

GENDER RE-BALANCING IN THE WORKS OF NEIL GAIMAN

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Neil Gaiman's female characters challenge the gender-imbalanced status quo typical to myth and fantasy genres. Scholarly research has previously explored these powerful women and identified them as thresholds—conduits to a magical universe who aid and offer passage to Gaiman's male protagonists. This thesis begins with a deeper examination of gender roles in Gaiman's magical multiverse by tying into concepts of anthropological structuralism. Within this new framework, Gaiman's women are analyzed using Joseph Campbell's hero criteria as they embark on physical and spiritual journeys. The result is a post-modern fantasy heroine unlike any existing archetypal female. Empowered and equal to her hero counterpart, the Gaiman woman ultimately reconciles long-standing thematic, generic, and gender binaries—a groundbreaking change to the centuries-old myth and fantasy genre that has hitherto required strict opposition in all things.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Snow White breaks a sleeping spell by Chris Riddell, illustrator of *The Sleeper and the Spindle* by Neil Gaiman

Introduction

Female characters in Neil Gaiman's works often inhabit threshold spaces, doors, and liminal passageways that usher characters between worlds, landscapes, or journeys. These women create worlds and spaces of their own in an awesome display of feminine power and tend to replace the males, who tend to dominate myth and fantasy narratives, as leading protagonists. It is sometimes unclear whether Gaiman's women function as muses for male journeys or as heroines on journeys in their own right. This thesis will investigate them as heroines, but it will also articulate the way in which they serve as generic threshold figures crossing boundaries between binary oppositions.

One traditionally gendered binary opposition is that between nature and culture, a foundational boundary in myth and anthropology dividing things beyond human cultivation and things under the control of humans. Upon reading the works of Neil Gaiman, one should consider anthropologist Sherry Ortner's 1976 article, "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" In the article, Ortner explains that across cultures females are considered closer to nature than males due to their roles as procreators, their ability to lactate and nurse infants, and the resulting psychic structure which root them more deeply in species survival roles. Women are practical, realistic, and "embedded in things as given" (Ortner 82). Contrastingly, men are physiologically free to engage and shape culture. Man's greatest survival contribution is to protect the family and to acquire food. Therefore, men draw boundaries, build fences, erect lookout towers, make roads, and create the rules of civilization. Man, in every known culture, seeks to transcend and dominate the problems of nature, or things as given, by "transforming things through the superimposition of abstract categories and transpersonal values" (Ortner 78). If man is

symbolically aligned with culture and suppresses nature through philosophical, political, and scientific means, then, by extension, he dominates woman, the symbol of nature.

Ortner's binary is altered when read through a Gaiman lense. The opposition between nature and culture transforms into a binary of *magic* and culture. Women remain the symbol of nature but they are elevated as they enable boundary crossing. This thesis will begin by discussing Gaiman's female characters in the context of Ortner's thesis—that women are to nature as men are to culture—situating magic within the framework, and then it will establish and explore the female mythic journey. Finally, this study will investigate the resulting convergence of binaries and feminist implications for post-modern fantasy.

Female in the Middle

Ortner defines the universal gender binary as it relates to nature and culture, yet she concedes that women are not aligned to nature with the same purity that men are aligned to culture because women are active participants in culture as well. Woman's inclusion and contribution to society cannot be denied since she is charged, after all, with producing cultured human beings. Women perform a kind of converting function between nature and culture especially with reference to the socialization of children. On the other end of the spectrum, in many cultures woman are also charged with preparing bodies for burial. Women's exclusive interaction with the dead brings them to heaven/hell/afterlife's door—a place far away from culture which teams with life. Thus, the female gender bookends the spectrum of life by darkening the doorways of birth and death. For this reason, womankind align more closely to paleo characteristics than man,

though they are not entirely primal or animalistic due to their connection to society. Thus, woman occupies an intermediate position between culture and nature, an in-between space that still situates her subordinately to culture and man.

Neil Gaiman—critically acclaimed, award-winning, and best-selling author—deviates from Ortner's concept in his fiction, a notable achievement when considering that men have dominated women in nearly every culture throughout recorded time and more often than not in fiction. The trans-Atlantic author of just about every kind of genre one could imagine empowers his feminine characters by adding a third element to the mix: magic. As it relates to Ortner, this study defines magic as that which exceeds scientific explanation of nature, literally the super-natural, and is an extension of the "embedded in things as given" feminine characteristic (Ortner 83). Ortner employs a helpful metaphor that contributes to this theory. She describes culture as a small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system. In this image, woman, or that which is intermediate between culture and nature, is the vegetation located on the "continuous periphery of culture's clearing; and though it may thus appear to stand above and below (and beside) culture, it is simply outside and around it" (Ortner 78). If the metaphor is adjusted to include Gaiman's restructuring, then magic is the stuff beyond the visible vegetation that surrounds the clearing—magic happens in the shadows and dappled light of the deep forest. Around the edges of the clearing, however, is the space where women function as a threshold between Gaiman's very mundane and very fantastic worlds. Women are the central link between magic and culture. The effect of this Gaiman-shifted binary is that women are placed on equal footing with men due to their crucial gateway to magical functions. Men no longer fully dominate women in the Gaiman universe

because only through women, these magical thresholds, can men enter the supernatural. Women in the supernatural realm are what men are in the cultural realm.

Kristine Larsen explores the topic in her 2012 work, “Doors, Vortices and the In-Between Quantum Cosmology Goddesses in the Gaiman Multiverse.” By evaluating Gaiman's women through a quantum scientific lens (an unexpected viewpoint due to its presumed objectivity), Larsen brands many of Gaiman's protagonists “Quantum Cosmological Goddesses.” These goddesses embody primal and natural characteristics such as death, animals, water, blood, and elemental earth. She also symbolizes feminine cultural phenomena such as procreation, sexuality/sensuality, nurturing/healing behavior, or survival qualities. Gaiman's women reside on middle ground touching both society and magic. In this feminine space, nature abounds and is represented by symbols of the mother, maiden, birth, blood, and food. Establishing this expanded sociological and cultural foundation which elevate women in terms of functional equality, Gaiman's settings and plots take off with modified thrust and vector to exciting destinations.

The Lady Door, the leading female character of Gaiman's 1996 breakout novel, *Neverwhere*, begs initial consideration in this particular study. For starters, her very name implies transcendental characteristics. While her entire family has entry-type monikers, Door's name is the most literal and therefore marks the strongest threshold character of the novel. Door's status as a magical entryway comes in many other shapes and forms. Door is entirely rooted in London Below society due to her affluent underground family. While the aristocratic structure of London Below is unclear (what exactly constitutes a marquis or a duke? A barony or fiefdom?), the House of Temple and Arch is the only traditional family unit mentioned throughout the novel, implying a rarity

akin to royalty. Door's father, Lord Portico, a politician and inventor, pushed for social reform in London Below with noteworthy traction. Even after his gruesome murder, his influence continues to afford Door all manner of respect. This social deference may seem to place Door firmly on the cultural/male side of the spectrum. Additionally, the thoroughly urban setting of *Neverwhere* seems to negate any proximity to nature; however, the primal setting of the subterranean, urban jungle belies any such notions notwithstanding its literal existence and position in London's infrastructure.

Door has an aboriginal connectedness to London Below that goes beyond simple good breeding. London Below is anti-London both culturally and architecturally—the primitive shadow that bares “no resemblance to the reality of the shape of the city above” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 7). Everywhere underground there is hunger, trade of shabby goods, and a veritable hustle for survival as demonstrated by the constant pilgrimage to the floating market despite the danger of the journey. The desperate need for commerce, even the primitive commerce of London Below, is symptomatic of a resource shortage. Moreover, a huge, mythical beast lurks somewhere in the Underneath. Risk and death are prevalent, as the marquis de Carabas, Anasthesia, and Hunter all attest. Door physically navigates this underworld with ease. Even Hunter, who is a true predator at the core with unparalleled instinct for pursuit, asks Door for directions as times, “Which way to the Black Friars, my lady” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 147)? Additionally, she comprehends the extensive packs and tribes of the Underside which demonstrates a bond with the space that exceeds geographical understanding. She is cultured (according to London Below standards), but she abounds with primordial characteristics as evidenced during her first meeting with the novel's male protagonist, Richard Mayhew.

Door is the quintessential model of Gaiman's threshold figure who unifies nature and culture through her navigation of the male labyrinth. Through the vehicle of Door's body, Gaiman uses blood and mother-rites to connect Door to three major feminine symbols—blood, the maiden, and the mother. When Richard first encounters Door, she is incapacitated with injury. When he picks her up, "Richard felt the sticky warmth of blood soaking into his shirt. Sometimes, he realized, there is nothing you can do" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 17). When Door awakens, she immediately tends to her most basic needs by binding up her wound and asks for Richard's assistance. The reader is to understand by Richard's conduct that he is everything opposite of Door: placid, ordinary, and feeble. When faced with a resourceful, battle-hardened woman, "Richard was beginning to feel a little out of his depth." In order to avoid discomfort, he offers a weak excuse about not knowing much about first aid. Door decides to indulge him, "Well...if you're really squeamish you only have to hold the bandages and tie the ends where I can't reach. You do have bandages, don't you" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 21)? Blood is the symbol of menstruation, childbirth, and life in general. Door literally spills her lifeblood on Richard, figuratively giving him life by stirring him from an inauthentic existence. Meanwhile, Richard demonstrates how powerless men are while in the female, sanguine sphere. He feels incapable of leaving Door in good conscience, thereby eliminating any agency of his actions. Richard has no more control over the situation than he has control over the moon's phases (or control over menstruation). The erotic symbolism in this scene is strong and wrought with implication. Richard is the bewildered recipient of the maiden's blood and thus undergoes a visceral and physical transformation, an imitation of the marriage act. These bloody symbols connect Door with the maiden archetype.

In addition to the maiden, Door also embodies the mother archetype with her simple management of Richard, who very much resembles an adolescent with his meager protestation of applying first aid. He claims that he doesn't know *how* to help. Door takes a patient pause—"Well"—before deciding how to bend Richard to her will (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 45, emphasis added). She utilizes the trick of the false ultimatum by saying that if he cannot stomach the task, all he has to do is help her with the bandages. Door employs mother-like techniques by offering an illusion of control, like a parent giving a child the choice of a bath before or after dinner. The child gets a bath either way. Similarly, Richard is helping her dress her wound whether he feels squeamish or not.

Blood is a token of life, as previously established, but also death. Door preserves her life using Mr. Ross's blood as payment. When facing her would-be murderer, she finds some grit, "Until that moment, she had never thought she could do it. Never thought she would be brave enough, or scared enough, or desperate enough to dare. But she reached up one hand to his chest, and she *opened*..." (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 12). Setting the subject of blood aside for a moment, the primary characteristic that roots Door to elemental earth is her supernatural "opening" powers. Her father teaches her, "the most important thing for you to understand is this: all things want to open. You must feel that need, and use it.... All you have to do is let it do what it wants" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 143). In other words, in order to open something, one must understand the nature of the object and let it be. Practicing on a padlock, Door "suddenly understands, and somewhere in her heart, she lets it be what it wants to be. There is a loud click, and the padlock opens (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 143). Her comprehension of this phenomenon

is a mystical experience in that there is very little technique to actually master. Door needs only to recognize the phenomenon for what it is, a very feminine sentiment due to its understanding and appreciation of an object's nature—an interesting word play on the subject. The concept that man-made objects have their own disposition is a philosophical inversion of the nature-culture binary in itself. Even so, Door “links together science and the supernatural (experiences outside science) in her unique powers” (Larsen 267).

This power to open things comes at a very real corporeal cost. Everything she opens takes a power toll from her body. The novel begins with Door's “harum-scarum” flight away from danger: “She had been running for four days now... was hungry, exhausted, and more tired than a body could stand, and each successive door was proving harder to open” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 5). Not only does the magic take biological energy, but there is an analogous psychic/bodily action necessary to open something. Door “put the palm of her hand on the door...let [it] tell her where it opened, what it could do, finding those places inside herself that corresponded with the door” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 219). The elemental connection between magic and her body is real. The magic requires the same fuel as the body—air, water, food, and rest.

Returning to the subject of blood, Door's initial first-hand experience with death requires her to draw from an unknown reserve of inner strength. When Door opens Mr. Ross's chest, “He gasped, and tumbled onto her. It was wet and warm and slippery” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 12). The chest cavity and heart, by deduction, are objects that want to be open. Figuratively, an open heart is a very romantic concept. The reality is both gruesome and disconcerting. Door, like any woman, has the capacity to marshal life into the world given the correct conditions. As an opener, her touch can inflict death onto

anyone she decides to “unlock.” Impressively, Door finds even more strength in her exhausted reserves only minutes later. Cornered by two villains, “the girl pulled whatever she could find deep inside her soul, from all the pain, and the hurt, and the fear. She was spent, burnt out, and utterly exhausted. She had nowhere to go, no power left, no time. . . . And as she began to pass out, she tried to open a door” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 16). Door’s exceptionalism does not simply lie with her magic abilities; rather, her magic highlights the extraordinary determination that springs directly from her feminine nature. Door travels the indistinct border between magic and culture with greater range than her heroine contemporaries.

Laura Moon of Gaiman’s 2001 masterpiece, *American Gods*, is another “natural” creature in the atypical manner that is so indicative of Gaiman’s characters. Expectations for a character functioning in an in-between, natural space produces images of a gardener, florist, or hiker. Laura is none of these things, yet Gaiman constructs a threshold character nonetheless through subtle hints. Descriptions of Laura before her death are deliberately sparse due to a limited omniscient narrator who mimics Shadow’s private persona. Still, the details slip out of Shadow’s careful grasp to reveal Laura’s strongest “natural” impressions. First, Laura fills the caretaker void left by the untimely death of Shadow’s mother. For example, she cooked Shadow’s favorite chili. This detail may seem innocuous since food is not a strong theme in *American Gods*. Yet, those who are familiar with Gaiman’s sprawling oeuvre know that the author’s treatment of food reveals much of the consumer. According to Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard (who study the treatment of food in their article “The Key is in the Mouth: Food and Orality in *Coraline*”), good food is synonymous with home and safety and therefore has strong ties

to individualization. Also, food is a symbol of women's intermediate position as she performs the essential converting task from raw to cooked, as proposed by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. According to philosopher Jaques Lacan, food is "a highly elaborated social artifact—food is produced, bought, cooked, prepared, consumed in a mannered form—and thus transcends the demands of hunger and inexorably functions symbolically" (Lacan 254). The Hempstock women in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* are a prime example of Gaiman's food treatment. It is through delicious comfort food (described elaborately throughout the novel) that the Hempstocks provide the narrator with healing, distraction, and comfort from deeply disturbing events such as abuse, powerlessness, and betrayal. Laura's chili provides the same security for Shadow. This conversion from raw to cooked is something that Shadow cannot perform, nor can he achieve the same security that Laura's food provides. His attempts at making chili fall short:

On more than one occasion Shadow tried to get her to show him how she made it. He had even written down the sequence of events...and he had once made Laura's chili for himself on a weekend when she had been out of town. It had tasted okay—it was certainly edible . . . but it had not been Laura's chili. (Gaiman, *American* 30)

Emphasis on the maternal function of Gaiman's threshold "goddesses" link them to a core literary archetype—the mother. By aligning these characters to the Great Mother, the goddess dominating all mankind, Gaiman's female characters inherit the great powers of death, savagery, beauty, and creation. In life, Laura revealed maternal characteristics through her overall care for Shadow, even rivaling the care of his own mother. Of course the untimely passing of his only parent does not warrant blame;

however, the resultant psychological scars affect Shadow's destiny. Particularly, the relationship between mother and son "come[s] into play in sexual relations, impelling people toward others with whom they can reenact the experiences of pleasure and remedy those of pain that they underwent in their early years" (Dean 2). Laura is Shadow's selection in this endeavor. As a child, Shadow was shy outcast. He experienced a growth spurt as an adolescent and surprised his peers one fall by emerging tall and muscular. His new physique placed him firmly in the dumb-jock demographic where no one correctly estimated his worth. He shot between two vastly different forms of ridicule in less than a year, enduring back-to-back crisis of identity fraught with powerlessness. Shadow is described as "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" (Gaiman, *American* 186). Laura was the first to have expectations for Shadow, which that he aspired to live up to. This interplay echoes that of Door and Richard. Laura also functions as an intermediate, socializing Shadow as a mother would a child.

There are more clues that validate Laura as a motherly woman. "When they got married Laura told Shadow that she wanted a puppy" (Gaiman, *American* 9), a typical precursor to children. Laura's maternal desires reveal themselves again later in the novel. It's Christmas Eve and Shadow can see Laura, who is now dead, outside of her mother's residence. Laura looks into the home, "watching her mother, and her sister and her sister's children and husband in from Texas, home for Christmas. Out in the darkness, that was where Laura was, unable not to look" (Gaiman, *American* 227). Longing for the missed opportunities in life, or making Christmas wishes perhaps, Laura seeks out two

mothers—her own and her sister. Laura is “unable not to look,” which is to say that the sensible action would be to avert her gaze and avoid the torture of unattainable desires. Yet, her longing is stronger than her pain, and so she stares. According to Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, the heroine’s journey always seems to be centered on the achievement of some kind of freedom but also a reunion with a maternal principle that was lost to her. It is the same maternal energy that sustains women through the immense pain of childbirth, a woman’s agony born solitarily. It is easy to overlook Laura’s fecundity because she dies young, because Shadow can’t bear to speak of her, and because her zombie persona dramatically overshadows her mortality.

Laura’s death figuratively ignites Shadow’s life. Laura tells him on a few occasions that Shadow was never *really* alive during the time she knew him. She admits, “It’s like there isn’t anyone there. You know? You’re like this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world” (Gaiman, *American* 326). According to Jungian philosophy, the “Shadow” represents the aspects of people that are reserved and hidden from other people. If we take Shadow’s name to be the mark of the man, then his essence is stealth. Shadow slips through life undetected. “But when you’re dead you get to see things clearer,” Laura says (Gaiman, *American* 326). Shadow becomes unavoidably brilliant—magnesium bright—upon her death. Laura tells him, “You shine like a beacon in a dark world” (Gaiman, *American* 136). As the catalyst to Shadow’s life, or rather, to his living with a purpose, Laura fulfills a procreative role. Though her magic is imported by way of a gold coin, she steers it true while she is in its possession.

In her new role as a zombie, a middle point between life and death, Laura acts as Shadow’s guide to their magical surroundings. In this role, Laura is not to be confused

with Zorya Polunochnaya and Bast, two goddesses who guide Shadow spiritually (more on this later). Laura's direction is more practical and elemental. She is like a seasoned immigrant who passes on hard-learned lessons to the new traveler (a fitting metaphor since Laura was a travel agent, enabling the journeys of others, when she was alive).

Laura knows something of the supernatural plane that Shadow seems to have wandered into, presumably because the dead know things that the living do not. In an ironic, unexpected Gaiman-esque way, Laura fulfills the role of a nature deity. Like Tolkien's Tom Bombadil, who plays the role of mentor to Frodo, Laura too is a "character who appears when the hero is in distress and help him with advice" (Ramaswamy 173). She gives Shadow inane, sensible instruction like to take a jacket before heading out into the cold, "Put on a coat, hon. You'll freeze" (Gaiman, *American* 135). Laura also gives less inane advice, like prompting Shadow to steal a car in order to escape danger. She explains the philosophy of the world of gods and magic, a world normally revealed upon one's death. On the topic of murder, she explains, "I mean, it's not such a big deal. You're not so prejudiced any more" (Gaiman, *American* 134). Laura also warns Shadow broadly of the danger that he is in, but ultimately she finds it simpler to become his protector. "Someone has to watch out for you, and I told you I would, didn't I?" (Gaiman, *American* 135). Laura kills many men for Shadow, ushering the dead into the beyond, brokering souls out of the world the same way women bring them into the world. Beyond any mortal woman, Laura experiences the entire cycle of life (figurative procreation), death (first- and second-hand), and the unexpected other (immortality, but not quite Judeo-Christian heaven). Later in the novel, she visits Shadow as he is dying. She repeats her message from earlier, but with a stronger maternal conviction. Laura

reassures Shadow, “like a mother to a child she said, ‘Nothing’s gonna hurt you when I’m here” (Gaiman, *American* 417). Laura qualifies as a Golux, or “children of nature who save the hero,” a term Northrop Frye’s used to describe Bombadil and his idealized wife, Goldberry—Laura saves Shadow and despite her many flaws, she is blameless in Shadow’s eyes. In her new domain of death, Laura is instinctual, shrewd, and instructive—all feminine characteristics that befit the “natural” definition.

Heroine or Muse? Gender Leveling & the Spiritual Journey

Gaiman’s women are firmly established in the middle of civilization and Faerie/dreamland/the paranormal. The substantiation of this magic-culture binary (with women as the fulcrum between the two) is a critical jumping off point in staging the feminine journey. In Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the female is never a hero. She never ascends beyond four common scenarios: she is a platonic helper to the male, she is the prized object “won” at the end of the journey, she is the thing to be destroyed, or “her task is to be the mastered world” (Pearson 177). Only the male hero travels the physical and figurative road from childhood to adulthood, following a familiar pattern: “The hero feels something’s lacking in his life. He then goes off to recover it or to discover a life-giving elixir. There’s a cycle of going and returning” (J. Campbell 123). It is unnecessary to mention how many critics have picked up the feminist argument and shined a light on the gaping holes in Campbell’s observations. Valerie Estelle Frankel, author of *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine’s Journey through Myth and Legend*, further explains, “women oppressed by hero myths see only two choices: be the helpless

princess sobbing for rescue, or be the knight, helmeted and closed off in a cubicle of steel, armored against the natural world, featureless behind a helmet. Only men or those who act like them, with business suits and power lunches and strategy charts, will succeed” (3). The heroine’s only other option is to cross-dress and ensue violence as a way to achieve freedom through masculine means.

Fantasy and myth literature is wrought with female warrior figures: Eowyn, the Lady of Rohan; Shieldmaidens of Norse mythology; Sakthi of Hindu pantheon who fights demonic forces and is most powerful when she is alone. The development of magic or mind powers as a female escape from oppression (“magic as the new cross-dressing”) is a kind of compromise reached in contemporary fantasy and myth genres (Tolmie 151). Magic is the new way that women assert their freedom within the traditional patriarchal power structures. However, this model simply doesn’t work in a feminine gender framework. In their 1981 text, *The Female Hero*, an extensive analysis of feminist texts that do battle with traditional notions of femininity, Pope and Pearson argue that when women are portrayed as heroes, their journeys simply do not, cannot, and should not conform to traditional theory. A clash of psyche and motives prevent females from fulfilling the hero’s role without seeming unnatural, forced, or contrived.

Adopting masculinity is not the only way that a heroine can assert her autonomy in traditional fantasy literature. In high fantasy and mythical genres, the most recognizable heroine next to the female warrior is the damsel who escapes disenfranchisement within power structures oriented towards the subordination of women (Tolmie 146). This trope is one of the reasons that so much fantasy has a medieval

setting. The patriarchal structure of this culture/time period consistently provides the external criteria in which the heroine rejects by flight, avoidance, or renouncement of sexuality (feminine means). The woman may, for example, refuse an ill-made match, argue with her father, escape the forced marriage by fleeing into the night, and/or vow celibacy.

The question arises: why is female subjectivity in the fantasy and myth genres so prevalent? Why is this market so conservative to this particular tendency? Individual authors continuously return to the same theme in which women must doggedly forge their own destiny and achieve independence (Tolmie 146). Ultimately, the existence of this stable and popular motif carries with it the implied social commentary that nothing has changed (Tolmie 151). Readers fool themselves into believing that they are rooting for strong women by delighting in their one, repeated success. Still, admonishment for the industry's complacency with this trope cannot be too strong, for in the very least it is an indication that the reader desires change. They buy the books because they feel there *should* be a social adjustment. These novels have little protection, however, from the feminists who decry the constant fantasies of female disempowerment as a plot norm.

Gaiman avoids this conundrum in two ways. First, he does not resort to this familiar setting in his novels. Gaiman's heroines do not fight against a stacked deck of overt feminine subordination. They are women with jobs, birth rights, and an array of ethnicities and sexual tendencies. Joseph Campbell maps the hero's journey into three broad categories, each category having subcategories and ample allowance for individual variation. According to the acclaimed mythologist, every hero goes through a Departure,

Initiation, and Return stage. During these three periods, the hero usually undergoes corresponding story patterns, such as a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return. The same is generally true of Gaiman's heroines. There are marked differences, however, in the female experience. The first detail that delineates Gaiman's heroines from a majority of traditional mythic females is that their spiritual journey is entirely autonomous. The woman is no longer a mere segment of the male journey, fated to only help or hinder his quest (such as the platonic friend, supernatural aide, temptress, etc.). Nor are Gaiman females mere muses. That is not to say that her path is entirely separate from the hero. It is unnecessary for her to travel in total isolation, after all. Rather, the men and women of Gaiman's various works maintain separate agendas and goals. The quality of the female spiritual journey is equal or exceeds that of the male journey in this mythic road category.

American Gods, Gaiman's mythic masterpiece, takes place in the twentieth-century. Laura Moon can easily be mistaken for a muse. At first, Laura's reanimation appears to be nothing more than Shadow's projection, his desire for her to be alive. A close examination of the novel proves otherwise. When Shadow dies during Odin's vigil, he chooses oblivion. Any thought of Laura is so profoundly painful that he opts for nonexistence over reincarnation or afterlife. It is equally doubtful that Shadow's subconscious would produce a version of Laura that kills people and gives graphic details about her infidelity. After Laura murders four guards to free Shadow in the train, he describes himself as "Heart numb, mind numb, soul numb. And the numbness, he realized, went a long way down and a long way back" (Gaiman, *American* 139).

Additionally, a hopeful man would not contemplate suicide so serenely. While shaving in the bathroom of Jacquel and Ibis's Funeral Parlor, Shadow holds the straight razor up to his neck and thinks to himself that death would be a way out. He considers the benefits, "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" (Gaiman, *American* 180).

Laura's presence decidedly does not give Shadow comfort; she is not his projection and her journey is not an off-shoot of the hero's journey. Throughout the novel, it is Laura who progresses through all stages of Campbell's monomyth journey, her death at the beginning of the novel marking the Crossing of the Return Threshold. Though Shadow's vigil to Odin is a mini hero's journey in itself, replete with all three of Campbell's stages (Departure, Initiation, and Return), he makes very little headway in his larger narrative of *American Gods*. At the end of the novel, Shadow progresses to the Initiation phase of his life by entering a healthy state of grief. When asked if he had learned anything from his extraordinary experience he answers, "I don't know. Most of what I learned on the tree I've already forgotten. . . . I think I met some people. But I'm not certain of anything anymore. It's like one of those dreams that change you" (Gaiman, *American* 486).

Laura Moon is one of Gaiman's most complicated characters—clearly she is more than a muse, but one might be hard-pressed to label her a "heroine." She cheats on her husband with his best friend. Three days before Shadow is released from prison, she and her lover die in a car accident, an unfortunate consequence of her performing a

distracting, good-bye fellatio. Laura was also the one to involve Shadow in the petty crime that landed him in prison in the first place. However, it is her character journey (manifested through physical journeys) that earns her the title of “heroine.” Laura’s impetuosity, carnal nature, and rakish past is the necessary trigger for her journey and as well as Shadow’s (the latter being performed in an indifferent fog of shock). It becomes apparent throughout the novel that Laura was the fuel that drove Shadow for the duration of their married life. Recalling Shadow’s lack of presence discussed earlier in this study, it is safe to say that he was a non-entity. Knowing little about their marriage, it appears to the reader that Shadow’s only contribution to the relationship was love and a bit of money. It was a great burden for Laura, living a life for two people. Having filled the hole left behind by his mother, Shadow may have been content to be with Laura for his entire life without recognizing the need for action, input, or involvement.

Loki and Odin reach the same conclusion, “We needed to find out what made you tick. What buttons we could press to make you move. . . . And you had a wife to go back home to. It was unfortunate. Not insurmountable” (Gaiman, *American* 475). Shadow was content with merely existing with his wife. Laura’s most redeeming quality, then, is her decisive behavior, not her discernment. Though not the idyllic woman by the fantasy genre standards, one might also be hard-pressed to call Laura a villain. Her affair with Shadow’s best friend is not a deliberate betrayal but rather a longing for touch, warmth, and life. She gives in to these impulses entirely, even gluttonously—an indulgent trait typically reserved for males. She is thoroughly and piteously human. Laura fits Aristotle’s description of the tragic hero(ine), for her misfortunes occur not through any

terrible character flaw but by an error of judgment. She is among the unfortunate individuals who commit, “without evil intent, great wrongs or injuries that ultimately lead to their misfortune, often followed by tragic realization of the true nature of events that led to this destiny” (Reeves 172).

In this early stage of the novel, the quests for both Laura and Shadow soon become apparent. Upon her death (departure phase) and return as a zombie (initiation phase), Laura tells Shadow that she wants to be alive again and places the burden on him to produce a solution. She “wants to feel the blood pumping through her body, hot and salty” (Gaiman, *American* 137). Her naked entitlement is a refreshing deviation from the fantasy and myth tropes to see a woman speak her desires, even if they appear selfish. This is atypical of the hero’s spouse, who virtuously puts his safety before her own needs. Instead, Laura makes no qualms about asking Shadow this favor when by all accounts, she owes him a much greater debt. She tell him, “Make it happen, hon. You’ll figure it out. I know you will” (Gaiman, *American* 137).

Laura asks Shadow to find a way; she does not, however, join in the search for things/ways that will bring her back to life. She has some magical capacity, perhaps an additional sense that all of the dead acquire, but the extent of her powers is unclear. Laura explains, “I don’t know much more than I did when I was alive. Most of the stuff I know now that I didn’t know then I can’t put into words” (Gaiman, *American* 58). She uses this supernatural sight solely for Shadow. Laura does not use her newly acquired skills to acquire personal resurrection. Though reanimation is the goal she speaks aloud, she privately has a single mission—to protect Shadow. From the very start, she warns

him, “You’ve got yourself mixed up in some bad things, Shadow. You’re going to screw it up, if someone isn’t there to watch out for you” (Gaiman, *American* 58). Laura’s claims might be a mere educated guess, but the inference is that she knows *more*. Her warning to Shadow proves to be prophetic. Laura sees how the events will unfold and understands the true danger—that Shadow will die without ever having lived.

Laura makes this audacious request of Shadow to give him some purpose lest he follow Mr. Wednesday blindly and dispassionately to his own demise. Her plot succeeds. Shadow dreams of solutions, which in turn acquaints him with his powers and the forces of the gods and goddesses around him. Somewhere, he even begins to understand that he failed Laura, too. Shadow makes the painful admission, “I was an okay physical trainer, a really lousy small-time crook and maybe not so good a husband as I thought I was. ...He trailed off. ‘How do I help Laura? ...She wants to be alive again. I said I’d help her. I owe her that.’” (Gaiman, *American* 218). Laura herself may not recognize the secondary benefit of her request: she has provided Shadow a way to fulfill his obligations as a husband, to make up for his short comings while Laura was alive. If he succeeds in bringing her back to life, then it is all the better, but living again is not Laura’s primary quest.

Laura’s Initiation phase is spent conceptualizing what exactly she wants to achieve as a zombie, which appears to be a limited timeframe judging by her rate of physical decay. Gaiman’s limited omniscient narrator does not reveal how Laura arrives at this conclusion; however, the specific episode is irrelevant: her real pursuit is simple redemption. This tragic heroine wishes for atonement and she knows that the only way to

accomplish this is by making Shadow whole—this is her true quest. In chiding Shadow for not being truly alive, Laura “had hoped, perhaps, to see a spark of raw emotion, something that would show her that the man she had once been married to was a real man, a live one. And she had seen nothing at all” (Gaiman, *American* 436). This discovery of purpose fulfills the monomyth feature wherein the hero/heroine discovers a source of power that fuels them to the end of the journey.

At each subsequent conversation, Laura tries to awaken Shadow. At the narrative turning point, she witnesses the success of her actions, “Now, dying on the tree, Shadow was utterly alive. She had watched him as the life had faded, and he been focused and real. ...He had forgiven her...perhaps he had forgiven her. It did not matter. He had changed; that was all she knew” (Gaiman, *American* 436). Her quest achieved, Laura drops the façade of her other request easily, an admission that it was only a means to an end. In the denouement of the novel, Laura asks Shadow:

“Did you ever figure out how to bring me back from the dead?” she asked.
 “I guess,” he said. “I know one way, anyway.”
 “That’s good,” she said. She squeezed his hand with her cold hand. And then she said, “And the opposite? What about that?”
 “The opposite?”
 “Yes,” she whispered. “I think I must have earned it.” (Gaiman, *American* 481)

While Laura certainly enables Shadow's self-discovery, her journey is independent. She does it by choice, she does it on her own terms, and she meets her own goals of seeing Shadow as an animated participant in his life as well as atoning for her wrongs.

Gaiman’s attention-grabbing fairy tale, *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, rejects the notion that a male hero is necessary at all. The characters are never named but strongly

hinted at, so for purposes of this discussion, their nicknames will be invoked. “Snow White,” now a queen, sets out on a journey to rescue “Sleeping Beauty.” It is now Sleeping Beauty who is afflicted with the magic sleep and Snow White’s experience with breaking this particular spell qualifies her for a quest without male hero augmentation. Instead, Snow’s companions include three dwarves, magical beings who are mostly resistant to the sleep plague. Mainly, they serve as the sounding board, the literary device driving dialogue for Snow White and the third person narrator. The dwarves exist so that Snow White can give voice to her logic for the reader’s enlightenment. The antagonist in this fairy tale fusion is also female, furthering the point that the fairy tale genre can succeed without machismo. The project’s iconic picture (see Fig. 1) cements the notion that women do not need nor should wait for a prince charming. Snow White, clad in armor, plucks a flower from the enchanted, thorny vines and places it in her hair. Upon finding the sleeping woman, she does the deed without hesitation, giving her a most capable kiss to break the spell.

Another way that Gaiman levels gender-biased settings is through clever inversion of traditional male and female roles. Many people failed to rescue Sleeping Beauty in *Sleeper*, not just princes and knights: “And brave men...Aye and brave women too, they say, have attempted to travel...to the castle at its heart, to wake the princess.... But each and every one of those heroes ended their lives lost in the forest” (Gaiman, *Sleeper* 16). Women are mentioned casually, easily grouped into the hero demographic because in this universe women embark on quests of gallant feats. As the sleep plague begins to spread over the land, Snow White realizes that she has the best chance of

withstanding the magic, having done so before. She promptly acts, calling off her wedding, putting her first minister in charge of the kingdom in her absence, and evacuating the cities in the most danger. Gaiman's economic prose reveals much:

She called for her fiancé and told him not to take on so, and that they would still be married, even if he was but a prince and she a queen, and she chucked him beneath his pretty chin and kissed him until he smiled. She called for her mail shirt. She called for her sword. She called for provisions, and for her horse, and she rode out of the palace, towards the east." (Gaiman, *Sleeper* 21)

Snow White shoulders the burden of her kingdom with care and a most proficient command. Many of Grimms' and Perrault's fairy tales ascribe such traits to the king or lord of the domain, such as Snow White's father, Sleeping Beauty's father, or Cinderella's father. Not only does Gaiman's Snow White inherit and rule the kingdom (without having to marry), but she keeps her fiancé out of danger and prefers the company of dwarves who are magical and can better withstand the curse. These are all noble and chivalrous characteristics befitting a brave Arthurian knight, but they are also pragmatic decisions. Her choice in company offers her the best chance of success; the decision is entirely logical.

Snow White's fiancé is "but a prince." A fairy tale prince who is less powerful than the female protagonist is rare. He is even described as "pretty," which is a decidedly female adjective and implies a certain softness or youthfulness. Snow White does not fall completely into the warrior female literary trap in which all femininity is sacrificed to attain a man's liberty. There is too strong a feminine current coursing through her that goes beyond the flower in her hair. When putting off her intended to go on the quest, she

unleashes considerable feminine wiles. By employing gentle touch, teasing, offering reassurance, and kissing her fiancé, she is able to pursue her own course without offending him. Her sexuality is a powerful tool, and she uses it effectively.

In *Neverwhere*, Richard's figurative journey is secondary to Door's figurative journey in terms of importance and intensity. This is partially due to the power deficit in his relationship with his fiancé. Richard must overcome this handicap prior to beginning his trek to maturity. Jessica smotheres Richard with her extraordinary capacity to control Richard's life and steer his future as if it were entirely hers to captain. Dorothy Dinnerstein's notion that humans have a deep desire to escape the all-encompassing mother and achieve independence manifests itself in Jessica's actions (Dean 1). Desiring to be a grown up in her own right, Jessica achieves this independence by dominating and controlling the forces around her. She enlists (or more accurately, enslaves) Richard into her rigid domestic sphere, convincing both of them that *this* is what it means to be happy:

And when they made love—which they did at Jessica's apartment in fashionable Kensington, in Jessica's brass bed with the crisp white linen sheets (for Jessica's parents had told her that down comforters were decadent)—in the darkness, afterwards, she would hold him very tightly... and she would whisper to him how much she loved him, and he would tell her he loved her and always wanted to be with her, and they both believed it to be true. (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 14)

Richard does not entirely buy into this fantasy as he constantly must ask himself, "how did she end up with me" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 14)? The answer is that Jessica falls into a class of women who desire full authority in their lives. The easiest way to avoid a power struggle in a relationship is to choose someone that is easy to train or break. Richard is easy prey.

Richard is an ordinary man: a disorganized and mediocre worker who contents himself with the unremarkable feat of moving to London from a small Scottish town. On a path to certain averageness, he becomes as thoroughly domesticated as a pet poodle. Jessica euphemizes Richard's pliable nature, seeing in him "an enormous amount of potential, which, properly harnessed by the right woman would have made him the perfect matrimonial accessory" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 8). Richard recognizes immediately that Jessica "was certainly going somewhere" and submits himself to her, letting her drag him to social events and wearing "the kinds of clothes she thought he should wear" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 9). Richard is willingly trapped in an infantile state functioning as nothing more than an appendage to Jessica in her quest for grown up life. Richard's friend recognizes his incarceration with more clarity. Gary asks Richard, "Why do you go out with her? ...She's terrifying" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 9). Gary later refers to Jessica as "the Creature from the Black Lagoon" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 12). These descriptions conform to the traditional quest-fantasy model. Richard, the average boy from the provinces, is chosen for a mission and overcomes the treacherous, monstrous female en route to the target. He does manage to sever this overwhelming bond when he chooses Door over Jessica, but the decision is hardly a conscious assertion of will.

It would be easy to assume that Door is purely a projection of Richard's escape fantasy, similar to Laura's reappearance in Shadow's life. Door is the virtual opposite of Jessica in every way—she is dirty, elfin, kind, raw, and mysterious. She pops up

magically on the street directly in front of Richard as he is on the way to dinner with Jessica and her boss. Yet, Door is summoning a rescuer at that same moment. Fate seems to connect the two and both characters arrive at the Departure point of their journey simultaneously. Upon finding her bleeding on the sidewalk, Richard takes Door to his apartment and “did not, at any point on his walk, stop to think. It was not something over which he had any volition. Somewhere in the sensible part of his head, someone...was telling him how ridiculous he was being” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 18). The implication is that Richard has become enchanted. His agency is entirely subdued and logic obscured as he is pulled into Door’s story arc. Her journey intersects with Richard’s, yet her goals and destiny are entirely her own. In fact, she only needs a safe place to rest, recover, and eat—Richard is indispensable so long as she acquires some basic shelter and amenities. As the novel progresses, if Richards proves himself useful in Door’s mission, though it is often by accident and his success is supremely unexpected. The two arrive at each other serendipitously, two independent journeys crossing paths. The distinction is that Door’s quest has a clear destination—find her family’s murderers and avenge them—while Richard’s journey is entirely reactionary. Caught in Door’s momentum, Richard is forced to come of age alongside her, which is once again unexpected, though delightful.

Richard's journey is substantial in an everyman heroic kind of way. He kills the beast of London, though with much luck and help from Hunter. He manages to survive the Ordeal of the Key at the Black Friars when every man before him going back for centuries has failed. Richard’s most interesting experience, an internal psychic struggle

where Richard must reconcile his life to magical London below or believe that he has suffered a psychotic break, demonstrates the male difficulty of interpreting, accepting, and embodying the supernatural. He manages to overcome the convincing grips of madness, a process that echoes the development of female protagonists before him (primarily of the Victorian era). Much like Alice in the *Alice in Wonderland* texts or Yvaine in Neil Gaiman's novel, *Stardust*, Richard has to "fall down in order to grow up" (Potter 73). Such a descent (whether down a rabbit hole, down from the heavens, or down into London Below) is also a symbolic act of submission—falling into a subordinate state—which bears a weighted social commentary usually reserved for women. The feeling of displacement, of living in a world where all the rules are known to everyone but you, is decidedly a feminine trope. The opposing up and down movements in these novels, according to postmodern and poststructuralist theory, explains how binary opposition fulfills a specific didactic function of female domestication (Potter 74). Outside of the Victorian context, the theory still applies in the *Neverwhere* setting with a few complementing differences. The most significant difference, of course, is that Richard is a twentieth century-male with uncertain criteria of what domestication should look like. This idea creeps into his quest and becomes one of the things he finds in the end.

Despite his formidable achievements, Richard is overshadowed by the strong women in *Neverwhere*. Richard initially does not bring any value to the group. He is unfamiliar with the customs of the Underside, so he cannot offer strategy—Door is the brains of the operation. He has no experience in combat and the entourage is adequately

protected by Hunter. Richard is briefly guided by Anesthesia, a respected, rags-to-riches (relatively speaking) rat-speaker. Also of note are the Velvets, dangerous vampiric women who try to consume Richard's life-force. Door's strategic heroics in the end finish off a series of powerful feminine occurrences, a strong theme throughout the novel that neutralizes the male journey.

In *Neverwhere*, Gaiman reverses traditional literary gender roles. Hunter is the greatest warrior in the history of the Underside. Her skill is unmatched despite her lithe frame. She easily triumphs over the winner of the body guard auditions, a large muscular man with some magical powers. This feat is no trifle since it appears that Hunter contains no magic other than prolonged life. Hunter also defeats a Black Friar in the fighting task, presumably the best man at his trade judging from the important token that he guards. She is constantly saving Richard, who strongly mimics Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (if only slightly more oblivious) in his pursuit of home. Yet Hunter, like Gaiman's Snow White, is more than just a chain-mail cross-dresser. She is an iteration of the Greek goddess Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, wild animals, wilderness, childbirth, virginity, and protector of young girls. The parallels between myth and *Neverwhere* are obvious: Hunter's chief duty is to protect the maiden Door.

Hunter appears to prefer the company of women in general, having worked for the Seven Sisters over thirty spell out years in the past. The suggestion is that Hunter was the body guard or protector to these seven maidens individually at intervals. They too matured into dangerous women. Serpentine, the only sister whom Door and Richard meet, is the only person in London Below in whom Door was "actually and obviously

scared” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 145). She is clad in tattered white, confectionary lace and leather. She is a cross between Charles Dicken’s Miss Havisham, a crone figure, and a dominatrix, who both outwardly or inwardly hold men in contempt and subordination. It seems that Hunter’s influence breeds a dislike or impatience with men, or in the very least, she keeps like-minded company on the matter. A case in point is Serpentine’s female majordomo, a servant who serves as the steward of the household. Note Gaiman’s omission of the easier, more familiar noun “housekeeper” in this instance. He deliberate conveys an Amazonian savagery and self-sufficiency in Serpentine’s domain. Finally, there is an erotic tension between Hunter and Serpentine, “She reached out a white finger and gently stroked Hunter’s brown cheek with it, a gesture of affection and possession” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 145). Lesbianism holds much significance in this context as it bypasses the male-female binary, and all of its clinging social and cultural implications, entirely. At her first appearance in the novel, Hunter establishes this point firmly when she states, “I owe no man fealty” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 68). Men have no useful place in the lives of the Seven Sisters or to Hunter.

In *Neverwhere*, the male characterizations are undermined in various ways. In London Below, the dangerous male characters have simple, crude capabilities, such as strength or fighting skill. The auditioning bodyguards are violent, but their violence hangs on them like a feeble costume. Even those with limited magical powers appear to employ it solely for combat. Their “knack” for telekinesis functions merely as an extension of their fighting persona, or material fashion, which “in bodyguards, seemed to be everything” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 77). Even Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar are thugs

for hire, provoked into violence in exchange for currency—a soulless act. They merely do the bidding of the novel’s true villain. This violence is an unremarkable skill which does little to capture the reader’s attention since danger in *London Below* tends to exceed the standards of the violence of *London Above*. Richard eventually recognizes this difference and discovers “he was not scared of death—or at least, he realized, he was not scared of that death” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 199). Contrastingly, dangerous women abound in *Neverwhere*, even beyond the likes of Hunter and Serpentine. Jessica, Richard’s fiancé, is terrifying in her own right (more on this later). The kind of destruction these women offer springs from an internal and independent source. Fueled by some inner passion, the damage they inflict extends beyond bodily harm, a notion and reality more terrible than pain.

Gaiman’s men in *Neverwhere* also sport physical deficiencies that contradicts their authority. The Earl, for example, is physically inert and senile. Father Abbot is blind, Dunnikin of the sewer is mute, and Old Bailey is covered in bird shit. Even the marquis de Carabas lives on the fluctuating currency provided by his insubstantial trade of personal debts. Finally, Richard is an effeminate man who satisfies motifs usually reserved for the fantasy heroine: forced marriages, subjugation, and subservience. Thus, men are rendered a bit indolent and women recognized for their savagery in *London Below*. Gender roles are effectively leveled in *Neverwhere*.

Gaiman’s women are elevated time and again, further supporting the gender leveling of Gaiman’s universe. In his Newberry Award Winning work, *The Graveyard Book* (2008), women do all of the negotiating. The novel opens with a two-year-old

wandering into a graveyard narrowing escaping being murdered. Bewildered, the graveyard ghosts find him and discuss what is to be done. Freshly dead and insubstantial, the ghosts of the toddler's family present themselves to the ghosts of the graveyard:

But there was a difference between the folk of the graveyard and *this*: a raw, flickering, startling shape the grey color of television static, all panic and naked emotions which flooded the Owenses as if it were their own. Three figures, two large, one smaller, but only one of them was in focus, was more than an outline or a shimmer. And the figure said, *My baby! He is trying to harm my baby!* (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 15).

Only the boy's mother manages to communicate, pleading for help, begging the inhabitants of the graveyard to protect him. Mysteriously, only Mrs. Owens can hear or understand the woman once she begins to fade. This may be primarily due geographical proximity, "Mrs. Owens put an arm around the woman-shape and spoke to it privately" (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 16). Another possibility is that the woman-shape can only summon the strength and control to commune with her proxy. She selects Mrs. Owens as the boy's foster mother. After a brief discussion with Mr. Owens, Mrs. Owens agrees, "'Did you hear that?' Mrs. Owens asked the flickering shape in the graveyard.... It said something to her that no one else could hear, and then it was gone" (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 17). The two mothers—both ghosts and therefore magical thresholds—efficiently transfer the care of the boy between them.

An argument then ensues among the inhabitants of the graveyard, vacillating between the impracticality of ghosts raising a living boy and the urgent necessity to keep the boy safe at all costs. Men and women make valid points for both sides of the argument, and a decision cannot be reached. Ultimately, the deciding vote is made by

The Lady on the Grey. Like Gaiman's famous character Death from the *Sandman* comic series, the Lady carries souls to the afterlife, serving as every man's magical doorway to the beyond. The Lady is a rare visitor, so her mere presence cuts through the squabble as she declares, "The dead should have charity" (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 30). Her words carry more weight than those of all the other substantial characters in the novel combined. Her support of the two mothers' pact implicates a strong matriarchal judicial system in the graveyard. Additionally, the heroics of both Miss Lupescu and Liza Hempstock effectively lay a foundation of feminine capability before gender bias can take root in Bod (more on this later).

The expansive age of the graveyard helps moderate any firm gender prejudice as well. It is hard to be judgmental of one's ghostly neighbors when social customs vary by approximately 2,000 years. Caius Pompeius is never perceived as immodest or primitive despite his toga; in fact, he is revered as the most senior citizen of the graveyard. Similarly, women are afforded a certain deference in death. In fact, Gaiman makes use of the same tool that he uses in "Chivalry," a kind of dispassionate tolerance for the customs of others no matter which period they lived, as will be made clear below. Shed of this patriarchal setting handicap and imbued with magical powers, Gaiman's women have little to struggle against, which proves an interesting and refreshing starting point. Untethered from the culture of repression, they are free to excel or languish as any man. It is under this premise that Gaiman's women must achieve exceptionalism but some do it better than others. The point is that they are offered the opportunity. Thus, Gaiman has opened his own door and set a post-modern precedent for the fantasy genre.

The Feminine Road

The second way that Gaiman avoids the gender pitfall of his predecessors is through careful depiction of women on a physical journey, a subject that has largely eluded academic analysis in reference to his work. The heroine's journey, typically reserved for men in myth, fantasy, and fairy tale genres, is the final piece of Gaiman's equation for writing relevant, contemporary myth. Even Gaiman's journeying woman is in between magic and society. She contains elements of multiple well-established female archetypes—the mother, the maiden, the crone, the healer—and yet she literally and figuratively walks the roads as often as she allows men to bridge into the supernatural (such as Shadow, Fat Charlie, Richard Mayhew, Nobody Owens, and the boy from *Ocean at the End of the Lane*). The Gaiman woman's contribution is not limited to the procreation and socialization of male travelers, rather, these female travelers interact and influence culture alongside men, extending the feminine power from the supernatural binary into the cultural. Moreover, the road woman experiences meaningful adventures in her own right producing a uniquely female mythic journey that does not mimic the format, style, or tropes of the long-established male mythic journey. On this newly-flattened terrain, Gaiman's women embark on a post-modern, mythical journey unique unto themselves. Systematically, his women take to the road—walking, hitchhiking, or maybe reserving airline tickets—to fight mundane battles and in the next turn catch up to an ancient boar the size of a horse. In physically traveling, they undergo spiritual journeys of maturity. The physical and the psychic often coincide to challenge personal

and physical boundaries. Gaiman's women channel and employ their divine nature as females—mothers, maidens, crones, and more—to create an entirely refreshing narrative experience.

Throughout American history, mobility in general has had significant connotations. Yet, it is a difficult task to paint the notion of a “nation on the move” with the right hue considering the varied experiences of colonialization, pioneering mentality, immigration, eighteenth century, manifest destiny, etc. On the surface, the ways people have come to America have been positive. The reality, which includes criminal transportation, slavery, expatriation, brutal conquer, and the general let-downs of achieving the American Dream, is more complex. It is a concept that inspired Gaiman's *Coming to America* digressions in *American Gods*. He uses these tales to confront myths of American mobility, which largely reflect what Alexandra Ganser describes as the “historic perspective of the White (male) Anglo-Saxon Protestant” or the implications of social ascent through freedom (Ganser 16). To be true to American transiency there must exist tales of what Tim Cresswell calls marginality and exclusion (Cresswell 20). Ganser explores this phenomenon further with a pointed focus on women, who have not escaped this segregation. Mobility has been denoted by a distinct “genderedness.” Specifically, there exists a binary in which all things feminine, private, domestic, and stationary sits at one end while the masculine, public, outbound, and civic sits at the other (Ganser 17). The contemporary road novel featuring women, however, destabilizes these gendered constructions of space.

Since *American Gods* is an American road novel featuring Shadow, it is important to begin this analysis by setting up his physical journey in which to compare the female road journey. However, even Shadow's journey is navigated by women at key times. Blomqvist credits Shadow's entire success to three character helpers: Laura, Sam Black Crow, and the buffalo man (Blomqvist 6). Using Blomqvist's own criteria for spiritual guides which include "peripheral characters" with transcendental views of reality, arguments must be made for the aide provided by Zorya Polunochnaya and Bast. Both goddesses have an epistemic understanding of geographical, metaphysical, and moral boundaries (or lack thereof). Together, they also guide Shadow through the philosophical quagmire of death, marking the way at each intersection. Bast tells Shadow, "One [path] will make you wise. One way will make you whole. And one way will kill you. ...If you trust me, I can choose for you." Shadow answers without hesitation, "I trust you" (Gaiman, *American* 424). Shadow's journey inverses the typical quest narrative in that he loses his perceived identity entirely in the end, which challenges the fantasy genre's conventions.

Playing to fantasy readers' expectations regarding the close relationship between lands and heroes, *American Gods* primes the genre reader to expect a quest narrative or a road narrative that will resolve both the protagonist's and the nation's identity crisis (Carroll 318). The notion that space is crucial to the construction of identity is reinforced by the novel's characterization of Shadow, a lifelong émigré without a place to which he relates, and which can help define him. He reveals early in the novel, "I was never in one

place too long as a kid” (Gaiman, *American* 71). As a young boy, Shadow lacked the stability of a home since his mother was a government worker. He recalls that he and his mother lived several places in Europe. For Shadow, the idea of home and identity is related to people rather than locations. *Laura* is Shadow’s home, and thus, he lives where she lives. Any ties to their home town, Eagle Point, are severed when she dies. Lakeside, the bucolic town that comes closest to offering Shadow a home, is an illusion that Shadow himself destroys by killing the old god who has constructed and maintained the very myth of the ideal small American town (Carroll 320). What Shadow finds is that a coherent identity, whether global or national, is impossible to achieve (Carroll 317).

Untethered from person or place, Shadow is employed by Mr. Wednesday and the two take to the road. Suitably, the journey is humbling in all of its segments. The scenery of Midwestern America in winter is bleak, a good match for Shadow’s mood. The automobiles—great symbols of “masculinity and male mobility” (Ganser 17)—are jalopies. Moreover, the cars are switched out for increasingly defunct models as the novel progresses. Shadow even becomes involved in a car chase while driving a “lumbering and ancient Winnebago, which smelled non-specifically but pervasively and unmistakably of male cat” (Gaiman, *American* 299). The road women of *American Gods* do not own cars at all. Surprisingly, this does not preclude them from journeying. Sam Black Crow hitchhikes frequently, traversing state lines and transgressing the cultural expectations regarding gendered spaces. Sam integrates elements of the *picaresque* into the novel by celebrating women’s “wanderlust and recklessness, often with a distinct sense of

postmodern playfulness” (Ganser 34). Unburdened by a vehicle, the empowering nature of travel is focalized and enhanced.

Laura, rather than Shadow, fulfills the reader’s generic expectations. Her point of view is a crucial addition to the novel’s two genres: fantasy and the American road narrative. According to Ronald Primeau, “The literature of American highway has been dominated for the most part of its history by the values and attitudes of white males” (4). Gaiman empowers Laura by allowing her natural fulfillment of the hero’s journey, thereby completing her character arc in a non-patronizing, non-cliché manner that is punctuated by her clever deceptions, daring heroics, and sacrificial death. Laura’s refreshing generic gratification still manages to achieve, “the signifying heroic quest for freedom and flight from domesticity—the American highway myth” (Ganser 3).

Gaiman gives us very few details of Laura’s whereabouts throughout the novel. She goes to Chicago, where she buys boots. Then she heads south, to escape the cold which feels like a great and terrible “nothing” when you’re dead (Gaiman, *American* 325). The significance of both details is profound in that they give three major intimations. First, Laura can physically travel great distances with ease. Somehow, she can afford the mobility, though her means of income and mode of travel is unknown. The setting is contemporary, of course, so there is no expectation that a woman would encounter difficulty in catching a bus or plane. That Laura still manages this fast journey with multiple destinations while legally dead is beyond impressive and resourceful (for either gender). Second, Laura buys fashionable boots, apparently retaining the hobbies and tastes of her former life. It is unknown how often she was able to travel while alive;

in the very least her profession as a travel agent implies an interest in tourism. The third inference is that Laura has complete freedom to choose and pursue her destinations. She thinks that the warm weather might stave off the empty cold of death, so she goes south. She pines for the living when she is unable to accept her death, so she visits her family. When Shadow needs her, she returns. Even when she knows that her appearance will physically disgust him, Laura answers his call. Laura's mobility knows no boundaries, unlike Shadow's travel which is dictated entirely by Mister Wednesday and is occasionally buffeted by his enemies. Even after Wednesday's death, Shadow's actions are bound by his oath to the man. In comparison to Gaiman's other female heroines, Laura is more free to embark on journeys because being dead severs most of her ties with humanity. She has no one in whom she needs to consult for her travels.

The final portion of Laura's road trip is described in detail during a significant part of the novel. The importance of her journey is even highlighted by a narrative clue: Gaiman's first person-omniscient narrator is affixed to Shadow except for half a dozen times. One of these unique point-of-view digressions is when Laura makes her way to Rock City at the climax of *American Gods*. Resourceful as ever, she manages to hitch a ride with one of Shadow's unwitting enemies who stops to ask her for directions. Cleverly, Laura replies, "You know, I don't think I can explain it. But I can show you, if you like" (Gaiman, *American* 447). It is unclear how Laura knows the way out of the magical zone surrounding the world tree, nor how she navigates them to the nearest gas station. It is fitting that this travel agent in life manages to be a guide in death, somehow understanding the magical roads therein. She navigates her way to the final battle, where she kills her chauffeur and kills Loki, a dangerous move and crucial plot occurrence that

clears the way for Shadow's victory. Laura's physical journey parallels her spiritual journey and complements Shadow's spiritual journey. She is among "the deceased traveling their own path in their own covered ways" (Gaiman, *American* 197).

Neverwhere is more likely to be shelved next to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* rather than Kerouac's *On the Road*. Certainly, Gaiman's novel lacks some of the staples of the road narrative—the primary being its setting in Great Britain, not America. Also, the open road is replaced with the urban labyrinth of London Below. Still, there are numerous thematic similarities regarding space and gender as well as the character journeys that make *Neverwhere* a suitable study with regards to the road novel genre. Lady Door is another remarkable example of Gaiman's women of the road. She seeks answers to her family's death, which propels her physical journey. She also continues her father's vision of a united London Below, which launches her intellectual journey. Moreover, Door seeks safety and retribution for her family's murders: a combination of physical and emotional travels. Since Richard is her traveling companion, the pair naturally experience many of the same adventures. The obvious difference is that Door has a firm understanding of who she is and where she belongs from the very beginning. Her journey is reminiscent of that of a prince rising to fill the shoes of a dead king, like Aragorn from *The Lord of the Ring* saga. She deviates from Campbell's monomyth in a major way—she does not reject or shrink from the responsibility of her task. She does not refuse the call to rule, descend into melancholy, or bury her grief by running away for a period before acting. In this respect, she outshines protagonists like Aragorn or Achilles. Her success in skipping this step, which is normally used to prepare for the

impending challenges of the ordeal, is credited to the plain fact that she is a woman. Her nature is to endure pain without utilizing a testosterone-induced outlet, like rage, violence, or madness that reduced the likes of Hamlet. When listening to her father's last words before his death, Door's "face was wet: tears were brimming from her eyes, glistening down her cheeks. She seemed unaware that she was crying, made no attempt to wipe away the tears. She just stared at her father's image, listening to the words" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 64). Door's behavior is tempered from such impetuosity. Neither does she suffer from a male obligation to treat violence with violence. This restraint is because she either has naught to prove or she may feel physically incapable of such ferocious achievement. While she cries freely when she returns home to search for evidence, she also recognizes the futility of long periods of crippling grief. Instead, "emotions flicker across her face: quiet anger and, finally, resignation: "'We'd better go,' was all she said" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 66). Door checks her emotions and directs her energy into obeying her father's final direction, "Avenge us. Avenge your family" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 65).

This mission is the primary action of the novel: Richard's pursuit for home takes a backseat to Door's quest. She tells him, "we'll try to get you back home again. ... Promise. Once we've found what I'm looking for" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 87). Thus, Richard is exposed to the unfurling events as an unwilling witness rather than as an active participant. Richard's aforementioned achievements occur quite by accident. His first thrilling steps into a new world fall under Campbell's journey category of the Crossing the Threshold, or the hero's first stage in his journey. Door, on the other hand, is in the

middle of the hero(ine)'s path: the Road of Trials. In the ultimate boon, Door saves herself, Richard, and the marqui de Carabas by opening a door to hell which sucks the antagonist through. Unwilling to believe that she is capable of winning, the enemy desperately attempts to protest and offer the impossibilities of such an action. Boldly, she cuts him short, "'No,' said the girl with the opal eyes, distantly, 'I opened a door. As far and hard away as I could, *I* opened a door'" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 221, emphasis added). Door, a small girl of indeterminate age with impressive resiliency, comes into her own (what Joseph Campbell aptly calls the Atonement with the Father) in this profound climax. "Door looked at [her enemy] with utter contempt, every inch Lord Portico's oldest daughter. ...There was triumph in her eyes" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 218, 220). In a final twist, Gaiman once again alters the roles of hero and sidekick. The deed done and everyone safe, Door willingly lets her guard down and releases her royal composure. Richard "reached out his good arm and cradled [Door's] head holding her close to him. He rocked her slowly back and forth, crooning a wordless lullaby" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 222). For a moment, Door is a young maiden and Richard the protector, though the level of comfort flowing between the two is steady.

The Graveyard Book also has a strong traveling woman theme. Nobody "Bod" Owens, as the human boy is eventually named, has two additional guardians that provide for Bod in ways that his ghost parents cannot. As Bod inhabits the border between the living world and the dead, his guardians must necessarily be transient, a dense and multi-faceted term:

Transiency, from the Latin *transire*—to go across, to pass—highlights the simultaneity of the spatial and the temporal dimension in narrative subject

formations. On the temporal level, it emphasizes the fact that identity is always already in transition.... At the same time, transiency also calls attention to the spatial dynamics in which identities are enmeshed, to shifting borders and territorialities or the transgression of spatial and categorical boundaries. The notion of transient identities and differences can therefore also figure as an instance of transgressing categorization. (Ganser 25).

Silas, a vampire, provides food for Bod and physical security from his living enemy. Miss Lupescu, a werewolf who substitutes as guardian when Silas is absent, is a tougher educator and tougher cook. Additionally, Miss Lupescu can travel “somewhat further afield than [Silas] would have been able to follow” (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 98). Only Miss Lupescu can venture into the red cities of hell to save Bod Owens when kidnapped by ghouls. The timing of the episode is developmentally significant. Bod is at a cheeky age of intolerance and impatience, a state which directly contributes to his abduction. Miss Lupescu’s is the first rescue experience that Bod can remember and she manages it with bravery, tenacity, and theatricality.

Liza Hempstock is another woman traveler who influences Bod’s childhood. A witch buried in the potter’s field, Liza has special abilities that exceed the other ghosts. She boasts, “There’s rules for those in graveyards, but not for those as was buried in unhallowed ground. Nobody tells me what to do, or where to go” (Gaiman, *Graveyard*, 126). Liza can transgress the borders of the graveyard into the town, a talent none of the other ghosts possess. It is this skill which allows her to come to Bod’s aid. In uncharacteristic friendliness, Liza saves Bod from two men who mean him no good. She casts a spell to make Bod “fade,” an act in which the physical effects feel like being

brushed “from head to feet” and make Bod invisible (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 132). After this incident, Bod retains the ability to “fade” for the rest of the novel. Both werewolf and witch leave Bod with a respect for women’s capabilities, a characteristic that his mother cannot physically demonstrate herself.

Moreover, throughout the course of their relationship and through the act of journeying, the characters of *The Graveyard Book* must adjust features of their identities. Bod must correct his initial judgement of Miss Lupescu, who he initially finds “horrible” in her strictness (Gaiman, *Graveyard*, 67). Miss Lupescu “also learned things” (Gaiman, *Graveyard*, 98) and rounds out her maternal instincts with a hard-earned affection for Bod. Liza, too, is in possession of a transient identity. She fluctuates between being a suspicious misanthrope and an older sister, of sorts, to Bod. As Bod approaches manhood, she refrains from engaging with Bod in any way, presumably due to her lingering hatred for the men who burned her for witchcraft. At the end of the novel, it appears the spatial and figurative journeys shared with Bod had a therapeutic effect. Liza visits Bod one last time and gives him a less than sisterly farewell, “The touch of her lips against his cheek, against the corner of his lips. ...Her voice said, ‘I will miss you too. Always’” (Gaiman, *Graveyard*, 300). Unexpectedly, the act of journeying provides Liza with much spiritual growth. She epitomizes the philosophy that she shares with Bod: “‘You’re always you, and that don’t change, and you’re always changing, and there’s nothing you can do about it’” (Gaiman, *Graveyard*, 298). Gaiman’s female road tropes are proof that integrating the woman’s open-road text into fantasy re-writes long-standing, gendered spatial formations

Merging Binaries

Women's transgression of Gaiman's reformed gendered space creates a specific image—a bridge between thematic binaries. Feminine mobility “must thus be seen in its double function as affirmation and resistance—not to be understood as polar opposites, but as a continuum that is inscribed in the literary text” (Hilton 13). The discussion naturally turns into a study of healing, or convergence. According to Stephanie Trigg, convergence was initially a theory developed in media and communications studies in an attempt to address technological change, but it is also a social and cultural phenomenon. The practice brings together multiple ideas while tunneling through many intervening strata, such as popular meetings of the past and present (Young 166). Gaiman's short story, “Chivalry,” makes liberal use of convergence. An old woman finds the Holy Grail in a second hand shop and purchases it for her fireplace mantel. Over the next several days, she entertains an honest-to-God Arthurian knight who very chivalrously tries to barter for the sacred relic. The short story makes its point by refusing to reject the conventional “Other” of fantasy fiction on the grounds of its difference (Young 166). Rather, the characters accept the impossible, that Mrs. Whittaker is an old bitty of the twentieth century and Galaad is a medieval knight. Their conversations are strange, but neither seem very concerned with the cultural and speech differences. Additionally, historical treasures become mere baubles of the present while simultaneously maintaining their power—depending upon which character esteems it. Galaad kneels reverently when he sees the Grail, nestled just right on Mrs. Whittaker's mantel. Mrs. Whittaker cherishes

it as the perfect thrift store find—inexpensive and aesthetically pleasing. The story thus becomes one of tolerance, of making the alien familiar and comfortable without irredeemably altering its original status or meaning. This principle of convergence is a staple of nearly all of Gaiman's work. The author finds a reality between two seemingly opposed objects, ideas, genres, time, or places. His female characters tend to be a necessary presence to these mergers.

Lord Portico in *Neverwhere* had a vision of uniting the binaries of space and culture as represented by London Above and London Below. He muses on the strange, riven gulf, “that two cities should be so near...and yet in all things so far; the possessors above us, and the dispossessed, who live below and between, who live in the cracks” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 64). He attributes the Underside's underdevelopment to “petty factionalism,” which he calls both “divisive and foolish.” In the same speech, Lord Portico hits on another theme du jour, “there are those who wish to see things the way they are,” and then there are the others (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 65). This idea echoes the “feminine” sentiment of clear sight, of viewing and accepting circumstances with transparency.

It seems Lord Portico enlisted Door in the propagation of his philosophy before his death. Door escapes the grisly fate of her family because she'd “gone off exploring for a few days,” in which she had discovered a few dozen Roman soldiers. Perhaps Door was sent as an emissary for her father, or maybe she acted on her own volition. Whatever the circumstance, Door was compelled to seek out relationships, which is the building block of Lord Portico's unification concept. It is through these associations that she

recognizes the humanity in others. She inherently understands that connection is the first step in achieving a sense of community and belonging.

Arguably, Door's greatest achievement in the novel is the relationships that she develops along her quest with the gothic and eccentric "gentry" of London Below. She manages to charm the Earl of Earl's Court. She has pleasant enough interaction with the Black Friars. The terrifying Serpentine of the Seven Sisters provides her shelter. Each of these characters reveal their acquaintance with her father. While some express their condolences at his murder, others express contempt at his politics. Serpentine tells Door, "I had little time for your father. All that foolishness about uniting the Underside. ...Silly man. Just asking for trouble" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 147). Lord Portico is unsuccessful at uniting the factions in London Below, yet Door drives the cause which now has the momentum of her father's martyrdom. Her small band of allies provides much help. More importantly, she has a hero, unwitting as he is to the role. Serpentine is the first to identify Richard by his function. Door rejects the accusation outright, "He's not my hero." Dispassionately, Serpentine avows, "I'm afraid he is. You learn to recognize the type. Something in the eyes perhaps" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 147). When Richard kills the beast of London, his feat adds credence to her success. He is, after all, one of her entourage, thus Richard's private quest will never be viewed by the public as a bildungsroman. The Underside will forever tell the story of how Door's companion killed the beast of London in her quest to avenge her family. Door's agenda has a much larger scope and thus beats out Richard's personal feats. Door's mission of unity continues even after the novel ends, "There's a lot of sorting out to do in London Below.

...My father wanted to unite London Below...I suppose I ought to try to finish what he started” (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 233). This is more proof that her mission is greater than Richard’s.

A major theme found in many of Gaiman’s works is the fluidity of gender roles, some which have already been discussed. The iconic illustration from *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (See Figure 1) was released online before the work was sold by way of promotion. Critics and readers expressed outrage and disappointment that these characters were, by all appearances, homosexual. Then, upon actually reading the fairy tale and discovering that they were not homosexual, other critics and readers expressed outrage and disappointment about their heterosexuality. Leaving Gaiman’s treatment of LGBT characters to another project, the resulting binary is twofold. First, the fairy tale joins the disparate and archaic notions that separate females and heroes. Secondly, Gaiman obfuscates the treatment of true love and sensuality and its existence between a combination of personnel—lovers, sisters, comrades, etc.

Fig. 1. Snow White breaks a sleeping spell by Chris Riddell, illustrator of *The Sleeper and the Spindle* by Neil Gaiman

Rut Blomqvist makes a thorough investigation of mythical culture based on “dubious binary pairs.” A select few points from his article will further of the feminine convergence argument. Blomqvist’s studies Shadow as he initially “struggles to make

sense of what he sees and in doing so accepts the concept of binary division” (Blomqvist 5). Shadow seems to bin opposites into mutually exclusive categories: “dead/alive, real/fake, light/darkness, good/evil, divine/human, old/new, and religious/secular” (Blomqvist 5). Gaiman recognizes the inclination to treat identity as something holistic, and he explores it. Throughout the novel, Shadow questions his identity in terms of these many dichotomies, ultimately dismissing them entirely. In the end, “We understand that the difference ... is illusory, a misleading simplification of reality” (Blomqvist 23). Larsen makes a similar observation by pointing out that the females in *Stardust* straddle the wall between the real world and Faerie as well as “science and society marked by the Industrial Revolution” (Larsen 263).

However, Laura supports this point truer than Shadow ever could. The novel starts with an emotionally broken man who was private and uncomplicated until the shock of his wife’s death. The first section of the novel follows Shadow, now a husk of man in his distress, as he is reconstructed and imprinted on by his new magical surroundings. As Blomqvist states, he must sort through the binaries being offered to him and decide. Gaiman offers the same choices to Laura without the benefit of a “blank slate.” She carries with her a lifetime of experience, habit, and prejudice. She also has the special knowledge of the dead. Under these constraints, Laura must choose sides internally and externally and has a much more difficult time of it than Shadow experiences during his own journey. Like Shadow, Laura is a walking contradiction. She is alive and dead. She is bad and good. She embodies two major feminine roles—the mother and the harlot. Laura, too arrives at the conclusion that binaries are illusory,

but she represents the concept more completely because she is not the untouchable hero chosen by Odin for the quest. Rather, she is a tragic heroine who makes mistakes and bold reparations despite being sidelined. Laura heals binaries more authentically than Shadow.

The *Graveyard Book*, Gaiman's reimagining of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, heals binaries on many levels. While many intertextual relationships exist, there are several departure points between the two children's novels. One such way that Gaiman's critiques predecessor "involves complicating the binary opposition between good and evil that Kipling offers up in his work" (Robertson 169). None of the novel's characters quite fit their stereotypical qualities. For beginners, Gaiman again refrains from naming the creatures he invokes. The reader must identify the context clues to divine with what creatures Nobody Owens is interacting. Christine Robertson makes the shrewd observation, "Gaiman puts the onus on his readers to change their own preconceptions surrounding the werewolf, even going so far as to change the very language we use to label the supernatural creature" (Robertson, 170). Miss Lupescu refers to herself as a "Hound of God." She patiently rights Bod's (and the reader's) preconceived notions regarding her kind, who "claim their transformation is a gift from their creator, and they repay the gift with their tenacity, for they will pursue an evildoer to the very gates of Hell" (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 97).

Neither is Liza Hempstock exactly as she appears. Accused and burned as a witch in her time, she is buried on unconsecrated ground and generally avoided by the graveyard folk. Bod befriends the attractive girl with her "lopsided smile" and "pretty

goblin” features. The boy “didn’t think she would have needed magic to attract Solomon Porritt, not with a smile like that” (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 111). The reader settles in for a story of one wrongfully accused. Bod is expected to mitigate Liza’s suspicious nature with kindness and good deeds, the moral being that appearances are deceiving. The joke is on the reader, for Liza admits freely to the crime in which she was murdered, “Of course I was a witch. They learned that when they untied me from the cucking stool and stretched me on the Green. ...I rolled my eyes back in my head, and I cursed each and every one of them” (Gaiman, *Graveyard* 111).

Gaiman heals binaries one final time. He extends his threshold characters on a limited basis to men. Shadow and Silas, the demigod and the vampire, most closely embody the characteristics of a Quantum Cosmological Goddess. Other male characters experience episodes of transdifference—a term coined by practitioners in the German Research Foundation’s doctoral program, “Cultural Hermeneutics: Reflections of Difference and the Transdifference.” Essentially, transdifference is awareness that matter is never completely one binate or the other (Breinig 22). Richard and Bod are obvious examples from this study, however, there are several other males who fit the bill: Fat Charlie from *Anansi Boys*, the “wee man” from *The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains*, Tristan Thorn from *Stardust*, Joey Harker from *Interworld*, the boy from *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, Dream from the *Sandman* oeuvre, and Alvin/Wanda from *Sandman* “A Game of You.” In most of these narratives, there exists a female that fits the nature-threshold character more completely, but these male “in-betweeners” must be acknowledged (honorable mentioned female thresholds include: Mrs. Dunwiddy from

Anansi Boys; Lettie Hempstock from *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*; Yvaine and Una from *Stardust*; Death from *Sandman*; and Barbie from *Sandman* “A Game of You.”). They are evidence of Gaiman’s continuous blending, blurring, and merging of discrete opposites.

Conclusion

Gaiman sets a game-changing precedent in his fiction in that women are not subjugated to men in magical universes. As such, these threshold goddesses manage to transcend generic, mythic, and thematic boundaries. The results are fascinating. The spiritual and physical feminine journey is entirely redefined, demarcating a holistic, contradiction-free explanation for mythic and fantasy heroines. Additionally, binary opposition that is paramount to myth and fantasy are merged by these journeying women in the same way that a comet pulls disparate matter into a single, glittering tail. Set against neutral worlds of gender impartiality, Gaiman’s characters also enact fantasy with entirely new and better results, namely a multi-classified experience encompassing urban fantasy, road narrative, children, and fairy tale genres. Gaiman sets a new standard for the contemporary myth which unites niche followers into one mass fandom.

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