic of the nameless narrator in the somewhat biographical *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, see chapter 10.

hung from the World Tree" (Skains 37), but also because of Laura's doubt as to whether Shadow was ever really alive. This may sound ridiculous, especially coming from a corpse, but Laura points out that while Shadow is not dead, he is not "alive, either. Not really" (*Gods* 396). She proceeds to call her husband a "big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world" (ibid.). This stands in contrast to the *bildungsroman*'s nature, since it is a "novel of all-round development of self-culture" (Howe 6). Shadow, the protagonist, has yet to define himself even though readers were instructed to read his journey so far as precisely the kind of developmental journey so familiar from the *bildungsroman*. Laura continues to inform her husband that he will know when he is really alive (397), thus intimating at more development to come. This moment comes on the tree, where Shadow is honouring his vow to Wednesday and proves to himself that he is alive by eventually dying from a "ghost hurt" (544). The wound is an echo of the human sacrifices previously made in Odin's name: no blade is necessary to make the cut, the memory does it instead. The wound as such is a trauma, or rather; the trauma reappears as a physical wound.

These ritual sacrifices have been outlined in an interspersed interlude that chronicles the tales of early settlers who also practiced human sacrifice for Odin (cf. 75-78). True to trauma's repetitive nature, the brutalising history repeats itself as Shadow, like his father before him, bleeds to death on the tree. Shadow is eventually brought back by Ēostre, but the time he spends in the afterlife is an intense process of self-discovery in which he learns about the murderer of the children of Lakeside, his own identity as Baldur, Odin's son, his orchestrated conception (cf. Sims 105) and Wednesday's plot to manipulate all old gods into dying for him as a blood sacrifice. This epistemological process is delivered in a number of dream-like sequences and memories that are pieced together in fragments, in keeping with Luckhurst's assertion that "trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways" (*Question* 1). At the end of it, Shadow still self-identifies as a human rather than as a god, and thus serves as a reminder that the old gods have been turned into mere myths by now, losing much of their potency. In an essay on the fecundity of myths, Gaiman said that

> [m]yths are compost. They begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, or as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow. [...] And then, as religions fall into disuse, or the stories cease to be seen as the literal truth, they become myths. And the myths compost down to dirt, and become a fertile

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ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers. ("Myth" 95f.)

The old gods Shadow encountered, his father and the intensely likable Mr Nancy[166] among them, are thus necessary for the future, but only in the sense that they serve as a feeding ground for a postmodern society. *American Gods* charts precisely the development from highly ritualised religious belief systems into secular society, but links it to lingering questions of religious identity. Who are we if we stop to believe? The novel insinuates that at least its protagonist is simply 'himself', free but melancholy.

While Shadow being strung up on the tree seems like a funeral rite, it is actually a coming of age rite that sees him passing into more knowledgeable life. Millard has pointed out that "[t]he contemporary coming-of-age novel might be usefully understood as walking the line between presenting its protagonist as a newborn who is innocent of history and of depicting a protagonist whose coming of age consists principally of acquiring historical knowledge" (7). Shadow, in death and beyond death, has accomplished both extremes. When he is brought back and takes in the world anew, Ēostre "found herself reminded of the gaze of a baby, at the point where it learns how to focus" (*Gods* 565). This newly attributed innocence serves Shadow well, as it has prepared him for the final confrontation with his father, his wife, and the other gods. Millard's observation that when moving outside the confines of age as a qualifier for the *bildungsroman*, innocence can be used as an alternative factor (5) is apt here as it fundamentally applies to Shadow, whom readers encounter in his early thirties, but who, in his emotional reticence and fundamentally honest nature, and finally, in his rebirth, is innocence incarnate despite his rap sheet.

Shadow's unique position in the novel, one half forgotten god, one half reborn human, is foreshadowed by his unquestioning acceptance of the gods and their actions (Skains 37), but it is also through him (and only him) that "the past, present, and future spectacularly overlap" (L. Campbell 189). While in the afterlife, Shadow encounters many of the gods he had previously talked to, but most importantly, he completes Whiskey Jack's (this is how Shadow understands the Native American

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[166] Where many of the characters in *American Gods* are somewhat dour, Mr Nancy, with his natural propensity for lively storytelling, stands out and charms readers and characters alike. For an extensive reading of the character in the novel's sequel *Anansi Boys*, see chapter 6.

god's Wisakedjak's name) challenge to "find your tribe" (*Gods* 380). As it turns out, Shadow "tribe" is not the Norse Pantheon, but the land he has travelled.

> Shadow finds truth in his dreams, approaching unity with his other, connecting strongly with the buffalo man and the thunderbird, reaching deeper into the spiritual mythology of America, further back than the immigrant gods carried there by the first settlers. Shadow is indeed the son of Wednesday/Odin, but it through this developing and trusting connection to a land that is foreign to him by nature of his ancestry and his upbringing that Shadow finds his true identity. (Skains 39)

Thus fully divorced from Wednesday's agenda and instead affiliated with the land he has grown to care for, Shadow is brought back to life and ends the battle of the gods. He flies to the battle on the back of a thunderbird[167], a symbol of his new affiliation, and convinces everyone to end the war. It is also at this battle site that he finally lets go of Laura; while he has found out how he can properly return her to life with the aid of an eaglestone, she simply asks him to put an end to her existence. Shadow offers the zombie a return to humanity (the thunderbird operating as a deus ex machina to make it possible), but in the most human action to date, Laura chooses a final and peaceful death instead. By taking the coin back, Shadow's involuntary act of magic comes to an end and his wife dies. This is significant for it offers a final confrontation with death that Shadow must encounter in order to be finally free. It also means that the trauma can no longer physically intrude in his life. Shadow's traumatic past, which "is not experienced as mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment" (Caruth, "Introduction" 10), has thus given way for future that finds realisation in the novel's stacked ending(s) and the two short-stories that follow its events. It should however be noted that despite Shadow's many epiphanies on the World Tree, he is still not entirely free of his past as encounters the ghost of Wednesday again in "Black Dog", a story that deals with depression as much as with fantasy and attests to the lingering power of trauma.

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[167] Shadow dreams of thunderbirds and educates himself on Native American belief during his time in Lakeside; visiting the local library, he reads up on the mythical creatures. He learns that they bring lightning, make thunder by flapping their wings, and are believed to have created the world (cf. *Gods* 317). For a historical anthropological account of thunderbirds as Native American belief and folklore, see McClintock.

5.4. Lakeside Revisited: Reuniting Shadow's Identities

While "*American Gods* is very much a tale of gods behaving badly" (Littmann 23) as they "bring madness, chaos and destruction" (24), the novel presents a utopian setting that seems to stand in stark contrast to it: the small town Lakeside in Wisconsin. It is in Lakeside that Wednesday hides Shadow earlier in the novel. Living under the assumed identity of Mike Ainsel, Shadow enters a period of reprieve from the traumatic turn his life has taken. This is only possible because Shadow fully assumes his fake identity:

> He knew everything about big Mike Ainsel in that moment, and he liked Mike Ainsel. Mike Ainsel had none of the problems that Shadow had. Ainsel had never been married. Mike Ainsel had never been interrogated on a freight train [...] Mike Ainsel didn't have bad dreams, or believe that there was a storm coming. (*Gods* 291)

Mike is a fake identity, but one Shadow warms to instantly. Being allowed to hide from his torturous past and confusing present however does not help Shadow heal. Mike can be understood as an untraumatised and simpler version of Shadow. The fake identity is thus everything Shadow is not: where Shadow is weighed down by his past, Mike has none. Where Shadow has no family, Mike has an uncle he is in business with. Where Shadow has no place to go, Mike happily settles into Lakeside. Mike can thus also be understood as a symptom of Shadow's repression of traumatic experiences. The Lakeside episode significantly takes place shortly after Shadow almost committed suicide and it is still very much in this state that he comes to the small town – he is traumatised, unable to deal with his memories and still trapped in the traumatic moment without means of escape. Lakeside, while offering him a location and time of reprieve, also forces him to suppress his past. Lakeside only wants Mike, and Mike has no trauma to speak of.

Lakeside seems thus not only antithetical to Wednesday's chaotic nature, but also to Shadow's traumatic life. Everyone in town is nice, there is an annual raffle wherein people get to guess when an old car parked on the frozen lake will crash through the ice, and cops seldom have more to do than welcome newcomers and help them do their shopping. "I think I may like it here," Shadow muses (294) in a rare personal statement. But appearances are of course deceiving and Lakeside is indeed too good to be true. The quintessential idealised Americana harbours a dark secret that is repressed by all its inhabitants. In an otherwise economically depressed

region, Lakeside's prosperity is paid for by its children. The brief illusion of a hidden Midwestern utopia is shattered as the dystopian core[168] of the town is revealed. As Shadow uncovers while reading old books he bought at the library, each winter, a child disappears, while bodies are never found. The inhabitants of Lakeside believe that the children run away, but Shadow is less convinced. He had met this year's runaway on the bus coming to town, and studious Allison McGovern did not strike him as the type. As it turns out, all the missing children are murdered by the eccentric old man called Hinzelmann who, as his name suggests, is a kobold. When Shadow meets him in the guise of a harmless old man who likes to tell tales and gives Shadow rides across town, his sinister nature is hidden behind a camouflage of benign eccentricity. As is revealed towards the end of the novel, Hinzelmann's murderous spree across the centuries is yet another re-enactment of trauma. As a child growing up in a preliterate European society, Hinzelmann himself was sacrificed to secure the prosperity of his tribe (cf. 281-2, 613) and consequently turned form human to kobold. His continuous killings thus attest to his inability to come to terms with his own traumatic past.

As the supernatural heart of the town, Hinzelmann claims to only kill for the greater good. He maintains that the children are the blood sacrifice necessary to maintain the small town idyll. James argues that Hinzelmann's child sacrifice

> serves as a powerful metaphor – youth is sacrificed in exchange for tradition. The inevitable change and growth that each generation brings must be repressed so as to maintain the old order. [...] Killing off the children symbolically prevents time from moving on, the future, good or bad, is permanently stalled. (119)

Hinzelmann, much like the old gods, thus stands opposed to development and thus also opposed to the town's modernisation and progress. Shadow leaves Lakeside before he can uncover where the children go, but the mystery haunts him on his further journey. During his time with Mr Nancy in Florida, after the battle of the gods, he realises where the lost child is: "It's in the trunk" (*Gods* 595). The latest alleged runaway is in the trunk of the car that the entire town is betting on. Shadow returns to Lakeside as the ice is melting, opens the trunk, and finds the dead girl inside. It is

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[168] Tally reads not only the Lakeside episode, but the entire novel as a transgressive dystopia, linking it in part to the notion of America as "bad place" for gods, since "'bad place' is, after all, what the very word *dystopia* means" ("Grand Central" 361).

then that he realises that there are hundreds of dead children in the trunks of cars and carriages at the bottom of the lake:

> This was where they rested: Lemmi Hautala and Jessie Lovat and Sandy Olsen and Jo Ming and Sarah Lindquist and all the rest of them. Down where it was silent and cold… (602f.)

Caruth argues that "the story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return" (*Unclaimed* 7); the referential return is here both Shadow's return to Lakeside and the annual klunker (which is what the old cars are called), wherein the entire town comes to see when the ice breaks, not knowing that they are always staring at the piece of their soul that is the missing. The child sacrifice, the novel suggests, has tainted the town even without its inhabitants being aware of it. Shadow's uncovering of the crime thus frees the town,[169] leaving its inhabitants to make their own decisions and their own fortune. No longer paid for in blood sacrifice, Lakeside's effortless affluence is at an end. This also means that for the inhabitants of the town, the American Dream now becomes a genuine possibility rather than a well-maintained illusion: with everyone free to make their fate, they are also free to be successful, and free to fail. Lakeside thus becomes a town of self-made (wo)men. The American Dream is thus, in the Lakeside setting, reconfigured as the boon the monomythical hero brings to his society.

Solving the mystery that was tugging at the back of his mind makes Shadow a hero, far more so than his dissolution of the battle of the gods does, but more importantly, him solving the gruesome puzzle reunites him with his bookish, brainy side. Shadow does not solve the situation because of his often commented on size and physical prowess, but because he figured out the uncanny nature of the town. Skains argues that the old gods represent the uncanny as they show the emergence of repressed primitive beliefs (37), but Lakeside too feeds into this pattern. The town's subliminal fear comes from the loss of youth; and the pattern of the children's disappearance is both easy to note and easy to suppress, thus creating the mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar that stands at the heart of Freud's theory. The child sacrifices are the repressed belief American society has long since overcome, but it is their lingering presence in Lakeside that renders the town uncanny. Once he realises

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[169] Although it is not Shadow, but the friendly neighbourhood policeman Chad Mulligan, who kills Hinzelmann, the kobold. This is thus also a return to 'how things should be', or Tolkien's notion of recovery: it is not the convict, but the cop who rights the ultimate wrong.

this, Shadow, his brainy and physical side fully aligned for the first time, for it takes his mind to solve the uncanny puzzle and his body to open the trunk that is frozen shut, the novel one step closer to a fully satisfactory conclusion. The entire Lakeside episode feeds into the preoccupation with inner hells Jódar has observed in Gaiman's narratives (cf. 178 fn35). Long before the mystery is solved, another inhabitant of Lakeside sings the town's praise, but Shadow notes that "[t]here was something empty at the bottom of all her words" (*Gods* 341). All of Lakeside's inhabitants are trapped in both the town and the blindness to the crime that protects it, just as Shadow is trapped in his aforementioned traumatic history until being reborn frees him.

5.5. Into New Worlds

Shadow's tale in *American Gods* end with his leaving the States; after travelling for a while, he meets the original rather than the 'immigrant' Odin in Iceland on American Independence Day, of all days. Swanstrom observes that it "offer[s] a poignant closure to the narrative, but also leave[s] open the possibility for Shadow's return to the Unites States and the gods he's left behind there, as well as his own status as Balder" (19). It also insinuates that Shadow's story and his development is not yet at their end. While the mysteries, including his only godly identity and the Lakeside murders, are solved, Shadow is anything but reconciled with his mythological past. Gaiman has a habit of continuing Shadow's story, both in the original novel's particular, prolonged structure (it is divided into three regular parts, an epilogue, and a postscript) which stacks several endings over one another, but even more so in the two Shadow-centric short stories Gaiman published in 2006 and 2015. Bryan Hollerbach's review of *American Gods* is generally positive, but he expresses dissatisfaction with the ending, finding that the novel "ends in anti-climax" (para v). I argue that the protracted ending (and the two short stories too belong to it) actually alludes to Shadow's *bildungsroman*, hinting at his complex coming of age that surpasses the heroic moment and lingers on the traumatic repercussions of the experience. This is made evident in the return to Lakeside, evocatively titled "Part Four Epilogue: Something that the Dead Are Keeping Back", and further continued in "Monarch of the Glen" and "Black Dog ".

While the "Monarch of the Glen" is a variation of Beowulf[170], it mainly expands on the "fragmentary access to [Shadow's] past and inner life" (Olesen 121), confirming "that Shadow was himself an immigrant to America, having been born in Oslo" (122) and that his journey as an "American of dual heritage" means "attempting to reconcile his inner split, and his reconciliation with America as his home, where someone with a 'composite nationality' belongs" (123). The short story does however not conclude with his return to the States, and neither does "Black Dog", even though this seems necessary to complete both Shadow's heroic arc as well as his *bildungsroman*. Since he was told to "find your tribe" (*Gods* 380), and his "tribe" is positioned as Native American belief in the land, to come full circle he must set foot on American soil. Gaiman has teased that "[t]here is one last story to be told, about what happens to Shadow when he reaches London. And then, if he survives that, it will be time to send him back to America. So much has changed, after all, since he went away" (*Trigger Warning* xxxvi). As Odin tells him on July 4th in Reykjavik, "Things wait for you there" (Gods 634). Gary K. Wolfe, reviewing Gaiman's anthology *Trigger Warning* (in which "Black Dog" is published) observes that the short story serves "as a tantalizing reminder that Gaiman is not yet done with Shadow, one of his most intriguing characters" ("reviews" n.p.).

It is this situation that allows for a neat categorisation of Shadow's arc as a *bildungsroman* as Shaffner argues as a kind of "forenovel" (27), which prepares the protagonist for that which is to come after the coming of age has been completed. Kadenbach shares this observation as becomes evident in her analysis of the novel's last sentence, "[h]e walked away and he kept on walking" (*Gods* 635): she sees this as indicative of a change from a passive to an active character who moves on his own rather than waits for the next thing to hit him (cf. 107). The formulation of action and decisions in the novel's last sentence is further in keeping with Summerfield and Downward's observation that

> the Bildungsroman's plot is open-ended and future-oriented, which means that it is not propelled by the achievements of an end, such as social integration or marriage. The end of the narrative itself may be ambiguous. Narration is always in the third person, which creates distance between the

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[170] For an extended reading of Gaiman's treatment of *Beowulf* prior to the Shadow short story, see Fisher, Jason. "The Authors and the Critics: Gaiman, Tolkien, and Beowulf".

Bildung protagonist, often unaware of the process of development as it is happening, and the telling. (171)

American Gods and the two following short stories have reunited Shadow with his spiritual side, have prepared him for a supernatural world, and for a life without the woman who defined him. It is the next novel dealing with the character (if such a novel is ever published) that may see him putting what he learned to use in a post 9/11 America.

Chapter 6: "it's all a matter of confidence": Postmodern Intersections of Comedy, *Bildungsroman* and Trauma in *Anansi Boys* (2005)[171]

Much like *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys* focuses on the unwitting descendant of a deity. Fat Charlie Nancy finds himself surprised not only by his father's sudden death, but further by a mysterious mythological heritage he was previously unaware of. For his father is none other than the American incarnation of Anansi, the African spider god. By placing the novel against the backdrop of Mr Nancy's trickster spirit, Gaiman generates a highly comical plot that utilises the familiar elements of fantasy, the *bildungsroman*, and even trauma.

Gaiman began work on *Anansi Boys* before he wrote *American Gods*. As with *Neverwhere*, the idea was originally conceived in conversation with Lenny Henry in the mid-nineties, when Henry complained about the lack of diversity in horror movies. Gaiman began a potential script to fill this void, but because he thought of casting the comedian Henry as the protagonist, it was "going to be funny" (Gaiman in H. Campbell, *Art* 232) and the prospective genre changed. However, writing *Anansi Boys* proved difficult:[172] Gaiman found that the few scenes he had written were not coming

> alive, and I wasn't sure who these characters were. The only one who seemed interesting was Mr Nancy, and he wasn't much of a character, in that he was going to die before *Anansi Boys* started, or just as it started. So, I put it on the back burner, not really being sure what it was. Then when I went to write *American Gods* [...], it was fun to go and get Mr Nancy and put him in as a visiting guest star from something that I hadn't yet done! (Gaiman in Lawless)

Once *American Gods* was published, prompted by his editor Jennifer Brehl, Gaiman decided to change *Anansi Boys*' format. The text developed from a film script to a novella to finally, a fully-fledged novel (ibid.).[173] Even with the changed medium, the text still retained much of Henry's voice. This culminated not only in Henry reading

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[171] Quotation from *Boys* 393. Portions of this chapter have previously appeared in *Neil Gaiman in the 21st Century: Essays on the Novels, Children's Stories, Online Writings, Comics and Other Works* © 2015 Edited by Tara Prescott by permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640. www.mcfarlandpub.com.

[172] While the writing process was initially problematic, Gaiman said that "[t]he research was the fun bit" (5). He largely drew on an unspecified 1922 book about Jamaican folk stories, which was important "as much for tone of voice as for content, but also because so many of the Anansi stories told today have been cleaned up by being told to children" ("Conversation with Neil Gaiman"). Gaiman's Anansi too resists political correctness and his outrageous nature informs much of the novel's humour.

[173] The novel is currently in development as a TV adaptation with Red Production Company for the BBC, but since the Starz TV adaptation of *American Gods* already features a Mr Nancy (played by Orlando Jones), the question of a spin-off with the same creative team has arisen if the rights to the text should become available again (Freeman n.p.).

the audiobook, but more significantly, manifested in *Anansi Boys* having a very different tone than *American Gods*: it is a true comedy, and as such ends happily, with plenty of weddings and good humour.[174] Kadenbach has even compared the fast-paced *Anansi Boys* to classic Hollywood screwball comedies (cf. 120); it is perhaps this comparison that makes the contrast to the rather melancholic and ponderous *American Gods* most apparent.

Gaiman's novels *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005) thus have a complicated relationship. While they take place in the same fictional universe where forgotten gods roam America, share a theme in the problematization of godly fatherhood, and a featured character (Anansi/Mr Nancy), they differ wildly in scope, tone, and structure. As Andrew Lawless notes, "[l]ike siblings, destined to be described in connection with each other, *Anansi Boys* and *American Gods* share common genes, […] but have gone in different directions" (n.p.). When *Anansi Boys* was heading towards release, Gaiman said that he "worried a bit when *[it]* was being sold as if it was the *American Gods* sequel. And I kept walking around going (cough, grumble) it's, uh, not" (Gaiman in Crispin n.p.).

Nevertheless, as both portray the effect of traumatic father-son relationships on their protagonist's psychological development, they can be productively read in conjunction. As Millard points out,

> [a]n important issue in the coming-of-age novel is the way in which finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father. For the young male protagonist especially, the relation to the father is a vital means to socialisation, and he is often the principal figure through whom the codes of society are learned. Coming of age is thus a drama of coming to terms with the father, and with all the social and cultural governance for which he stands. (15)

Whereas paternal problems were located in the subtext of much of *American Gods*, they become text proper in Fat Charlie's *bildungsroman*.[175] Both novels interrogate the quality of father-son relationships and their effect on the protagonist's identity. Where Shadow, as outlined in the previous chapter, gradually comes into his own by

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[174] Henry also participated in the BBC World Service radio play, which Gaiman has since expressed dissatisfaction with because it condensed the narrative into one hour and thus drastically changed the story (cf. Gaiman "Normal Service").

[175] I have argued elsewhere (cf. von Czarnowsky, "Gone" 47) that Mr Nancy makes a much better father to Shadow than Wednesday ever does; the key difference between the parental problems in both novels is that Charlie is in no need of another father figure, he just needs to accept the one he has. This is all the paternal resolution the character requires. Mr Nancy's good relationship with Shadow in *American Gods* further serves to prefigure his eventual reconciliation with his own son in *Anansi Boys*.

learning about and rejecting his father, *Anansi Boys'* protagonist Fat Charlie (who "was only ever fat for a couple of years", *Boys* 5) has rejected his father already, but must learn to reconcile with the trickster in order to successfully find his place in the world. Fat Charlie, as someone who has grown up with chaos, desires stability and order, but these qualities are antithetical to his father's godly origins.

Having been out of touch with his father for a few years, Fat Charlie initially reaches out because his fiancée Rosie wants him to invite his estranged father to their wedding. It is then that Fat Charlie learns that his exuberant father has passed away. Travelling from England, where he moved with his mother, to his father's home in Florida to bury him, Charlie is inundated with two shocking revelations, both of which he refuses to believe: one, that his father was a god, and two, that he has a brother. Charlie returns to England and in a dark hour, follows the advice of his old neighbour, Mrs Higgler, and tells a small spider scuttling across his London flat that he would like to meet his mysterious relative. The wish is barely uttered when his outrageously lively and enchanting brother Spider makes an appearance and begins to turn Charlie's life upside down. The novel then expands into a wild comedic arc in which Spider pretends to be Charlie, losing him his job and fiancée in the process, and the two brother engage in a battle of wits, first against each other, and then against the other gods in the novel's Pan-African pantheon which wants to see Anansi's bloodline finally receive its comeuppance.

Compared to his other novels, *Anansi Boys* has received very little academic attention. Neither *Good Madness* nor *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman* or *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman* includes an essay that focuses on *Anansi Boys*. The last edited collection to be published on the author, *Neil Gaiman in the 21st Century*, presents two essays on the book.[176] This chapter here attempts to add to some material and to contextualise *Anansi Boys* in the tradition of Gaiman's oeuvre. It is – aside from *Good Omens*, Gaiman's collaboration with Pratchett – the only true comedy the author has written. In an interview added to the Headline edition, Gaiman admits that "I had to […] figure out how a comedy worked. I knew that I wanted it to be a comic novel, and it needed to be a comedy, but also that there were places in there where I was skirting perilously close to horror" ("An Interview with

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[176] In my contribution to the book, I analyse constructions of fatherhood in the shared universe of *Anansi Boys* and *American Gods*. In her insightful essay, Danielle Russell offers a reading that links *Anansi Boys* to the oral tradition of Nora Zeale Hurston's storytelling, in particular to the process of voicing the silenced in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Neil Gaiman", n.p.) The novel riffs of this contrast between light-hearted and darker material to both enhance the comic effect (the term tragic relief comes to mind) and to add depth to the story. This combination, as well as the narrative multitude the text aims for, makes it a textbook example of postmodern writing.

In *Anansi Boys*, Gaiman aims for a postmodern union of genres and styles which speaks to the trickster's multi-faceted and unpredictable personality. Klapcsik observes this "multiplicity of style" and links it to the three different levels the novel operates on. Ultimately, this "plurality of world is reflected on the formal level, [as] the thematically multiplied zones manifest themselves in multiplied discourses" ("Double-Edged" 201). The 'real' world in which Charlie lives makes use of normal language, what is called "backstage" in *American Gods*, i.e. the world of the gods, draws on stark, simplistic language to evoke an impression of universality, and the world of stories as dominated by Anansi are – in the spirit of their chief deity – colourful and lively and make use of a "jovial, rural, unsophisticated" language (200f.). As part of Charlie's development, the novel embraces the humorous and colourful narration of the Anansi stories, seeing it lap onto to the main, 'normal' level of narrative. Klapcsik argues that the different levels "gradually become intertwined" (201): this connection can be understood as the novel's strive towards a unification of father, son, heritage, past, and present. The novel needs to resolve layers of narrative to present Charlie's harmonious character as its endpoint (which of course offers a link to the *bildungsroman* and its conventional albeit idealized ending). Russell too has commented on the text's stylistic variety and finds that the novel is a "speakerly text" (53) with uses a third person narrator with oral leanings ("God" 60). She finds that "Gaiman maintains the third-person mode throughout his narrative but there are brief glimpses of the oral tradition in his work too. When the text moves from Fat Charlie's story to Anansi's, it shifts into a more conversational tone through the use of second person" (60f.). It is in the Anansi tales that humour and violence, and thus humour and horror, are easily linked. They thus prefigure the main level's unusual combination of comedy and trauma.

Discussing a text that is easily classifiable as a comedy in the context of trauma of course raises a number of questions. Before tackling those in the discussion of villains and their metaphorical potential, I will offer a brief definition of comedy. Abrams' approach from his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* serves as a good starting

point. Arguing that, "[i]n the most common literary application, a comedy is a work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest, involve, and amuse us", he concludes that "the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern" (28). Christopher Booker even sees comedy as one of the aforementioned seven basic plots and defines them in contradistinction to tragedy. Naturally, he refers back to Aristotle's approach. Comedies are

> stories in which things initially seem to become more and more complicated for the hero or heroine, until they are entangled in a complete knot, from which there seems no escape. But eventually comes what Aristotle calls the peripeteia or 'reversal of fortune'. The knot is miraculously unravelled (from which we get French word *denouement*, meaning literally unknotting). Hero, heroine or both together are liberated and we all the world can rejoice. (19)

A high degree of entanglement and complication is one of the key features of a comedy, as is its eventual resolve towards the end of a given tale. This process of complication can for instance be grounded in dramatic irony, often played out via mistaken identities and impostors, a strategy that governs much of *Anansi Boys'* plot. The plural in the novel's title already indicates that we are in fact not only reading the tale of Anansi's *son*, but that of his *sons*, pointing out the doppelgänger motif before the text explicitly does so much later. The Spider-centric passages of the novel can be best understood as extended asides, doubling down on the notion that Fat Charlie, in all of his innocence, is rather witless. They serve as a supplemental plot to Charlie's development, highlighting his growth and his moral nature over his brother's sparkling but shallow personality.

Unlike the previous novels discussed, *Anansi Boys* offers a different version of the *bildungsroman* fantasy, which shall be referred to as model B in the following. Whereas *Neverwhere*, *Stardust* and *American Gods* begin with a traumatic event that then propels all further action into being, *Anansi Boys* deals with a past trauma and its continuous intrusions. The traumatic event is the magical splitting of Fat Charlie's personality into two distinct ones. While Charlie retains a somewhat tamed version of his self, his trickster nature is relocated into a person of its own right: his 'brother' Spider. This split personality (something Charlie is entirely unaware of, attesting to his uncanny ability to repress the trauma) shapes the protagonist's life going forward and variously impedes and furthers his development. As the novel begins, Gaiman stacks another trauma onto the deeply buried one. The sudden, but conventional

death of Mr Nancy forces Fat Charlie to engage with the lineage he has forgotten. Using Mr Nancy's demise as means to kick-start fantastic intrusions (Spider's appearance, the mysterious Bird, the murderous Grahame Coats), Charlie is alienated from his 'normal' surroundings. This alienation serves to prepare him for a reintegration into a fantastic world and into an existence not marked by repression, but by confidence and awareness. One of the most interesting elements of this particular *bildungsroman* plot is that Gaiman refuses to merge the split personality again to create a strong symbol of healing and recovery. Instead, both brothers remain their own person. This is both a testament to Charlie's (and even Spider's) development, but also to the lasting impact of trauma. Gaiman insinuates that some things cannot just be made over, erased: even when the traumatic event has been addressed and made visible, its impact remains. Charlie's final metaphysical challenge is thus an acceptance of this godly father, brother, and Self. Only when acceptance is mediated on all three familial planes can the comedy's expected happily-ever-after be realised.

6.1. A Tale of Two Brothers: Fat Charlie's Fantastic Split Personality

To understand Fat Charlie developmental arc, one must understand the paternal heritage he struggles against. Born into a West Indian expat community in Florida, Fat Charlie's heritage is of a multicultural nature with strong African ties. It is in these ties that we find Anansi, the spider god. According to Emily Marshall, the god/folk hero Anansi originates among the Asante in Ghana ("Liminal" 30) and is seen as a figure who brings wisdom and knowledge while simultaneously being "the ultimate hoaxer, a cunning deceiver, a master of lies and malice" ("Syndrome" 127).[177] This paradoxical nature is one the defining characteristics of the trickster figure. In his seminal work on tricksters, Paul Radin postulates that the trickster

> represents not only the undifferentiated and distant past, but likewise the undifferentiated present within every individual. This constitutes his universal and persistent attraction. And so he became and remained everything to every

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[177] Regarding the physical paradox of Anansi being both spider and person, Kwawisi Tekpetey notes, "[e]ven though Ananse is a spider, he is presented in the stories told about him as an *everyman* or *everyone*, and attention is seldom drawn to his spider nature, his *spider-ness*" (75). In the Anansi tales that intersperse the contemporary plot line of *Anansi Boys*, the narrator points precisely to this complex characterization: "You want to know if Anansi looked like a spider? Sure he did, except when he looked like a man" (54).

> man – god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and creator. If we laugh at him, he grins at us. (168-169)

Anansi Boys' Mr Nancy is the poster boy of tricksters, a character who, despite the fact that he is recently deceased, does a lot of grinning. His mirth carries the book, which Gaiman has said to be at its about core surviving families (cf. Lawless n.p.), but Mr Nancy's trickster nature also stands in direct contradiction with a traditional model of fatherhood that prescribes parental authority in order to aid the child's development. It is this contradiction that the novel's protagonist, Fat Charlie, feels most acutely.

Following in the footsteps of *Neverwhere*'s Richard Mayhew and *Stardust*'s Tristran Thorn, Fat Charlie Nancy is another everyman hero who engages the reader as a relatable point of view character. Especially in contrast to his flamboyant father, the son appears almost overly normal, due to his efforts to blend in as much as possible. At the beginning of the novel, Gaiman goes to great lengths to establish Fat Charlie's character. One of the ways in which this is achieved are Charlie's reflections of a childhood in which his desire to blend in is narrated as his father tricks him into standing out. Mr Nancy for instance thinks it is funny to trick his young son into dressing up as an American president for a holiday he has just invented, the President's Day. Charlie, dressed as President Tuft, goes to school expecting everyone to have picked and dressed as their favourite president. Naturally, he is the only child in costume. Sparking an even more intense desire to blend in, Charlie then reflects on his emigration from Florida to the UK, where he had tried his hardest to lose the American accent that marked him as other. Just as he accomplishes this linguistic challenge and forces his American pronunciation into stiff upper lip restraints, his peers realise "that they needed very badly to sound like they came from the 'hood" (*Boys* 26), and Charlie stands out once more. In the novel's narrated present, with his school years long behind him, Gaiman places Charlie in a straight-forward, no nonsense office setting. Diligent and sensible, he prefers working to lounging on the sofa (cf. 61), leading Andrew Wearring for instance to call Charlie "an awkward young man", but also a "respectable and rational" (245) one. Working as a financial analyst at the Grahame Coats Agency, Fat Charlie's professional advancement is hindered by his awkward nature despite his "facility for figures" (*Boys* 65). For Charlie, maintaining an air of respectability is chiefly achieved by avoiding any and all embarrassing situation. Writing about comedy, Eric Weitz postulates that an audience

is invited to place itself in the footsteps of the protagonist, and is just as much invited to be feel relief that the unfortunate events befall the everyman hero and not the audience member itself (78). Fat Charlie stumbles from one predicament into the next, not quite realising that this is directly linked to his disavowal of his paternal heritage. Refusing to embrace his outrageous trickster side, Fat Charlie aims for a normality that is quite simply not in his nature.

Kadenbach speaks of Charlie in the context of a Campbellian hero's journey, but points out that the quest to be accomplished is not that of besting a monster, but of conquering his fears and allowing himself to develop (cf. 115). Charlie, whose musical abilities will become a major plot point later on, once accidentally sings at work. Despite being praised by both his boss and his colleagues, he is mortified (83-85). In discussing this scene, Russell points out that "[f]ear severely limits Fat Charlie; he denies himself the pleasure of his talent because of his dread of an audience" ("God" 54). Gaiman stresses this point even further and has his main character musing on both his deepest fears and sincerest wishes, both of which revolve around an exploration of music:

> In Fat Charlie's worst nightmares, a spotlight shone down upon him from a dark sky, on to a wide stage, and unseen figures would to force Fat Charlie to stand in the spotlight and sing.[…] He would always awake before he actually had to sing, sweating and trembling, his heart beating a cannonade in his chest. (*Boys* 66)

When Charlie, stuck in a job he is good at, but not well regarded for, daydreams of an ideal but unattainable future, his wishes are modest: enough money for good restaurants, having a job where people do not tell him what to do all the time, and "to be able to sing without embarrassment, somewhere there were never any people around to hear him" (86). This already points to a key feature of *bildungsroman* plot pattern: the challenges that Charlie has to face over the course of the novel are mainly of a psychological nature. While there are portions that evoke adventure novels (there is a fair bit of travelling and violence), the key point that is stressed is that Charlie needs to grow out of his acute and constant embarrassment (cf. Kadenbach 122). The *bildungsidee* is thus formulated as an acceptance of Self, including the paternal trickster heritage that stands in stark contrast to not wanting to be in the spotlight.

The *bildungsroman*'s first stage, the path to alienation, is presented on two levels. For one, Charlie is geographically alienated from his London life by travelling to Florida to bury his father. Once there, the fantastic makes its first intrusions, accelerating the manifestation of a decades-old trauma. By being told about his father and brother, Charlie is later prompted to call upon Spider. Spider's presence sets out a second layer of alienation, as Spider quite wilfully and actively alienates his brother from his surroundings (both personal and professional) in order to take his place.

Spider is designed as a younger version of Mr Nancy/Anansi, fully embracing his trickster side. In a prophetic dream, Charlie catches a first glimpse at Spider in all his outrageous glory (he is literally walking on water, but at a high end pool party in Hollywood). When Charlie wakes, he cannot piece things together: "Fat Charlie realised that he knew the man in his dreams, knew him from somewhere, and he also realised that this would irritate him for the rest of the day if he let it" (74). Spider's intrusion, despite its humorous presentation, is thus of an uncanny kind. Harkening back to a forgotten and repressed past, this first glimpse acts as both a heroic call and as foreshadowing: once Spider makes an appearance, he is unlikely to be ignored.

Pointedly, Russell notes that "Spider is everything Fat Charlie wishes to be, and, as it turns out, could be" ("God" 55). Spider "is more confident, more magnetic" and

> has all sorts of magical powers: the ability to distort space, conjure objects from thin air, and to travel anywhere at will. They are all based on his confidence and ability to conceive of and tell a good story (Wearring 245)

Spider, simply put, appears as the epitome of coolness. When the two brothers meet, Charlie is somewhat shocked by the direct comparison.

> There was a family resemblance between the two men. That was unarguable, although that alone did not explain the intense feeling of familiarity that Fat Charlie felt on seeing Spider. His brother looked like Fat Charlie wished he looked in his mind, unconstrained by the faintly disappointing fellow he saw, with monotonous regularity, in the bathroom mirror. Spider was taller, and leaner, and cooler. He was wearing a black and scarlet leather jacket, and black leather leggings, and he looked at home in them. (*Boys* 77)

Face to face with the "potentially imaginary brother he had not previously believed in" (75), Charlie is confronted with his own lack of coolness, confidence, and success. Spider has a "larger than life" quality about his person and a smile "so charming, so cocky, or so twinklingly debonair", Charlie could not manage if he practised "smiling

in front of a mirror from now until the end of time" (77). The two men embark on a wake for their deceased father that ends with Spider moving into Charlie's London flat. Soon, Spider begins to take over Charlie's life, wooing his fiancée, the chaste Rosie, trying to blackmail Charlie's villainous boss, Grahame Coats, and wreaking havoc wherever he goes.

The presence of doppelgängers and impostors is widespread in comedies as it offers frequent opportunities for a "bisociation of the character's actual framing and the framing misattributed to him or her. For maximum humour effect, it is not simply an error of identification, but one loaded with amusing inferences for both parties" (Weitz 76). The fact that the two brothers do not really look all that much alike is used as another instance to create a humorous effect. As Fat Charlie goes to his old neighbour Mrs Higgler to complain about this brother's interference, she tells him that they fight because they are "too similar" (*Boys* 212). Charlie thinks she is pulling his leg: "I take it this is some obscure West Indian usage of the word 'similar' which means 'nothing at all alike'?" Refusing to join him in sarcastic interpretation of the relationship, she instead asserts that they're "cut from the same cloth" (ibid.).

In the tradition of comedy, "[i]dentical twins and lookalikes lend themselves most obviously to the plotting of mistaken identities. As Harry Levin puts it, 'a twin is regarded as a kind of human pun, where an imperceptible substitute unexpectedly switches the continuities'" (in Weitz 77). That Spider passes for Charlie even though they look different is due to "*the* attitude" (*Boys* 398, emphasis mine): a trickster's attitude can shape the world he is operating in. In contrast to his seemingly mundane brother, "Spider was, give or take a little, a god. When you're a god, your emotions are contagious – other people can catch them" (236). Spider successfully passes for Fat Charlie for the very simple reason that he wants to. The confidence thus makes the man, and con-man Spider enjoys pretending to be Charlie immensely. As the narrator shares in a well-placed piece of free indirect discourse: "He was having such a good time being Fat Charlie he began wondering why he hadn't been Fat Charlie before" (219). Not even Rosie, the person who as his fiancée is closest to Fat Charlie, can tell the two apart: "There were two men and they looked and sounded completely different, and she still could not work out which one of them was her fiancé". She desperately concludes that "'I'm going mad, aren't I?'" (250). While she is not going mad, she has been enveloped in the trickster's trademark spin on reality.

Fat Charlie himself is of course a rather unwilling participant in this game of swapped identities precisely because for him, it is not a game at all. Where Spider plays, Charlie works. Where Spider thinks in the moment, Charlie plans long-term. Especially when Spider, pretending to be Charlie, seduces Rosie, who has always asserted that she wanted to stay a virgin until marriage, the rift between the newly reconnected brothers widens to a chasm. This prompts Kadenbach's observation that Spider is initially presented as the novel's antagonist (cf. 127). He retains this status until mid-point of the novel, when Charlie's attempts to get rid of the trickster brother he magically summoned backfires and the mythological creatures Bird and Tiger are set up as primary villains instead.

As the novel reveals in its second half,

> Fat Charlie and Spider are the embodiment of a divided self. [...] the division is forced onto Fat Charlie but he too must step out of his shadow life – of his own fears, of the intimidating divinities who are his father and brother – and claim the right to determine his own identity. (Russell, "God" 55)

This claim however cannot be realised without confronting the trauma that stands at the root of Charlie's and Spider's relationship.

6.2. Of Birds and Spiders: Giving Shape to Traumatic Memories

Just as the label "fairy tale" shapes the outcome of *Stardust*, the marker "comedy" affects reader expectations of *Anansi Boys*. Neither form seems particularly inclined to extended representations of trauma, yet this is precisely what Gaiman adds to the expected plots of each genre. Perhaps a testament to his postmodern leanings, Gaiman refuses a simplified and straight-forward structure for the comic romp that is *Anansi Boys* and instead opens the novel with the traumatic revelation of a father's death. As the novel goes on, the narrator reveals that there is an even older trauma at the root of Charlie's character, one located far back in his childhood.

Gaiman begins the novel with a long exploration of Fat Charlie's boyhood years, which were significantly shaped by an acute state of embarrassment. This embarrassment was caused by his father's eccentric nature, his unusual behaviour and his refusal to simply behave the way Charlie thought a father ought to behave. Thus setting the scene, the narrator offers a protracted comic build-up that results in Fat Charlie finally but hesitantly reaching out to his father only to be informed that he

has just died singing karaoke. Having expected his father's presence at a wedding as a rite of passage, what Fat Charlie is actually confronted with is a funeral rite. The sudden and unexpected death of a father Charlie had little contact with destabilises the young man. He flies to Florida for the funeral and hurries to the graveyard. Joining the service midpoint, the otherwise shy Charlie gives a rousing speech in which he tries to come to terms with the estrangement between father and son, while at the same time (and for the *first* time) expressing positive feelings for the recently deceased. Evoking bathos, the situation is turned comical when his old neighbour Mrs Higgler hollers at Charlie to "stop botherin' those people and get your ass over here *this* minute!" (*Boys* 34): the prodigal son has returned, but somewhat unfortunately, to the wrong grave. While this first (failed) attempt at burying his father is designed to be absurd, the novel does take a moment a few scenes later to explore Charlie's grief.

Having sent the gravediggers away, Mrs Higgler expects Charlie to bury his father himself. In doing so, he is actively involved in both laying him *and* his own grievances to rest. This moment, which is set on a rather garish Florida cemetery during persistent rain, is highly symbolic. The death and burial of a father is of course reminiscent of the events of *American Gods*, but where Shadow willingly sat vigil for a man he liked and did not know to be his father, Charlie unwillingly buries a man he knew to be his father, but did not particularly like.[178] The conflicted relationship however adds to Charlie's ongoing traumatisation as the grief is both unexpected and – given that father and son were far from close – not explained logically. The novel positions the act of burying quite explicitly as a rite of passage that the young man must undergo:

> The earth became mud, and became, if anything, heavier. After what seemed like a lifetime, and a very uncomfortable one at that, Fat Charlie patted down the final shovelful of dirt. Mrs Higgler walked over to him. She took his jacket off the fence, and handed it to him. "You're soaked to the skin, and covered in dirt and sweat, but you grew up. Welcome home, Fat Charlie,' she said, and she smiled and she held him to her vast breast. "I'm not crying," said Fat Charlie. "Hush now," said Mrs Higgler. "It's the rain on my face," said Fat Charlie. Mrs Higgler didn't say anything. She just held him, and swayed backward and forward, and after a while Fat Charlie said "It's OK. I'm better now." (37)

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[178] Another similarity can be found in the relative impermanence of death in both novels: Wednesday returns as a ghost planning on taking corporeal form again, and Mr Nancy's death is cast more as a voluntary break from life.

Gaiman stresses the physical effort of burying Mr Nancy: earth turns to mud, and each shovel becomes harder to lift. In this quiet moment, Charlie does more than "show willing" (36): he does his filial duty. Were it not for the mythological family background, Charlie's tale might have ended here. Having buried his father, Mrs Higgler seems to insinuate, the boy can now become a man. The problem that appears however is that Charlie cannot be the man his father was because his brother already beat him to it.

Much like Shadow's zombie wife Laura in *American Gods*, Charlie's godly brother serves both as a blocking character and as an extended metaphor of traumatic ruptures of both Self and family. It is in Spider's presence that childhood trauma manifests: he serves as a visualisation of a traumatically disrupted Self. Later on, this trauma will also be embodied by the mythological Bird, but where Bird is best understood as a traumatic symptom, Spider links directly to traumatic origins. Spider's role in the novel is complex and it is part of Charlie's *bildungsreise* to understand how the two brothers really relate to one another. When the two finally meet after being prompted by Mrs Higgler, Charlie shares that "I never knew I had a brother" (92). The same cannot be said of Spider, who replies that he did: "I always meant to look you up, but I got distracted. You know how it is" (ibid.). This indicates that a level of repression and avoidance that extends in both directions: Charlie represses any and all knowledge of Spider's existence, but Spider too kept his distance because being in touch with Charlie entails a confrontation with a world of rules and regulated behaviour that is antithetical to the trickster's nature.

It is the intersection of the mundane and the mythical that contains not only much of the novel's comedic content, but also its traumatic core. What brutally divorced Fat Charlie from his father's mythical talents and located himself (too firmly, the novel seems to argue) in the mundane is revealed shortly before the comedy's climax. As a young boy, Fat Charlie was not the meek and embarrassed man readers encounter in the opening chapters. Instead, he was a cheeky boy who unfortunately happened to annoy the neighbourhood's resident witch. The novel here establishes an explicit connection to both fairy tales and *Macbeth*, which serves to characterise *Anansi Boys*' witches as a threatening influence despite their seemingly harmless appearances as elderly black Florida residents who cook a lot. By means of intertextuality, Gaiman hints at an undercurrent of monstrous femininity that

positions the witches both as Other and as a danger to Charlie's well-being. Charlie reflects that "[w]hen he was a little boy he had truly believed that Mrs Dunwiddy was a witch. Not a nice witch, more the kind kids had to push into ovens to escape from" (41). Meeting all the elderly ladies in an attempt to get rid of his brother later on, the stereotypical connotation of witchcraft is still hovering close to the surface: "It was sort of like *Macbeth*, thought Fat Charlie [...] if the witches in Macbeth [sic] had been four little old ladies, and if instead of stirring cauldrons and intoning dread incantations they had just welcomed Macbeth in and fed him turkey" (186). Charlie actively represses his understanding of the supernatural powers of Mrs Dunwiddy, Mrs Higgler, Mrs Bustamonte, and Miss Noles despite knowing better. After all, it was Mrs Dunwiddy whose magic shaped and disrupted his life so significantly. This act of repressal links back to his childhood trauma. To return to Wald's assertion that trauma requires "forms that are distinct from narrative memory" (96), Anansi Boys adds Spider who in his refusal to address the trauma that birthed him, becomes one such form.

Never having known that he had a brother in the first place, Charlie is introduced to Spider by Mrs Higgler's offhand comments after the burial. When she tells Charlie that his father was a god, Charlie raises the point why he himself is so very normal. Mrs Higgler tells him that "You're brother got all that god stuff" (46). Already, Spider is linked to the extraordinary and to an overt violation of Charlie's sense of reality. Not only is there a brother he did not know he has, the brother is a god and has supernatural abilities. When the two brothers meet and Charlie gets to know Spider, Mrs Higgler's observation that Spider "was a handful" (47) begins to make more sense. Spider is an embodiment of a "traumatic memory [that] remains unaffected by time and cannot be recounted verbally" (Wald 97). In Spider's presence, Gaiman does not narrate trauma, but presents its result. In keeping with Freudian mental defence mechanisms of repression, disavowal, rejection, negation, and splitting of the ego (cf. Leys 24), Spider operates as the return of repressed. He is a part of Charlie's Self that the protagonist is so mentally divorced from that he can no longer recognize it as his own. While Charlie is entirely unaware of this, Spider is perhaps more cognizant of truth. As he tells Rosie, "I'm half of a matched set" (125).

Spider thus – fantastically – turns from part of a split personality into a person of his own. When Charlie's hitherto undisclosed childhood trauma thus intrudes in his

life, Charlie is quick to wish for its disappearance. Yet, the traumatic representation in the shape of his brother can no longer be disavowed: Spider is nothing if not overly present. This presence is not controllable by Charlie. This is best illustrated in the wilful appearance and disappearance of Spider's room. When the brothers first meet, Spider moves into the spare room in Charlie's flat. While it is a tiny room in the real world, Spider's godly abilities allow him to change it at will. He turns the spare room into a lavish lair that he can enter at will. Charlie however can only access this room when Spider lets him. This imbalance can be understood as the trauma being present, but not visible at all times. Like trauma, Spider is entirely unpredictable and Charlie cannot prepare himself for its intrusions. Soon, Charlie wants to restore order and tells his brother that "I want you out of here. Out of my life. Out of Rosie's life. Gone" (166). Spider, having a found a place in a life that is not his own, but that he enjoys, refuses to leave.

> "I like it here," said Spider.
> "You're ruining my bloody life."
> "Tough." (ibid.)

The squabbling among brothers, which turns into a physical fight at a later point (cf. 251), is indicative of a deeper truth: Charlie is not just unsettled by a family member, but by his own mind.

Being unable to cope, Charlie approaches the witches to make Spider disappear again. While invoking them, he uncovers the truth about this brother's identity. This act of recognition of a magically induced disruption of Self is relayed from three different perspectives at different points, speaking to the impossibility to fully narrate and comprehend trauma. Charlie's memories of this moment are clouded.

> He remembered it, the way you remember things from childhood, part memory, part memory of memory: following the tennis ball into Mrs Dunwiddy's yard, and once he was there, experimentally picking up her mirrored ball to see his face in it, distorted and huge […] He remembered the strong old fingers that grabbed him by the ear and dragged him out of her yard and into her house… (*Boys* 317)

This already foreshadows Charlie's magically inflicted personality disorder; his face, distorted and huge, is not recognizable as his own just as he will not recognise his brother Spider as a part of his own personality. Gaiman's use of the ellipsis here

indicates that what happens inside Mrs Dunwiddy's house threatens the boy, leaving the reader to expect the worst.

Spider too remembers this moment and links it to his fear of old Mrs Dunwiddy:

> "She made me go away," said Spider. "I didn't want to go. But I broke this ball in her garden. Big glass thing, like a giant Christmas tree ornament." "I did that too. She was pissed." "I know." The voice from the dark was small and worried and confused. "It was the same time. That was when it all started." (*Boys* 292)

Despite their traumatic past being narrated from both perspectives, the readers still do not have the full picture. As Vickroy observes,

> [c]ontemporary fiction depicts the struggle with memory and avoidance that character undergo, but these presentations move beyond the repetitive-performative image in found in the classic model of trauma to accommodate the ambiguous aspects of traumatic experience that include limited remembering in contrast to a fixed state of forgetting. ("Voices" 140)

The struggle of memory and avoidance is symbolized in the brothers' tempestuous relationship and attempted (and failed) repression of one another's existence. In their many interactions over the course of the novel, their joint past appears as moments of "limited remembering" that will eventually lead to the *bildungsroman*'s positive resolution.

Interestingly, Gaiman switches from the victim's recovery of the traumatic memory to the perpetrator's account. The Macbethian witch Mrs Dunwiddy is revealed to be the source of a great many of Charlie's problems. Her own reminiscences of that fateful day finally and fully illuminate the brothers' relationship. As Mrs Dunwiddy shares, Spider is not just Charlie's brother. He *was* part of Charlie.

> 'I break him off from you. All the tricksiness. All the wickedness. All the devilry. All that.' She sighed. "'My mistake. Nobody tell me that if you do magic around a [sic][179], around people like your daddy's bloodline, it magnify everything. Everything get bigger.' [...] He wanted to argue with her, to tell her how this was nonsense, that Spider was not a part of him, no more than he, Fat Charlie, was part of the sea or of the darkness. (318)

This event had led to a permanent disruption of Self. Due to the godly origins, however, this 'extraction' turns into a person of its own, and Spider is born. Spider can consequently be interpreted as the *bildungsroman*'s generic focus on inner life

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[179] Mrs Dunwiddy here avoids the word "god".

that has been fantastically externalised. Everything his meeker brother is not, Spider is all Freudian id and as such more defined along the lines of Anansi than Mr Nancy's human side. Michelle Balaev speaks of an "innate causality between trauma and dissociation, [of] the idea that an extreme event directly produces a dissasociative consciousness wherein the past is hidden" (5). In *Anansi Boys*, the dissociation produces a new person. By trying to banish Spider after his brother's fantastic intrusion, Charlie is trying to repress urges he has refused himself: his life is not one of indulgence, and out of fear of embarrassment, his personality is dominated by his super ego, without an id to balance it. As Mr Nancy explains to Charlie in a meeting in the spirit world, the brothers are like starfish. "*Starfish,* said his father, musing. *When you cut one in half, they just grow into two new starfish*" (*Boys* 129, italics in original). Over the course of the novel, the traumatic separation of id and ego/super ego is manifested in a profound lack in both brothers: where Charlie lacks an ability to assert himself and to fully enjoy life, Spider lacks insight and empathy, and consequently, the ability to form meaningful relationships. While the two "starfish" can thus exist independently of one another, it is only by confronting each other's existence that they can grow and develop the potential the form of the *bildungsroman* predetermines.

It takes Charlie a number of confrontations with his brother, the African pantheon, and the witches to decode his father's cryptic words. Eventually, he shares his knowledge with Spider: "'You know,' [Charlie] said, 'you used to be a part of me. When we were kids.' Spider put his head to one side. 'Really?'" (*Boys* 418). That Spider has disassociated himself from the event that caused his existence in the first place can be understood as a form of primal repression: he cannot conceive (of) his own conception.

> Schönfelder's definition of trauma
>
> as a profoundly distressing, painful, or shocking experience that affects the individual so deeply as to cause a disruption in, injury to, or breach within the structures of the mind and the psyche and that, as a result, may have a persistent impact on an individual, especially regarding his or relation to identity, memory, and the social environment (20f.)

is thus literalised in Charlie's supernatural division of personality at the hands of Mrs Dunwiddy, pointing to the fragility of the human mind and to the danger of magical intrusion. Despite the reconstituted memories, the brothers remain separate and autonomous.

In providing an antagonist they have to jointly deal with, Gaiman offers both the second stage of the *bildungsroman*, that of reintegration. Their mutual antagonist seems to be Bird, whom Charlie enlists to get rid of Spider. Like Spider, Bird is a metaphor of trauma, both her own and that of the brothers. In the "myth places" (*Boys* 101), Bird has held her grudge against Anansi for centuries. Their relationship is an ambiguous one. As the narrator shares,

> Anansi did not like Bird, because when Bird was hungry she ate many things, and one of the things that Bird ate was Spiders, and Bird, she was always hungry. They used to be friends, but they were friends no longer. (214)

As payback, Anansi once tricked Bird to climb into a boiling cookpot and cooked her alive. Much like a Grimms' fairy tale, the story is dark despite its simple tone: "That evening Anansi and his family had the most delicious Bird soup, with boiled Bird. They did not go hungry again for many days" (216). Even though the many interspersed Anansi tales (tales focusing on the 'original' form of the deity, rather than its American version Mr Nancy) emphasize that death is something that happens to all gods, and is by no means a permanent state, Bird has never forgiven the Spider god for cooking her alive. As it turns out, she also not forgiven his family for joining in.

In the confrontation with the myth-places and the spirit world, Gaiman draws on the *bildungsroman*'s third stage – the metaphysical challenge – and extends it to almost half of the novel. Like the witches Charlie approaches to get rid of Spider, Bird is rendered as a monstrous femininity. And like Laura in *American Gods*, Bird is yet another female physical metaphor of trauma. As an intrusion in Mendlesohn's conceptualisation of fantasy rhetorics, she appears outside her prescribed setting and intrudes on Charlie's (and consequently, Spider's) London everyday life. When confronted with her, Charlie is unable to comprehend what he is seeing. Like trauma, Bird cannot be simply and cognitively understood.

Drawing on a highly subjective figural narrative situation, the narrator refuses a linear and reliable reading of Charlie's first personal encounter with Bird in the myth-place. The moment is rife with flashforwards, both to events, and to reflections. Trauma presents itself as omnidirectional; there is no safe space, neither geographically, mentally, or temporally as it intrudes forward and backward into all directions. After leaving the myth-place, Charlie forgets large chunks of what happened here – the dual reality is too much to deal with for his (at this point) entirely human mind. As the narrator shares in free indirect discourse,

> Fat Charlie saw one thing with his eyes, and he saw something else with his mind, and in the gulf between the two things, madness waited. He could feel a wild panic welling up inside him, and he took a deep breath and held it in while his heart thudded against his ribcage. (*Boys* 206)

> Later, Fat Charlie tried, and failed, to remember what she had been wearing. Sometimes he thought it must have been a cloak of feathers; at other times he believed it must have been rags of some kind, or perhaps a tattered rain-coat, of the kind she wore when he saw her in Piccadilly, later, when it all started to go bad. (207)

This foreshadowing is one of the elements which Gaiman uses to mark the presence of horror in the otherwise comical text. The threat of madness links back to Richard's Ordeal of the Key in *Neverwhere*, where the everyman protagonist too must confront a world outside reason to grow into a hero. Since Charlie is at the time of this confrontation however literally non compos mentis since his mind is still split in half and he has not yet embarked on the psychological process of recovery, his inability to understand Bird's nature is a testament to his ongoing traumatisation. The madness he perceives is one that will begin to haunt him, just as Bird herself does. While Bird cannot be understood, the threat to his Self that emanates from their encounter is already present.

Another common horror trope Gaiman refers to is that of muted threats. Following the assumption that a refusal of human communication leads to a growing estrangement, Bird's silence needs to be understood as threat and statement alike. Bird does not speak when she eventually comes after Spider (cf. 238-240). Assuming the shape of Rosie, she meets him in a London bar.

> Her lips moved, as if she were trying to find the wright words to say. Spider waited. Her mouth opened. His first thought was that she was eating something, because the thing he saw between her teeth was brown, and was certainly not a tongue. Then it moved its head and its eyes, little black-bead eyes, stared at him. Rosie opened her mouth impossibly wide and the birds came out. (239)

This moment harkens back to Edvard Munch's expressionist painting "Der Schrei" (1893), which too offers a voiceless representation of shocked incomprehension. Combining this image with the threatening motif of Hitchcock's eponymous birds and slack-jawed destruction that is later used to great effect in the horror film *Mirrors*

(2008)[180], Gaiman's depiction of Bird as a voiceless evil overshadows her communicative presence in the Anansi tales interspersed into the main narrative.[181]

Bird's price to rid the world of Spider is a promise she extracts from Charlie. Despite being warned by the witches not to give anything away when making deals in the myth-places, Charlie falls into the trap and tells Bird that "I give you Anansi's bloodline" (*Boys* 208). Due to his traumatic estrangement and emotional detachment from his trickster lineage – referring to his father, his brother, and consequently, his split-off Self – Charlie falls into the trap, not realising that of course by giving away Anansi's bloodline, he is also giving away himself (cf. Russell "God" 56). To no one's surprise but Charlie's, Bird then begins to haunt both brothers. Her voiceless, silent threats continue as Spider and Charlie try to escape, using Spider's abilities to teleport across the world in search of a Bird-less place. Going from Italy to the arctic to desert dunes, the brothers' flight is destined to fail. Even in the most deserted places, Bird as a representative of trauma, continues to haunt them, appearing against laws of logic and reason. Whether it is the birds in a square suddenly observing them, the penguins in the arctic turning towards the brothers, or the vultures in the desert, Bird – and thus trauma – is omnipresent. Her ability to draw on all avian creatures as an extension of herself also speaks to trauma's category-defying nature. Following her familiars, Bird eventually catches up with the renegade Anansi boys.

> Someone was watching them on a distant dune. A casual observer might have mistaken the figure for a scarecrow. [...]Now the woman in the brown overcoat was standing of the nearest ridge of sand, so close that Fat Charlie could see the glassy blacks of her eyes. (287)

Trauma is inching closer: despite knowing that it may be there, the victim can never fully prepare himself for its onslaught. Eventually, Bird takes Spider captive, thus moving from a return of the repressed to a psychological overtaking. Spreading her own silence onto him, she tears out his tongue. This must be understood as Charlie doubly silenced: not only was the exuberant part of his soul cut out decades ago, now this part is not only split off, but also muted and violated. Bird's appearance thus constitutes a haunting in the sense of a horror narrative: like Bloody Mary, she came

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[180] A character stands in front of a titular mirror, opens her mouth as wide as she can and then, possessed by a spirit, cracks her own jaw and rips it until the slack-jawed woman looks much like Munch's painting, only in blood-filled.

[181] Like the coming to America tales in *American Gods*, the interspersed Anansi stories in the novel serve as a (de)constructing postmodern narrative element: since they establish the Spider god as a manipulative storyteller, the tales subvert the grand narrative of Charlie's *bildung*, pointing to the various points where storytelling influences action.

when called, and her presence is a damning one. Bird however, and her haunting of the brothers, is only a symptom of Charlie's filial repression. Bird will eventually go away when Charlie returns a feather she gave him; this symbolic transaction speaks to a recognition of trauma and an acceptance of its force. By returning the feather, Charlie also admits to his own mythological origins, thus intimating that at last, he has understood that he too is part of "Anansi's bloodline".

In *Anansi Boys*, Gaiman overlaps the fantastic intrusion with the offer of a reintegration into a magical society and a metaphysical challenge. Logically, Charlie's attempt of getting rid of Spider by invoking Bird must fail because he cannot just erase trauma, and because he cannot just erase a part of himself he does not enjoy. The formulated *bildungsidee* thus speaks to harmony, the unification of a family (letting go of old grievances, see page 397), and an acknowledgement of trauma. But since Gaiman does not reconcile the two brothers into one person, the novel's traumatic core is not resolved into a unilateral reading. He hints at the persistence and long-lasting effects of trauma: some wounds will not fade, but survival may operate in new and different ways instead. This plurality of existence is negotiated in the entirety of the bloodline Fat Charlie gave away: Anansi is both man and spider, Spider is both Charlie's brother and simply a part of Charlie's Self. The after-effects of the bargain Charlie attempted to strike with Bird also yield positive side-effects. As Russell notes, "Fat Charlie's ill-conceived act of self-defense is ultimately liberating. Rectifying the chaos he has unwittingly instigated requires Fat Charlie to develop the power he has denied" so far ("God" 56). While Charlie still insists that

> "'I'm not like my dad,' said Fat Charlie. 'I'm not magic. Spider got all that side of the family, remember?'" (318)

the reader already knows that of course there is a bit of the trickster left in the erstwhile Londoner. The comedic form dictates a happy ending, which can only be achieved if and when Charlie acknowledges his heritage.

6.3. Claiming Kin: "I am Anansi's son"[182]

Continuing his examination of the role of fathers in the traditional *bildungsroman*, Jeffers extends his argument to the observation that "the Bildungsroman verges on the family novel" (190). This is in keeping with Meyer Spack's assertion that "[t]he battle of the generations, with its loves and hates, plays a comparably crucial role, determining structure as well as content" (17). It is thus apparent that in order to unite the strands of comedy and *bildungsroman*, *Anansi Boys* has to reconcile father and son, and brother and… imaginary brother (Spider's status as his own person as opposed to just Charlie's id will find discussion at a later point). While these yet to be reconciled family relationships thus determine the novel's content and speak to its central *bildungsidee* of harmonious unification, they also shape, as Meyer Spacks observes, the form of the novel. In the case of *Anansi Boys*, the previously discussed multi-layered plot (the Anansi stories, Fat Charlie's main plot, and the interactions in the myth-places) must be reconciled into one. The last chapter has already pointed to the interrelation of the final two stages of the *bildungsroman*. In this chapter I will discuss how notions of reintegration and the metaphysical challenge will not only lead to Charlie's recuperation from his childhood trauma, but lead to the formation of family bonds both old and now, and how this awareness and acceptance of heritage leads to a reunified Self.

Anansi Boys places the discussion of family harmony into the broader context of world building and mythology. While on a base level, the text negotiates Charlie's journey from a conflicted son who is too shy to realise his musical passion because of childhood family trauma, the text also elevates the discussion. As the narrator implies at the very beginning, all the world is a song, and depending on who sings it, the world is shaped. "It begins, as most things begin, with a song" (*Boys* 3) thus refers to Charlie's development, his father's demise, the genesis of the world, and the hint at the resolution the reader of the comedy is to be rewarded with. The idea of harmony therefore plays out on a metaphorical and literal level: Charlie must metaphorically reach a state of harmony, which he can only do by accepting his heritage, but he must also literally create harmony in song. As the narrator shares,

> Each person who ever was or is or will be has a song. It isn't a song that anybody else wrote. It has its own melody, it has its own words. Very few people get to sing their own song. Most of us fear that we cannot do it justice

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with our voices, or that our words are too foolish or too honest or to odd. So people live their songs instead. (223)

Charlie's tale is one of a son who initially neither lives nor sings his song, but will achieve this dual harmonious state by the novel's end. For *Anansi Boys*, growing into one's song consequently refers to finding one's place in the world. The ability to sing one's song also speaks to a healing power that extends beyond the personal. As Charlie tells Spider, "You sing the song, you fix things" (434). If we take the *bildungsroman*'s desired endpoint as not only fitting into, but benefitting society, then Charlie's ability to "fix things" makes his arrival and healing after the successful metaphysical challenge evident.

Consequently, this analysis explores how the notion of arrival and healing can only be realised by acknowledging and expressing trauma and grievances. Honesty, with one's Self and others, leads to growing confidence and an optimistic outlook on the future. In Charlie's case, this means that he first has to intellectually and emotionally comprehend what it means to be part of "Anansi's bloodline". Intellectually, this speaks to the realisation that he not only made his brother, but himself a target. Emotionally, this means that he has to embrace the trickster that was taken from him. The acknowledgement leads to action, the performed action leads to confidence, and the confidence leads to new station in life and serves as the *bildungsroman*'s conclusion.

The acknowledgement of his trickster identity is, as discussed, complicated by Spider's existence and the two brothers' relationship. As long as Charlie believes that it is Spider who has received all of their paternal supernatural abilities, he casts himself in the role of the family outsider. The trauma of being split into two remains a central concern as Fat Charlie struggles to find his identity, first in opposition to his joyous, but overbearing father, and then in contrast to his decadent brother. The childhood trauma of being separated from the mythological part of his heritage is the subtext that propels Charlie's story forward: in his case, there would be no development without trauma, no two starfish if one had not been cut in half.

If Charlie however believes that he too has these abilities, that there is a trickster inside him, then Spider's very existence as the separated supernatural part of Charlie is called into question. If Charlie reassumes this side of his heritage and personality, does that eradicate Spider's existence? Gaiman resolves this paradox by

evoking the starfish simile again. Eventually Charlie realises and tells Spider that "[y]ou're not the magical side of me", but that they are like "'two halves of a starfish. You grew into a whole person. And so,' he said, realising it was true as he said it, 'did I'" (419). Worriedly, Spider asks what consequences that will yield for him. Charlie kindly assuages his brother's fear:

> "So what now? Are you going to take me back or something?" Charlie's brow crinkled. "I think you've turned out better than you would have done if you were part of me." (ibid.)

Instead of merging the two men, Gaiman has Charlie reclaim his trickster side by making peace with his father, and allowing Spider a tempered existence by providing him with an educative wife[183] (who, in a comic turn of events, happens to be his brother's ex-fiancée).[184] The continued psychological and physical division of what was formerly one character however also speaks to trauma's persistence: there is no simple erasure of the past.

The moment of intellectual comprehension of his past, personality, and family relations leads to one of emotional comprehension and consequently allows Charlie to exchange his boring old life into an exciting new one that he can excel in. The former strict contrast between Charlie and his family members is the means by which humour is generated, while the dissolution of this contrast is the means by which the novel, and thus Charlie's coming of age, is brought to a positive resolution. Once Charlie has realised how to define the relationship to his brother, the two can exist separately from one another for good. As Charlie assumes the behaviouristics, looks, and powers of his father, "Anansi's bloodline" (286) is continued in spirit and in fact.

The behavioural characteristic of the mythological Anansi relates to his cleverness: he derives his power not from being a supernatural, but from outwitting

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[183] The function of the female characters in the novel is negated on two interacting levels. As monstrous femininities, they bring chaos, but at the same time create (the witches create Spider, Bird creates the opportunity for the brothers to reconcile and for Charlie to find his voice). However, they are also associated with a romantic (and heteronormative) order: both rule-abiding Rosie and policewoman Daisy bring order to Charlie's and Spider's life, something that Charlie embraces and Spider secretly craves. To a certain extent, both Daisy and Rosie also somewhat problematically serve as boons in the Campbellian sense: marrying them at the comedy's conclusion is the hero(e)'s reward.

[184] The brothers are united by Bird as their shared enemy: this can be understood as a joint, therapeutic acknowledgment of their traumatic history. They eventually bond in a pitch-black coalmine, and as the narrator indicates in the novel's frequently used free indirect discourse, "[n]ot seeing Spider when they were talking made it easier somehow" (290). There is an undercurrent of repression and evasion still present in this encounter: while the brothers finally talk and try to reconnect, in a call-back to stereotypical depictions of masculinity, they are hesitant to embrace their emotions in full light. "It's easier to say true things in the dark" (293), Charlie muses. The main point though is that these things are being said at all.

and charming everyone else. This is partly what drew Gaiman to him: "The thing that made me happy was just the idea that really it represents the point where people stop trying to hit their way out of trouble and start trying to think their way out of trouble**"** (Goodyear and Pesca n.p.). Gaiman, who expresses a general fascination with tricksters, further explained that Anansi "seemed a natural. I needed a trickster in *American Gods*, I had a few in there already, but I wanted one we could just like" (ibid.). Anansi's likeability stems from his wit, humour, and outrageousness: he is so cheeky that one cannot help rooting for him, and the same applies to his contemporary re-imagining Mr Nancy, and later his sons, first Spider, and then Charlie.

Anansi, in both myth and in Gaiman's adaptation, can be read as the very embodiment of desire. In the oral stories analysed by Marshall and included in modified form in *Anansi Boys* and *American Gods*, Anansi is all about the immediate fulfilment of his wishes. Every whim must be met, and it must be met promptly, irrespective of the logicality or cost. If he wants food or sex, then Anansi will get both immediately. If he wants recognition, he will trick a larger animal or tell a story about a previous trickery. If Anansi is angry, he will hurt the person who caused his anger. If Anansi wants bird soup, then Bird soup he will have. In this sense, Spider is presented as Anansi's true heir: heedless of consequences, he embraces desires, even stealing his own brother's fiancée in the process. In his absolute lack of patience, the mythological Anansi often behaves like a child and thus the problematic relationship between the god and his paternal potential become apparent, for the father figure usually governs desire rather than lets it roam free. Anansi's bottomless desire has lead Tekpetey, in his essay "Kweku Ananse: A Psychoanalytical Approach", to argue that the trickster god can be read as a personification of Freud's id (cf. 74). Tekpetey further argues that the other two elements of the Freudian psychoanalytical model are assumed by the audience of Anansi's tales. Anansi's exuberance and excess, his "unrestrained vitality" (81), has a cathartic function and is then in the manner of the ego and the superego moderated to an acceptable degree by the stories' audience (cf. 78). Within the novel, Fat Charlie assumes the function of the superego and Gaiman thus creates a role reversal. It is not the child that is in need of behavioural moderation, but the father. Yet Mr Nancy is both a joyful father and a god, thus his refusal to let Charlie reduce his excesses culminates in an estrangement that is only

healed by the old man's (apparent) death. With the introduction of Spider, the character-based reading of Freud's mental apparatus changes: while rule-abiding and reliable Fat Charlie is now linked to the ego, rather than the super-ego, Spider in his wild behaviour assumes the role of the id, and Mr Nancy, offering spirit-council from beyond the grave, grows into a conventional paternal super-ego.[185] The essence of Anansi however remains; and is now located in the past Anansi stories the novel shares as well as in Spider's early exploits.

But Anansi's (and thus Mr Nancy's) excessive nature does not automatically make him a bad father because it is one of the deity's character hallmarks that he exists precisely outside of a good versus bad dichotomy. As Fat Charlie's mother reminisces when speaking about her former husband, "he's not a bad man [...] Well, that's not exactly true. He's certainly not a good man" (*Boys* 16). More to the point, however, is that Mr Nancy is quiet simply *not a man at all*. Mrs Higgler, one of the old ladies in Florida who knew that funny Mr Nancy from down the street was really a god, tells Charlie he "can't judge [his father] like you would judge a man" (45). Different, and as is quite clearly implied, more forgiving standards apply. A godly father is not like a mortal father and all the things Fat Charlie holds against Mr Nancy, such as the Presidents' Day trick, the nicknaming, and the scandalous way Mr Nancy died, can be directly attributed to the trickster's wild and exuberant nature. Tekpetey finds that Anansi's limitless "energy can therefore be used indiscriminately [...] for constructive and for destructive purposes" (81). While Charlie always thought of his father as destructively humiliating, Mr Nancy genuinely cares for his son: "Humiliate you? I loved you," he insists (397). Mr Nancy's humour might have been an embarrassment to Charlie, but it was not intended as such. Gaiman clearly

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[185] One way of analysing the father's role in children's lives is to draw on French poststructuralist Jacques Lacan, who argues that a person's real father is also an embodiment of a male, gendered, paternally governed culture, i.e. what Lacan calls the symbolic order. Lacan thus discusses a double mode of fatherhood consisting of a person's actual father and also the larger "socio-symbolic law" he stands in for (Homer 57). Todd McGowan asserts that "[t]hough there always remains a distance between the actual flesh-and-blood father and the symbolic father, the actual father stands in for the latter, attempting to embody symbolic authority" (ibid.). Interestingly, it is an "attempt": the real father may make mistakes that call his personal authority into question. This however does not diminish the way the socio-symbolic law operates and relies on a paternal metaphor in its ongoing implementation (cf. McGowan 41). Sean Homer also forges a link between the internalization of the paternal metaphor and the existence of the Freud's concept of the superego (cf. 57f.), which governs all notions of morality and thus controls a person's behaviour and desires. The abstract notion of a fatherly authority thus becomes synonymous with a person's conscience. The traditional model of fatherhood, drawing heavily on psychoanalysis, thus stands for paternal law, order, and conscience, all authoritatively enforced.

emphasizes construction over destruction, as his modern paternal incarnation of Anansi is exuberant, but not dangerous.

The same cannot be said of his fraternal depiction of the trickster: because Spider is (at least) half-human, the same freedom from rules does not apply to him. His excessive nature, the novel assures its readers, most certainly makes him a bad brother. While Mr Nancy played good-natured tricks on his son, his brother's good nature is called into question as soon as he begins to displace Fat Charlie from his home, his relationships, and his professional life. In both cases, the trickster's natural exuberance is thus in need of some tempering: Mr Nancy is tempered by Charlie's retrospection (meaning he does not change so much as he is simply evaluated differently), while Spider must undergo a process of humanisation in the sense that he has to understand the concept of consequences.

The inherited exuberance is then passed on to the least promising, but most likely candidate: Fat Charlie Nancy, the neglected son. His ancestral exuberance helps him to finally come into his own and to accept the trickster within himself.[186] The novel advocates that an Anansi, any kind of Anansi, is necessary to hold darker gods such as Tiger at bay, thus attributing the trickster figure at large with a protective paternal quality and presenting it as a revisioned law of the father. Once Mr Nancy (semi)dies, his position as a protector of people, stories, and trickery is vacant and must be filled by his one true son. As Charlie embarks on the quest to save both his brother and himself, as well as his new love interest Daisy, he has to travel to the spirit world and confronts a number of imposing mythological creatures. In a surprising Nibelungen twist, one of them is a dragon. Because of the dragon's impressive size, it is immediately clear that Charlie cannot physically defeat him. The David and Goliath narrative of course predetermines the encounter's outcome: the novel's humorous tone further contributes to both placing the scene in the grand scheme of Anansi tales, as well as in the broad context of a comedy with a happy resolution. Realising that he has to resort to wits to trick the dragon into letting him pass, Charlie inquires what the creature is afraid of.

> The creature laughed, scornfully. "I," it said, "am afraid of nothing."
> "Nothing?"
> "Nothing," it said.
> Charlie said, "Are you *extremely* frightened of nothing?"

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[186] Mr Nancy's benign nature is one area where he differs from both Anansi the mythological figure, and Wednesday, the other godly father in Gaiman's mythological novels.

> "Absolutely terrified of it," admitted the Dragon.
> "You know," said Charlie, "I have nothing in my pockets. Would you like to see it?"
> "No," said the Dragon uncomfortably, "I most definitely would not."
> There was a flapping of wings like sails, and Charlie was alone at the beach.
> "That," he said, "was much too easy." (410)

This is a typical Anansi narrative in which a physically weaker character has to face off against a big bully, and the god's trademark use of "tricky wordplay and puns" secures the desired outcome (Marshall, "Anansi Syndrome" 131). Linking African myth and contemporary writing, Giselle Anatol finds that the use of "the Anansi figure in a present-day or future setting" allows the promotion of "African values, such as celebrating community over the individual and craftiness over physical size or strength" (150). Following this argument, it is Charlie's ancestral African and culturally-coded inherited "craftiness" that leads to success. In the tradition of his father, he relies purely on wit, confidence, and wordplay to reach his goal with ease. Russell speaks of Charlie accessing his trickster lineage in this scene ("God" 57), while Kadenbach points out that unlike his father and brother, Charlie does not use these abilities for his own, selfish gain, but for selfless reasons (saving Spider, saving Daisy, cf. 127). I argue that this indicates a further development of the trickster figure, a postmodern union between trickster and hero, while still maintaining the trickster's essence which Ricki Tannen defines as "his humorous take on a situation and the resolution of that situation through humor. Humor is the energy which upsets the apple cart" (137). Tekpetey postulates that Anansi tales serve "as tension-relieving aesthetic devices," (74): the tension of the upcoming big conflict between the novel's central antagonist Tiger and Anansi's descendants is thus mitigated by the almost anti-climactic encounter with the dragon. As Charlie himself notes, this "was much too easy" (410).

This ease, characteristic of Anansi the god and Mr Nancy the man, is passed on to his son(s). Ease then also stands in contradiction to embarrassment; someone who is at ease with himself is not embarrassed. While initially described as someone who "felt embarrassment in his teeth, and in the upper pit of his stomach" (*Boys* 25), and despite only being "slightly soft-looking around the edges" (5) is stuck with a

desperately uncool nickname he cannot shake,[187] Charlie undergoes a development that closely mirrors that of *Stardust*'s Tristran, who is born to something greater. This is one of the reasons why *Anansi Boys* can be productively read as Fat Charlie's *bildungsroman*. Charlie's development into his father's heir and his true and unified Self is thus well underway. By learning to evaluate his father's potential as a god, Fat Charlie not only gains spiritual belief in things unseen, but also in himself. Reconciling himself with his father is thus the paramount quest the novel negotiates, and the successful completion of this quest will present the hero with the desired boons of restored family relationships, a new love interest, and a healthy confidence in himself.

When Charlie embraces both his father's mythical and peculiar nature and adopts some of Anansi's character traits which he had hitherto suppressed, his *bildung* is complete. This is symbolized in two ways: first, the formerly shy Charlie quite literally finds his voice and becomes a singer, following in his karaoke-belting father's footsteps. Second, Mr Nancy passes his trademark green fedora on to Charlie during a one-off, post-death meeting[188] in the spirit world, thus turning the hat into a family heirloom, and riffing on the idea of 'handing over the crown'. Charlie is sceptical and initially refuses the hat, but Mr Nancy is nothing if not convincing: "Son, all you need to wear a hat is attitude. And you got that. You think I'd tell you you looked good if you didn't? You look real sharp" (398). In this instance, Kadenbach's observation of Mr Nancy as a mentor figure in the Jungian understanding (cf. 126) finds support.

From beyond the grave, Mr Nancy has finally become a presence in his son's life and offers him the guidance to confidence that Charlie so desperately needed ever since his Spider side was split from him. So while Mr Nancy is no stranger to tricking his son, this time, he is sincere and the hat fits, both metaphorically and literally. By donning the fedora, Charlie goes from unwilling apprentice to master. First introduced and defined by his moniker "Fat Charlie" (5), the narrator then shifts his

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[187] This is "because his father had given him the nickname, and when his father gave things names, they stuck" (*Boys* 5), already hinting at Mr Nancy's supernatural powers long before his son finally comes to believe in them.

[188] One can argue that Mr Nancy's death was entirely voluntary, and designed to help Charlie reconnect with his mythical side. This reading positions the god's death as a sacrifice for his son. The fact that it also allows Mr Nancy some much needed downtime is just an added, but cleverly placed bonus.

approach and describes him as "lean[189] man, with a trademark fedora hat" (448): Russell finds that the hat turns from Mr Nancy's trademark to Charlie's own (cf. "God" 59). It is thus the ultimate symbol not only of Charlie accepting his father, but becoming more than a mere replica. While this is not the first time Gaiman has used clothes to symbolize growth of character, the moment in Anansi Boys' differs significantly from Tristran's changed appearance in *Stardust*. Whereas Tristran's fae attire harkens back to his maternal heritage but offers no specific emotionally charged item of clothes, Charlie's acceptance of the hat is a direct result of his resolved paternal relationship. The right attitude is found, and Fat Charlie turns into Charlie. The unshakeable and no longer correct nickname has finally been shed because Charlie himself has now taken over his father's magical ability of naming things. Since he does not think of himself as Fat Charlie anymore, indicating his psychological growth, the name is lost. Charlie's ability to now be called Charlie by everyone, narrator included, speaks to the power of stories, a power he has now grown into. Kadenbach points out that these are powers Charlie always had, but had to learn how to access over the duration of his hero's journey (cf. 132). This moment, communicated via the visual of the heirloom and the change of name, thus also signifies Charlie no longer being tricked by his father because he is beginning to become a trickster himself. Once Charlie accepts his father's hat, and thus his symbolic legacy, he joyfully embraces the odd little moments in life rather than finding them embarrassing. All it took for Mr Nancy to tip the scales was to die, a state that Charlie, initially living in the mundane, non-mythical world, takes to be permanent, but that for tricksters such as Anansi is more a matter of choice.

The novel's conclusion refers to a combination of self-confidence and professional changes to indicate Charlie's development. When discussing the definition of a comedy, David Konstan has proposed that the ending is of vital importance. Building on Northrop Frye, he argues that

> [t]he fundamental feature of comedy is that the protagonist is reconciled with society at the end. This can happen in various ways. For example, a powerful protagonist may, by strength of character and ingenuity, reconstruct the world according to his desire: this schema corresponds to Aristophanic comedy. Alternatively, society may change in such a way as to enable the hero or

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[189] Interestingly, it is the formerly slim Spider who assumes his brother's weight: Spider becomes a chef in the novel's conclusion and thus finds a vehicle to guide his strong desire for pleasures of the flesh into avenues more acceptable to his wife, Rosie.

heroine to achieve the object of desire, very commonly through a marriage (30)

Kadenbach notes that both brothers have changed to an extent that necessitates a new world as their realms of origin are no longer befitting their developed personalities (cf. 124). I generally agree with this assessment, but do find that it warrants some closer inspection. While Spider, by virtue of meeting his brother, is introduced to a changed world, it is Charlie who has changed and is now able to reconstruct the world into patterns that fit his mind-set. This is due to his acceptance of his bloodline, his father, and his inherited power over the song that governs all things.

While, as previously discussed, Charlie has always been a good singer, but has been too embarrassed to make use of his ability, he now embraces his musical side. The novel's previously explored dual meaning of harmony is thus used to bring about its conclusion. Charlie is initially characterised by his very refusal to engage in his song, or, differently put, in his own myth-making. Only by accepting his father's trademark fedora does he also accept the power of myth and the power of Anansi. The act of singing must here be understood as indicative of Charlie's bloodline: the power of song is both ancestral and identity-forming. The power of song is also a self-fulfilling prophecy: as soon as Charlie begins to sing and expresses his hope through song, through his supernatural lineage, the melody will become reality. The first time Charlie deliberately sings in public, he does to save Daisy. Motivated by fear of her getting shot by Graham Coats, the experience is however not traumatic in the slightest. Instead, it is a positive one:

> All he wanted was to buy himself some time, but he felt comfortable. No one was throwing things. He seemed to have plenty of room in his head to think in. […] He was still terrified, still angry, but he took all the terror and the anger and he put it into the song, and let it all become a song about lazing and loving. As he sang, he thought: *What would Spider do? […] What would my dad do?"* (376)

This reflection, conceptualised as the novel's links to the *bildungsroman*'s strong focus on inner life, leads to a rapid change of character. From the moment the tune begins, Charlie is attributed with the mythological power of song that shapes the entire novel. Charlie realises then that "as he sang he knew, without any shadow of a doubt, that everything was going to be all right" (377). His ploy to save Daisy is successful and from the first step taken, everything that follows is easy (even the

encounter with the dragon). As the novel thus builds from one song to another, from one act of musically-realised saving to another, Charlie is advancing his *bildungsziel*:

> Charlie realised, with no little surprise, that he enjoyed singing to other people, and he knew, at that moment, that this was what he would spend the rest of his life doing. He would sing: not big, magical songs that made worlds or recreated existence. Just small songs, that would make people happy for a breath, make them move, make them, for a little while, forget their problems. (437)

Russell sees the path to his goal navigated by the need for Charlie to step "out of his stance of silence and claim the power and pleasure of his own voice" ("God" 57). The power once claimed, the resolution is complete. The novel thus charts Charlie's growing into his song until he eventually uses it not only to distract Graham Coats when he wants to shoot Daisy, but also to convince all the animal gods to support Anansi and shun Tiger's ploys instead. The novel here comes full circle: where it opened with Mr Nancy's ability to change the way things and people are seen, be it by turning the neighbourhood's prize-winning dog into a "goofy dog" by simply calling it that, leading even Charlie to see "the dog through his father's eyes" (6), or by convincing Charlie's mother and everyone else (including her own body) that the terminally ill woman really was not all that terminally ill yet (an act Charlie then repeats for Rosie's mother), Charlie has now fully inherited his paternal abilities of conviction and assurance.

As Charlie tells a disbelieving Spider, "[y]ou sing the song, you fix things" (434). The reversal of the brothers' worldviews becomes apparent. Whereas it used to be Charlie who needed convincing when it came to supernatural abilities, it is now Spider who is tied to realist conceptualisations of the world. As Charlie sets forth to convince the entire Pan-African pantheon to abandon their support of Tiger and that the world is Anansi's once more, he supports his claim by asserting that "I am Anansi's son.[190] Listen as I sing my song. Listen to my life" (435). As Anatol has argued, "Anansi stories become a site of collective memory" (151). Here, Charlie turns a moment into a collective memory and draws on his trickster heritage to do. His narrative becomes fact, and Anansi thus becomes a part of himself once more.

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[190] Note how again, Gaiman uses the son's claim of kinship to the father to end a conflict. The very same has been previously happened in *American Gods*.

Charlie thus healed, his past acknowledged, he can move on and assume not only his hereditary role of good-natured trickster, but can also advance from son to father. In its final pages, the novel jumps forward in time. As Wearring observes,

> *Anansi Boys* [...] begins with a divine death, but ends with not only a literal birth (of Charlie and Daisy's child), but with a definite kind of rebirth. The divine is neither eradicated nor eclipsed; rather, as it is no longer opposed to the profane, it is given a new lease of life as the quality that enhances the ordinary and infuses the everyday with magic. (246)[191]

Charlie's conceptualisation and acceptance of his divine past and supernatural present thus compose a significant portion of his *bildungsidee*. His development is also rendered geographically, refuting what Anatol sees as a "mono-cultural focus of Western education, including the concept that ideas, information, expertise, and knowledge travel only from the Global North to the Global South" (151). She argues that this refusal is manifest in "[t]he incorporation of Anancy stories into the current moment" (ibid.): the trickster Anansi is neither an American creature, nor a British one. If Charlie reconnects with his ancestral side, then he must leave the land of the colonisers: his home is no longer Britain or the US. Gaiman creates a fictional history for the fictional island of Saint Andrews that houses the final third of the novel, and that becomes Charlie's home. Saint Andrews was under – in that order – Spanish, British, Dutch, and British control; perhaps the fictional setting and its fictional history serve to create a narrative freedom from real colonial atrocities that would necessitate a negotiation of history not fit for a book designed as a comedy. Either way, the novel emphasizes the need to embrace cultural, religious, and geographic heritage, and it is no accident that Charlie eventually chooses Saint Andrews as his new home. While still dreaming of "a tropical beach somewhere, with the breakers crashing from an impossibly blue sea to the impossibly yellow sand" during his time in England, where "the loveless grey rain rattled against the glass" (67), the novel concludes with Charlie relocated to the Caribbean.

The final scene presents the idyllic picture of Charlie and his son on the beach: "Together the man and the boy danced their way back up the sand to the house, singing a wordless song that they made up as they went along, and which lingered in

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[191] Wearring positions this in contrast to *Sandman* and *American Gods*.

the air even after they had gone in for breakfast" (*Boys* 451).[192] Russell sees this moment as symbol of Charlie's paternal reconciliation, something that Kadenbach pinpoints as an integral part of Charlie's heroic journey (123), and observes that is even echoes a previous scene in which Mr Nancy took Charlie to the beach to spot some mermaids ("God" 59). Whereas Charlie always believed his father had tricked him, the appearance of a real mermaid now indicates that this was not the case and the mermaid memory was repressed alongside his Spider side. Now that this side is both reassumed into his own personality and realised as his brother, the memory – and thus the mermaid – can reappear. The mermaid appears because father and son, this time Charlie and his boy Marcus, sing together: the power of song, which stands in for harmonious acceptance, thus leads to a manifestation of the magical. As Russell argues, "[t]he book ends with father and son in harmony, signaling that Fat Charlie has made peace with his own father" (ibid.). The harmony is again of a double nature: pertaining to the music as much as to the relationships.

Gaiman thus advocates a modern kind of father figure and thus stresses the importance of the father in the *bildungsroman* pattern. *Anansi Boys* is not called 'Anansi's Boys' for a reason: rather than being possessive, Anansi describes the infectious charm of the trickster figure. Anansi thus becomes an adjective, a desirable quality that Charlie consequently acquires and even passes on to his own son. In true comedy fashion, all knots are untangled and (no longer Fat) Charlie gets to dance into the sunrise with his son, continuing the narrative in the next generation.

6.4. A Shadow *Bildungsroman*: Changing Spider, an Afterthought

While much attention has so far been focused on Charlie, the second titular Anansi boy offers yet another variation of the *bildungsroman* in a fantasy context. As Kadenbach argues, the hero's journey in *Anansi Boys* charts the personal development of both Charlie *and* Spider (cf. 123). While all protagonists examined at this point –

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[192] This conclusion also harks back to Mr Nancy's teased return from the dead. As the old god is pondering the comfort of his coffin, he surmises that the grave "is an excellent place to get a little down time. Six feet down, best kind there is. Another twenty years or so, and he would have to think about getting up" (444). The eventual prospect of grandchildren ("always interesting to see how grandchildren turn out", 445) promises to rouse him from the dead, which also shows that despite his absence for most of Fat Charlie's adult life, he is deeply invested in his family. The reconciliation at the heart of the novel thus extends into all presented generations.

Richard, Tristran, Shadow, and Charlie – are men who are confronted with trauma and the supernatural and consequently rise to the challenge and find inclusion in a world beyond their imagining, Spider is a character who is already familiar with the supernatural, no confrontation necessary.

Where then is his arc positioned within the larger model presented here? For Spider, it is the ordinary, the normal, the real that comes to pose a challenge. As previously discussed, he was conceived of and born in trauma: as a violently ripped off part of Charlie's personality, he turned into a character in his own right. Yet, where Charlie lost his hereditary exuberance, Spider lost any kind of control and restraint. No longer governed by any parental presence or rules – after all, it is Charlie who stays with their mother and as Mr Nancy ambiguously tells Shadow in *American Gods*, he is not really in touch with his son – Spider grows into a wilful Freudian metaphor. All desire and no bounds, Spider is a safety hazard to anyone who grows close to him.

When Charlie reaches out to him in an echo of a heroic call to action, a first family relationship is forged. By making up with Charlie, the novel intimates, Spider finally grows up. The novel ends with him, much like his brother, married. Spider goes from "potentially imaginary brother" (75) with demi-god status and supernatural abilities to well-rounded chef on a Caribbean island. The well-rounded here refers as much to his character development as it does to his figure, which is expanding alongside his sense of responsibility and family involvement. As the narrator shares, "[h]e's fatter than he used to be, though not as fat as he'll wind up if he keeps tasting everything he cooks" (446). Whereas (Fat) Charlie grows into a "lean man" (448), Spider's body develops into another direction altogether.

His physical development is prefaced by a psychological one. Starting as all jouissance and no cognition, Spider appears as a happy outlaw. It is not the death of his father or the presence of his brother that produces a change in his behaviour, but the night he spends with the (erstwhile) virginal Rosie. Rosie, thinking him a weirdly intoxicating version of her fiancé Charlie, sleeps with him. On the morning after, Spider develops (for the first time ever) a feeling of guilt. This is something he cannot fully admit:

> Spider felt odd. There was something going on: a strange feeling, spreading like a mist though this life, and it was ruining his day. He could not identify it, and he did not like it. And if there was one thing that he was definitely not feeling, it was guilty. It simply wasn't the kind of thing he ever felt. He felt excellent. Spider felt cool. He did not feel guilty. He would not have felt guilty if

he was caught red-handed holding up a bank. And yet there was, all about him, a faint miasma of discomfort. (173)

Spider thus circles around the feeling, giving verbal shape to it precisely in his attempt to disavow it. Whether it his betrayal of Charlie, or his betrayal of Rosie, who only slept with him thinking he was his brother, that affects him so is left open. Either way, the confrontation with 'real' people and their very real feelings leads to a sudden bout of character development that Spider tries his hardest to resist. But the narrator pinpoints that Spider's carefree days are at an end: "Until now, Spider had believed that gods were different: they had no consciences, nor did they need them" (ibid.). "Until" signifies that there is an end point, but perhaps a turning point would be more correct.

Spider thus resolves to be honest for once, and to tell Rosie the truth. The process leading him to his point is one of hyperbole, repression, and circular logic, but the result remains the same: Spider is about to change.

> Being an imposter was not the problem. He liked being an imposter. He was good at it. It fitted in with his plans, which were fairly simple and could until now have been summarised more or less as: a) go somewhere, b) enjoy yourself and c) leave before you get bored. And it was now, he knew deep down, definitely time to leave. The world was his lobster, his bib was round his neck, and he had a pot of melted butter and an array of grotesque but effective lobster-eating implements and devices at the ready. Only... Only he didn't want to go. He was having second thoughts about all this, something Spider found fairly disconcerting. Normally he didn't even have first thoughts about anything. Life without thinking had been perfectly pleasant – instinct, impulse and an obscene amount of luck had served him quite well up to now. (237)

"Until now" (173) and "up to now" (237) speak to the enforcement of temporal boundaries he was hitherto unfamiliar with. The reason for this change can be located in the reciprocal relationship between the brothers. While a confrontation with wild Spider leads Charlie to embrace his own wild potential, a confrontation with Charlie leads Spider to experience moral complexities. Just as Spider changes Charlie's life, Charlie's life also changes Spider. He is infected by his brother's life, personality, and ultimately, even Charlie's sense of right and wrong. Spider's life thus changes to include consequences. One example of this is that when Spider eventually reveals his identity to Rosie, her response is far from the benevolent reaction Spider expected. Instead, she is appalled, slaps him and leaves (cf. 259). Somewhat surprised, Spider learns that women do not take kindly to this violation of trust. This is unfortunate for

it is only in interaction with Rosie that Spider can conceive of himself as entirely separate from his brother and father. He has realised that he loves Rosie, "*he*, Spider. That he wasn't Fat Charlie. That he was something quite different" (254). When Charlie approaches the witches to get rid of Spider, Mrs Dunwiddy tells him that "I done it once. Can't do it again. Not that way" (153). This is because Spider, much like Charlie, is his own person. He cannot be subsumed back into Charlie and he is no longer a part of Charlie. The only way to get rid of him is to have Bird trap and kill him. Since Spider has however begun to develop something of a conscience and displays a rather genuine affection for the good-hearted Rosie, the novel's adherence to poetic justice means that he too must be saved.

Each brother undergoes a developmental journey, each finds his place in the world, but where the novel focuses on Charlie's inner life, it could be argued that Spider first has to develop one to begin with. In their development, the brothers can be understood as a quest for not only harmony, but balance: a little excess is a good thing, a general sense of social restrictions likewise, but an extreme subscription to either leads to problems. However, as the title of this chapter suggests, Spider's development, while present, must be understood as secondary to Charlie's. This also manifests in Charlie rather than Spider being shown as their father's true heir: the fedora – i.e. the crown – must go to the eldest son. Since Charlie has existed longer than his brother, by virtue of the latter being created out of the former, he is heir apparent to Anansi's line, and his *bildung* is presented as the novel's primary focus. Spiritually, the true heir must be the son who embraces his trickster heritage rather than mutes it. When Spider tries on the hat, he finds that the hat simply does not fit (cf. 431): he is now lacking what Mr Nancy calls the right "attitude" (398).[193]

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[193] The right attitude can also be extended to the motivation for their respective changes: Charlie changes because he wants to develop, Spider develops because he must do so in order to not win, but keep Rosie Noah's heart.

Chapter 7: "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold"[194]: Fairy Tales, A Coming of (Postmodern) Age

For some, fairy tales are stories for children, told by adults. For others, they are an interesting adult genre that developed out of an oral tradition. And for yet another readership, they are simply universal tales. Naturally, all camps are right. As Marina Warner points out "the adult reader has never quit the scene: as parents, as grandparents, as teacher, as babysitters, we have continued to read and watch fairy tales alongside the young, simply for our own pleasure" (104). In the past decades, fairy tales have experienced a renaissance for child and adult alike,[195] becoming once more highly productive genres with many new tales and films released, while also receiving serious critical and academic attention. In the introduction to their fairy tale collection, Peter and Iona Opie observe that

> [i]n 1832 when Walter Scott contemplated a work on fairy tales there were still people who regarded nursery literature as being beneath the notice of a great man of letters [...] No such scruple has troubled subsequent scholars. Fairy tales are now considered a reputable subject for research [...] The literature existing today on fairy tales is voluminous. (5)

Jack Zipes, one of the most notable scholars in the field, links the fairy tale's popularity, endurance, and ability to update itself to its memetic nature. Pointing out that the fairy tale "communicates information" (15),

> [t]he writers/speakers of this genre knowingly play upon a scale of memorable and notable motifs, conventions, and topoi to engage the audience in a dialogue that harks back to a tradition of oral folk tales and literary fairy tales and refers to present and future social conflicts. The fairy tale acts through language to depict all kinds of issues and debates that concern socialization and civilization. (ibid.)

Whereas the previous subchapters were largely concerned with tracing the combination of trauma and the *bildungsroman* on a plot level of the discussed books,[196] this chapter seeks a different approach as it additionally analyses Gaiman's work in the fairy tale genre as emblematic of the genre's own coming of age. This is achieved, in part, by highlighting the darker undertones so prominent in canonical

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[194] "The White Road" 124.

[195] While this chapter is largely concerned with fairy tales for adults, it should be pointed out that the most recent fairy tale renaissance for children can be directly linked to Disney's reconnection with princess-centric fairy tale films such as *Tangled* (2010) and the stupendously popular *Frozen* (2013).

[196] For an example of this type of fairy tale revision, please see John Connolly's excellent *The Book of Lost Things* (2006), which narrates a boy's coming of age against the backdrop of a fairy tale world and World War II.

tales and by arguing that the postmodern fairy tales not only shows traumatising actions, but also traumatised characters. Zipes calls fairy tales "survival stories with hope" (27), yet, as trauma theory has taught us, survival and a happily ever after are not necessarily the same thing. Targeting fairy tale revisions intended primarily for adult audiences, this chapter examines how they negotiate the "oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*" that is so symptomatic of trauma, which Caruth positions "between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (*Unclaimed* 7).

Gaiman's work in the genre is diverse. Having tackled "Snow White" twice, he also reworked "The Three Billy Goats Gruff", "Sleeping Beauty", "Mr Fox", "Aladdin", "Bluebeard" and "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". His most recent venture into the genre is his 2014 retelling of the Grimm brothers' *Hansel and Gretel*. While *Hansel and Gretel* is written very much in the fairy tale mode of repetitive structures, relatively flat and thus easy-to-identify-with characters,[197] his two takes on "Snow White" are more complex.[198] Because they too draw on characters one is already familiar with, there is no question as to whether or not they belong to the fairy tale genre. Gaiman's work on fairy tales can be easily placed in a larger frame of feminist rewritings of fairy tales which often stands in contrast with a "forced sanitation of fairy tales" (Abbruscato "Introduction" 4) which renders them relatively harmless.[199] Disney in

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[197] Steven Swann Jones offers an analysis of "the specific formal characteristics of fairy tales" (xi) and finds that they rest in the tale's use of fantasy, their confrontation of a problem and its successful resolution (cf. 17), the use of sympathetic protagonist and the presence of a thematic core.

[198] The work is a collaboration with artist Lorenzo Mattotti, and the book thrives as much on the dark and gloomy pictures as it does on the text they accompany. Gaiman's tale makes only few diversions from the Grimms' tale. So what does this do with the hypothesis that postmodern fairy tales not only show traumatising actions, but also traumatised characters? Trauma is written all over this particular tale, as it delves into fear of abandonment, actual abandonment, parental neglect, cannibalism, and murder. While Gaiman's tale makes a point of outlining that Hansel and Gretel are fine at the end, even offering a prolepsis to their adult life when they never have to go hungry, the traumatic event beyond comprehension claims at least one victim, namely the mother. The brothers Grimm changed the role of the mother to that of a stepmother in later editions, but Gaiman once more returns it to the original form. Hansel's and Gretel's mother pragmatically decides that the children cannot stay and need to be left in the woods. When the two children return after having killed the woman Gaiman never directly calls a witch, their mother too has died. The death of the mother is by no means a new addition of Gaiman's, but what Gaiman specifically adds is that grief and anger might have been the components that caused her death. The otherwise omniscient authorial narrator muses about the cause of her death: "she had died soon after the children had gone, whether of something eating her away from the inside, or from hunger, or from anger, or loss of her children, no one alive can say" (49). Since the narrator knows everything else, this limited knowledge is interesting. It insinuates that sending her children away was an unspeakable act and perhaps one that finally consumed her. Following this line of argument, the traumatised character is the mother who abandoned her children and could not live with the consequences. Tellingly, it is this character who is silenced.

[199] Morin makes an interesting argument that sees the old, darker versions of the tales, such as those collected and edited by the Brothers Grimm as marginalised, whereas the sanitised versions (meaning

particular has provided family-friendly versions of erstwhile dark tales. Gaiman is sceptical and instead favours the grim(m)er versions:

> Where stories are concerned, I tend to be very Darwinian. Because I look at something like "Sleeping Beauty". Disney retold "Sleeping Beauty"; one can assume that its "Sleeping Beauty" reached more people than any other version has. And yet, if people tell the story you won't get the Disney version where she meets the prince that morning, you'll get a tower of thorns growing up and a hundred years passing before a prince turns up. It feels like a much better version. (Gaiman and Ishiguro n.p.)

Expressing the desire to contribute to the Darwinian strand of fairy tales, Gaiman has characterised one of his own revisions as being like a virus in that "[o]nce you've read it, you may never be able to read the original story in the same way again" (*Smoke* 32). The story in question is "Snow, Glass, Apples", Gaiman's revision of "Snow White".

The tale can be broadly attributed to belonging to the subgenre of feminist fairy tale revisions, made popular by Angela Carter's pioneering short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). This subgenre is highly prolific and engages with the complex notions of survival, trauma, and hope in a decidedly adult way. Carter revisioned the fairy tale and significantly contributed to its rise as an adult genre once more, even though this was, as she explained not her prime motive: "My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories" (in Haffenden and Amis 80). The influence of her work cannot be overestimated, leading noted scholars like Warner to argue that "the fairy tale grew up in 1979" (141) when Carter published her collection and that it serves as "the founding charter of the modern fairy tale" (140). Gaiman is openly appreciative of Carter and her influence can be easily detected in his work. In an article in *The Telegraph* in 2007, Gaiman said that Carter "was the first writer I encountered who took fairytales seriously, in the sense of not trying to explain them or to make them less or to pin them dead on paper, but to reinvigorate them" (Gaiman, "Happily" n.p.). Carter's approach to fairy tale revision is one that Gaiman continues. Fowler has noted that particularly "prescriptive genres

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Disney) have become the better known ones (128). Current rewritings and revisions seek to position themselves quite consciously between those different poles; an excellent case-in-point is ABC's TV series *Once Upon a Time*, which heavily borrows from both spectrums of the scale.

encourage the writer to break new ground" (29), and the fairy tale, with its concise structure and easily recognisable characters, has prompted many writers to do so.

One can easily argue that while fairy tales feature many traumatic events (being left in the woods by one's parents, being cursed to die on one's sixteenth birthday, having one's heart cut out of one's body), they are notably devoid of traumatised characters. This has partly to do with the tales' structure: we as readers are not invited to stick around beyond the obligatory happily ever after. As Warner observes, canonical

> [f]airy tales are one-dimensional, depthless, abstract, and sparse; their characteristic manner is matter-of-fact – describing a wolf devouring a young girl, ordering a palace chef to cook a young woman, or chopping up a child to make blood pudding arouses no cry of protest or horror from the teller. This is as it is, as it happened; the tale is as it is, no more no less. (xx)

In the tales' climax, often showcased via a wedding or the ascension to a readily available throne, desires seem to be fulfilled instantly and all former wounds are narratively forgotten. The characters receive a new station in life despite or perhaps because of having experienced trauma, but they nevertheless remain relatively flat. Neither the *bildungsroman*'s focus on inner life not its psychological developmental arc find representation here.

Postmodern tales offers a significant departure from this mould. While Freud's famous rhetoric question "[w]ho would be so bold as to call it an uncanny moment [...] Snow-White opens her eyes once more?" ("Uncanny" 246) is often used to explain the relevance of the set-up of secondary world with its own rules, Gaiman literalises the sentiment in his two Snow White centric short stories and links the idea to both cognition and trauma. His first take on the iconic fairy tale is the short story "Snow, Glass, Apples", written in 1994, which turns the fairy tale into a Gothic one, complete with a terrible Other at its centre. Gaiman, calling the short story "one of the strongest pieces of fiction I've written" ("Myth" 82), changes the tale's narrative structure from an omniscient third person narrator to an unreliable first person and thus reverses the aforementioned lack of psychological insight. The tale is told from the evil queen's point of view, even though, as Emily Morin has noted, Gaiman deliberately suppresses the traditional good/evil dichotomy in his revisions (132). By choosing the queen as the protagonist, the attribution of the expected hero/villain label is significantly challenged. Following Vladimir Propp's definition of the fairy tale hero as the

"character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain in the complication (the one who senses some kind of lack), or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person" (50), the stepmother does indeed seem to assume a heroic role: she is the one who is called to defeat the vampiric Snow White that haunts and harms the realm. Interestingly, evil in canonical tales is frequently connected to female characters so much so that Warner argues that "[f]emales dominate fairytale evil" (25). Postmodern writing, especially in the case of Gaiman and Carter, seeks to critically engage with this idea, leading to one particularly notable shift in the genre's structure. While in the seminal *Uses of Enchantment* (1976), Bruno Bettelheim argues that "the figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent" (9), it is precisely this lack of ambivalence that postmodern writers tackle and change, thus rendering the tales (and the often the female characters at their heart) more complex.

Gaiman's not-so evil queen presents the familiar tale in a new version, calling it "my story" (Gaiman, "Snow" 384). This effectively leads to a subversion of one of the hallmarks of canonical fairy tales, namely that the tales follow a "central protagonist, who is presented in an unambiguous way" and who "the audience is encouraged to identify strongly with" (Swann Jones 17). Here, the focal character is the (evil) queen, who is implicitly contrasted with all the iterations of evil queens that came before her. In 'her story', Gaiman has made the stepmother more ambiguous and thus part of the current trend in fairy tale writing (Morin 131). While many of the original tale's elements remain the same, Gaiman plays with them (cf. Slabbert 77) and has his queenly narrator allude to the constructedness of Snow White's version of events. "They say I was fooled; that it was not her heart. That it was the heart of animal [...] They say that, and they are wrong ("Snow" 374), the queen affirms, thus both confiding in the narrator (Slabbert calls the story evocative of a confession, cf. 77) and establishing direct links to the tale's dominant version. "They have told the people bad things about; a little truth to add savour to the dish, but mixed with many lies" (384). It is left to the reader to determine which pieces of the tale are true, and which are lies, and the queen, while insisting on her version, also alludes to moments she has not seen, but can only "imagine" (380, 382, 383), leading Slabbert to argue that "her personal involvement in the plot and her manner of imaginatively

reconstructing events is clearly subjective and renders her narration as unreliable despite her forceful and repeated claims to reliability" (77).[200]

Gaiman's version focuses not only on the ambiguity, but also on the gruesome elements so common to fairy tales. Hearts are hung on strings, as both reminders and warning signs, the queen is eventually roasted alive, and Snow White becomes the necrophiliac prince's object of desire.[201] The tale follows a pattern of trauma and recognition as the Queen continually fails to grasp her stepdaughter's true nature. By failing to assess the danger when it first arises, the queen dooms her own development into a benevolent ruler and whatever *bildungsroman* trajectory was initiated in her story must fail. As it happens, the king is murdered by his own child in a perversion of the petit mort, and Snow White (even though Gaiman is careful never to explicitly identify her as such) is taken into the woods to be killed. Men from the forest die, and the queen takes it upon herself to kill the girl (again). Eventually, the prince recognises *either* his love *or* the simple conventions of the tale, and united, Gaiman's vampiric Snow White[202] and her lover set out to kill the queen. The confrontation with the murderous princess is thus a metaphorical combination of all three stages of the *bildungsroman* (individual, social, and metaphysical) but the queen does not manage to successfully complete them.

The eternally youthful Snow White, with her revenant presence and insistence on her own impossible history, can be read as a wound in the queen's life. In an interpretation along Caruth's lines, "the [traumatic] event", here the death of the king, "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" ("Introduction" 4). The possession is presented via Snow White, who haunts the queen from both the forest and from within the castle. Snow White's heart, strung up and beating on a piece of string, is a symbol of trauma's power over narrative. As such, both female key characters as the traumatized not only "carry an impossible history within them," rather "they become

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[200] "Snow, Glass, Apples" has a much-divided range of interpretation. As Klapscik asks, "can the reader believe the Queen who demonizes Snow White, or does she just vindicate her case after the death sentence?" (*Liminality* 71). While Slabbert for instance is sceptical about the Queen's narrative, Elizabeth Law takes it at face value and argues that "Gaiman's queen, however, is damned because she will never be meek. Her death and the ceremony that surrounds it is an exercise in humiliation to punish her for refusing to defer in life. She was not a weakened ruler, but instead a wise ruler, both just and fair" (Law 180). Drury argues that "how we ultimately judge the Queen's narrative is of less importance than that her story has been allowed to escape from the kiln" (114) in order to cast doubt both on her tale *and* on the original version (115).

[201] For an exploration of the eroticised dead female form, see Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body*.

[202] For an extended reading of Gaiman's tale in the tradition of the vampire novel, see Tiffin 2011.

themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess"(5). The traumatic component of a belated experience (cf. 6) is negotiated in the queen's final moments as both she and Snow White face off in what promises to be the last battle for one of them. The queen is re-allocated her role as the evil one, and as a history that was impossible to her, namely being Othered by the "inhuman otherness" of her stepdaughter (Tiffin 225), she comes full circle within the fairy tale mode and dies at the climax of Gaiman's revisionist tale.

The traumatic events of the tale are used to illustrate the double bind female characters in fairy tales are placed in. Beauty is paramount, but beauty is also what renders them lesser:

> In order to be the "fairest one of all," one is necessarily dehumanized. The ideal woman is nothing more than a pale, submissive body unblemished by desire of its own – a body that ensures the primacy of male potency through an absence of vitality. Whether deified or demonised, the "fairest of them all" is dehumanized. (Law 180)

Gaiman's tale thus contributes to the fairy tale genre's coming of age initiated by Angela Carter. Where fairy tales were traditionally concerned with a "symbolic order […] framed by male hegemonic concerns" (Zipes 15), fairy tale rewritings are concerned with the shifting landscape of gender relations and as such visibly and frequently take the feminist movement into account. This shift is carried out (as one central means) by shedding light on the dark undertones of the genre that are usually simply taken in stride (cf. Warner xx). Zipes finds that "[w]ithin the borders or the oral and written frame there is a dialogue concerning gender-oriented rituals, social initiations, or the appropriate manner of behaviour in specific situations" (15); Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples" points to the problematisation of these encoded rules and adapts them for a 21st century audience.

This trend is continued in his second version of "Snow White", which is fully independent from the events of "Snow, Glass, Apples". "The Sleeper and the Spindle" (2013) shows a Snow White who cannot forget what happened to her previously and thus consciously seeks a different life for herself, leaving the lovely Prince Charming at the altar to be an adventuress instead. Rather than look forward to her happily ever after, she muses that "[i]t would be the end of her life […] if life was a time of choices" ("Sleeper" 54). The happily ever after is thus understood not as desirable goal or narrative endpoint, but as a limitation. It is final and finalising, but instead of

conceptualising it as her true *bildungsidee* as a fairy tale princess, Gaiman's second Snow White sees it as a restriction of her (feminist) agency. At the end of the tale, she makes the decision than rather to head back West to her own kingdom and fiancé, she will head East[203], accompanied by the dwarves. This decision is connected to her realisation that "[t]*here are choices* […] *There are always choices*" (80, emphasis in original). Gaiman thus directly links the revision of the tale to the feminist movement as his Snow White asserts her right as a woman in the tradition of the 21st century over that of the fate of the fairy tale princess in conventional narratives.

In the case of this particular Snow White, so very different from the vampire child in "Snow, Glass, Apples", one can argue that trauma and its specific component of belatedness affects her most strongly when she is immersed in a fairy tale other than her own. Tapping into the trend of combining several fairy tales to construct a new one – a narrative fait accompli also made use of by Gaiman's friend and fellow author Terry Pratchett in *Witches Abroad* (1991), the aforementioned ABC show *Once Upon a Time* (2011—), as well as Stephen Sondheim's popular musical *Into the Woods* (1987) – Gaiman unites the tales of "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" into one intertextual narrative. Drawing on Kristeva, María Alfaro observes that

> One of the most immediate consequences of [… the] proliferation of intertextual theories has been the progressive dissolution of the text as a coherent and self-contained unit of meaning, which has led, in turn, to a shift of emphasis from the individual text to the way in which texts relate to one another. (268)

The relationship between the two texts is that of giving the originally rather passive protagonist Snow White an occasion for psychological growth and action. Repeating her own history in another's story (sleeping princess thought dead), she breaks the pattern by assuming the role of the saviour rather than that of the saved.

Jeana Jorgensen observes that the frequent motif of enchanted sleep can be read as a silencing of female characters (cf. 23), contributing to the notion that passivity is presented as a desirable quality in women. By becoming active and by saving Sleeping Beauty, Snow White ultimately saves herself. The doubled appearance of this plot point however speaks to a visualisation of the return of the

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[203] This is the second time that the East is positioned as the locus of continuing and enchanting fairy narratives in Gaiman's work. Previously, it was *Stardust*'s Tristran Thorn who succumbed to the strange allure of the East, and thus chose adventure over endpoints. If the West is understood as a representation of the characters' Self, then the East must be understood as an alluring Other that tempts Gaiman's adventurous protagonists.

repressed, and repressed are not only memories, but most of the canonical fairy tale's female population. According to Caruth, "[t]rauma is not experienced as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment" ("Introduction" 10). Snow White has been carried past the shock, almost into marriage, before she realises that her own impossible history is still haunting her when (genre) history is repeating itself. In keeping with the observation that "trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site" (ibid.), Snow White is told by the dwarves that "you woke again, none the worse for it" ("Sleeper" 60) and that much like the sleeping beauty they discover in the tower, "[y]ou slept a year in the same witch-sleep [...] [y]ou did not starve. You did not rot" (73). These assertions of Snow White's physical survival do little to communicate that she has left behind her traumatic past, and instead serve as reminders. Heading to the tower, Snow White, in a haunting reflection of her inner life, has a vision of her stepmother "dragging her iron shoes along the forest path" (70). Taken together with her decision to leave her home first to save a sleeping girl, and then to very deliberately not return to her fiancé, they speak to the lasting effect of her own tale on her psyche. The story is thus just as much concerned with creating agency for characters that previously did not have any, as it is with the introspection into their minds.

Like "Snow, Glass, Apples", "The Sleeper and the Spindle" can be considered a revision more than a mere rewriting. Where

> [a] rewriting narrates the tale differently, either by changing the point of view or by providing details that are usually not told by the original tales, the revisions alter them in a much more elaborate way, openly contrasting the tradition they belong to, often operating a subversion of the archetypes of that very tradition. (Cutolo 34)

Both of Gaiman's versions of the tale refuse the princess her simplified, romance-based happily ever after in favour of highlighting the quest for power ("Snow, Glass, Apples") or the desire for agency rather than mere survival ("The Sleeper and the Spindle"). Raffaele Cutolo positions "a sophisticated intertextuality that moves in different directions" as a marker of "postmodern revision of the fairy tale" (43). "The Sleeper and the Spindle" merges the two princess-centric fairy tales "Snow White"

and "Sleeping Beauty"[204] and deconventionalises them by not only setting Snow White free, but by having the wakened beauty be the villain of the piece, while the crone who lived in the tower is the actual princess. Despite the death of the villainess, an evil enchantress who sucked the life from the sleeping inhabitants of the castle for decades in order to be young once more, the princess is not restored to youth and beauty, but is left an "old woman" (79), unrecognised by her subjects as the princess they once loved.[205] This can be critically read as a commentary on the importance and deconstruction of beauty, and a critique of fairy tales' occupation with it. Even more so than Snow White, the princess turned crone is haunted by her traumatic past and quite unable to overcome it.

Bettelheim argues that a chief characteristic of the fairy tale is the ubiquitous happily ever after (10-11). For Snow White and the princess, the happily ever after is recast as freedom and agency, both from narrative conventions and the villains of the piece. The aged princess no longer needs to use the voices of her sleep-walking subjects to narrate her trauma; it has been heard by Snow White, who has (albeit unwittingly) saved her from her curse. Fairy tales communicate "the inner problems of human beings" and ideally, offer "the right solutions to their predicaments" (Bettelheim 5); here, this relates back to Snow White's fear of entrapment (no surprise given the glass coffin) and her realisation of her agency and the ability to make her own choices, no matter how unpopular they may be. Further in keeping with the story's feminist agenda, it is the cursed princess herself who takes down her abuser by "thrust[ing] the point of the spindle at the golden-haired girl's breast" ("Sleeper" 77).[206] Snow White's role as the saviour is thus primarily linked to bearing witness to the cursed princess' trauma, and thus to relive and confront her own.

Since Gaiman's connection to Carter's writing has already been pointed out, this chapter will close with an analysis of the fairy tale that gave Carter's anthology its name. Gaiman's narrative poem "The White Road" presents a revision of the fairy tale "Bluebeard", or rather its English variation, "Mr Fox". As he has done in "Snow, Glass, Apples", Gaiman plays with the roles of protagonist and antagonist and rejects the

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[204] Cutolo observes that revisions and "rewritings, especially in the case of fairy tales, hardly ever draw from one source only" (92), making them inherently intertextual.

[205] This is the third time Gaiman refuses to magically un-do the effects of traumatisation: Laura was never turned into a living human again, the Anansi Boys remained split into two, and now the crone does not revert back to the youthful princess as which she was first cursed.

[206] There is a Freudian reading to be undertaken here: only when endowed with a phallic object can the princess turned crone shift from passive to active.

genre's good versus evil dichotomy by playing with the choice of narrator. The narrative ambiguity already familiar from the first of his two takes on "Snow White" is maintained as it is never quite made clear if the husband is indeed a "Gilles-de-Rais", a "Bluebeard" (128), a murderer, or if, like his evil queen, Gaiman has rendered a villain an almost innocent protagonist. "Though Mr. Fox is our window into [his fiancée's] narration, he contributes little to how we are meant to interpret the tale" (Drury 117) and the tale ends as ambiguously as it begins.

The extended poem plays with the idea of narrativity. As Leslie Drury has pointed out, rather than replicating the action-narration of the original tale (the fiancée first witnesses a murder and then recounts it for the audience that will kill Mr. Fox), Gaiman's version focuses on narration only (115-116) and "[b]y seizing the narrative momentum, the beloved is able to define the parameters of reality for her audience" (117). As the girl sets her trap, telling her fiancé that "before that, Mister Fox, I seized, from the floor, from the bloody floor, her hand, Mister Fox. The hand of the women you hacked apart before my eyes" ("White" 128), she tosses a fox's paw at him. The piece of evidence contradicts her version of events, for it is not a woman's hand, but an animal's paw. It should thus serve as evidence supporting her husband's innocence, but instead, the poem follows the fairy tale's convention and it is taken as a mark of his guilt. It thus serves its purpose as "[a]ll honest farmers" (128) attack Mr Fox and his "tale is [rather literally] done" (130).

Gaiman here plays with the idea that in fairy tales, "evil is as omnipresent as virtue" (Bettelheim 8). The "Mr Fox"/"Bluebeard" fairy tale has always been a complicated one as the girl chooses her fiancé not because of love, but because of his wealth, thus calling the issue of a fairy tale's heroine's overly emphasised virtue severely into question. Angela Carter complicates this by pointing to the bride's youth as much as to the lavish setting in her take on the tale. Gaiman's debt to Carter is perhaps even more evident in another narrative poem of his called "The Hidden Chamber". The title clearly alludes to Carter's seminal anthology and the lyrical-I just as clearly plays with both reader and addressee when he says "[P]lease, wander around. Explore all you wish. I've broken with tradition on some points. If there is one locked room here, you'll never know. […] You'll find no blood" ("Hidden" 84). Like Carter before him, Gaiman's break with tradition is centred on both style and content; characterisations are torn from black/white dichotomies and where Carter's prose is

lavish, Gaiman's poetry is expressive, both far from the reduced, almost factual tones of fairy tale narratives. They are playing more along the lines of Gothic renditions of entrapment and seduction. As Jessica Tiffin notes, fairy tales and the Gothic share a "fascination with the monstrous and evil" (220). "Nonetheless," she observes,

> there are aspects of fairy tale, in particular its structural tendencies towards clear-cut quest, externalised action and moral certainty, which function directly against the internal, psychologised and uncanny spaces of the Gothic. (ibid.)

With the fairy tale coming of age, the clear-cut quest and externalised action often give way to musings on guilt and innocence, riddled with moral ambiguity rather than certainty. One way in which the fairy tale has thus developed is to embrace its Gothic potential, further delving into the uncanny and into desires than the stock characters roaming its narratives have done so far. Carter's "Tiger Bride" features a father who sells his daughter to the Beast rather than her benevolently trading places, "The Company of Wolves" has Little Red Riding Hood literally embrace the big bad wolf in a celebration rather than damnation of female sexuality, and "The Snow Child" plays into the same necrophiliac reading of beauty as Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples". All variations of the well-known tales remain just that – known. It is easy to locate their origins, as if their writers too adhered to Mr Fox's warning to "be bold, be bold, but not too bold" ("White" 124), but their burgeoning focus on both trauma and their erstwhile simplistic protagonists' inner life speak to the postmodern *bildung* of the tales.

:: PART THREE :: POSITIONING THE CHILD PROTAGONIST ::

Chapter 8: "How dark is too dark?"[207] *Coraline* **(2002) on the Path to Becoming**

As Yaeri Kim observes, "[c]hildhoods in Gaiman's work are more often than not disrupted" (156). This is in keeping with the tradition against which Gaiman places his works, namely that of "a dark vein in British children's literature, drawing on the works of authors from Lewis Carroll to Roald Dahl" (K. Booker 35). In the following chapters, three of Gaiman's novels featuring child protagonists will find analysis, arguing that even for these younger characters (children rather than adolescents or even adults), the novels draw upon the traumatic *bildungsroman* as a pattern. Interestingly, even in the two novels that are marketed more or less specifically at children as a desired readership (*Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*), the impact of trauma is not lessened or obfuscated and continues to dominate much of the plot.

When examining children's literature and its canonical components in particular, one quickly notes that traumatic events are nothing new. Mowgli's father was killed by a tiger and the boy grew up in the wilderness, surrounded by predators. The very same applies to Tarzan, too. Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden* loses her parents to cholera, and the little Lord Fauntleroy finds himself shipped from America to England to live with a hostile grandfather he never met. The difference between the classics and Gaiman's texts it that Gaiman embraces his novels' Gothic potential and even merges it with horror to further complicate his protagonists' voyage and return plots. Ultimately, Gaiman however does feed into the placating happily ever after: he lets the child protagonists of his children's novels escape either unharmed or healed, while the child protagonist of the novel directed at an adult readership (*Ocean*) does not fare so well and thus presents what Jódar has called a "regredierendenroman" (180), a failed *bildungsroman* that rather than moving forward, continually moves back. The author here shows a stark distinction in his approach of children's book with child protagonists, and adult books with a child protagonist. While the stakes are already high in the children's books, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* intimates that for adult readers of Gaiman's child-centric tales, all bets are off.

John Clute has commented on a growing trend in children's fiction, namely that "[i]t is now an axiom in CHILDREN'S FANTASY – as in any writing for the young – that children should not be patronized, although the protagonists of tales designed to

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[207] Howarth 6.

appeal to children are usually children" (Clute 184). Conversely, this means that the setting for a children's novel does not need to be simplistic, and emotions may also veer off into the deep end without strong didactic explanations in place to guide the readers to the desired emotional response.[208] While children's fiction – and Gaiman's is no exception here – operates under a rather narrow framework, the trend towards trauma complicates established narrative patterns and offers a gothicisation of the works.

In his study on the classics of American children's literature, Jerry Griswold observes a frequent, tripartite pattern that also finds application in works stemming from the other side of the great pond. Griswold focuses on *The Wizard of Oz, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Little Lord Fauntleroy, Tarzan of the Apes, The Prince and the Pauper, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Little Women, Toby Tyler, Hans Brinker, The Secret Garden,* and *Pollyanna.* He observes that the life and narrative arc of the child protagonists can be divided into three stages, which he (somewhat unfortunately) calls "lives". The first life focuses on the orphan's initial situation of "poverty and neglect" (5). The child is often of a surprising heritage: Griswold speaks of a (often metaphorical) "dispossessed royalty" that can recount a "vanished happy time". The first life ends with a journey, which "marks a transition into a new life" (6). This new life, the second one, is one in which the hero faces social problems at the new destination. Soon, an "adoption by a second family" occurs before the hero meets both a "same-sex antagonist" and as well as "opposite sex-helpers or outsiders" (7). Predictably, the "triumph over the antagonist" is as mandatory to the plot structure as the hero's emergence as "savior" (8). Griswold observes that in the classic children's novel, the secondary family is not needed beyond the point of reconstitution the original family in the novel's conclusion (cf. 12), a point that will find critical examination especially with regard to Gaiman's *Graveyard Book.* The third life then sees the hero resolve any issues of identity (8), often in "recognition ceremonies" that install the child in the circumstances (prosperity, safety, familial love) that were previously lacking. This pattern notably

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[208] Tolkien's *The Hobbit* has been frequently criticised for relying on an infantilising tone. Jean MacIntyre offers an overview of the criticism, noting that for instance Randel Helms, author of the influential *Tolkien's World* (1974) "objects to the angle of address adopted by the narrator, 'of approximately forty-five degrees, talking down to his little listeners' (26). Katharyn Crabb notes the same stance more sympathetically; she discusses *The Hobbit* seriously as a quest-story, which 'lacks complexity in conception, in design, and execution' because 'written down to a naïve audience' (28) of children" (1).

evokes parts of Booker's voyage and return plot (note the importance of the journey motif in Griswold's model), but also, and perhaps more significantly, Shaffner's tripartite model of the *bildungsroman*. This too aims for a positioning of the protagonist in desirable circumstances after the three developmental stages of the individual, social, and metaphysical variety have been completed. Gaiman relies heavily on metaphorical and character-bound depictions of trauma to complicate his protagonists' development and to finally signify its completion when the villain cum traumatic representation is defeated.

Inscribing himself into children's literature's "dark vein" (K. Booker 35), Gaiman is heavily indebted to his narrative precursors. *Coraline* in particular has been frequently connected to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in that it pays "homage to Carroll's Alice at a number of points" (Rudd 160, but cf. also Howarth 11, Perdigao 102, Burstyn 77). Following McHale's argument about the prevalence of Alice adaptations (cf. 51), *Coraline* must be understood as part of a particular postmodern trend: finding that "[t]he rewriting or recycling of canonical texts is a typical postmodern practice", McHale even goes so far as to argue that "postmodern *Alice* is postmodernism in a nutshell" (61). Gaiman deftly makes use of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a motif, but turns Carroll's nonsensical text into a dark metaphor for childish desires. Whereas all of wonderland is a child's dream, to be escaped both unharmed and undeveloped (the Alice who went through the rabbit hole is very much the same as the one who comes out), Coraline presents the *bildungsroman*'s focus on inner life in its heroine's horror-induced development.

In *The Art of Neil Gaiman*, Hayley Campbell describes *Coraline* as "pure Gothic horror, tinged with an *Alice in Wonderland* feel" (228), which of course calls its suitability as a children's novel starkly into question. While Adam Zolkover sees the text as only "nominally a children's book" (71), Campbell argues that "horror has a way of being self-selecting. Children read it as an adventure story and are never scared because Coraline is never scared, while the adults know just how much danger she is in and read it through the gaps between their fingers" (22). She thus feeds into the reading advocated by Gaiman himself,[209] who "claims a double audience[210] for the

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[209] Not a big surprise, given that she is his goddaughter.
[210] For an extended reading of dual audiences, or "crossover fiction", see Beckett's *Crossover Fiction. Global and Historical Perspectives* (1).

novel" (Gooding 390). Having written the novel for his daughters,[211] Gaiman has shared that

> It's always adults that say to me that they finish reading the book at three o'clock in the morning and go around the house turning on all the lights. I never get that from the kids. (Goldberg and Borgo n.p.)

Richard Gooding, who is highly critical of this claim, observes the dual nature of *Coraline*'s reception: one strand of critics of readers and critics receive it as a good, but unsettling tale for children, others found it to be just a little *too* good at being unsettling for an intended child audience (cf. 390).

This fear factor has a long tradition in the reception of children's fiction, prompting C.S. Lewis to speak out in favour of bloody rather than tamed fairy tales, and to argue that every child "wants to be a little frightened" (31). In the introduction to their insightful volume *The Gothic in Children's Literature. Haunting the Borders*, Anna Jackson et al. observe that "fear or the pretence of fear has become a dominant mode of enjoyment in literature for young people". This means that "in children's literature today, the Gothic is mainstream" (1). The Gothic, "a writing of excess", deals with "the fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries" (Botting, *Gothic* 1-2). As such, it "produce[s] ambivalent emotions and meanings in [...] tales of darkness, desire and power" (ibid.). Fear and its dissolution is one of these ambivalent emotions. One of the reasons at the heart of this continuing trend towards the Gothicisation of children's literature is that – as Frances Deutsch Louis proposes – "[t]he key emotion of childhood is fear" (20). Only by growing up and by widening one's frame of reference can that fear be banished and contextualised (cf. ibid.). The fears negotiated in Gaiman's three novels with a child protagonist are some of the most common ones a child experiences, namely "the fear of being abandoned and the fear of being overpowered" (Howarth 11). This is in keeping with Vickroy's assessment that "the most significant cause of psychological devastation is helplessness" (*Trauma* 16). These fears, experienced in the extreme as "[t]he psyche and brain of children are particularly vulnerable to traumatic and chronic stressors" (Schönfelder 72), are used to evoke the *bildungsroman*'s urge towards development.

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[211] The novel's dedication reads "I started it for Holly [/] I finished it for Maddie". Gaiman began the novel in 1990 for his eldest daughter Holly and finished it in for his youngest daughter Maddie; it was released in 2002 (cf. H. Campbell, *Art* 229).

While *Coraline* tackles the issue of perceived neglect by working parents and the fear of being overpowered by a strong, maternal adversary, *The Graveyard Book* centres on childhood violence and abandonment. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* – it bears stressing again, a novel designed for adult readers – deals with notions of repression and both physical and psychological child abuse. All three novels use the fantastic to give form to these fears and by overcoming them and their traumatic potential, the protagonists of *The Graveyard Book* and *Coraline* successfully complete their *bildungsroman* narrative, while the one from *Ocean* finds himself just as lost as a man as he was as a boy, encapsulated by his traumatic past.

8.1. Freudian Feminist Dilemmas: Here's Looking at you, Kid

The 'all ages' novella *Coraline*[212] is very contemporary in the trauma it presents: highlighting the difficulty to follow the postfeminist mantra of 'we can have it all', it shows how a family reaches a breaking point. Rather than focus on the realist component, Gaiman turns this into a Freudian, fantastical narrative that negotiates the (post)feminist trauma on a metaphorical plane. While the other mother continually produces uncanny and disturbing situations, I argue that the 'real' problem, much as in *Neverwhere*, was present before the intrusion of the fantastic into the narrative. The fantastic is needed as a locus to negotiate the family's relationship and to aid Coraline in understanding her parents' dilemma. The novel is thus "an unsettling narrative of maturation" (Gooding 404) that discusses families in a postmodern society. Its central *bildungsidee* is the negotiation of Selfhood in the context of family relations and the position of development between a dual desire for order and freedom.

Young Coraline Jones – whose exact age is never specified (cf. Howarth 75) – has recently moved into an old house of *"Gothic appearance" (Rudd 160)* with her parents. The house, in which they own a flat and two others are inhabited by other tenants, is "very old" and has "an attic under the roof and a cellar under the ground

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[212] *Coraline* has also been adapted for the screen. Henry Selick's charming stop-animation production controversially added a male character to the plot. This addition has sparked a strong negative response, arguing that it takes away from Coraline's potential as a feminist hero. For an extended and comparative reading of the novella and its 2009 film adaptation, see James Curtis. "Why *Were* You Born?: An Analysis of the Anti-Feminist Implications of the Film Adaptation of *Coraline*". Wehler too notes in how far Wybie's addition to the film version is problematic, cf. 126-127.

and an overgrown garden with huge old trees in it" (*Coraline* 3). The description hints at space for both exploration and secrets, thus establishing an intertextual link to the likes of the Castle of Otranto, Northanger Abbey, and Thornfield Hall. While the attic is not inhabited by a madwoman, Gaiman's general Gothic inspiration for the tale is easily traceable. A more specific one rests in "Lucy Lane Clifford's eerie short story, 'The New Mother' (1882)" (Coats 86), in which two children's mother disappears after they have been naughty. Their mother is then replaced by the eponymous new one, who has glass eyes and a wooden tail. While Coraline is by no means naughty, but rather a "smart, perceptive, quirky child" (Pratt, n.p.), she despairs of her working parents who have little time for her just as they despair of their demanding daughter who wishes to be entertained all the time. Soon, Coraline discovers a secret passage in their living room. Walking through it, she finds a mirror version of her own home, complete with a set of 'other' parents. Zolkover notes that the journey motif here is employed in an unusual way as the novel is "stark in the degree to which [it] remain[s] domestic" (68) in the sense that the novel's quest does not lead the heroine out of the home, but rather negotiates the home as a central setting. By comparison, the protagonists of Gaiman's other novels discover a second London (Richard in *Neverwhere*), a faerie realm (Tristran in *Stardust*), or, via lots of (trans)continental travel, a long forgotten Pantheon (*American Gods*' Shadow and *Anansi Boys*' Fat Charlie). While a cynical reading would now point to Coraline's gender (she is Gaiman's only novel-length female protagonist) and link this to an antiquated notion of house and home, I instead point to the two Snow Whites, who do embark on extensive journeys (into the wild forest in "Snow, Glass, Apples" and into an entirely different kingdom in "The Sleeper and the Spindle"). Furthermore, I find that the extent of a journey is not so much determined by gender, as it is determined by age. The younger the protagonists are, the more constricted their range of physical exploration is (Bod in *The Graveyard Book* moves largely within the restrictions of one cemetery, while the nameless child-narrator of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* makes it all the way to his neighbours). This localised restriction cannot necessarily be attributed to the narrative habits of children's literature, as the Pevensies for example start, exactly like Coraline, from home, but make it into a fully realised Other World that has few links to their original one.

While Coraline does not embark on a geographically or physically grand tour, the transition from the 'real' world into anOther one nevertheless affords her with the same opportunity to traverse the previously discussed plot patterns that fuse fantasy, trauma and the *bildungsroman*. Subscribing to model A of this variation, the tale positions Coraline's alienation as linked to her family life, while the intrusion of the fantastic in the guise of the other mother offers an opportunity for reintegration into a new world.[213] Ultimately, the novel demands a metaphysical challenge that pits (other) mother against daughter. That the other mother turns out to be the villain is "a plot derived from fairy tales" (Perdigao 116): there is a price to be paid for attaining a goal, and the price reveals the depravity of the antagonist. The other mother tells Coraline that if she wishes to stay in the Other World (which of course is characterised by all the attention Coraline finds lacking at home), all she must do is to have her eyes replaced by buttons. Predictably, Coraline refuses. As Gooding pointedly observes, "[i]t is […] at this point that one begins to suspect that the author […] has been reading Freud" (391).

The mere mention of eyes being taken by a mysterious villain evokes Freud's essay on the uncanny, which has a long tradition of being fruitfully applied to the analysis of canonical Gothic novels and their literary offspring. Freud famously read E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1816)[214] as a tale of repressed fears and castration complexes. *Coraline* heftily implies that having Coraline's eyes replaced by buttons would metaphorically castrate her, stripping her agency and reducing her to a shell. David Rudd links this motif of oracular destruction to both Oedipus, and

> the related association of giving up one's soul, the eyes being its windows. Aside from paying the ferryman, this was one reason the eyes were covered with coins: to keep them shut; just as mirrors were covered when someone died, in case their soul might go into the mirrored surface and haunt the living. (163)

This reading is further intimated by the presence of three ghostly children in the Other World, whose souls have been eaten up by the other mother until only their shells remain. One of these nameless creatures mournfully tells Coraline that they are

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[213] Since it is Coraline's real mother who leaves the door to the Other World unlocked despite her daughter's insistence (cf. 11), it is also she who makes it possible for the other mother to appear and tempt her girl. This is one of the many instances where the text advocates listening to the wisdom of its child heroine, thus deconstructing an absolute parental authority.
[214] Rudd comments on how the motifs of the eyes link *Coraline* and Hoffmann's tale in the sense of the Freudian uncanny (cf. 162).

just "[h]ollow, hollow, hollow, hollow, hollow" (102). This repetitive phrasing must be understood as a failed attempt to verbalise the unspeakable, and as the insistence of the repressed. In the (un)dead children, Gaiman points to the effect of unacknowledged trauma. As the children are ghosts, they no longer age or develop. Their static character can only be changed when their trauma is acknowledged and witnessed by Coraline. After their story has been heard and their souls (metaphorically) freed,[215] they can advance to the next world, even though their eyes had been taken. This can be understood as *bildung* being made possible by having the metaphysical challenge completed.

Coraline's uncanny potential has been noted by various scholars (cf. for instance Rudd, Gooding, Cook, Parsons et al.) and a psychoanalytic approach to the text seems to be the norm (cf. Wehler 112, Keeling and Pollard 1). As Rudd observes,

> Gaiman has given us a quite overt fictional representation of the Freudian uncanny—not merely by invoking the motifs that Freud enumerates in his essay, but by animating the very etymology of the German term, das Unheimliche: heimlich, or homely, with its root in Heim, and its mirror counterpart, the unheimlich. As Coraline explicitly comments when in the latter, her mirrored home, there's "something very familiar about it," although it is not "exactly the same" (37–38), one of the key points of difference being the "other" characters' eyes, which are opaque, black buttons. (161)

While the Other World is introduced as a means to fulfil a desire of Coraline's (namely to have permanent parental attention), this desire is soon subverted when Coraline realises that the other mother is precisely that – Other. As such, she is a threat to Coraline's developing sense of Self and symbolises a prohibited development. Yet, the Self can only develop in contrast to an Other, meaning that the traumatic confrontation with the other mother not only endangers Coraline's Self, it also leads to its assertion in the first place.

The text's (de)stabilising uncanny element is thus one of the key features that contributed to its reception as 'too spooky'. Interestingly, Gooding precisely argues that a "young child's sensitivity to the uncanny is limited because the process of repression is ongoing and she has [not] yet surmounted the animistic stage of development" (392), giving support to Gaiman's theory of the dual audience. Where adult readers pick up on the disturbing and destabilising nature of the uncanny

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[215] Coraline sees them crossing a bridge in a dream-meeting, one of the ghosts telling her that "[t]his is our staging post. From here, we three will set out for uncharted lands, and what comes after no one alive can say" (173).

setting and characters, children cannot yet do so and thus read the text differently. Either way though, the text plays with the fears of abandonment and helplessness noted by Howarth, as Coraline feels at first abandoned by her real parents and then helpless at the hands of the other mother in her uncanny realm.

8.2. A Child's *Bildungsroman*

Coraline presents a merging of number of genres. While fantasy remains most dominant (even though it is frequently not included in the genre enumerations undertaken by scholars studying the novel,[216] perhaps for fear of stating the obvious), Coraline's repeated journey into the other world and back establishes Booker's voyage and return plot, which before long gives way to a more dominant and decidedly Gothic version of the overcoming the monster plot. As Mendlesohn and James observe, "[o]ne of the problems with the Gothic is that the moment of revelation is often an anticlimax in comparison to the stress induced in the reader from the period of apprehension" (16). *Coraline* offers a slow, but steady build-up of terror as the other mother transform from a vision of idolized motherhood to a villainous perversion thereof. The threat of anti-climax is evaded in the layered construction of the novel's ending, which sees the other mother banished, but her hand transported into Coraline's everyday life.

Taken together, these two (completed) plots or even character arcs of voyage & return/overcoming the monster lead to Coraline's personal growth and allows for the text's categorisation as a *bildungsroman* fantasy. In the context of the two models presented here, *Coraline* falls firmly into model A. Her path to alienation is well-established in the early insistence on her correct name: "'It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline," said Coraline" (4). In this simple statement, Gaiman already positions expectation and reality against one another. This is developed as a motif that runs throughout the entire story: Coraline wants the right to be as she is, not as people want or need her to be and thus emphasizes a quest for individuality. Yet, as the

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[216] Perdigao argues that the novel "takes the fairy tale, children's novel, and Gothic story and adapts them for a contemporary world and audience" (120), while Burstyn observes that "Gaiman's narratives *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* are as much Gothic novels as they are coming-of-age stories" (80). Both notably ignore the fantasy component of the book(s), evident in its ample use of supernatural creatures and things known to be impossible. A rare observation of it is made by Wehler, who, in keeping with my own argument, calls the text a "*bildungsroman* fantasy" (112).

bildungsroman plot also calls for a (re)integration into a fitting society, it is clear that this strong focus on her individuality must be accompanied by a growing social ability. While the other mother offers her the necessary space to integrate into a world build just for her, Coraline must learn to reject that tailor-made twist on reality in the novel's metaphysical challenge. This ultimate leads to her attaining a better position in her original family network; her characteristic quirks are now not merely tolerated, but embraced.

The novel's protagonist develops from a smart but demanding child into a young heroine with an understanding of adult responsibility and Gaiman uses the Gothic tradition to further emphasise and develop this process of maturation. The end of the novel sees Coraline defeat the other mother and she is just about to fall asleep, Gaiman attributes his heroine with an epiphany: "Normally, on the night before the first day of term, Coraline was nervous and apprehensive. But, she realized, there was nothing left about school that could scare her anymore" (*Coraline* 194). After her doubly traumatic maternal encounters (for one, by her postfeminist's mother's parental disregard and for the other, by her other mother's prefeminist monstrous agenda), a first day at a strange school holds no fear for Coraline. Her confrontation with the gothic and the fantastic has paradoxically prepared her well for the ordinary.

Karen Coats argues that "children's Gothic has become prevalent enough as a phenomenon to represent what can be considered a cultural symptom – an indicator that points to an underlying trauma, often in such a displaced or condensed way that there is no apparent link between the trauma and its symptom" (77). Coraline's trauma, embodied by the Gothic other mother, is the desire to be loved and the perception that the daughter is not. This feeling is caused by her parents, in particular her mother's, preoccupation with her work rather than her daughter. This has lead Parsons et al. to offer a reading that critically examines the novel's feminist potential, arguing that it is undermined in the negative stereotyping of the working, postfeminist mother (cf. 387, also cf. Zolkover 79)[217]. Elizabeth Parsons et al. propose that "Gaiman deploys the trope of the evil, powerful 'other' mother as a vehicle through which the protagonists resolve questions of identity, one's (gendered) place in the world, and the kinds of interpersonal relationships that are culturally

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[217] Keeling and Pollard finds that "Parsons, et al. rightly note that *Coraline* is Gaiman's critique of the postfeminist world because he writes from the position of the law of the father, attempting to evaluate that world through a reassertion of those simple binaries" (10).

sanctioned" (371). It is thus the monstrous feminine that embodies not only the trauma of the (self-perceived) neglected child, but that also leads to a development into a more enlightened personality that understands that the world is not just about individuality, but also about social networks.

Gaiman thus positions Coraline's real mother as a flawed, but loveable character, and the other mother as the threat of regressing into old-fashioned, pre-feminist motherhood. Where the real Mrs Jones relies much on convenience food, the other mother is almost Stepfordian in her homely perfectionism. Coraline is initially impressed by the "huge, golden-brown roasted chicken, fried potatoes, tiny green peas", all of which "tasted wonderful" (*Coraline* 34), but soon realises that she much prefers the real deal.[218] As Parsons et al. propose, "[t]his old-school, maternal feminine stereotype is depicted here as evil and must be decommissioned in order for Coraline to accept and love her postfeminist mother" (376). Within a short time in the other world, Coraline has thus already learned to evaluate different notions of love (genuine versus possessive) and motherhood (caring but distracted versus oppressive but attentive). Russell, who reads *Coraline* as a commentary on second and third wave feminism and the movement's changing approach to motherhood, from trap to empowerment (cf. "Unmasking" 162), proposes that mothers function as psychological "obstacle[s] to the daughter's maturation" and that this obstacle must be overcome in individuation. Gaiman then turns this psychological threat into metaphor as the other mother "becomes a literal and potentially lethal adversary" (161).

Returning to Griswold's pattern of children's fiction and the noted absence of parents, it must be pointed out that as soon as the other mother enters the scene, Coraline's real parents become notably more absent and are eventually shrunken and hidden by the other mother. This ploy is designed to force Coraline into the position of an orphan and to establish the other mother as the secondary family so common in children's fiction. "On a practical level," Russell further proposes, "the plot requires the absence of the 'good' mother – too much support and nurturing leaves little room for the character of the daughter to develop or dramatic incidents to unfold" (172). *Coraline* therefore also serves as an overt commentary on the absence of parents in children's fiction: the other mother is presented as a "literary revisionist" who

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[218] For an extended analysis of the role food plays in Coraline, see Keeling, Kara K. and Pollard, Scott. "The Key Is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in *Coraline*".

recreates seductive fairy tales (Perdigao 118) to steal away its audience's soul. She attempts to utilise fairy tale plot patterns such as absent or unloving parents as well as enchanted settings in order to convince Coraline of the superiority of the Other World, showing awareness of psychology and conventionalised narratives the same time.

The other mother, who perverts the idea of loving motherhood, serves as the necessary foil to spark Coraline's development. Having created the entire Other World to lure her prey, she has unwittingly presented Coraline not with a gilded cage, but a location to develop her autonomy. While the world, is initially presented as odd but enticing (Coraline observes that "[i]t smelled wonderful" (33), finds "all sorts in of remarkable things" in her other bedroom, including "[a] whole toy box filled with wonderful todays" (36), it falls into disrepair when Coraline rejects the other mother's offers of conditional love. Eventually, Coraline realises that "[t]he other mother could not create. She could transform, and twist, and change" (149f.). With this realisation and Coraline's rejection, "the house flattened out" until it looked "like a drawing, a crude, charcoal scribble of a house drawn on grey paper" (150). Likewise, the other mother's own appearance cannot be maintained. In their first encounter, Coraline already perceived that she is anOther mother, but the similarities to her own outweigh the differences:

> A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline's mother. Only… Only her skin was as white as paper. Only she was taller and slimmer. Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp. "Coraline?" the woman said. "Is that you?" And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons. (33)

Despite the uncanny warning signs (and the polysyndeton's effective use to highlight Coraline's growing unease), the girl does not yet know any better and gives in to the childish temptation. She returns to the Other World a number of times, enticed and wary at the same time. As Coraline's psychological development advances, her other mother becomes more monstrous in front of Coraline's (unbuttoned) eyes:

> It was funny, Coraline thought. The other mother did not look anything at all like her own mother. She wondered how she had ever been deceived into imagining a resemblance. The other mother was huge – her head almost brushed the ceiling – and very pale, the color of a spider's belly. Her hair writhed and twined about her head, and her teeth were sharp as knives.… (155)

Recognising that this Medusa-esque creature is not her mother is as much an emotional as it is an ocular response. This dissolution of the visual temptation then of course demands the destruction of the victim's eyes: if Coraline cannot see, the other mother's logic seems to insinuate, then she also cannot understand that not all is well. The more Coraline develops, the more the vision crumbles, and the other mother's internal monstrosity is reflected in her outward appearance: she becomes monstrous before *and* in Coraline's eyes.

As Braidotti notes, "[t]he monstrous body, more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about his or her embodied self" ("Doubt" 150). Gaiman uses this metaphor literally: the other mother, like a spider, spins a web of seduction. Yet the maternal discourse of her love, so freely offered in its conditional model (only if Coraline gives up her eyes and thus her Self), is deconstructed as her surroundings are. This shifting image can also be linked to Bronfen's conceptualization of the female hysteric:

> as the hysteric produces a versatile and seemingly infinite array of self-representations, alternating between sustaining and interrogating paternal desire, she can traumatize those toward whom her discourse is directed – her family members, teachers, analysts, or audience – precisely because the inconsistent number of masks she dons actually displays the inconsistency of the symbolic system ruled by the paternal metaphor. (*Knotted* 39)

In refusing any kinds of paternal metaphor, it could be argued that the other mother must be made a monster to adhere to the heteronormative order. Offering a false maternal idealisation to Coraline, she then traumatises the girl in her refusal to deliver: this mother does not nurture. She does not create. This mother destroys.

Consequently, Coraline's "physical journey through that strange, misty world is an externalization of the mental process that she, as well as all children, must eventually undergo as they move away from childhood and begin to integrate themselves more regularly into an adult culture and society" (Coats 81). Coraline knows that she must outwit the other mother to save both her actual parents and herself, for "[t]o lose the game [against the other mother] would be to accept perpetual childhood" (Gooding 398). By having the villain of the piece desire to keep Coraline a child, Gaiman emphasises the need for development. Coraline is no Peter Pan, happy to remain exactly as she is. Instead, she, the self-characterised "explorer" (*Coraline* 17), knows that she must grow up, scary as it may be. Adulthood is yet another realm to be explored, and Coraline has already heard its call. This

advancement is prompted by the confrontation with the monstrous, which Margrit Shildrick conceptualises as follows:

> Monsters, then, are deeply disturbing: neither good or evil, inside or outside, not self or other. On the contrary, they are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject. (4)

The monster's "transgressive and transformative" nature sparks the same qualities in Coraline. As a child, she is inherently liminal (childhood being a developmental phase to be grown out of) and thus on the cusp of developing into a grown-up with all the responsibilities this status is accompanied by. While the other mother offers the opportunity to remain a child, with nothing to worry about and everything handled by her, life with her real parents demands compromises and an understanding not only of parental, but more generally familial responsibilities.

Rudd offers an interesting interpretation when he argues that, inspired by "the Freudian economy, [in which] reversals and displacements of character are forever possible", the other mother serves not merely as Coraline's antagonist, but further as her doppelgänger (167). This would make Coraline, the child, a monstrous creature of her own and entails that the entire plot is less about defeating a possessive other mother and more about defeating her own unrealistic and possessive expectations with regard to her parents (ibid.). Either way, the other mother's presence disrupts the external order of Coraline's family life, and the internal order of her still maturing Self.

Michael Howarth astutely argues that the Gothic in children's literature helps its readers to understand crises and develop further (cf. 9). This is in keeping with David Gilmore's understanding of the monstrous, who finds "that imaginary monsters provide a convenient pictorial metaphor for human qualities that have to be repudiated, externalized, and defeated" (4). Consequently, the use of the gothic motif of monstrously uncanny mother realises Coraline's developmental process and potential. "Coraline's experience in the other mother's world charts the development of a sophisticate sense of desire" (Coats 87): Coraline learns that she neither wants nor needs a secondary family that fulfils her every wish. She rejects the other world's overtures by asserting that "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

then it didn't mean anything" (*Coraline* 145). Having learned to formulate desire as well as to deal with its negation, which is the novel's *bildungsidee* in a nutshell, Coraline has outgrown the other mother's world. Coats argues that "Gaiman uses the gothic landscape to symbolize the conflicts and emotions that Coraline undergoes as she moves away from a reliance on her imagination and toward a sense of industry and productivity that will aid her in adolescence" (80). While scholars are divided as to the extent that Coraline develops or completes coming of age (cf. Burstyn 77 for a positive reading and Keeling and Pollard 24 for negative one), the novella clearly charts a development towards self-sufficiency and tolerance. Having left her world, one she found lacking, Coraline learns on her journey into the mirror world that not everything that seems perfect is so, and her return home, alongside her parents, reinforces her growth.[219] While the journey is geographically circular, Coraline nevertheless arrives at a new place: individuated, socialised, and appreciated, the girl no longer experiences her home as uncanny. Coraline has thus overcome two monsters, following Rudd's interpretation one within herself, as well as the externalised monstrous Other. The traumatised family is reunited, and the tale seemingly at an end.

Yet, before Coraline's school day epiphany takes place, Gaiman once more affirms the recurrent nature of trauma when he lets the other mother's hand make her way into Coraline's ordinary world. The hand thus becomes a metaphor for both the fantastic and the traumatic. Rendering the novella a classic Mendlesohnian intrusion fantasy, the hand continues to haunt Coraline, affirming that trauma lingers and cannot be fully comprehended in one moment. While "Coraline's parents never seemed to remember anything about their time" trapped in a snow globe in the other mother's world, or "[a]t least, they never said anything about it" (*Coraline* 179), this is in keeping with Schönfelder's observation that

> traumatic experiences that happen in childhood and in the contained, supposedly safe, or even nearly sacred space of the nuclear family seem even more socially unspeakable and taboo than other traumas. Accepting the unacceptable, long buried in the silence of shame or hidden in the blindness of unbelief, is an ongoing process. (73)

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[219] I should not be amiss in pointing out that the return to Coraline's real world is affected through pushing, pulsing tunnel that can easily be decoded as a birthing channel (cf. Gooding 403). Her return must thus be understood as a metaphorical rebirth.

Coraline is highly aware of the events they survived. The experience has made her vigilant and changed her from a relatively carefree little girl to (and here it becomes a question of perspective) either a savvy heroine or a shrewd survivor. Her memories, even though they remain unspoken in the network of her family, are represented in the return of the other mother's hand. As the return of the repressed (and it is a repression that is positioned as an entirely adult concept), the hand stands for the inevitability of history's traumatic present. But as Gaiman emphasises that *Coraline* "is not a story about fear, but one about bravery" ("Introduction" ix), this recurrence too is taken care of.   Coraline tricks the hand into falling down a deep well. Interestingly, the hand is not destroyed. It is still there, "in the overgrown garden with huge old trees in it" (*Coraline* 3) and, in the tradition of the Gothic, haunts and reminds readers of the female protagonist's forbidden desires. By having understood how to repress, the novel intimates, Coraline has left childhood and entered the realm of adults.

Chapter 9: Rewriting Gothic Monsters in *The Graveyard Book*: "People don't behave like you."[220]

Like *Coraline*, *The Graveyard Book* is another Gaiman novel that took a long time to write. Originally inspired to tell the tell of a little boy who lived on a graveyard while watching his then two-year old son Mike riding his bicycle in an English cemetery in 1985, Gaiman felt he was not yet good enough a writer to tackle the story. Revisiting the idea every few years, he finally began writing it in 2003 (cf. Campbell, *Art* 240-241). Variously marketed as a children's novel, an all-ages novel, or a YA novel, *The Graveyard Book* has won prestigious awards for children's (Carnegie and Newbery medals) as well as for adult literature (the Hugo as a World Fantasy Award, cf. 242). It tells the story of young Nobody Owens, whose parents are murdered and who is taken in by a family of ghosts. Gaiman's rewriting of canonical tales that began in *Coraline*'s homage to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is therefore continued with Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* in the neo-Gothic *The Graveyard Book*. Gaiman takes a keen interest in the Victorian age (also visibly in his two Sherlock Holmes short stories, "A Study in Emerald" and "The Case of Death and Honey") and often focuses on one strand of writing particularly popular in that era, namely Gothic fiction. Franziska Burstyn has observed that *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* "are not only transformations of the Victorian classics into a twenty-first century setting; they also take a new approach towards the identity and rite-of-passage theme inherent in Carroll's and Kipling's books" (77).[221]

While *Coraline*, as previously discussed, offers a significant snippet of its titular heroine's coming of age, *The Graveyard Book*, much like its Victorian source of inspiration, charts the full coming of age of its protagonist, both physical and psychological. When little Bod is first introduced, he is still a baby. When the novel ends, he is, much like Mowgli, a young man, ready to embark on adventures in a new world. The universal metanarrative of the transition from childhood to adulthood has been observed as the key theme of the novel (cf. McStotts 69, Newhouse 116), but Tsung Chi Chang has pointed out that despite the ubiquity of coming of age stories,

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[220] *Graveyard* 286.
[221] McStotts finds that "[u]nlike *The Jungle Book*, *The Graveyard Book* is not laden with sociopolitical commentary, which marks the true difference of the works: thematic contrast. *The Jungle Book* sets man against nature, evokes cultural relativism, and questions the merits of civilization, while *The Graveyard Book* is non-provocative on these issues. [...] regardless of tame versus wild, good versus evil, we have all been children and we all eventually pass on. In this way, Gaiman's themes are universal" (69).

Gaiman's "setting [of] such a component against the backdrop of a graveyard is unusual in the history of adolescent literature" (9).[222] Gaiman uses the graveyard setting to great effect and builds the novel's *bildungsidee* on an acceptance of "divergent viewpoints and accepting their contradictions, limitations, and eccentricities as the very essence of selfhood", which Newhouse calls "a vision of postmodern moral growth" (125). Death as the great equalizer means that the titular graveyard is inhabited by all sorts of characters from all sorts of different origins, both with regards to class as with regards to culture and time. The book consequently charts Bod's growing understanding that none of them are better than the other, himself included. In this, I locate a chief difference to *The Jungle Book*, which offers a more hierarchical than egalitarian approach: Mowgli as a man is presented as developmentally superior to the animals that take him in. Both Bod and Mowgli begin their tales as displaced characters and "[d]espite the wide historical gap separating these two authors (113 years between the publication of *The Second Jungle Book* and *The Graveyard Book*), both Kipling's and Gaiman's work equally emphasizes the importance of home to a child's sense of stability" (Robertson 168).[223] Only once this family-centred stability is achieved can the protagonist complete his *bildungs*-arc. Interestingly, the completion goes hand in hand with an expulsion from the world he grew up in, be it the jungle or the graveyard.

Burstyn argues that the canonical antecedents, Alice and Mowgli, fail to attain a "definite sense of maturity", while "both Coraline and Bod complete the rite-of-passage challenges" (77). Burstyn here alludes to the quest nature that coming of age is often connected to in fantasy novels. Alice of course has no real quest to complete, as the nonsense world of Wonderland refutes any clear cut missions as they would require a kind of logic Carroll's work consciously tries to resist. Her observation of Mowgli's arc is more noteworthy as the jungle boy seemingly completes the narrative he was destined to live. Lost in the jungle, he (after a number of setbacks) returns home to be with his kind, exactly as his jungle guardians Baloo and Bagheera

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[222] The universality of the plot is also mirrored in the "old song" Mrs Owens sings to Bod during their first encounter: "Sleep my little babby-oh / Sleep until you waken / When you're grown you'll see the world / If I'm not mistaken. / Kiss a lover, / Dance a measure, / Find your name / and buried treasure..." (26). The narrator points out that that is a song "her mother had sung to her when she was a baby herself, back in the days when men had first started to wear powdered wigs" (ibid). The trajectory of coming of age stories, the novel insinuates, thus does not change significantly over time: it is a universal question of identity, romance, and mobility.

[223] "Gaiman's decision to uproot his protagonist is part of the way in which the author 'writes back' or engages in a postcolonial critique of Kipling's work" (Robertson 169)

predicted he would. However, Mowgli's return does not seem to be a happy one, and Kipling retains a melancholy for the jungle the young man was forced to leave behind.[224] There is no such melancholy in Bod's final departure from the graveyard, as he knows that at some point, everyone will return to it, as everyone must die eventually. What does happen though is that "Gaiman enables his protagonists to achieve a definite sense of self and to loosen the ties to their childhood in order to grow up" (Burstyn 77). The novels, *The Graveyard Book* in particular, charts this development of independence and then leaves just as the independence is fully realized – readers are not informed of Coraline's future school days, only that she no longer fears them. Likewise, readers do not know what kind of life Bod has after leaving the community that raised him. He is now attributed with "important symbols" of his "transition from adolescence to adulthood" (Chang 16): some money, a suitcase, and a passport. "While the passport suggests his transporting from the otherworld to the real world, the use of money, as a means of exchange in society, alludes to his socialization and initiation into the secular world" (ibid.). The world is now open for him to explore. This effectively positions these two all-ages novels as a variation of the *bildungsroman*, but more importantly, once again, in the sense of a "forenovel" (cf. Shaffner 27).

9.1. Murderous Origins

The protagonists' development in the "forenovel" is shaped by traumatic experiences; in Bod's case, the traumatic event not only jumpstarts Bod's development, but the entire novel. The novel opens with the foreboding line "[t]here was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife" (*Graveyard* 2). In a way, the knife is the first character the narrator introduces. While this is not to say that it serves as a sentient being (always an option in fantasy literature), it is via the image of the knife that the traumatic event is relayed in roundabout fashion. "The knife had done almost everything it was brought to the house to do, and both the blade and the handle were wet" (5), the novel continues, intimating a knowledge of a horrendous crime the narrator seems reluctant to relay. Little information is given about the deaths of the

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[224] The short story "The Spring Running", which affirms Mowgli's pending departure from the animal kingdom, literally ends in tears as Mowgli "sobbed and sobbed" (Kipling 348), while "In the Rukh" casts Mowgli as a man still yearning for his animalistic jungle past.

family targeted with said knife, only that the murderer, called "the man Jack[225]" (7), "had left the woman in her bed, the man on the bedroom floor, the older child in her brightly coloured bedroom, surrounded by toys and half-finished models" (7). The murderer has left one more family member "the little one, a baby barely a toddler, to take care of" (ibid.). The focus on the knife and the dead bodies rather than on the act of murder are linked to "the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the vent fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself" (Caruth, Introduction 7). It is significant here that the only survivor, the only witness, is a child yet incapable of speech. Bod's inability to both directly witness and directly relate the trauma of his family's murder is Gaiman's way of attesting to the disruptive potential of traumatic events.

The novel thus opens with the after-effects of a traumatic event and with a Gothic chase. The house the family lived in is later described as "a tall house, spindly thin, in the middle of a terraced row. It was red-brick and unmemorable" (251), yet it assumes, in the opening chapter, all the airs of a Gothic mansion. "The toddler's room was at the very top of the house", hidden behind an "attic door" (8). No artificial light is light as "the real moon shone through the casement window" (9) in a night in which "the fog stifled everything, made the night shadowy and treacherous" (10). Burstyn has observed that *The Graveyard Book* is "full of allusions to Victorian conventions, especially with regard to setting" (Burstyn 78)[226], but the allusions are not merely Victorian, but more specifically, Victorian Gothic. The otherwise ordinary house is coded in a way that evokes the creatures of Gothic fiction. While it is not a damsel in distress running from a monster, but a baby boy tottering away from his family's murderer, the conventions hold true. It is only once the boy has stepped onto the graveyard that Gaiman begins to subvert Gothic conventions (cf. Burstyn 78) and to play them against type.

9.2. Subverting Gothic Conventions: the Monstrous as a Safe Space

When first engaging with the novel, scholar Wade Newhouse read the novel "as a typical coming-of-age story with some ghosts thrown in for spooky effect" but found that "[a]nother way to read *The Graveyard Book* is to think of it as a traditional Gothic

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[225] The man Jack, who does not have a last name and is part of a larger collective of murderers with the same name, can be understood as the everyman villain to match the everyman protagonist.
[226] She extends the same argument to *Coraline*.

ghost story with coming-of-age elements thrown in for structure and moral effect" (Newhouse 113). Likewise, Burstyn finds that both "*Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* are as much Gothic novels as they are coming-of-age stories" (80).[227] The question that follows is what happens when "we don't privilege either [...] or?" (114) and instead attempt a unified reading. Both types of writing, the coming of age tale and the Gothic novel, share a focal point in that "the whole purpose of the plot is to let the protagonist come to grips with new (or previously hidden) dimensions of their character" (114). In *The Graveyard Book*, Bod flees from a monstrous humankind in the form of the man Jack and is embraced by the Othered creatures that conventionally haunt the pages of Gothic and horror novels, namely vampires, ghosts, and werewolves. This subversion and change from predator to protector means that the "typical Gothic elements [...] do not really appear to have a traditional Gothic effect anymore" (Burstyn 78) and that the rhetorical strategies of Mendlesohn's intrusion fantasy have been reversed. The traditional Gothic effect is destabilisation and insecurity, whereas the creatures roaming the graveyard offer Bod precisely the opposite. While living among them as opposed to living among the—well, living, sets him on the *bildungsroman*'s path to alienation, they make this world safe for him (cf. 79). It is only among them that Bod can embark on the *bildungsroman*'s second stage, that of a reintegration into a new and fitting world.

Gaiman has thus reversed both Gothic setting and Gothic characters – houses are more unsafe than graveyards, and monsters are kinder than humans. Gaiman's use of the Gothic (in *The Graveyard Book* in particular) has spawned some lively scholarly debate: while Burstyn finds that "*The Graveyard Book* reverses the typical conventions of good and evil with regard to the supernatural and the Gothic in general" (79), Coats finds that "[e]thically speaking, Gaiman does Gothic old-school, that is, the demarcations between good and evil are clear, and even when the evil is within, it is soundly defeated and expelled by a problem-solving hero or heroine" (78). Robertson, disagreeing with Coats, argues that

> While this may be true with regard to the texts that Coats specifically explores here (namely, *The Wolves in the Walls*, *Coraline*, and *MirrorMask*), I would argue that this is far from being the case in *The Graveyard Book*. In his novel, Gaiman inverts stereotypes surrounding several mythological and religious figures, transforming the way in which Western culture has conditioned us to think about these creatures. (170)

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[227] Interestingly, the label fantasy is once more omitted in Burstyn's genre allocation.

Gaiman's use of vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and witches is by no means free from their literary antecedents. Bod's guardian Silas, who is identified as a vampire without ever uttering the word[228], admits that "[w]hen I was younger […] I did worse things than Jack" (*Graveyard* 303), and Bod's friend Liza, a witch, rather gleefully shares how she punished those who hunted her (cf. 111-112). Robertson observes that "Liza's status remains morally ambiguous: as readers, we may sympathize with her as Bod's friend and ally, but we can never completely dispel the implications of her unsettling past" (172). Gaiman thus creates a sense of moral ambiguity that extends beyond the witch and is carried out in all of the creatures' redemptive arcs: they may have done horrible things in the past, but now they guard Bod and redeem themselves. Both Silas the vampire and Miss Lupescu, a hound of god[229] (another instance where Gaiman refuses to use the common label, in this case werewolf, in favour or a more liberal interpretation) are, alongside a Mummy and an Ifrit (a djinn), part of the so-called "Honour Guard" (*Graveyard* 302) that "guard[s] the borderlands. We protect the border of things" (303). Where Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his seminal seven theses on the monstrous, argues that "[t]he Monster Polices the Border of the Possible" (12), these monsters police the border of what should be possible and what must be rendered impossible. They assume a position of moral control that stands in direct contrast to their Gothic origins. Not only do they watch out for and educate[230] Bod, who was, in common fantasy fashion, destined to destroy an evil band of antagonists, [231] the so-called Jacks, who killed his birth family, they also watch out for

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[228] Silas tells Bod that "I have been walking this earth at night for a very long time" (*Graveyard* 149), alluding to the vampire's inability to face daylight, which is also hinted as when we learn that Bod "would be […] waiting at sunset, just before Silas awakened" (37). Likewise, his nature is hinted at when the narrator shares that Silas "consumed only one food, and it was not bananas" (27). The narrator also points out that Silas exists in relation to the graveyard folk, i.e. the ghosts, "on the borderland between their world and the world they had left" (29), hinting at his status as the undead.

[229] Miss Lupescu is an elderly woman who transforms into a "huge, grey beast" (94). Occasionally filling in for Silas as Bod's guardian, she teaches Bod that "[t]hose that men call Werewolves or Lycanthropes call themselves Hounds of God, as they claim their transformation is a gift from their creator, and they repay the gift with their tenacity, for they will pursue an evil-doer to the very gates of hell" (97).

[230] At various points in the novel, Silas, the ghosts on the graveyard, and Miss Lupescu assume the role of teachers, linking Bod's *bildungsroman* more closely to the *erziehungsroman* in its strong didactic approach. Bod, a keen student, is however poised to outgrow his teachers as none of them can educate him in what it means to live a human, contemporary life. This final part of his education is consequently located in his eventual departure from the graveyard, which can be understood as the apprentice having finally become a master.

[231] Since the novel hints at a common destiny motif in Bod's life (he is destined to eventually defeat the Jacks), he must be integrated into a society that can prepare him for this (metaphysical) challenge. The novel is however not largely concerned with notions of prophecy and destiny and instead focuses on

the world at large. The Gothic monsters are thus recast as a merry band of avengers set out to do good and thus "force us to challenge our ideas of monstrosity because, despite the acts of evil for which they are responsible, they have also enabled the hero Bod's survival by becoming his caretakers and protectors" (Robertson 172).

These "caretakers and protectors" inhabit a place that is (ideally) associated with peace and rest, but most commonly connected to death. Tally points to Foucault's reading of graveyards as heterotopia, as "a space that (unlike utopia) is real, but is also different from the other social spaces in which we live" (cf. "Nobody" 175). This space, well known but different, common but exceptional, is the novel's main setting. As a place otherwise connected to stagnation and finality, Gaiman rewrites it as the locus of Bod's *bildungsroman*. It is, however, despite convention and expectation, not a traumatic or traumatising place. Instead, it becomes the place where trauma is dealt with and where Bod, a trauma survivor, can actually *live*. This paradoxical set-up repositions the heterotopia and renders the graveyard more common. Gaiman here plays with the adage that it takes a village to raise a child. Bod is indeed not only raised by the ghostly Owenses, but also by vampire Silas, werewolf Miss Lupescu, and a colourful array of secondary ghost characters. The graveyard becomes a place where Bod recovers from being displaced from his 'real' home and family life, and where he learns to come to terms with death and violence. The absence of his birth parents, who appear in the graveyard only once when they ask Mrs. Owens to take care of their child, is negotiated via the presence of his adoptive parents. The trauma of Bod's past seems to end as soon as he has embarked on the – another paradox – safe adventure of his exceptional life in the graveyard. When his real parents make their brief appearance, they leave the inhabitants of the graveyard in shock:

> You might think – and if you did, you would be right, that Mr Owens should not have taken on so at seeing a ghost, given that Mr and Mrs Owens were themselves dead and had been for a few hundred years now, and given that the entirety of their social life, or very nearly, was spent with those who were also dead. But there was a difference between the folk of the graveyard and this: a raw, flickering, startling shape the grey colour of television static, all panic and naked emotion which flooded the Owenses as if it were their own. Three figures, two large, one smaller [...] "Protect my son!" said the ghost, and Mrs Owens thought it was a woman. (14f.)

Bod's socialisation. While the basic set-up is thus not significantly different from for instance the *Harry Potter* series, the novel does not anticipate a climactic battle of good versus evil to the same extent.

Here, the Gothic conventions (uncanny appearance, destabilisation, intrusion, and repression) find conventional application. The Owens stand in for the humans, while Bod's original parents are allowed to assume the traditional roles of ghosts. They are dead, but haunting the 'living' to carry out one final mission or deliver one final message. This very explicit message is to protect Bod from his family's murderer, the man Jack, who is just then intruding on the graveyard, ready to grasp the child. But Bod is passed from one dead mother to another, and when Mrs Owens agrees to become his parent, Bod's birth mother disappears. "'She'll not come here again,' said Mrs Owens. 'Next time she wakes, it'll be in her own graveyard, or wherever it is she's going'" (17). While the ghosts regularly inhabiting the graveyard are thus not traumatised, Bod's birth parents, ripped from their lives by an act of violence beyond comprehension are. Mrs Owens muses that "[i]t's always easier to die gently, to wake in due time in the place you were buried, to come to terms with your death" (15). *The Graveyard Book* presents a very insular view on death: the afterlife is spent where you are buried, each cemetery a village of ghostly citizens. The ordered structure of Bod's new home is no place for the violent emotions connected to his parents' death: their ghosts disappear and Bod's second life among his new family begins. The complete disappearance of Bod's birth family – he never tries to find their graveyard and establish contact – can be read as a form of repression. The price for his new, second life and his well-being is a disavowal of his murdered family in favour of an acceptance of his new one. In that, Bod's murdered relatives become the ultimate traumatic metaphors.

It is not uncommon to target families in fantasy fiction[232] as "absent or shattered families are presented to evoke a sense of pathos; young characters quickly earn the audiences sympathy because they lack normal parents" (Lundquist and Westfahl 163). Here, this effect is combined with the instant affirmation that everything is going to be alright as the man Jack is diverted by Silas and Bod adopted by Owenses, feeding into the dual "motif of isolation and protection" noted by Joseph Abbruscato ("Identity" 70). As such, "the characteristic problem confronting [orphaned] young characters [, namely] the need to compensate for their

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[232] Again, the *Harry Potter* series is a case in point, but the argument can easily be extended across a wide variety of texts. Even in *Coraline*, as previously discussed, the heroine's family needs to disappear for her to develop her potential.

irremediable lack of one or both parents" (ibid.)[233] is resolved immediately when, to return to Griswold's terminology, a "second family" is introduced (cf. 7). This problematizes a reading of Bod as a feral child in the vein of his literary ancestor Mowgli.

> The term feral has often been used to designate both children reared by animals and thus reared in isolation. Thus in its more inclusive usage, it may refer to four sub-groups of atypically reared children: (a) children reared by animals, (b) children reared in isolation in the wilderness, (c) children reared isolated in confinement, and (d) children reared in confinement with limited human contact. (McNeil et al. 70)

This can be linked to Chang's argument that in fantasy literature, the real world is often ignored in favour of the otherworld (cf. 10). The world that *The Graveyard Book* only sparingly engages with is that of the living, which would mean that Bod falls into category (c) of the aforementioned feral child categorisation. Chang further makes the point that Bod only truly develops in confrontation with the real world, which enhances his perspective and world view (11). I agree, but would reverse the argument and link it to the real world being presented as Other: to Bod, the ghosts are the norm, and people the exception. It is all question of the point of view. In the tradition of all of Gaiman's protagonists discussed so far, it is the Other that prompts Bod to develop. He is thus more aligned with the ghosts, and is thus confronted with an Othered real world. While the regular human contact is indeed limited, it is however present. Bod goes to school in one chapter, an experiment that fails dramatically and puts him on the map of the man Jack again, and as a little boy, befriends a girl, Scarlett, whom he will meet again when both are teenagers. Both extended encounters with his 'old world' lead to rather disastrous results: the man Jack resumes his hunt, and Scarlett and her family move away to Scotland.[234] I argue that despite only these short (and failed) interactions with humans, the dead (and undead) in the graveyard take their place and assume the same socialising function. They are positioned in contrast to the dead birth parents, who are mere flickers of their past. The Owenses are human – they just also happen to be dead. Bod is thus

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[233] Lundquist and Westfahl focus their research on early Disney films, but much like Griswold's model of canonical children's literature, their results are suprisingly applicable to a range of newer texts as well, perhaps highlighting a conservative nature of children's literature.

[234] Her parents thought their daughter had been kidnapped on the graveyard. In fact, she was playing with Bod who took her down into the Sleer's lair. That she returned physically unharmed was of small consolation to her parents who thought her tales of dead boys and supernatural creatures were indicative of an unsettled mental state (they think Bod is her imaginary friend).

less of feral child than a regular adopted one. The trauma that has placed him in the graveyard is not one that ends his childhood, but that starts its second phase and later his adolescence. It will also serve as a motivation to kill the man Jack, which must however not only be understood as some sort of noble revenge, but also a means of self-preservation as the villainous character is still hunting him.

The Graveyard Book, with its strong emphasis on the importance of the second family for Bod's life, well-being, and identity is thus much concerned with what Griswold calls the second life of the protagonist. The novel embeds this second life in Booker's classic voyage and return plot as the novel opens with Bod's journey to the graveyard and ends with his journey out of it back into the 'real' world. Nutall argues that it is this plot which enables the coming of age in *The Graveyard Book* (cf. 88)[235]. Bod's eventual moving on from the graveyard is connected to both his realisation that he needs to go back to his world (cf. Burstyn 83) as well as to "the cycle of childhood. It's about leaving and the glorious tragedy of being a parent, which means that there comes a point [...] [where children] leave you" (Gaiman in Campbell, *Art* 242). Bod, like all children, must leave his parents one day in order to stand on his own feet. In his case, however, he cannot return to his home until he dies: his home, as a heterotopia, is removed from easy access and regular use. This realisation is the price Bod has to pay for the new life he then embarks on.

Further, Nutall proposes that an "additional quest plot" is used to supplement the narrative (cf. 91); in Bod's case, this is negotiated in a number of chapters, most notably "The Witch's Headstone" in which Bod leaves the graveyard to buy a gravestone for his friend Liza, who was buried unrecognised on unconsecrated ground. While, as previously argued, the inhabitants of the graveyard are precisely not Othered, but serve as the norm, Liza stands out. Buried in "potter's fields" (100) without any church rites, she is an outsider despite being just as dead as everyone else. In his quest to procure a gravestone with her name on it,

> Bod is striving for his own sought-after identity, which has been denied him since his early childhood. Interestingly, in Lacanian terms, Liza serves as "the Other" whose wish mirrors the desire of the subject (Bod). Therefore, she plays an important role in Bod's development and self-actualization. (Chang 12)

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[235] She makes a similar argument with regard to Coraline, who has to win the game against the other mother and return home with her real parents.

Bod perceives his own outsider status in Liza: just like her, he differs from the inhabitants of the graveyard. In keeping with the novel's central bildungsidee of universal acceptance, Bod however perceives that these differences are of a superficial nature and should not impede on relationships. While the friendship to Eliza thus leads Bod to briefly leave the graveyard to complete a quest, it also offers a smaller voyage and return plot for of course, he must come back: he is not yet fully grown, and his metaphorical challenge yet awaits.

Nuttall observes that both the voyage and return plot and the quests "provide protagonists with ample opportunities for self-reflection" (105). In his confrontations with the human foes Mr. Bolger (who wants to sell out Bod to the man Jack for material gain) and the schoolyard bullies Mo Quilling and Nick Farthing, Bod learns about right and wrong, desirable and undesirable behaviour, and the true nature of monstrosity. This further positions the inhabitants of the graveyard as human characters: they may be biologically monstrous, but are not ethically so (or, in the case of Liza and Silas, at least not anymore). Bod, a human, must learn how he wants to behave and what he wants to be. While Nutall correctly observes that "parting is a key aspect of the theme family that runs [ ] through *The Graveyard Book*" (101), so is the need to develop an identity based on nurture rather than nature.

9.3. A Rose by any Other Name: Identity Politics

As became evident in the discussion of Shadow's name in *American Gods* as well as Fat Charlie's in *Anansi Boys*, "[o]ften in Gaiman's fiction, a key rite of passage involves names and the process of naming" (Robertson 175). Abbruscato finds that

> Bod, reminiscent of Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, is identity-less from the start: he has no name, no family, and effectively, no home to which he can return. Consequently, the novel follows his fairy tale quest to discover his name and identity. ("Identity" 67)

Gaiman places great importance on names and their ability to mark stages in development and a beginning fixation of identity. Soon attributed with the moniker Bod, *The Graveyard Book*'s protagonist's individuality and singular position is cemented (cf. Tally, "Nobody" 171). While the other two novels mentioned focus on a name change in the end to highlight the transition from one thing to another, *The*

Graveyard Book has Bod affirm his name and identity in its climax. "'I know my name,' he said. 'I'm Nobody Owens. That's who I am'" (282).

Bod's tale, as a traditional coming of age story, combines action and inspection as it moves toward adulthood. For Bod, growing up is in large parts connected to defining himself as a person. Upon moving into the graveyard as a child, he is given a new name, as "his old name won't be of much use of him now, anyway" and the Jacks are still hunting him (24). When it is noted that "he looks like nobody but himself" by Mrs Owens, this, combined with the surname of his adoptive parents, becomes his name and remains so even when he sets out into his new life in the end. Chang calls this reasoning "absurd" (14) and discusses the naming process at length. He finally argues that Bod, at the end of the novel both "sadder and wiser", "comes to realize that, regardless of the name given to him, he is who he is" (16). While many researchers read the naming as significant and identity-shaping, Chang takes a different approach and sees it as a mere by-product of Bod's development. In contradistinction, Abbruscato too offers a detailed reading of the naming and its relevance for the plot. He observes how Nobody can be broken into "No" and "Body", thus pointing to the lack of intact physical bodies surrounding Bod (cf. "Identity" 67).[236] This effectively signifies that "Bod becomes an amalgamation of human and ghost, while being not quite either" (68); in his name, Bod is thus already the kind of border-straddling monster Cohen positions in his monster theses.

However, with the clear emphasis on individuality that comes with his idiosyncratic first names also comes a decisive identity marker linked to his last name. Bod remains connected to his adoptive parents and takes much of their behaviour as cues for his own actions. As the Owens take him, the outsider, in, Bod likewise befriends Liza, an outsider who is shunned on the graveyard because she is both a witch and buried in unhallowed ground.[237] Thus, in my interpretation and in contradistinction to Abbrucascto's, Bod's journey is less about finding his identity, and more about growing into it in the context of his social network. Following in the footsteps of his adoptive parents, Bod embraces the Other. Christine Robertson

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[236] This is also slightly ironic, given that the one wearing the name is the only with a functional human body.

[237] Newhouse finds that "[t]he graveyard's treatment of Liza Hempstead [sic] , however, stands out as a grim reminder that it's tricky to impose our own contemporary sensibilities backward onto history" (Newhouse 125). Bod's parents are happy to accept their Othered son, but they cannot stop othering the witch whom they are culturally conditioned to fear. Newhouse reads this against what he sees as Gaiman's otherwise relatively simple depiction of presentations of good and evil.

undertakes a similar reading when she notes that "Gaiman's treatment of the transition between childhood and adulthood suggests that Bod has already developed a fully formed sense of self in the graveyard and that, rather than leaving this identity behind, he will carry it with him into his adulthood" (Robertson 177).

Abbruscato reads the name Nobody as an "identity place holder"; and as "[a]s there is no name, and consequently, no history associated with him, he is able to truly grow into whoever he is supposed to be" ("Nobody" 67). Who he is supposed to be is both a normal boy among the living, and the fated opponent of the Jacks. Bod is thus both ordinary and extraordinary, something Gaiman reflects in the initial renaming. His identity, and his name in all particularities, is fully affirmed when Bod receives a passport made out to the name Nobody Owens in the book's final pages, something that Abbruscato reads as a "rite of passage" (69, see also Chang 16). Bod's destiny and identity have now been made official.

The process to this finalisation is carried out over the entire novel and, in fact, informs most of the plot. While the man Jack makes an appearance every now and again, the focus of the story is on Bod and his transition from childhood to adulthood, and his "search for, and ultimate acquisition and integration of, his name and identity" (ibid.). Gaiman parcels Bod's development into chapters:

> At each state of [Bod's] development (demarcated in the book by approximately two years time passing between each chapter) there is a new challenge[238] which must be faced and overcome. These obstacles come in various shapes and sizes, increasing in difficulty as Bod ages. (70)

Bod physically and mentally grows with his challenges and leaves the graveyard a man.

9.4. Monstrous Ethics: A Question of Perspective

Bod becoming a man however also complicates his status as an innocent, which becomes manifest in the final battle against the man Jack and his comrades, which constitutes the novel's metaphysical challenge. The man Jack, the novel's central villain, is a serial killer belonging to a larger collective of organised crime (called the Jacks of all Trades). Luckhurst, building on Mark Seltzer, argues that "the serial killer

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[238] Abbruscato discusses the big events in the novel with regard to Bod's development in detail; for more information see his article "Being Nobody".

became, after all, another central icon of popular trauma culture" (*Trauma* 104). Where Gothic monsters have been tamed into a child-rearing family, the monstrous vacancy is filled by the serial killer.[239] Monstrosity is thus rendered a human quality (if one wants to call it that) and one that Bod, in the eyes of his friend Scarlett, assumes when he disposes of the murderous Jacks. While Bod insists that "I didn't kill anyone" (*Graveyard* 286), his actions have resulted in the man Jack essentially being buried alive by a mysterious creature called the Sleer, and his comrades having been sent to Ghulheim, a city of the dead, where ghouls feast on human flesh.[240] This leads Scarlett to tell her erstwhile friend that "[y]ou aren't a person. People don't behave like you. You're as bad as he was. You're a monster" (ibid.). Has Bod's *bildungsroman* thus in fact been the education of a monster?

In discussing this section of the novel, Chang too detects "a certain barbarism inherent in human beings" in both Bod's earlier punishment of the school bullies and a ruthlessness in his defeat of the Jack of All Trades (13). Nutall too seems to think so and argues that

> *Bod is not presented with positive and negative forms of masculinity from his guardian and his enemies respectively; instead, he is shown two monstrous forms of masculinity, one of which happens to be on his side. Arguably, these examples make* Bod himself monstrous. (97)[241]

However, Silas rarely displays a monstrous masculinity other than by the reputation associated with traditional depictions of vampires. For Bod, he is simply his guardian, aloof but caring. Nutall's argument also disregards the positive influence of Mr Owens, who is a ghost, but apart from his Victorian stance on the corporeal punishment of children (he spanks Bod after the boy ran off to buy Liza's headstone) very kind. What is more to the point in an assessment of Bod's potentially monstrous nature is his origin story. He already knows what the man Jack is capable of, as it was the murder of his

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[239] This reading is indebted to Jonas Nerke, who proposed that the serial killer follows in the footsteps of the vampire at a student conference at the University of Cologne in February 2016.

[240] The ghouls are perhaps the only monsters in the text that do not receive the reversed treatment from agents of fear to agents of nurture. As identity-less creatures (they only appear in a group and their names are not their own, but taken from the first corpse they consumed after their transformation into ghouls), they signify the danger of not individuating, of not developing, and of refuting any kind of *bildung*. As such, the novel sees them soundly beaten when it reaches its end.

[241] While Nutall's argument struggles with regard to *The Graveyard Book*, it does hold when it comes to *Coraline*. Nutall correctly observes that "the gender of the main villain consistently matches that of the protagonist" (95). Nutall proposes *that part of the lessons that Bod, Helena [of MirrorMask] and Coraline must learn in order to grow up are associated with overcoming gendered stereotypes. Upon close reading, the villains of each story represent toxic forms of masculinity or femininity"* (Nutall 95).

birth family that brought Bod to the graveyard in the first place. His return, accompanied by his fellow murderers, must also be understood as the return of the repressed. Bod's childhood trauma, kept at length by the graveyard's familial protection, can be ignored no longer. The traumatic backstory and the Jacks' role in Bod's life are important pieces of information not available to Scarlett, who is now seeing her friend in another light. While "Scarlett believes Bod has become a murderer, that her friend has used evil to commit evil, [...] Bod believes he has saved them both by turning a mindless monster against the greatest evil he knows" (McStotts 78). What for him is poetic justice, is gratuitous violence to her.

Where the man Jack used brute force and his knife to kill the family before the novel's opening, Bod's method of battle (and his insistence on not having killed anyone) are linked to Gaiman's "heroic philosophy" (Wehler 112) already evident in Coraline's defeat of the other mother and Fat Charlie's tricking of the dragon: Gaiman continuously "emphasizes intellectual prowess over physical ability" (127). This also links Bod's story once more to the *bildungsroman*, which is less about physically growing up, and far more on the development of intellectual faculties. The extensive use of the faculties renders Bod "morally ambiguous" (Robertson 174)[242], leading Robertson to argue "Gaiman's 'heroes' [such as Bod and Silas] are also monsters if we consider them in a slightly different light" (175). By prominently presenting Scarlett's doubt, Gaiman renders the narrative subversive and plays with expectations once more. Bod's defeat of the villainous Jacks is therefore a complication of the Tolkienian eucatastrophe: the hero is saved, the villains defeated, but ""the joy of the happy ending" (Tolkien, "Fairy-Stories" 68) is ever so slightly tainted.

Ultimately, both characters, the vampire and the boy, leave the graveyard. Their dual departure, albeit in different directions, can be read as an expulsion for their actions, a punishment after becoming (however indirectly) murderers, which would support a reading of their battle actions as monstrous. It can however also be read as a reward for growing up (in Bod's case) and completing his arc of redemption (in Silas' case). The ending has received wildly different interpretations. On the one hand, Newhouse critically surmises that

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[242] This is where Robertson notes a distinct development away from the inspirational *The Jungle Book* where characters are either good or bad, but offer little room in the middle (cf. 174f.).

> *The Graveyard Book* ends before we have seen Body really applying the lessons of the dead to the living world, and it's not at all clear to me just what he is prepared for in a life without access to ghoul-gates and fading. (116)

He concludes that "the book's climax asks us to judge his social fitness for ourselves" (ibid.). Abbruscato argues on the other hand finds that the novel's "ending depicts a fairy tale hero who has fully synthesized all of his knowledge and experiences into one complete identity" ("Identity" 69): Bod, the boy has become Nobody, the man.

While not shedding his last name Owens, Bod must 'shed' his second family. Griswold's pattern demands that the second family is disposed of and the first family reinstated (this applies to *Coraline*, for example). In Bod's case, his first family remains dead, and his second must be dead to him until he himself has died eventually. This may sound harsh, but *The Graveyard Book* routinely emphasises that being dead is nothing to be afraid of, and that life is for the living. When Bod thus leaves the graveyard, he does not do so a punished monster, but a man who will return one day. It is another voyage and return journey hinted at, but in the tradition of the *bildungsroman* as a "forenovel" rather than as a 'life novel', it is not one the readers get to see. Instead, endowed with passport and suitcase, Bod, "with a smile dancing on his lips", sets out

> for the world is a bigger place than a little graveyard on a hill; and there would be dangers in it and mysteries, new friends to make, old friends to rediscover, mistakes to be made and many paths to be walked before he would, finally, return to the graveyard. (*Graveyard* 307)

Chapter 10: "Memories were waiting at the edges"[243]: The Failed Bildung of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*

In his *New York Times* review of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, Benjamin Percy finds that the novel "feels like a family-friendly nightmare, its tenor akin to that of Gaiman's Newbery-winning *Graveyard Book*" (n.p.). As such, it seems logical that it is a text suitable for the kind of young reader that previously enjoyed following Bod on his adventures. Yet, while there are similarities between *Graveyard* and *Ocean*, the latter is a so much more complex and more complicated narrative that Percy's assessment warrants closer inspection. When Bod leaves the graveyard, the idea of an eventual return is a positive one. While the motif of voyage and return in *The Graveyard Book* is thus cast in an optimistic, affirming light, Gaiman's most recent novel takes a different direction.

Dedicated to Gaiman's wife Amanda Palmer, it was inspired by her request to tell her about his childhood (cf. Campbell, *Art* 244). While the novel consequently features a child-protagonist, Gaiman was not yet certain whether it was intended for a child or an adult audience when he started writing the book.

> It was meant to be just about looking out at the world through the kind of eyes that I had when I was 7, from the kind of landscape that I lived in when I was 7. And then it just didn't quite stop. I kept writing it, and it wasn't until I got to the end that I realized I'd actually written a novel. ... I thought — it's really not a kids' story — and one of the biggest reasons it's not a kids' story is, I feel that good kids' stories are all about hope. In the case of *Ocean at the End of the Lane*, it's a book about helplessness. It's a book about family, it's a book about being 7 in a world of people who are bigger than you, and more dangerous, and stepping into territory that you don't entirely understand. (NPR n.p.)

As Gaiman surmises, the novel "has claws" (ibid.). While the author has not stated explicitly how this darker and perhaps more threatening tone is linked to his own experience, the biographical connection is established in its genesis.

"For Amanda, who wanted to know", the dedication reads.[244] This link to Gaiman's own life is not untypical for the *bildungsroman* form that so frequently draws upon biography as means of narrative sustenance.[245] Gaiman muses that

> It is such a weird book [...] in that the narrative character is absolutely playing fast and loose with my memories and my identity, and [the narrator is] kind of

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[243] *Ocean* 7.
[244] Well-known Scientology critic Tony Ortega sees the novel as Gaiman's way of coming to terms with his family's Scientology background and his own childhood in the cult (cf. Ortega n.p.).
[245] Summerfield and Downward for instance allude to the *bildungsroman*'s part-autobiographical nature, cf. 38.

me except when he's not. [...] I really tried very hard to kind of make him as me as I possibly, possibly could. (qtd. in Campbell, *Art* 245)

Gaiman thus uses autobiographical elements to ground the novel's magical plot. In its frame narrative, *Ocean* trails an unnamed first-person narrator's return to his childhood home for a funeral. Almost unconsciously, he begins to trace his childhood, revisiting the house he lived in as a boy and seeking out a family he used to know, the Hempstocks.[246] Upon meeting them at their farm at the end of the titular lane, he begins to remember the childhood he had forgotten, full of trauma, death, miracles, and magic. "I remembered everything," (8) the narrator suddenly exclaims, and the novel dips into an embedded narrative, where the readers encounter the narrator as a child. This memorial renaissance is however a problematic one, as already evidenced by epigraph Gaiman has used to introduce the novel:

> "I remember my own childhood vividly … I knew terrible things. But I knew I mustn't let adults know I knew. It would scare them." Maurice Sendak, in conversation with Art Spiegelman, The New Yorker, September 27, 1993 (*Ocean* n.p.)

Childhood is marked as a locus of fear and problems, not as one of opportunity. Already alluding to a traumatic past, the epigraph sets the tone for the novel that is to follow. Where *Graveyard* is as previously argued a rather straight-forward novel of development, which casts childhood as a phase of opportunity, *Ocean* is much bleaker. It uses a frame narrative that sees a nameless, adult narrator return to his childhood home after what is hinted at being a parent's funeral. In her review of the novel, A.S. Byatt writes:

> [t]he narrator of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* is an adult, now placed outside the fierce world of the drama of the book. The child I was would have seen him as wispy, grey, diminished. He stands in Wordsworth's "light of common day", and sometimes revisits and remembers the ocean. I can see the world from his point of view now. But it isn't more "real" than the bright terror and danger of his childhood. (n.p.)

As soon as the narrator sets foot on the farm at the end of lane he lived on, he begins to remember his long suppressed childhood and the cataclysmic traumatic event therein. What Byatt calls "the bright terror and danger" of childhood dominates the novel as well the protagonist who sought to forget about it. This repression already

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[246] The Hempstocks are a set of characters whose extensive family tree Gaiman has used previously. Calling them "the oldest characters in his head" (cf. Campbell, *Art* 245), their relatives have appeared in *The Graveyard Book* (Liza) and in *Stardust* (Tristran's adoptive mother is Daisy Hempstock). For more information, see von Czarnowsky "Secrets".

hints at a failed *bildungsroman*; the protagonist never successfully transitioned from childhood to adulthood and his fragmented memories and sense of Self are indicative of that. Unlike the other novels analysed so far, Gaiman here uses trauma not to so much to jumpstart his lead character's development, but to derail it.

10.1. Paths of Alienation

When readers meet the narrator, an artist, in the frame narrative, they learn that his marriage "failed a decade ago", that he is not "seeing anyone" and further is "not even sure that [he] could" and that his children are "all grown up" with "their own lives" (4). Combined with the funereal setting, Gaiman thus quickly casts a desolate picture of isolation not unlike that of Shadow after his prison release. While the narrator shares that art "sometimes [...] fills the empty places" in his life – an escape not available to Shadow – he also admits that it only does so for "[s]ome of them. Not all" (ibid.). In this state of mind, he drives around "winding Sussex country roads [he] only half remembered" (3) and the roads, winding rather than straight-forward, already indicate the state of his memories. What then was so traumatic about the narrator's past that it so strongly affects his presence?

In the embedded narrative, he lives with his parents and a younger sister. The protagonist is a young and shy child, whose first sentence in the intradiegetic section is the telling statement that "[n]obody came to my seventh birthday party" (*Ocean* 9). Already thus marked as being well on the path to alienation, the child flees into fiction: he is given "a boxed set of the Narnia books" that he loses himself in (ibid.).[247] Unfortunately for the protagonist, the Narnia books do not serve to foreshadow his own happy journey into a fantasy realm. For the time being, the boy remains in the 'real' world which becomes grimmer by the page. When the opal miner, to whom his parents rent a spare bedroom, runs over the boy's much-beloved kitten, it seems that he has lost his only (albeit feline) friend. In what must be understood as some very

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[247] This idea of escaping life through literature has been previously explored with regards to Shadow and his mother's death. Both Shadow and *Ocean*'s protagonist are drawn as bookish, quiet children who hide from bullies and traumatic experiences. The frequently stated love of reading however must also be connected back to the novel's biographical core and as such be understood as a metatextual reference. As Gaiman shares, "[w]hen I was 7, my proudest possession would have been my bookshelf 'cause I had alphabetized all of the books on my bookshelf. I'd got to the point where I'd persuaded my parents to let me go to the local library in my summer holidays, and they would actually drop me off with sandwiches at the library, and I would just head into the children's department at the back and just start reading my way through it. It was the best place in the world" (NPR n.p.).

grim poetic justice, the opal miner soon commits suicide over severe gambling debts. The suicide takes place in the family vehicle (a Mini) that the miner drove down to the Hempstocks' lane. It is there that the boy sees his corpse. For the self-described "imaginative child, prone to nightmares" (17), this doubled confrontation with death serves as a destabilising event.

The suicide, and the opal miner's ardent wish for money, awaken an intrusive fantastic creature from another word. This creature assumes the shape of a pretty, young woman who becomes the narrator's new nanny and, predictably, his father's lover. The nanny, who goes by the name of Ursula Monkton, soon consumes all of his father's attention and takes over the house. Rebecca Long argues that the narrator's family home "ceases to function as a safe and homely space the moment Ursula Monkton enters it" (125). While the frame narrative is best conceptualised as a variation of the voyage and return plot, the embedded narrative presents the overcoming the monster plot. This duality of plot has been used to great effect in previous texts of Gaiman's[248], where it usually leads to an emotional and psychological awakening in the form of the metaphysical challenge. While the presence of the overcoming the monster plot is therefore far from unexpected, it is its duality that catches reader and protagonist by surprise. For the monster is not only Ursula. It is also the boy's father.

What begins as preference of a new nanny over one's own child soon deteriorates from neglect into outright abuse. In a shocking scene, the narrator, after defying Monkton, is almost drowned by his father.[249] The scene opens with the father

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[248] *Neverwhere* (London Below, the great beast), *American Gods* (Europe/US, Odin and Loki), *Anansi Boys* (America/England, Tiger and Bird), "The Sleeper and the Spindle" (East/West, the faux-beauty), *The Graveyard Book* (world of living/dead, the Jacks) and *Coraline* (home/other home, the other mother). *Stardust*, in its refusal to kill the witch, only features the voyage and return part, while the monster at the heart of "Snow, Glass, Apples" is simply not overcome, but remains victorious.

[249] It is at this point that the previously established connection to Gaiman's own life becomes worrisome. Perhaps to forestall too intrusive lines of inquiry, the "Acknowledgements" contain what almost demands to be understood as a disclaimer: "The family in this book is not my own family, who have been gracious in letting me plunder the landscape of my own childhood and watched as I liberally reshaped those place into a story. I'm grateful to them all" (180). Likewise, in an interview with the BBC, Gaiman insists that "[i]t's absolutely not autobiographical in the sense that it happened to me…And it's not autobiographical in the sense that the family is not my family. But it's very, very close to my point of view. […]what I was like when I was seven, what it was like to look at the world through my eyes. And also what the landscape that I grew up in was like because that isn't really there any more. People have built houses all over it, you can't go back and see it. So I began describing this thing, using elements of fantasy I had when I was a small kid, using an anecdote that I heard about when I was in my forties, that I discovered that we had a lodger who killed himself using our car at the end of our lane, which I'd never known about. And just that piece of information. I thought, well, what would

bursting into the bathroom in which his son is hiding. "He pulled me over to the bathtub. He leaned over, pushed the white rubber plug into the plug hole. Then he turned on the cold water tap" (71). While the narrator at first "did not know what he was going to do, or why he was running a bath", he "was scared, so scared" (72). The fear is justified as his father then plunges him into the tub and pushed him under water:

> I was horrified, but it was initially the horror of something happening against the established order of things. I was fully dressed. That was wrong. I had my sandals on. That was wrong. The bathwater was cold, so cold and so wrong. That was what I thought, initially, as he pushed me into the water, and he pushed further, pushing my head and shoulders beneath the chilly water, and the horror changed its nature. I thought, *I'm going to die*. (72)

The attack is disturbing (and, in fact, traumatising) on a number of levels. For one, as the narrator observes, it disturbs the established order of things. It thus matches one of Tolkien's four key elements of fantasy plots, that of "wrongness", which, "when it bears in upon the protagonist of a fantasy text, generally signals not a threat from abroad but the apprehension of some profound change in the essence of things" (Clute, "Wrongness" n.p.).[250] The bathroom attack violates the most basic yet profound set of rules that govern families: parents love their children and endeavour to keep them safe. The father's action here indicates not only murderous rage, but more importantly, the kind of parental treachery that so often makes an appearance in Gaiman's fiction (Mr Wednesday comes to mind). The parent turns from protector to predator, effectively making the child nothing more than prey. Long consequently argues that "domestic intimacy is lost in the moment the little boy's father tries to drown him in the family bathroom" (125), while Monica Miller concludes that the actions of the father are linked to Monkton who feeds his father's temper in ways which lead him to physically abuse his son" (Miller 118).

The narrator has no problem identifying Ursula Monkton as the source of his troubles, but it is the fatherly betrayal that affects him so severely that years later, he refuses to explicitly state whose funeral he is attending. As the entire embedded

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have happened if I'd have been there, what would have happened if it had had strange reverberations, and created a story out of that." (Higham n.p.)

[250] The novel presents a fantastic deus-ex-machina to deal with the wrongness brought about by Ursula Monkton. The so-called hunger birds, who will eventually consume Monkton, serve to bring order to the world. Called by Lettie, they easily complete their task and eradicate Monkton. As they say, "[w]e are cleaners. We came to clean" (*Ocean* 130). When they also attempt to kill the narrator, whom they perceive to have been tainted by Monkton (implicitly insinuating a hereditary weakness passed from father to son), Lettie protects the boy, sacrificing herself to do so.

narrative is written as a reflection of an adult man on his childhood, the narrator freely comments on the relationship between him and his father. As he shares towards the end of the novel, he can now, as an adult, conceptualise Monkton's appeal:

> She was really pretty, for a grown-up, but when you are seven, beauty is an abstraction, not an imperative. I wonder what I would have done if she had smiled at me like that now: whether I would have handed my mind or my heart or my identity to her for the asking, as my father did. (*Ocean* 118)

While the narrator thus understands, he does not forgive. It is instead affirmed that Monkton did not force his father to do anything; it was a question of voluntarily *handing over* heart, mind, and soul, which his father, giving in to adult temptations, freely did. This sexual transaction was paid for by his son's safety and emotional well-being. The novel, in pointing out what children need to feel safe, draws a chilling portrait of what happens when this sense of safety is taken away. It can be placed in a trend of trauma writing evident in "in the last decades of the twentieth century" when "personal traumas experienced in childhood and within the family, such as sexual abuse, incest, and domestic violence, have emerged as prominent themes in fiction" (Schönfelder 17).

Kim reads this domestic trauma as an appearance of the uncanny in the text; as already pointed out in the analysis of *Coraline*, Gaiman is no stranger to constructions of the uncanny and frequently relies on them to make his villainous characters more threatening and to raise the stakes for his protagonists. The duality of magic and violence here render the home uncanny. Much like trauma, the uncanny cannot be precisely grasped because it shifts between two poles. In the case of trauma, these poles are both of a temporal nature – before and after – but also of a psychological one as safety clashes with helplessness. The uncanny then is located on an epistemological level; with its idea of suppressed beliefs, it too plays into the mould of before/after and thus destabilises those who encounter it. The uncanny deconstructs the safety of the familiar and confronts readers with a destabilising unfamiliar that yet harkens back to what is known. Like trauma, it defies easy categorisation. Kim observes that

> the usual opposition of *das Heimliche* and *das Unheimliche* is inverted in *Ocean*: the commonsensical world of the everyday is portrayed as incomprehensible and unsettling, while fantastic creatures and events are often depicted as familiar and reassuring. (154)

The most threatening element of Monkton's appearance are thus less her supernatural qualities, and more that the "greatest danger comes from her attractive adult body and the power it has over the narrator's father" (158). The boy thus represses not only the moment his father tried to drown him, but also the motivation at the heart of the action – the disruption of the parental unity as his mother is effectively replaced by a (familiar) stranger.

10.2. Reintegration and Rejection

In order to further heighten the contrast between what should be and what is, Gaiman introduces a second supernatural entity, the Hempstock women, on whose farm the narrator in the frame temporarily regains the memories of his repressed past. The Hempstocks serve the "central theme of the novel, that survival requires sustenance on many levels simultaneously" (Miller 114). While Monkton's villainy comes from her representing "unassuaged hunger" (117),[251] the Hempstocks embody (nearly) unlimited care and supply of both food and homeliness.[252] The boy narrator first meets the Hempstocks after seeing the opal miner's body in the family car. While his father and the police are busy handling the death and the practical realities of its aftermath, the child is left astray. As the policeman muses, "[w]e should find somewhere to wait that you won't be in the way". There is little concern for his emotional well-being, until an unfamiliar voice offers: "He can come back with me to the farmhouse. It's no trouble" (*Ocean* 18f.). The voice belongs to Lettie Hempstock, who in due course will become the child's first real friend. As the two embark on the short way to the house, the boy is also walking towards a place that is willing to take him in and that shows a concern for his person that has been established as missing from the conventional figures of authority (his father and the police). As the paternal is thus cast in questionable light, it falls to maternal figures to authority to aid the boy in what at this point could still be a positive developmental journey.

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[251] This conflict is particularly interesting because it intrudes at a time when the boy narrator is actually supposed to learn to govern desires. The failure of this, also in his parents, is thus highly problematic for his future development.

[252] For an extensive reading of the novel's gendered implications, please see von Czarnowsky, Laura-Marie. "'Power and all its secrets": Engendering Magic in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*".

Courtney Landis observes that every time the child visits Hempstock farm, he is fed (cf. Landis 169), and Miller further finds that "the material sustenance reinforces the sense of emotional security" (115) the narrator finds on the farm. Based on their actions, "[t]he three Hempstock women create the maternal ideal: they feed him, clothe him, comfort him, and (most importantly) make him feel validated and important" (Landis 168). Despite their role in the safekeeping of the world at large, they also find time to assume motherly roles in the boy's tormented life. As Kim observes "[h]owever powerful or dangerous they are", "the rules are never violated in the Hempstocks' world" (159). They represent a safe, nurturing femininity that offers a soothing counter-measure to Monkton's intrusive and destabilising nature. The narrator soon establishes "[t]he Hempstock home [...as] the new center of his life" (Long 125), but this centre is not one in which he is permanently welcome. As Lettie Hempstock tells the boy, the farm is a women-only residence since while "[w]e've had men here, sometimes", they "come and they go" (94), indicating that male presence in the face of the triple goddess the Hempstocks clearly evoke[253] can only ever be temporary. While the boy has thus found an alternate, a second family (much like Bod has), this family refuses to become his. At this point, the *bildungsroman*'s second stage of integration is severely challenged. The society is there, it happily accepts the protagonist, but it is made clear from the start that he cannot stay, no matter how happy he is. This applies both the past (when he will eventually be picked up again by his parents) and the present, when Ginnie Hempstock gently ushers him away: "Get along now [...] There's people who are wondering where you've got to" (176). The narrator is thus doubly destabilised and displaced: not only is he abused by his father (and all but forgotten by his mother who is oblivious to all going on her in home since she took on a new job[254]), he is also kindly, but decidedly rejected by the Hempstocks.

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[253] In the stagnant role allocation of the triple goddess, Lettie must forever be the maiden, Mrs Hempstock the mother, and Old Mrs. Hempstock the crone. The women do not age (cf. *Ocean* 30, 172), thus hinting at another failed *bildungs*-narrative in the novel. Not only does the boy not successfully complete his coming of age, Lettie in her eternal prepubescence (cf. Landis 175) also remains rather forcefully rooted to a developmental stage she should have long surpassed.

[254] This echoes the narrative treatment of Coraline's mother, whose working life likewise impacted her child's development. Where Coraline however comes to accept that her mother has an existence outside motherhood and that this is a perfectly normal thing, *Ocean* evades any parental redemption in the unspecified funeral. There are no graveside epiphanies (as in for instance *Anansi Boys*) that shows child forgiving the parent.

All of this leads to a fragmented mind and memory; trauma here bars the *bildungsroman* and coming of age and calls the genre marker into question. Saariluoma has discussed in how far the *bildungsroman* demands a happy ending or – to use less fairy tale-esque terminology – a positive outcome. She finds that in some cases, the mere formulation of a potential for the protagonist's positive development suffices (cf. 8) to allow for a categorisation as a *bildungsroman*. This links back to Sammons' sceptical analysis of the *bildungsroman* as a missing genre; such a broad genre formulation eventually deconstructs itself. While I am therefore sceptical that a mere expectation of positive development suffices to make a text a *bildungsroman*, it is even more important to point out that from the epigraph onwards, *Ocean* hints not only at a development, but at its certain failure. We already know that the narrator has not grown up to find his place in a society he can happily contribute to, and the novel doubles down on its pessimistic streak when he leaves the farm in the end with all memories once more submerged in Lettie's wondrous ocean. This makes *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* a true "Regredierendenroman" (Jódar 180).

10.3. The Metaphysical Challenges of Memory

Luckhurst has observed that "trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways" (1). Children are especially susceptible to his as "[t]he psyche and brain of children are particularly vulnerable to traumatic and chronic stressors" (Schönfelder 72). Not only are children thus particularly affected, "traumatic experiences that happen in childhood and in the contained, supposedly safe, or even nearly sacred space of the nuclear family seem even more socially unspeakable and taboo than other traumas. Accepting the unacceptable, long buried in the silence of shame or hidden in the blindness of unbelief, is an *ongoing* process" (Schönfelder 73, emphasis mine). It is the kind of process that the nameless narrator in *Ocean* never quite completes. While he returns to the lane time and time again (whenever he is troubled, Old Mrs Hempstock insinuates), he never really comes to terms with the events that disrupted his childhood and forever altered the trajectory of his life. Early on, he realises that "[m]emories were waiting at the edges of things, beckoning to me" (*Ocean* 7), but these memories remain out of reach until he stares down at the duck pond on Hempstock farm, the titular ocean at the end of lane. Only then, in this

specific fantastic place that Long links to the "river Lethe" of Greek mythology (131) and reads as "a repository of memory" and an "access point for the narrator, a gateway into his childhood and the past" (127), does he remember everything (cf. *Ocean* 8). Only here can he engage with Lettie's sacrificial death, his father's deeply-buried abuse, and the monstrous memory that is Ursula Monkton. This is in keeping with Schönfelder's assertion that trauma "victims often cannot recall traumatic experiences intentionally, although the experiences continue to haunt them through sudden, uncontrolled intrusions" (75). The entire embedded narrative of *Ocean*, with is shift from adult narrator talking about the present to adult narrator turned boy again reflecting on his past – thus takes on the shape of one of these traumatic intrusions.

This is rendered immediate and personal in Gaiman's choice of a first person narrator. While all other novels previously analysed here utilised third person narrators, the choice of narrative method in *Ocean* is deliberately different. With the choice of narrator, unreliable as he is, *Ocean* is thus Gaiman's novel in which trauma is both most central and most authentically portrayed. Paradoxically, while the readers are thus allowed into the head of the narrator, the narrator is kept at distance from his own memories. The repression of his past and feelings is so strong that he never even mentions who is being buried at the beginning of the novel. The strong focus on the father in the embedded frame insinuates that it is him, but other than that, no evidence is given. When the frame narrative resumes again in the end, the moment of epiphany and access to memories is already a thing of the past: while there is thus the *bildungsroman*'s expected focus on inner life,[255] it is an inner life that keeps slipping out of reach. Gaiman makes this evident when the narrator struggles to remember what happened to Lettie in the beginning of the frame ("Where did she go? America? No, *Australia*. That was it. Somewhere a long way away"; 8), and then leaves Hempstock farm and Old Mrs Hempstock with the words "[n]ext time Lettie writes from Australia [...] please tell her I said hello" (178) despite having just spent over ten pages dealing with the fact that Lettie sacrificed herself for him in a climactic battle in the embedded narrative.

The narrator here is thus highly unreliable. While the novel and the motif of forgetting can be read as a traumatic reaction, it can also be read as an instance of

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[255] In 3rd person narration, Gaiman rhetorically relies on dream sequences and free indirect discourse to allow his readers a glimpse into his protagonists' minds.

magical interference. Earlier on in the novel, the Hempstocks are shown to have the ability to 'edit' memory and time. In what Miller calls "[s]ome of the most striking magic" (118) in the novel, Old Mrs Hempstock not only mends the narrator's bathrobe, but while stitching it back together, also changes the fabric of reality. In the final battle that claims Lettie and in which the narrator's heart is ripped out by the hunger birds, Gaiman intersperses (in italics, parentheses and present tense) a moment that challenges the linearity of events:

> *(A ghost-memory rises, here: a phantom moment, a shaky reflection in the pool of remembrance. I know how it would have felt when the scavengers took my heart. How it felt as the hunger birds, all mouth, tore into my chest and snatched out my heart, still pumping, and devoured it to get at what was hidden inside. I know how that feels, as if it was truly a part of my life, of my death. And then the memory snips and rips, neatly, and –)*
> (*Ocean* 157)

The narrator knows "how it would have felt", but also "[H]ow it felt", and finally affirms that "I know how that feels". He is thus circling around a memory so deeply repressed that it is, while still somehow a part of him, fully disassociated. Thus hinting at the Hempstocks' once more magically altering time and memory, the readers are left with an interpretative choice: did the narrator repress his memories of his traumatic childhood or did the Hempstocks take them from him? Ultimately, it matters little for both readings attest to the same thing: the damaging power traumatic events hold over a person. The narrator is either protected from traumatic memories, or protects himself. Yet, this protection comes at a price, for "[w]ithout a past, without a remembered childhood, one cannot have an identity in the future" (Long 123).

The narrator has not only forgotten his boyhood, but also parts of his adult life, leading to the fragmented state we find him in at the beginning of the novel. Every time he struggles in his life, he returns to the farm, and every time he does, he forgets soon after.

> "[...] you drove to the end of the lane and you came here, like you always do."
> "Like I always do?" [...]
> "Like you always do."
> "No," I said. "You're wrong. I haven't been here since, well, since Lettie went to Australia. [...]"
> "You come back, sometimes," she said. "You were here once when you were twenty-four, I remember. You had to young children, and you were so scared.

You came here before you left this part[256] of the world: you were, what, in your thirties, then? I fed you a good meal in the kitchen, and you told me about your dreams [...]"
"I don't remember."
She pushed the hair from her eyes. "It's easier that way." (*Ocean* 173)

In this context of "a larger pattern of memory and memorial: a pattern that will continue in stages of forgetting and remembering, going, and returning", Long reads the embedded "narration [...] [as] an act of remembrance" (133).

It is however crucial that not only is this act of remembrance destined to be forgotten as soon as the narrator leaves the lane, the repression of trauma extends even to his own name and identity. The power of names has been pointed both out with regard to *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys*, *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*, which means that the absence of naming must be equally paid attention to. The narrator's namelessness indicates a fracture of Self. As Wehler has observed with regard to the nameless victims of the other mother in *Coraline*, the names function as "the very markers of their identities" (119). The lack of a name therefore indicates a lack of a fully realised identity. While Long argues that "[i]n recognizing the vulnerability of his home, the little boy begins to grow up" (128), I argue that the destruction of the home compromised the boy's maturation to an extent that he can never quite catch up with, and the absence of a name here serves as evidence. No name, no memories, and no direction in life indicate that the *bildungsroman*'s central goal of becoming "a quiescent master in the art of forming his own life" (Shaffner 27) has not been fulfilled. There is no mastery without knowledge, but knowledge here is not brought about by trauma, as has been the case in the other novels examined, but actively hindered by it.

While Miller has read the novel as "a beautifully-crafted illustration of the possibilities of adult healing through a willingness to remember, reconstruct, and temporarily return to the worlds of the childhood" (114), I argue that this healing precisely does not take place. Instead, the novel is perhaps Gaiman's most overt commentary on the persisting power of trauma and Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*. Gaiman uses trauma narratives' characteristic elements of "repetition and indirection" (Whitehead 3) in what is designed as a thoroughly circular tale. Miller sees "[t]he novel's reconstruction of the story of his childhood

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[256] Here, Gaiman seems to allude to his own leaving of England for the States. This reading is drawn from his statements that *Ocean* is in part biographical.

functions as a multivalent act of recovery" in the dual sense of recovery as "an act of memory" as well as a recovery from "grief, in his working through and recovering from the trauma of his father's death" (119). Yet, it is not his father's death and the subsequent grief that traumatised the narrator, but the father's life and the impact of his actions on his son.

The next intermittent visit at the Hempstocks and the consequent repressal thereof is to be expected as the trauma does not disappear, but persists, just out of sight. Perhaps the best metaphor for the novel's focus on the persistence and power of trauma can be found in Lettie. Having almost died to protect the nameless narrator, she is taken to her ocean to heal. The scene can be read as a mirror to the drowning scene the boy was subjected to, as both children are submerged by their parents.

> At the center of the pond, with the black water above her hips, she stopped. She took Lettie from her shoulder, so the girl's body was supported at the head and at the knees by Ginnie Hempstock's practical hands; then slowly, so very slowly, she laid Lettie down in the water. (*Ocean* 163)

Where the boy's submersion was an act of violence, this is an act of love. As Old Mrs Hempstock explains, Lettie has "been given to her ocean. One day, in its own time, the ocean will give her back" (164). Where the father wanted to take his son's life, the motherly Hempstocks wish to return it. While there is therefore definitive hope for healing and salvation, it is not bestowed on the narrator, but on the magical maiden he met on the lane. The text seems to advocate for strong, powerful maternalism as a means to counter trauma, and with his own absent mother and violent father, and the rejection of the Hempstocks featuring prominently, the boy never really has a chance. Lettie's absence at the end of the frame narrative indicates that the desired healing has not yet been completed; recovery from trauma cannot be planned and dated. His trauma is buried in the shape of Lettie, forever sleeping in her ocean. Much like *American Gods*' Laura, *Stardust*'s Yvaine or even *Anansi Boys*' Bird, Lettie too becomes a traumatic metaphor. As Yvaine's, her tale ends with silence and an immortality that exceeds both the protagonist's understanding and his own life span.

But even though Lettie is not physically present, her memory looms large. Her mother and grandmother hint that from her resting place deep within her ocean, she is observing and judging what the boy did with his life. When the adult narrator wonders what exactly he is doing staring at a pond when he should be at a funeral, Ginnie Hempstock tells him that "Lettie wanted you to" and that "she mostly wants to

find out what happened next, and whether it was worth everything she did" (*Ocean* 174). The narrator offers himself for appraisal only to realise that the moment has already passed:

> "If she brought me here to look at me, let her look at me," and even as I said I knew that it had already happened. How long had I been sitting on that bench, staring into the pond? As I had been remembering her, she had been examining me. "Oh. She did already, didn't she?" "Yes, dear." "And did I pass?" The face of the old woman on my right was unreadable in the gathering dusk. On my left the younger woman said, "You don't pass or fail at being a person, dear." (175)

On the surface, this statement reads like absolution, but taken in the context of his renewed expulsion from Hempstock farm, it is revealed as only a small consolation. But just as Lettie's pond is really an ocean, its depth speaks of the things unsaid. With his uncertain life and unacknowledged traumatic past, the narrator does not fail at being a person, but he does fail to successfully complete the *bildungsroman* plot that so many of his fellow Gaiman protagonists mastered. In relation to the all-knowing Hempstocks, he can never become a master. Instead, he is an apprentice whose education stopped before it began.

There is a hint of future healing, once again tying the narrator's fate to that of the girl who saved him. At some point, the novel insinuates, Lettie will come back to life, and at some point, the narrator will recover. As Ginnie Hempstock tells him, "I think you're doing better than you were the last time we saw you. You're growing a new heart" (175). That this new heart is 'growing' just as his parent has been buried is telling and the timing no coincidence. Using funeral rites for emotional healing is a trope Gaiman has employed previously, but here the use is almost opaque. As the man grows a heart, the boy in his past may be able to recover. Only in this recovery can the *bildungsroman* plot find its completion. This, however, is something Gaiman only hints at before then dissolving the narrator's childhood memories once more. Trauma here continues to dominate, demanding repression as a means of protective covering.

The early confrontation with his traumatising father and the villainous nanny mean that "[t]hroughout the narrative, the boy equates adults with monsters" (Long 124). This results in a subconscious refusal to grow up and leads to a meandering adult who gets lost on the day of his parent's funeral. The stroll down memory lane here is a failed one, but it also fails because the narrator never wanted it to succeed. While all other novels discussed at this point thus follow the *bildungsroman*'s pattern

from problem to solution, *Ocean* begins with a problem, embeds a problem, and in its final pages, reaffirms the problem. This is also linked to the fantasy world not offering a new home to the protagonist for the first time in Gaiman's novelistic work: the boy narrator cannot escape to another world even when he can see it. All that he is left with are the books he loves. Building on Caruth, Miller argues that "the key to processing trauma, then, is the ability to incorporate it into the narrative, into the story one tells oneself about the past" (120). While the narrator, nameless from beginning to end, thus relays his traumatic story, he does not incorporate it. Much like his stay at the Hempstocks', the act of remembering is a temporary one. What he has incorporated into his life's story is Lettie's departure for 'Australia'. The traumatic origins thereof however are forgotten, repressed, undesired. After all, forgetting, as Old Mrs Hempstocks asserts him, is easier (*Ocean* 173). If we thus read the fantasy *bildungsroman*, as proposed in the introduction, as a quest(ion) of becoming or a quest of be(com)ing, then trauma here answers that question decidedly in the negative, leading to a failed *bildungsroman* that leaves its narrator displaced in the present.

:: PART FOUR :: PARTING WORDS ::

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Joseph Campbell has observed that "[t]he changes rung on the simple scale of the monomyth defy description" (*Hero* 246, see also Kadenbach 14). Neil Gaiman has offered two variations of the basic underpinnings of the hero's journey, contextualising them within the inward-focused plot pattern of the *bildungsroman* and challenging them by extensively focusing on traumatic events as means to generate and hinder character development. As has been amply shown, all of Gaiman's main characters undergo the three steps that constitute the plot pattern of the *bildungsroman*: set on a path of alienation, they find an alternative society to reintegrate in, and finally confront a metaphysical challenge that either affirms or denies the elevation to their station in life. Always featuring a combination of the overcoming the monster and the voyage and return plot, their engagement with the fecund element of tragedy elevates them away from mere superficial escapism.

As Tally observes, "[i]n many of Gaiman's novels the hero's journey is one of self-discovery, while also being a quest of self-making" ("Nobody" 169). This, to return to Rosemary Jackson's conceptualisation of fantasy as a literature of desire, speaks to a desire to develop, to be enlightened, to broaden the mind – but to do so with the hope of a positive ending in sight. The hero desires not just to return, but to return with this boon. At the same time, the often traumatic starting point of these developmental *bildungs-* journeys also embody the dual rhetorics Jackson sees in fantasy. Desire can be told of to manifest it, or to expel it (cf. 3). As part of their *bildung* in fantasy, the protagonists must learn to judge which desire needs expulsion and which can be allowed to manifest. The manifestation of desire is usually linked to a geographical change that sees the protagonists choosing a world where their variable positive desires of humanist ideals, romantic love, recognition, confidence, and epistemological discovery can be made a reality.

In their frequent and layered acknowledgement of their traumatic pasts, Gaiman's many everymen protagonists however also expel the forbidden desires. This applies as much to the child protagonists as it does to the adult ones. Gaiman's writing for children has been called dark, even too dark, yet this turn toward the negotiation of forbidden desires and traumatic origins is indicative of a larger trend in children's and young adult literature (cf. McStotts 79). In what Percy calls Gaiman's "preoccupation" with "the cruel, uncertain dreamscape of childhood" (n.p.), the

novels express desires beyond their protagonists' active understanding: in confronting these desires, they rise to the challenge and hope to advance to the next stage of life. Gaiman's child protagonists come in three types, and all of them encounter and banish a different desire. Where *Coraline* only presents a small snippet of its heroine's childhood, it nevertheless extensively chronicles the expulsion of her controlling urges that link the child to the other mother: Coraline needs to abandon the child's self-centred point of view to become a considerate adult. Bod's tale chronicles the boy's complete coming of age, and examines his need to expel the tendency towards violence that unites his traumatic origins and his ruthless treatment of the Jacks. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* offers a bookend approach to *bildung* and desire: presenting the narrator as both a boy and a man, the text depicts the challenge that comes with expelling deeply sexual desires the nameless boy narrator's young mind is not yet (and, the text hints, will never be fully) ready for.

Similar observations can also be made for Gaiman's adult protagonists, whose developmental journeys likewise revolve around a dual treatment of desire and trauma. The two sons whose tales Gaiman extensively chronicles in *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* face very different desires, and therefore need to expel different desires, too. Shadow must learn to reject the wife he still loves, and Charlie to embrace his trickster father's thirst of life and consequently, banish his own feelings of inadequacy. In Gaiman's earlier work, Richard's decision for a life in London Above is logically accompanied by a rejection of the capitalist urban life his society intimated he *should* desire, while Tristran's desire for another world is paid for in the dissolution of his infatuation with Victoria.

Notions of desire, trauma, and *bildung* in Gaiman's works are often linked in a postmodern depiction of what Creed calls the monstrous-feminine. Writing about horror films, Creed postulates that female monsters need specific decoding as their construction is equally specific.[257] Finding that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (7), Creed offers a conceptualisation of Othered femininities that is easily

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[257] Creed explains: "I have used the term 'monstrous-feminine' as the term 'female monster' implies a simple reversal of male monster. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3).

applicable across a wide variety of texts, Gaiman's included. These gendered monsters[258] break the active-passive, male-female binary, but Creed cautions not to take this a sign of female liberation as the creatures' presence

> speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity. However, this presence does challenge the view that the male spectator is almost always situated in an active, sadistic position and the female spectator in a passive, masochistic one. (ibid. 7)

A similar argument can be extended to the presence of the many-faced monstrous-femininities that populate Gaiman's traumatic *bildungsroman* fantasies. Whether it is a male or female protagonist, there is always a confrontation with the active monstrous feminine that serves to enlighten as well as test the protagonist. This confrontation is frequently connected to the *bildungsroman*'s final stage of the metaphysical challenge. In the monstrous feminine, Gaiman gives shape to traumatic memory. If the everyman hero constructs his Self as male, then that which challenges him is logically Other. In an interesting affirmation of a heteronormative pattern, Gaiman thus frequently contrasts male, young, developing everymen with older, enlightened, monstrous femininities. These confrontations with enlightened monsters speak to what Creed calls the fear of the "woman as castrator" in contradistinction to Freud's notion of woman as castrated (ibid.): the monstrous femininities threaten to reduce, but when confronted successfully, help to advance.

A close analysis implies that this positioning of monstrous femininities is however also the case in the few texts that feature a female protagonist, namely *Coraline*, as well as the two "Snow White" stories. Here, the maternal disruption the monstrous-feminine enforces is presented most effectively. Coraline and the stepmother from "Snow, Glass, Apples" must engage with a dark mirror that demands confrontation: if they fail, they will be consumed by the monstrous-feminine that haunts their tale (the stepmother would become a vampire, and Coraline a ghost). If they succeed, their development is complete: the stepmother finally made her voice heard, and Coraline grows up. This means that Gaiman heavily implies that it is the monstrous-feminine that produces the kind of transcendental experience necessary to develop. Simply put, even the monstrous-feminine creates.

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[258] "These are: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman" (Creed 7).

In his depiction of the monstrous feminine, Gaiman also often relies on a double-sided construction: *Neverwhere* features Door, who as a fantastical entity with supernatural abilities can be interpreted as monstrous, but also the more conventionally monstrous Lamia, seductive vampire women who drink young men's life force.[259] *Stardust* likewise offers a dualised version of monstrous femininities in Yvaine, the humanoid star, and the Lilim, the witches who hunt her and wish to consume her heart. Tristran must learn to accept one, while rejecting the desires of the other. He will 'win' the star, but only by realising her personhood and overcoming his colonial tendency. The Lilim can be read as embodiments of anti-*bildung*; they do not wish to go forward, but always seek to go back, consuming other's life as they do so. Their journey offers a counter-tale to Tristran's, and to Richard's in *Neverwhere* as well. The potential toward *bildung* is aligned with the forces of good, while those wishing to regress are turned into villains. This is evidenced by the chief witch's aging: she begins the novel as old, then uses the remains of another star's heart to make herself young again, but with each bit of magic spent, slowly returns to her true age. The natural law of the universe (even that of Faerie) is to age.[260] Aging implies an adherence to the developmental pattern of the *bildungsroman*; the witch's monstrous subversion thereof may not be tolerated. Yet, the novel insists that it is less concerned with a climactic battle between good and evil, and instead favours a humanist notion of acceptance and forgiveness as the star parts from the witch with a kiss (cf. *Stardust* 324), never to think of her again.[261] Perhaps it is therefore opportune to divide Gaiman's gallery of monstrous women into two categories: the truly monstrous, and the fantastic beautiful souls. The latter, evoking the beautiful soul whose diary so inspires Wilhelm Meister, plays a significant role in advancing the protagonist's desire for *bildung*. Door and Yvaine as well as the Hempstocks from *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* clearly fall into this category.

American Gods offers a slightly more complicated picture: primarily concerned with a monstrous father, the novel nevertheless casts an impressive gallery of

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[259] This is a surprisingly conservative Victorian metaphor readers are already familiar with from *Dracula* and his feminine progeny.

[260] The stars here pose the sole exception: they are immortal.

[261] The film version here takes a slightly more conventional approach and in high fantasy fashion closes the conflict between Tristran and the Star and the murderous witch with a battle scene in which Yvaine burns the witch into nothingness with her inherent power of light. She shines with light, and the witch dies. The film does not spell it out, but the insinuation of the witch being burned by the bright hot blue light is more than evident and feeds into historical accounts of witch trials.

monstrous femininities.[262] The most significant one is clearly Shadow's zombie wife Laura, whose complex function has been extensively discussed in chapter 5.2. In her role as mentor as well as traumatic metaphor, each confrontation with Laura brings Shadow a little closer to a state in which he can live on his own, without her. The confrontation with the monstrous feminine must therefore also be understood as a quest towards individuation. The same argument can be extended to yet another witch in Gaiman's oeuvre, Liza from *The Graveyard Book*. Presented as the monstrous-feminine by the graveyard that continues to reject and Other her, it is Bod's humanist acknowledgment of her that sets him apart and marks him as surpassing everyone around him in his development.[263]

Anansi Boys presents the witches on the one hand, and Bird on the other. Both clearly conceptualised as monstrous, they serve to enlighten Charlie and alert him to his trickster lineage. I would argue that neither *American Gods* nor *Anansi Boys* or *The Graveyard Book* feature the union of beautiful soul and monstrous-feminine so easily traced in *Stardust*, but they nevertheless heavily rely on a confrontation with the monstrous feminine to both embody trauma, and to bring about their protagonist's *bildung*. The most overt representation of the dual inclusion of the enlightening beautiful soul and the challenging monstrous feminine can be found in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, where the nameless narrator is positioned between the kind and wise Hempstocks (an Other he is more than keen to accept, but that eventually refuses him) and seductive but dangerous Ursula Monkton. Where the latter upsets the safe confines of his childhood, the former affirms his trust in maternal figures. Yet, because of the Hempstocks' rejection of the narrator and the forced, not chosen, return to his ordinary life, his *bildung* can never be completed and he is the only protagonist left stranded.

While monstrous femininities are shown to be a great concern in Gaiman's work, so are depictions of parental failures. While mothers are frequently made absent (it is only Door's father who speaks to her, Shadow's mother has long since died, Charlie's likewise, Coraline's mother is too focused on her work, and Bod's birth

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[262] One that Shadow never encounters is Bilquis, an ancient goddess linked to the legendary Queen of Sheba who – in an evocation of the vagina dentata motif – consumes men with her genitals in a reversed birthing act (during intercourse, she sucks them, bodily, inside her).

[263] Since everyone else is dead, this is precisely the point they try to instil in Bod when Silas tells him that he can still change. Bod has room and time to develop; there is a hint towards a life to be lived outside the graveyard in the novel's final chapter.

mother has been murdered), the few times that they do make an appearance they are cast in somewhat overbearing light. When Tristran's mother is eventually revealed to be the Lady Una of Stormhold, she is less interested in reconnecting with her son and more focused on organising his royal ascension as she sees fit. The other mother displays the same controlling urges, and a metaphorical reading of her attempt to replace Coraline's eyes with buttons has already been linked to her seeking full control over the girl. I argue that the absence of mothers can often be linked to notions of a metaphysical second birth, that, much like *Frankenstein*, avoids the reproductive role of women altogether.

Gaiman's protagonists undergo a second birth that places them in the fantastic setting they can and (with the exception of *Ocean*) thrive in. As Joseph Campbell has argued,

> [o]nly birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be – if we are to experience long survival – a continuous 'recurrence of birth' (*palingenesia*) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death. (*Hero* 16, emphasis in original)

Rebirth here reaffirms notions of *bildung*. In passing through the other mother's door to the other realm, there is a kind of second birth of Coraline as an enlightened child, while *Stardust*'s passage from Wall *through* the wall into Faerie must likewise be conceptualised as Tristran being reborn as the heir of Stormhold. *Neverwhere* uses a similar trope in Richard's dark passage over the Night's Bridge, as does *The Graveyard Book* with the threshold of the graveyard's gates (in the novel's conclusion, Bod quite literally exits the gate to join the world of the living), while *American Gods* uses the world tree and Shadow's death to explicitly bring about a rebirth for its protagonist. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* hints at a rebirth of Lettie's in her titular ocean, which then assumes maternal qualities.

The rebirth motif usually leads to an enlightenment of the protagonist, even though Gaiman enjoys deconstructing this as an impermanent state. This is made evident when Mr Nancy and Shadow discuss Shadow's rebirth towards the end of *American Gods*. When Mr Nancy asks him whether he learned something "from all this", Shadow's replies:

> "I don't know. Most of what I learned one the tree I've already forgotten [...] I'm not certain of anything any more. It's like one of those dreams that changes you. You keep some of the dream forever, and you know things down deep

inside yourself, because it happened to you, but when you go looking for details they kind of just slip out of your head." "Yeah," said Mr Nancy. And then he said, grudgingly, "You're not so dumb." (590)

Shadow's epiphany and Mr Nancy's evaluation thereof insinuate that Gaiman sees *bildung* as an ongoing rather than finite goal. Learning to live with uncertainty as well as the ability to take chances and make changes is presented as a desirable course of action that will eventually pay off. Yet, in the true sense of the *bildungsroman* as a forenovel, Gaiman prefers to hint at the outcome rather than to spell it out (Tristran's finite tale is the lone exception). In the journeys and adventures that is to follow, the protagonists' previous traumata will however continue to play a role, as is made evident in the way that the Snow White of "The Sleeper and the Spindle" carries her incomprehensible history with her into the next adventure.

In the omnipresence of trauma in Gaiman's work, a decisive turn from Tolkien's notion of eucatastrophe can be observed. While, with the exception of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, all of Gaiman's protagonists eventually attain their desired form of *bildung* and are awarded with a new station in life, the journey that takes them to this point is fraught with a tension that continues to affect them. Gaiman alludes to this in always keeping the door to their traumatic pasts open in at least one way. When analysed chronologically, it is easily observed that this trend manifests more and more leading to its hitherto conclusion in *Ocean*. Richard Mayhew finds a new life, yet his realisation is complicated by the necessary rejection of his old one. The same applies to *Stardust*'s Tristran, who must leave his family and all of Wall behind. While he embraces this opportunity gleefully, Gaiman cast the lingering melancholia of a traumatic past in the forever displaced Yvaine. *American Gods*, with its many endings and follow-up short stories, seems hesitant to embrace a notion of an ending altogether, not only the sort of eucatastrophic ending proposed by Tolkien. Out of all of Gaiman's protagonists, Shadow perhaps best evokes Frodo Baggins' fate at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*: like Frodo, Shadow too must head for new shores. But where we are not told what happens to Frodo in the following, "Black Dog" insinuates that Shadow will never fully recuperate from the dual betrayal of his wife and father and that their ghosts continue to haunt him. *Coraline*'s eucastrophe is complicated by the persistence of the other mother's hand, waiting trapped in a deep, dark well. This hints at a darker truth to be uncovered in adulthood, but the novella ends before the hand (and thus the psychological troubles it stands for) can find a

way to escape. *Anansi Boys* is the rare text in which everyone gets exactly what they deserve: both Charlie and Spider end the novel happily married, with successful careers, and the sort of strong family ties the novel previously positioned as lacking. But even in this thoroughly optimistic text, Gaiman reaffirms the presence of trauma in his refusal to kill the antagonists (like the other mother, both Tiger and Graham Coats are entrapped, but alive) and in the continued split of the brothers into two people. *The Graveyard Book*'s ending goes out on a high note: a smiling Bod leaves the graveyard behind, knowing that he will return someday after his adventures are done. Yet, to do so, he must die. Finally, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* circumvents eucatastrophe and returns to catastrophe: with Lettie as dead as her kind can be and the narrator forever altered, the novel refuses to engage in a happily ever after. Gaiman effectively engages in a presentation of a 'tinged' eucatastrophe. This subform re-establishes its terminological origins to the catastrophe, which in its traumatic absolutism can never be entirely averted. *Bildung* keeps it at bay, but just that.

Gaiman's insistence on everyman heroes (cf. Jenkins 39 and Korte 87) who undergo relatable, but unique journeys of development (the general developmental being a metanarrative, the specific variation of it serving as a postmodern deconstruction thereof) critically contrasts the understanding of trauma as unique, incomprehensible, and particular. While the *bildungsroman* can be understood as a unique depiction of a commonplace experience, trauma is a unique experience that can be neither fully nor conventionally depicted. While Nadal and Calvo caution that "we should not conclude that we are all victims and everything is traumatic" (2), the preceding analysis has shown the extent to which trauma serves as the motif that both enables and complicates the omnipresent *bildungsroman* plot in the fantasy genre. In doing, it speaks to its unsettling impact on the many protagonists populating Neil Gaiman's various fantasy landscapes.

So where does this leave us? Which advancements has Gaiman brought to fantasy literature and how can they be understood in an overarching conceptualisation of the genre against the backdrop of the ubiquitous monomyth and the ever-present seven basic plots? As Fowler writes,

> [w]hen we assign a work to a generic type, we do not suppose that all its characteristic traits need to be shared by every other embodiment of the type. In particular, new works in the genre may contribute additional characteristics. In this way a literary genre changes with time, so that its boundaries cannot be defined by any single set of characteristics. (38)

Gaiman's combined use of the *bildungsroman* as a plot pattern and trauma as a not only a frequent, but a dominating motif have broadened previously existing genre expectations for fantasy. It should however be noted that is the fantasy genre that his contributions change and expand, not trauma writing or the *bildungsroman*. The latter being, in its pure form, best understood as a historical genre, the former somewhat continues to evade rightful categorisation outside of narratives that focus on historical or personal atrocities grounded in reality. While Gaiman uses trauma as a motif, and *bildung* as a plot pattern, his novels revolve around the fantastic. By contradistinction, Toni Morrison for instance, who has written at the intersection of fantasy and magical realism with the Pulitzer Prize winning *Beloved* (1987), too uses the kind of traumatic metaphors Gaiman employs so frequently, but in her narrative, the whole plot is shaped around that exploration of trauma, whereas Gaiman shapes his plots around the protagonist's development, the ensuing exploration of trauma and the desired exploration of other, fantastic worlds. Morrison's heroines have no alternative Other World to discover, they remain rooted in the familiar confines of our reality, in which the fantastic makes brief and highly metaphorical appearances. In Gaiman's world, everything is supernatural, including the traumatic origins. In the question of why trauma and the *bildungsroman* change fantasy literature, but fantasy literature does not necessarily change the *bildungsroman* or trauma writing, the answer rest in question of perspective and authorial intention: how heavy does the supernatural weigh? In Gaiman's novelistic writing, it remains absolutely dominant. It is the exploration of fantasy as a locus of desire that drives his narratives, but he makes these more complex in their acknowledgement of the way traumatic experiences shape who we are and where we go.

This postmodern combination of seemingly contradictory elements has made his works more complex, contributing to their positive critical and commercial reception. Fowler, writing in 1982, finds that "[w]ith modern genres, boundaries are even more indistinct and shifting, overlapping and allowing intricate mixture. Necessary elements are sparse" (39). While Gaiman only maintains the supernatural as a dominant form in his approach to fantasy, thus feeding into Attebery's conceptualisation of the fuzzy set and Manlove's formulation of "substantial or irreducible element of the supernatural" (1), he uses the fantastic to chart narratives of desire and belonging that upset the status quo and aim for a new one. In his

constant depiction of journeys of development, that both reference previous modes of storytelling as well as present new ones, Gaiman's position as an innovative writer against the backdrop of literary tradition is affirmed. As Gaiman argues, "[w]ithout our stories we are incomplete" ("Myth" 75): in his traumatic *bildungsroman* fantasy, he shows how *stories* strive toward completion, and speak to the desire of continuous personal development despite – or because of – that which seeks to hold us back. This is in keeping with Campbell's assertion that "[i]t has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (*Hero* 11). Pain, Gaiman's novels insinuate in their (mostly) optimistic variation of the monomyth, is a part of life, but one that can entail what Butler calls a "strange fecundity" (quoted in Bolaki 36). What pain needs though is an acknowledgement, not a repression. As the nursery rhyme Mrs Owens sings once more to her son before he embarks out into a new world demands,

> *Face your life*
> *Its pain, its pleasure,*
> *Leave no path untaken* (*Graveyard* 306)

Bod muses that this is a "difficult challenge, but I can try my best" (307). This sentiment is echoed across all of Gaiman's novels and therefore constitutes and affirms a plot pattern of his own making.

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