

# Odrastanje i motiv nadnaravnog u romanima "Nigdjezemska", "Koralina" i "Ocean na kraju staze" Neila Gaimana

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Filozofski fakultet

Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (nastavnički smjer) i filozofije

Marina Kompar

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doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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**The Coming of Age and the Supernatural in Neil Gaiman's  
*Neverwhere, Coraline, and The Ocean at the End of the Lane***

Master's Thesis

Ljubica Matek, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

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## Abstract

Although Neil Gaiman's works differ quite distinctly from one another, certain themes represent a constant in his writings, which this paper aims to show on the example of three of his novels. In *Coraline*, *Neverwhere*, and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (TOEL), among others, Gaiman explores the characters' coming of age and aims to uncover their true identity through stories of innocence, magic, spirituality, and disruptions in reality. The protagonists of all three novels face challenges and go on quests of different nature: Coraline faces an evil duplicate of her own mother; Richard becomes an outcast from his own already disconnected life; and the Unnamed Narrator of *TOEL* returns to the place he grew up in only to remember his encounters with the supernatural. By overcoming their fears, Gaiman's protagonists find strength hidden deep inside. Each of them come out as true heroes of their own lives, finding a resolution in the form of self-actualization.

**Keywords:** coming of age, hero, quest, supernatural, Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*, *Neverwhere*, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*.

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“But everybody's bones are just holy branches  
Cast from trees to cut patterns in the world  
And in time we find some shelter,  
Spill our leaves, and then sleep in the earth  
(...)  
But for now we're adrift on the winds of discontent  
Trying to carve our place  
All in hopes we'll be something they want” (Radical  
Face, “Holy Branches”).

## Introduction

This thesis discusses the coming of age through uncanny and supernatural situations that the protagonists of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, and *Neverwhere* go through due to both traumatic experiences, and the lack of love and understanding in their lives. The importance of a never-ending search for oneself, as well as the healing power of literature, is emphasised through the analysis of Gaiman's three heroes.

The opening chapter is dedicated to a brief overview of bildungsroman, the novel of formation that has its focus on self-cultivation, personal growth and physical, psychological, and moral changes within the characters in general. It is further on shown that with overcoming great difficulties and by getting to the ultimate reward, the heroes of the stories become self-actualized. They come out of the story deeply, irreversibly changed.

The second part of the thesis consists of three chapters each of which focuses on a more detailed analysis of one of the novels. This part follows their protagonists through spiritual transformation brought on by life-threatening quests against mythical evil creatures. It gives insight into Gaiman's transfigured world and its darkness, providing the perfect background to Coraline's, the boy's, and Richard Mayhew's self-searching journeys. The character of Coraline is analysed through the loss of identity symbolized by the images of eyes and soul. The clash with the adult world that all three characters experience is extensively elaborated in the analysis of *The Ocean*



*at the End of the Lane*, while *Neverwhere* tackles questions of location and the possibility of self-actualization in adults.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the importance of the coming of age novel and the power hidden within it. It argues against going through life blindly, that is with buttons instead of eyes, as Gaiman suggests in *Coraline*, and in favour of changing, re-forming, and becoming one's true self.

## 1. Bildungsroman

With the rapid development and growing popularity of the fantasy genre, it is not surprising that various combinations of genres appear in contemporary literature. One of the frequent contemporary hybrid genres is the fantasy *bildungsroman*. In his *Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends* Tobias Boes mentions several synonyms that have emerged over time: “novel of formation, the apprenticeship novel, or the novel of education”, and states that all of them “imply a stable and integrative end point to personal growth” (241). This thesis will attempt to identify the characteristics of bildungsroman present in Gaiman’s novels by focusing on the terms of “self-cultivation” (Bruford 1975) and “formation” as they best depict the processes that the characters in *Coraline*, *Neverwhere*, and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (TOEL) go through while searching for answers and experience.

According to Boes, the term itself is “sometimes ... used so broadly that seemingly any novel might be subsumed by it” (230). A Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, develops a theory of a combination of the novel of ordeal, such as the epics of Gilgamesh and Odysseus, and the modern family novel/biography, culminating in the bildungsroman. The hero “strive[s] ‘for actual results’, by which Bakhtin means some form of happiness, satisfaction, or maturity”, and the “crucial theme is precisely change - physical, psychological, moral” (Jeffers 2). This hero, according to Bakhtin, is called “the image of man in the process of becoming” (Bakhtin 19).

Looking back to the very beginnings of the novel of formation, one can notice that the meaning of the term has broadened, and in the last few years many branches or sub-genres have emerged. Although the term itself appeared in German literature even before the twentieth century, it was first noted in the English language in 1910 in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Bildungsroman was defined as a novel that “has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person” (Boes 231). With time, the term became more defined and specific. In fact, Boes argues that “by the early 1980s, new conceptual approaches to the novel of formation were radically transforming the discipline” (233). However, Jerome Hamilton Buckley, in his *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974), states that these novels depict “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by

love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (qtd. in Boes 231-232), which are precisely the main characteristics of the self-cultivation novels found nowadays. “In reality, the novel of formation continues to thrive in post-colonial, minority, multi-cultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide” (Boes 239). The list of these areas extends immensely, including children’s and young adult literature.

### 1.1. The Novel of Self-Cultivation in Children’s and Young Adult Literature

This thesis mainly uses Bruford’s term the “novel of self-cultivation” in connection to the emergence of the genre in the modern children’s and young adult literature. The reason behind this lies in the idea that childhood and youth are naturally the time of self-search, self-creation, and self-acceptance. However, the contemporary times more often than not sabotage young people in their emotional and intellectual development. The fast paced lives and self-centeredness of those in charge of bringing up the young rarely allow for self-cultivation. Lives are predetermined by the rules of society that were set up in the past, and have little relevance in the present, which is why it is often difficult for the young, who are naturally inclined to either enjoy the present moment or look to the future, to find their place in such a society. Franco Moretti, as quoted by Boes, says “youth is, so to speak, modernity's ‘essence’, the sign of a work that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past” (236). Possibly one of the simplest, but most applicable pieces of advice that promotes self-cultivation can be found in the commencement address that Neil Gaiman delivered at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia in May 2012. Opening with the statement that he “escaped school as soon as he could” to avoid any more “enforced learning”, Gaiman continues on to give advice on bravery to be creative and strength to get through life’s obstacles. He says: “I hope you’ll make mistakes. If you’re making mistakes, it means you’re out there doing something” and even mistakes “can be useful” (*The View from the Cheap Seats*, 463) because they shape one into a person one is destined to become.

Both the appearance and rise in the popularity of the coming of age novels are usually a consequence of major historical events which provoke a strong emotional impact: “Moretti identifies the First World War as a pivotal event because the trauma of the trenches precludes a

peaceful development into maturity and social acceptance. Youth is cut short, meaning remains enigmatic” (Boes 239), which is why Modernist period sees an abundance of such novels. Thomas Jeffers, in his *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*, mentions Jean-Jacques Rousseau who “helped Europe realize that children were not miniature adults but creatures with their own peculiar needs and capacities, which parents and teachers had to honor” (2), and which additionally explains why the genre remains popular to this day. The twenty-first century, however, with its rapid technological developments often leaves major aspects of children’s lives ignored or forgotten: parents are too busy with their professional lives and household errands, while children are overwhelmed with school and are not given many opportunities for creativity and self-growth. Moreover, they face turmoil on different occasions, but only in retrospective do they realize that they have surpassed it and have grown. Unfortunately, the times of great emotional disturbance, which are the strongest bases for development, are quickly dismissed or extinguished by those in charge. Bildungsroman preserves this important part of people’s lives and tries not only to show how tragedies and hardships affect and better people, but also serves as a guide through them. Individuals come out as victors and reach maturity through their own cultivation and self-actualization.

Brought to attention by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and popularized by authors like J. D. Salinger and his *The Catcher in the Rye*, the novel of self-cultivation is reaching its peak in the fantasy genre with writers such as Philip Pullman, Suzanne Collins, and many others. The fantasy genre is important and ideal for coming of age stories. Joseph Campbell, whose book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* was one of the most influential works in the twentieth century, suggests that all myths have one archetypal hero on an archetypal journey whose “prime function [has always been] ... to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward” (7) – showing that fantasy literature has a therapeutic purpose. One of the pivotal points in the development of the coming of age novel over the course of the last couple of decades was probably the publication of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series that boomed in the late 1990s. *The Scotsman*, Scottish national newspaper, published an article concerning new research by the Federation of Children’s Book Groups, which “shows that JK Rowling’s storytelling has had a major impact on literacy and reading habits in the UK. Almost six out of 10 children (59%) think

the books have helped them improve their reading skills. And 48% say Rowling's creation is the reason they read more" ("Potter works wonders for kids' literacy").

In addition to creating a sort of revival of the coming-of-age genre, the *Harry Potter* series seems to have a positive social impact as it increases literacy and supports the child's emotional development. Vicki Cohen and John Coven in their book, *Literacy for Children in an Information Age: Teaching Reading, Writing, and Thinking*, investigate the effect of the *Harry Potter* series on children's literacy. They emphasize the importance of emotional growth, and believe that stories can provide "the whole range of human emotions", which "enables the reader to empathize with characters they never would relate to" otherwise. It is an important part of human life; "children need to develop empathy, sympathy, and relate to others from other cultures, races, and ways of life" (406). Similarly, Friedrich Kittler sees the roots of the coming of age genre in "the rise of the nuclear family" and the new ways of home-schooling children (Boes 237). He talks about the "mechanism of maternal transmission of literacy – of 'natural' acculturation" that can only be given through "familial interaction" (Solie 87).

## 1.2. Self-Actualization as the Ultimate Reward

Coming of age is an important part of life and in many cultures the phenomenon has mythical importance. Various tribes still practice the rituals of rites of passage – the maturation of the youngest members of a tribe is ensured by their proof of strength, endurance, and so on. According to Arnold Van Gennep, "rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation"; hence, during the second, transitional stage "one's sense of identity dissolves to some extent", while finally "they reenter society, having completed the rite" ("Rite of passage"). When it comes to Neil Gaiman's novels, self-cultivation starts with the separation from reality via a tragic or disturbing event. For instance, Coraline is faced with a new life after moving away with her parents who are too busy to pay attention to her needs or wishes. The narrator in *TOEL* receives no emotional support after the death of a tenant in his parents' house; in addition, both he and Coraline have to face a supernatural villain. The protagonist of *Neverwhere*, Richard, starts questioning reality and his life choices when he accidentally gets sucked into the menacing supernatural world in the underground of London. All three characters are faced with choices

they are not sure they can make. However, thanks to unexpected and unusual help, they manage not only to make the right decisions, but also to survive and emerge as heroes who received the ultimate reward: self-actualization.

Ann Olson, a doctor of psychology and a writer of fiction, refers to Abraham Maslow and states that self-actualization “represents growth of an individual toward fulfilment of the highest needs; those for meaning in life” (2013). Even though Maslow’s hierarchy of needs dictates that the basic needs such as physiological needs and safety must be satisfied first, it is often the failure to fulfil them that leads an individual towards self-actualization. Some of the examples include Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, who found “life to be meaningful explicitly because of situations of danger to their lives” (Olson 2013). Maslow teaches that the individuals who achieve or come close to self-actualization are capable of reaching ‘peak experiences’, “which are profound moments of love, understanding, happiness ... during which a person feels more whole, alive, self-sufficient ... more aware of truth, justice, harmony, goodness” (“Abraham Maslow”).

## 2. The Re-Invented Fairy Tale – Self-actualization through the Supernatural

Contemporary literature reinvents the fairy tale, fable, and the parable in the coming of age novel, representing them in ways that are close and understandable to the contemporary reader. Bildungsroman is “autobiographical... with fact and fiction inextricably intermingled” (Buckley 24). Neil Gaiman’s novels can be looked at from these two aspects: the real, factual development of the characters and the unreal, uncanny environment that allows for the transformation – both designed to carry a message. In his introduction to *Coraline*, for example, Gaiman states: “I took things from my life. Coraline’s flat ... was the house we lived in when I wrote it ... I borrowed the door (door that opened onto a brick wall) from a house ... in which I had lived when I was a boy” (*Coraline* viii). Moreover, in the conversation included at the end of *TOEL*, Gaiman says *TOEL* is “incredibly personal ... [he] stole so much! Lots of the physical places existed (245-246). He goes on to say that the story of the South African lodger who committed suicide in his father’s car is true; with the exception that he “wasn’t there to see it happen” (248).

In contrast to the fairy tale happy ending, there seems to be a different branch of novel of self-cultivation, represented by the Hungarian literary critic and historian, György Lukács. In his *Theory of the Novel* (1920) Lukács warns about the emergence of ‘romance of disillusionment’ and its conflict between the soul and the outside world:

a purely interior reality which is full of content and more or less complete in itself enters into competition with the reality of the outside world, leads a rich and animated life of its own and, with spontaneous self-confidence, regards itself as the only true reality, the essence of the world: and the failure of every attempt to realise this equality is the subject of the work. (qtd. in McKeon 212)

Boes explains that there is a disjuncture in the disillusionment novel, between the self and the world, which eventually “proves to be unaccommodating to the poetic ideals of the protagonist” (239). A strand of this theory can be seen in Gaiman’s novels: the only change that happens is within the characters themselves. The world surrounding them, the one they attempted to escape

in the first place, is still there and unchanged. In their process of maturation, Gaiman's characters struggle to fit in the outside world, and through a series of difficult situations they come to terms with what it means to be them and what their place in the world is. There is an end to their immaturity, as opposed to other literary subjects that are "instead portrayed as endlessly immature and thus 'not-yet-ready' for self-governance" (Boes 241). Gaiman's fiction, on the other hand, strives to stay optimistic, to allow the change to happen and the characters to grow up, even if it includes their continuous dissatisfaction with the world: "Discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different" (Gaiman 2013b).

In his lecture "Why our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming" (*The View from the Cheap Seats*), Gaiman emphasises the importance of libraries in our lives, especially our children's lives. Moreover, he speaks of escapism through literature as not necessarily a bad thing. People tend to look upon escapism as "a cheap opiate used by the muddled and the foolish and the deluded" (13) when in fact it is the best thing literature can ever offer. Fiction is the one genre that lets us use and challenge our imagination; it lets us use it in yet unimagined ways, hence giving us the tools to deal with whatever world brings to our doorstep. Moreover, books are our connection to the past; Gaiman points out that "books are the way that the dead communicate with us. The way that we learn lessons from those who are no longer with us, the way that humanity has built on itself, progressed, made knowledge incremental rather than something that has to be relearned, over and over" (17).

Exactly as he explains it, Gaiman provides opportunities both for adults and children in his fiction. He gives equal opportunities to everyone; opportunities to see how characters deal with impossible situations, how they grow and how the reader grows with them. As Gaiman said in his lecture, "you learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You're being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you're going to be slightly changed" (12). Each book that a child (or an adult) reads leaves a mark upon them, and prepares them for the challenges that await.



## 2.1. *Coraline*

Published in 2002, after about ten years of hard work, *Coraline* emerged as Gaiman's first children's novel. It has since won various awards, including the 2013 Hugo Award for Best Novella, and has been adapted for screen by Henry Sellick in 2009. *Coraline* is a contemporary fairy tale, meaning that it still incorporates the darkness, and the didacticism, but it also deviates from the general definition of a fairy tale by staying within the boundaries of reality: there are no dwarves, elves, mermaids or unicorns – instead, the actual world Coraline lives in, her house, neighbours and their pets are enchanted/cursed and as part of the ordeal, Coraline suffers a devastating loss. In his introduction to *Coraline*, Gaiman says he resents “the idea of a world in which people thought there was something wrong with scaring children” (*Coraline* vii). He argues for the necessity of “the joy of literary fear, or an appreciation of the uncanny” and quotes Ogden Nash, an American poet who said: “Where there's a monster, there's a miracle” (*Coraline* viii). As David Rudd puts it in *An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's Coraline and Questions of Identity*, *Coraline* deals with themes of “existential issues that concern us all: to do with identity, sex, death, ontology, evil, desire and violence” (Rudd 2). These issues are dealt with through the supernatural occurrences, which perfectly reflect Coraline's identity, personality and imagination.

### 2.1.1. The Uncanny

The concept of the ‘uncanny’ defined by Sigmund Freud in his essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919) seems to be one of the crucial elements in Gaiman's *Coraline*. Freud defines the German term *unheimlich* as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (2). Going further, he investigates the word itself, and finds various translations of *unheimlich*, including “uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, uncanny, ghastly; (of a house) haunted; (of a man) a repulsive fellow” (2). Literally, it is also the opposite of *heimlich*, which is used to describe something familiar, homely – but in fact, the two words are an important part of each other. The term *unheimlich*, or uncanny, does not mean fear from everything unknown; it only promotes the mystery of the unknown as recognized in what is familiar or known. It is the

uncertainty “whether [the writer] is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation” (Freud 7).

The opening sentence of *Coraline* grabs the reader’s attention as well as introduces the uncanny: “Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house” (*Coraline* 3). The definite article used with the word ‘door’ lets the reader know that there is something important to know about it. The door, however, is only the beginning of the uncanniness in the novel; namely, upon encountering the other mother for the very first time, Coraline sees that she looks “a little like Coraline’s mother. Only... Only her skin was white as paper. Only she was taller and thinner. Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark-red fingernails were curved and sharp” (*Coraline* 21). The other mother is depicted as both familiar and strangely unfamiliar and disturbing to Coraline; she is her mother’s uncanny double. Freud states that the themes of uncanny are also “concerned with the idea of a ‘double’ in every shape and degree, with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike” (Freud 9), which brings up the term *doppelgänger*, defined by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary as “a ghostly counterpart of a living person”. The doubleness in *Coraline* is a constant; everything in Coraline’s world, except Coraline herself and the mysterious cat who helps her through the trials, has its own mirrored representation in the Other World. Supernaturally, the creatures on the other side all bear subtle differences: people have big black buttons in place of their eyes, animals can talk, and inanimate objects become animate. Freud says that the phenomenon of the double “undoubtedly, subject to certain conditions and combined with certain circumstances, awaken[s] an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams” (10). When Coraline notices that the other mother has no reflection in the window and comments on it, the other mother smiles and says “mirrors ... are never to be trusted” (*Coraline* 52), indicating that everything she encounters in the netherworld – that is a mirror of the real world – Coraline should be wary of.

Her constant companion, guide, and what represents the good in both of Coraline’s worlds, is the black cat. It appears to be of supernatural nature, and is in many ways the real arch-enemy of the monster that is the other mother. The cat refers to the other mother as the *beldam* and seems to be the only one who knows the truth about her and everything she creates; whereas the other mother

calls the cat *vermin* and does everything in her power to keep the cat away from her world. When Coraline goes through the door and sees the cat again on the other side, she immediately concludes it is the other cat. However, the response she gets from it suggests otherwise: “I’m not the other anything. I’m me ... You people are spread all over the place. Cats, on the other hand, keep ourselves together” (*Coraline* 25). Even though the cat communicates with Coraline quite sarcastically and coldly at the beginning of the novel, it learns to trust and respect Coraline as she progresses through the adventure. Both separate otherworldly entities, the cat and the other mother are the ultimate enemies, who cannot both have power at the same time. As the other mother’s power grows stronger because of the bet with Coraline, the cat seems to be losing its confidence; “They’ve gone ... The ways in and out of this place. They just went flat”, the cat said, scared, “trembling, like a dead leaf in the storm” (85). Throughout Coraline’s struggle, the good slowly starts to prevail, and as the cat grows weaker, the other mother grows stronger and more monster-like. Coraline realizes her mistake and wonders how she could have ever believed that this woman was her real mother: “The other mother was huge – her head almost brushed the ceiling of the room – and very pale, the colour of a spider’s belly” (88) and she had the medusa-reminding “wet-looking black hair ... like the tentacles of a creature in the deep ocean” (43). When Coraline finally manages to retrieve her parents as well as the souls of the lost children, stolen by the beldam, she manages to escape from the clutches of the monstrous mother, again thanks to the cat’s generous help.

### 2.1.2. Temptation and Loss of Identity

Coraline is stuck between two seemingly opposite worlds: one in which she is utterly ignored by everyone (including her own parents), and another one, the magical world where she encounters doubles of everyone she knows. Out of boredom, she flips through a book about native people and their strange rituals, and concludes that the things adults do are pointless, signalling her detachment from the world of adulthood. Upon discovering the walled-in door, Coraline’s mother leaves it unlocked saying: “Why should I lock it? ... It doesn’t go anywhere” (*Coraline* 7). Gaiman suggests that her mother, like anyone who allows themselves to grow up, lacks the imagination and adventurous spirit that children (still) have. Adults tend to be rather practical, as suggested by the behaviour of Coraline’s parents and neighbours, which prevents them from

seeing the magical in the present moment. To Gaiman, this seems one of the greatest flaws of adult life and one of his own biggest regrets when it comes to his own life and early successes, which he tries to amend through his novels: “there were parts of the ride I missed, because I was too worried about things going wrong, about what came next, to enjoy the bit I was on” (Gaiman 2012).

The adults in the real world are too absorbed in their own lives to take notice of Coraline; they do not even bother to get her name right, even after Coraline’s numerous corrections. In Coraline’s eyes, the adults are too practical and rational, always seem to talk about unimportant things endlessly, and tend to dwell on the past. Her own parents do not seem to have time for her and do not care about her interests. She tries to start conversations with them, only to get terse answers or grunts in response. It is the end of summer, the last week before Coraline starts at her new school, and she is extremely lonely and bored. When Coraline wanders off for a moment, her mother gets concerned. However, when Coraline tells her that she “was kidnapped by aliens ... They came down from outer space with ray guns, but I fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent, and I escaped”, her mother, fully uninterested, replies: “Yes, dear. Now, I think you could do with some more hairclips, don’t you?” (*Coraline* 17), and proceeds to order hairclips even after Coraline refuses them. The extent of her innocence, but also her self-sufficiency can be seen from the way she takes care of herself when her parents disappear: “For lunch she had a block of cooking chocolate and an apple” (35) – although not a healthy, full meal, she tries to not stay hungry until her parents come back. Coraline senses that something is wrong and that, although inattentive, her parents would never leave her alone for long, so she cries for help by telling her neighbours, but they ramble on without ever listening to a word Coraline says; similarly, the police officer she calls brushes her story off as a nightmare and does not even bother looking into it.

When Coraline meets her other mother for the very first time, she immediately notices the subtle differences: the whiter skin, the longer, curved, sharp nails, the big black buttons. She also notices the other mother’s concern and care, something her real mother rarely displayed, which is the key reason why Coraline trusts her, despite the fact that the other mother is a stranger. What drives Coraline is her desire to be noticed – something she could not achieve with her real

family. For example, when taken shopping with her real mother, Coraline expresses her wish to have Day-Glo green gloves that no one else at school would have: “I could be the only one”, she says (17), but her mother only ignores her. As suggested before, Coraline feels abandoned and unnoticed, and seeks out acceptance and love. When she goes through the tunnel that connects the two identical houses and hears her mother’s voice in the other kitchen, Coraline rushes to meet her. When the other mother offers her endless love by saying: “I will never become bored with you, and I will never abandon you. You will always be safe here with me” (43), a small part of Coraline is tempted and would have considered staying with her, had it not been for the uncanniness of the mirror house and its inhabitants.

The loss, or rather, uncertainty of identity, is also seen through the namelessness of the black cat and the lost children. When asked its name, the cat replies: “Cats don’t have names ... Now, *you* people have names. That’s because you don’t know who you are” (27). The name motif occurs throughout the whole novel; none of the people Coraline meets seem to remember her name correctly, while the children she meets do not even remember their own names after what the other mother did to them: “‘Who are you?’ whispered Coraline. ‘Names, names, names,’ said another voice, all faraway and lost. ‘The names are the first things to go’” (57). By succumbing to the other mother’s power, the children who lived in Coraline’s house before her were trapped by the other mother behind a mirror, not even remembering their own names, thus losing their identities.

### 2.1.3. Eyes and the Soul

One of the major themes in *Coraline* is the loss of eyes. The other mother and her creations on the other side all have big black buttons instead of their eyes; and those buttons are exactly what the other mother requires of Coraline to accept in order to give her everything she wants. She lures Coraline into her world with promises of love and happiness, but then reveals that “if you want to stay ... There’s only one little thing we’ll have to do, so you can stay here for ever and always” (*Coraline* 32). The idea of black buttons replacing her eyes repulses Coraline, and when the other father says it would not hurt, she knows for sure those are lies fabricated by the beldam.

In various cultures, eyes and sight have been perceived as the most important organs and senses. In Ancient Egypt, for example, the eye represented life and protection which can be brought in connection to “the left eye [that] was torn from Horus by his murderous brother Seth, and magically restored by Thoth, the God of magick” (“Eye of Horus/Eye of Ra (Udjat, Wedjat)”). In addition to this, an American sculptor, Hiram Powers, writes about the eye being the window to the soul – which is also known as a traditional proverb in many languages:

The eye is the *window* of the soul, the mouth the *door*. The intellect, the will, are seen in the eye; the emotions, sensibilities, and affections, in the mouth. The animals look for man's intentions right into his eyes. Even a rat, when you hunt him and bring him to bay, looks you in the eye. (Bellows 360)

In his essay *Das Unheimliche*, Freud not only discusses the uncanny, but also the fear of losing one's eyes. He interprets and presents E. T. A. Hoffman's “The Sandman”, a short story written in 1816, containing a depiction of the folklore character of the same name. He is described as “a wicked man, who comes to children ... and throws a handful of sand into their eyes, so that they start out bleeding from their heads. He puts their eyes in a bag and carries them to the crescent moon to feed his own children” (Hoffman). Even though Coraline knows that the real people she knows in the real world rarely take her seriously (even the police did not believe her when she calls to report her parents missing), Coraline understands that losing her eyes would be much more devastating than the reality she is growing up in. Freud calls upon psychoanalysis, saying that “a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration” (Freud 7). As with the lost children she encounters behind the old mirror in the other mother's house, the castration here happens with the loss of one's soul. Coraline knows that accepting her other mother's offer to sew buttons onto her face would mean the end of her – her individuality would be smothered and consumed by the other mother and there would be no turning back. She realizes that, if she does not fight for herself, the other mother will turn her into “a dead shell” (*Coraline* 62) because all she is to her is “a possession, nothing more. A tolerated pet, whose behaviour was no longer amusing” (73).

The loss of eyes does not only represent the loss of one's soul/identity – at least not in the case of the living inanimate things the other mother creates – but also the separation from society, from the world; namely, eyes are the main means of reception – without them communication with the outside world gets disrupted. While fighting what seems to have been her other father in order to recapture one of the lost children's soul, Coraline uses the importance of eyes in her advantage and tears off the black buttons on the other father's face: "The thing froze in place" giving her just enough time to run up the stairs, leaving the creature in "its anger and frustration" (77). Moreover, blindness does not only occur in connection with the loss of eyes, but as a result of blurred vision. To illustrate, when Coraline gets out of the other house "to explore", she tries to get as far as possible hoping she will lose the other mother. As she gains distance from the house, a white mist raises making her feel like she is "walking into nothing" and wondering if "she might have gone blind" (50). Coraline keeps calm and continues walking, for she is "an explorer". However, she eventually ends up exactly where she left off. The cat tells her mysteriously: "You start out walking away from something and end up coming back to it" (51). The cat here is implying that Coraline might have gotten away from one evil – the lack of love and attention from her real parents, only to stumble upon another: the other mother's smothering love.

#### 2.1.4. The Final Struggle and the Other Mother's Demise

Upon finishing the quest by finding all three children's souls, Coraline is faced with the final task: finding her parents. With careful planning, resourcefulness and her smarts, Coraline uses her knowledge of the location of her parents to trick the beldam and escape. She uses the other mother's need to gloat to make her believe Coraline has lost the game. When already through the door, the children and her parents return the favour and help her close the door. They were "somehow too insubstantial ... but their hands closed about hers ... and suddenly she felt strong" (91). We learn here that Coraline draws her strength and courage from people around her. She is not selfish – she does not give up until all five of them are safe. She returns to her world and falls into a deep sleep. She is awoken by her true parents and it all seems well. The door is now closed, and they are out of the other mother's reach.

Gaiman here lulls the reader into a false sense of safety. The final quest comes to her in a dream: she has a goodbye picnic with the three children, and is warned that the game for the other mother is not over. She has the key, and the other mother wants it. Gaiman uses the dream as an opportunity to teach Coraline and the reader that life is often unfair, but that there are always things to take comfort in. Each of the three children is used as a messenger. They thank her and acknowledge that she has “already shown that [she has] all three of these [good fortune, wisdom and courage] blessings, and in abundance”. She is told that “nobody is ever given more to shoulder than he or she can bear” and advised to be “wise. Be brave. Be tricky” (99). The next day, Coraline passes the final ordeal by luring out the other mother’s hand that got cut off when she was shutting the door to the other world. She traps the hand along with the key on the bottom of a deep, abandoned well, and happily returns home.

“Be careful what you wish for”, the 2009 film tagline, sums up the source of Coraline’s troubles, and hints that there is a cautionary tale ahead. It does not, however, bear the same terrifying imagery as the novel. The film itself was stripped of some of the darkness of the novel, possibly to make it more appealing and suitable to children, and hence is noticeably less effective at delivering the message. The other mother is vanquished and the Joneses and their neighbours are out celebrating Coraline’s victory. The novel, although also ending on a positive note, completely obliterates her parents’ memory. On her way home from the well, Coraline runs into her neighbours, who this time remember her name correctly and look at her with a hint of awe. None of the adults knows anything about Coraline’s journey, but her newly-found confidence is enough of a reason for them to finally notice her. Unknowingly, they helped her triumph against evil, and that seems to be enough for her. Gaiman’s protagonist has come out as a victor and now sees the world differently; she is no longer scared of the upcoming first day of school and goes to sleep feeling completely content: “She fancied she could hear sweet music on the night air: the kind of music that can only be played on the tiniest silver trombones and trumpets and bassoons, on piccolos and tubas so delicate and small that their keys could only be pressed by the tiny pink fingers of white mice” (110).



## 2.2. The Ocean at the End of the Lane

*The Ocean at the End of the Lane* was published in 2013, and was nominated for and received several awards since. In “A conversation with Neil Gaiman” published as an appendix to *TOEL*, Gaiman states that the book is “not a book without hope, it’s fundamentally a book about the powerlessness of being a child, the difficulty of being a child and being powerless – and how you cope” (244). Furthermore, Gaiman says that he eventually realised that the book was not written for children, but rather “for anyone who has ever been seven years old” (“A Conversation”, 244). It is a recollection of childhood memories, told from the perspective of an adult narrator, and therefore bears two viewpoints: how a seven-year-old child sees the world around him, and how it is interpreted many years ago by the same person.

Like many of Gaiman’s novels, *TOEL* is a story about a young character, a smart and resourceful boy, who struggles to figure out life itself while battling supernatural entities and family issues. His troubles start with what is probably every child’s biggest nightmare: a birthday party that no one comes to. A solitary child and a bookworm, the unnamed narrator (also referred to as “the boy”) feels hurt by being abandoned on that special day, but rises above it and withdraws to the imaginary worlds of his books, especially the new Narnia set he had just received as a birthday present<sup>1</sup>. The boy, however, does not mind that he is alone at his party, he “like[s] that. Books [are] safer than other people anyway” (*TOEL* 12). In his essay “Four Bookshops”, Gaiman confesses that those four places were what made him who he is, and wonders who he “would have been, without those shelves, without those people and those places, without books” (34).

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<sup>1</sup> This is most likely based on Gaiman's own experience as a child: “and when my seventh birthday arrived I had dropped enough hints that my birthday present was a boxed set of the complete Narnia books” (*The View from the Cheap Seats* 38).

In his lecture, “What the [Very Bad Swearword] Is a Children’s Book, Anyway?”, given at the 2012 Zena Sutherland Lecture, Gaiman claims *TOEL* is one of the reasons he wonders what children’s literature actually is. Although written from the perspective of a seven-year-old boy, the book contains both subtle and devastating themes that are not suitable for children. He says he does not “think it’s for kids”, but nevertheless is a “book about child helplessness. It’s a book about the incomprehensibility of the adult world” (*The View from the Cheap Seats* 94). The story itself also strays from the conventional fairy tale type, just like *Coraline* does: the problems start with a failed mission that brings an otherworldly monster into the boy’s world, and the final resolution does not occur without a devastating loss. Moreover, due to a memory loss induced by the magical protagonists of the story, the narrator only remembers these events of his childhood when he visits the supernatural farm, and otherwise does not remember the events that helped shape his identity.

#### 2.2.1. Family Issues and the Clash with the Adult World

In her review of the book, A. S. Byatt indicates that “one of the terrors of childhood is the realisation that parents are not necessarily strong or understanding” (Byatt). Throughout *TOEL* we see the boy’s struggle to get through to his parents and warn them about the immediate danger, or simply to just understand the things they do and say. However, his parents are mostly oblivious to his attempts and at certain points even punish him because they believe he is making things up. No matter what he says or does, they choose to trust his nanny, Ursula Monkton, who is the chief antagonist. Witnessing his father’s affair finally makes the boy lose all trust in the sanctity of his parents’ relationship and the safety it provided, and he turns to the only other people who seem to care about him and give him the warmth and comfort he needs and craves: the neighbours on a nearby farm.

The story begins with the return of the main character, who is also the first-person narrator, to his hometown for a funeral. To get away from the overwhelming atmosphere created by the people who knew the deceased, the narrator goes for a drive around his hometown. Almost as if in a dream, he first arrives at the old house his family used to live in sometime during his early teens. He does not remember much of his childhood and especially does not think it was “any part of

who [he is] now” (*TOEL* 4). However, all that changes when he finds himself at end of the same lane in front of the farm house the girl he once knew lived in. Just like Proust’s madeleines, the smell of bread baking, wax furniture polish and even cow stench involuntarily bring back memories of the Hempstock family and their short time together. He realizes that “childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like childhood toys forgotten at the bottom of a crammed adult closet, but they are never lost for good” (*TOEL* 6). Curious about the old farm, he goes in and meets someone who he believes to be Lettie’s mother, then proceeds outside towards the pond he and the girl, Lettie Hempstock, once called the ocean. More memories of his childhood are brought back and the embedded story begins with: “I was not happy as a child, although from time to time I was content. I lived in books more than I lived anywhere else” (17). As he describes his childhood, one can understand that it was full of trauma, neglect, and loneliness. In addition, the boy has trouble coping with the family’s difficult financial situation and the fact that he has to share a room with his sister.

Although at first glance the boy’s family seems like a happy suburban family, it is evident that there are many underlying issues and burdens the family members carry with them. The novel begins by depicting the boy’s innocence through the scenes of his comfortable life reading books on tree branches and his lack of understanding of the adult world. Throughout the book, hints of his innocence are also visible by his abstract and confused descriptions of his parents’ and sister’s actions, such as her obvious obsessive-compulsive disorder: “my sister sat on her bed, brushing her hair over and over. She brushed it a hundred times every night, and counted each brush stroke. I did not know why” (61). His sister even sets up selfish rules that their mother solves by creating a chart indicating whose rules will apply which day. His real troubles, however, start with the arrival of “the opal miner” (13), for which, once again, Gaiman immediately uses the definite article. Just like most adults the boy meets, the miner has little understanding for the boy’s feelings. On his arrival he runs over the boy’s beloved kitten and heartlessly breaks the news to the boy: “‘I’m afraid I had a little accident arriving here,’ he told me, cheerfully ... ’Not to worry. Disposed of the corpse’” (13-14). The miner was supposed to rent one of the rooms in the boy’s parents’ house, but a few days later he commits suicide in the family car. As the narrator remembers these moments, he realizes that kitten had been his only friend and companion back then, when his whole world was changing. His parents, just like the

miner, do not seem to care at all: “When my parents got home that evening, I do not think my kitten was even mentioned” (15). Similarly, after discovering the opal miner’s dead body in the family car, the only words about it the boy’s father ever says to him are: “Probably best if you don’t talk about this to your sister” (31).

The father figure is also one of the more important ones in the book: although the boy’s father is presented as a bad parent (he tries to physically hurt the boy, and has an affair), it is evident that the boy still looks up to him. Fuelled by the nanny Ursula Monkton’s cunning, the father’s anger reveals dark secrets from his own distant childhood and the relationship with his father, which obviously influenced both his character and his attitude towards childhood. The boy feels that and describes his father as a terrifying man when he was angry. He says his father never hit him, that “he did not believe in hitting ... [that] he would tell [them] how his father had hit him, how his mother had chased him with a broom, how he was better than that” (87). From the way the boy describes his father, it is evident that the father justifies his outbursts of anger by managing to restrain himself from hitting his children. Perhaps elevated by his infidelity, the father’s fury escalates one day when the boy calls the nanny a “flea” and he attempts to drown the boy in the bathtub. Even then, he refrains from hitting the boy when he cannot “break [his] grip without hitting” him (96), which is what eventually makes him let up and saves the boy. His next words are mere “you ruined my tie”, which seems like an attempt of pretending nothing major had happened.

Many of these things, which he never understood as a child, come back to the narrator’s mind as he is sitting on the bench next to the duck pond on the farm. He remembers how his parents used to be and what he thought of them and their actions and decisions: “Why do I find the hardest thing for me to believe, looking back, is that a girl of five and a boy of seven had a gas fire in their bedroom?” (97). Just like Coraline’s father, the father in *TOEL* keeps strict rules about the food the children should eat; and just like Coraline, the boy is embarrassed by his father’s attempt at either eating healthy or simply being different: “my father had found a local baker’s shop where they made thick loaves of heavy brown bread” (21), which, additionally, his father would burn while trying to make toast. One of the first times the narrator remembers being disappointed in his father was “when [he] was much older, he [the father] confessed ... that he

had never liked burnt toast ... and for a fraction of a moment, [the boy's] entire childhood felt like a lie" (24). Similar to Coraline's mother, the boy's mother makes final decisions on what he can buy. She sneakily confiscates the twenty-five pounds he receives in the mail from the Premium Bond his grandma set up when he was born and thus crushes his dreams (34). Moreover, the narrator remembers his father's "nice, pretty secretary" who was always around when the children visited him at work (81) and his affair with the nanny, including a (subtly described) scene of sex he witnessed as a seven-year-old boy, which he was almost completely oblivious of at the time: "I was not sure what I was looking at. My father had Ursula Monkton pressed up against the side of the big fireplace ... He was hugging her from behind. Her midi skirt was hiked up around the waist" (103). Running away from home in the rain at that moment, the boy does not care about the adults – as long as he is as far away from them as he can be. As any other normal child, he is deeply shaken with what he has discovered – after all, his "parents were a unit, inviolate. The future [has] suddenly become unknowable: anything could happen" – and this frightened him far more than the monster who was Ursula Monkton, or his father attempting to drown him (105).

According to Carl E. Pickhardt, "witnessing loss of love between parents, having parents break their marriage commitment ... and the daily absence of one parent while living with the other, all create a challenging new family circumstance in which to live". He says that a child's life is closely dependent on the parents and the surroundings, and in the instability and unfamiliarity with the new situation, the child can experience "separation anxieties, crying at bed times ... tantrums, and temporary loss of established self-care skills, all of which can compel parental attention" (Pickhardt). This is evident in *TOEL* as well; the boy cries himself to sleep when locked away in his room, refuses to eat for days although realizes he is starving, and is openly rude and offensive to the monstrous nanny in order to get his father's attention. He draws away from the world and appreciates the little things that happen to him along the way: "I didn't want to talk about it to anybody. I had found a special place, and made a new friend, and lost my comic, and I was holding an old-fashioned silver sixpence tightly in my hand" (*TOEL* 32).

### 2.2.2. The Hempstock Family

As said earlier in this essay, inspired by Gaiman's childhood landscape and memories, *TOEL* is set in a small town, at a family house very similar to the one he grew up in. The book begins with the boy's description of the "ocean" – a duck pond on a nearby farm where he meets Lettie Hempstock, a strange girl who saves his life more than once. The Hempstock family's appearance is not a novelty in Gaiman's stories, though. Starting with Daisy Hempstock in *Stardust* in 1998 and then Liza Hempstock in *The Graveyard Book* ten years later, the family has been an important motif in Gaiman's books. They have been around for a long time: Liza was burned as a witch some 500 years ago and has since been haunting the said graveyard, while Daisy took in a fairy's child and raised him as her own. The *TOEL* Hempstocks, on the other hand, have survived since the beginning of time, perhaps even before: when seeing Lettie's pond/ocean for the first time, the boy does not see anything magical about it. However, she explains that "It is an ocean ... We came across it when I was just a baby, from the old country" (29) and then when asked about her age, Lettie says she and her family are "Old enough," she said. 'I remember when the moon was made'" (43) and they have been protecting this world ever since.

Lettie Hempstock is the youngest of the three women living on the farm – including her mother, Ginnie Hempstock, and the grandmother, Old Mrs Hempstock. They are three strong women, living and keeping the big farm functioning by themselves, and they do not have or need any men in their lives. They dress plainly, and are rather seen as motherly, protective figures than sexually attractive women: Lettie's "hair was worn relatively short, for a girl, and her nose was snub"; Ginnie was a "stocky woman ... had apple cheeks, a dark green skirt that went to her knees, and wellington boots"; while Old Mrs Hempstock's described as "an old woman ... with long grey hair, like cobwebs, and a thin face ... standing beside a cow" (25-26). All three of them, however, are highly intelligent, and also exhibit magical abilities. Gaiman's inspiration for the creation of the Hempstocks in *TOEL* apparently stems from mythology as well: the three women represent the Triple Goddess, best explained by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*: "three expressing the three phases of the moon and the Goddess's three aspects of maiden, nymph and hag" (Graves 245). The women themselves are presented as "a personification of primitive woman – woman the creatress and destructress" (386). As he further on explains, the Triple Goddess "represent[s] the New Moon, Old Moon and Full Moon triads—the crone being

Atropos, the senior member of the Old Moon triad” (399), evidence of which is found in *TOEL* as well: “But it was a crescent moon yesterday. And now it’s full ... Gran likes the full moon” (*TOEL* 140). Then, when the narrator is sitting next to the duck pond and talking to the two elder women, he realizes it was only one woman all along: “It’s funny. For a moment, I thought there were two of you” to which she replies that it has “only ever just” her. He then leaves the farm, but sees “two moons hung in the sky ... one moon perfectly full and round, the other, its twin on the other side of the sky, a half moon” (234-235).

Throughout the novel the Hempstock women state they are not witches and do not dabble in spell-making; they are rather represented as the ever-present, all-knowing gatekeepers between this and other worlds who are able to create and destroy in order to keep peace. Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky in her essay “‘Power and all its secrets’: Engendering Magic in Neil Gaiman’s *TOEL*” sees “the power of magic as an exclusively female concept” in the novel. She also juxtaposes “the aforementioned protective, nurturing magic of the homely Hempstocks, and the dark and dangerous allure of Monkton’s powers” (Czarnowsky), both trying to prevail over the boy’s fate. Luckily, the boy understands the consequences of trusting in either power, and chooses the protection under the farmhouse roof. The three women help him through the extremely rough journey to defeat Ursula Monkton, offering him both an escape from the difficult family situation and safety from the monster lurking at this house. As opposed to his own parents who give him little or no attention, the Hempstock women understand the boy and do not take him only as a helpless, lost child. It is the Old Mrs Hempstock’s gently rocking in the rocking chair that makes him finally feel safe after escaping the monster for the first time: “It was as if the essence of grandmotherliness had been condensed into that one place, that one time. I was not at all afraid of Ursula Monkton, whatever she was, not then. Not there” (*TOEL* 122). Another calming leitmotif connected to the farmhouse is food; the boy finds consolation in every meal the women serve him, and while eating feels safe: “I could not control the world I was in, could not walk away from things or people or moments that hurt ... and perhaps I was going to die that night and perhaps I would never go home again, but it was a good dinner” (199). Every time he steps through the door of the farmhouse, even upon his return many years later, the boy is served food and taken care of, which creates the feeling of being at home that he always missed at his own house as a child. About his time spent with the Hempstocks, the narrator says

that they always “asked [his] opinion”, followed his suggestions, and he “felt wonderfully important” (44). The three Hempstock women and the farm hence present the answer “to the narrator’s desire to prolong childhood and ward off destabilising influences (such as a burgeoning sexuality and the realisation that parents are not necessarily perfect) that come with growing up” (Czarnowsky).

### 2.2.3. Ursula Monkton and the Supernatural Struggle

The supernatural occurrences in the book start with a suicide. After his father’s stolen car is found abandoned at the end of the lane, the boy accompanies his father to the site, not knowing what they would find there: “I saw it. It was an *it*, the thing I was looking at, not a *him*” (*TOEL* 22) – unprepared, both the father and the boy stumbled upon the dead body in the car. Shocked and unsure of what he was seeing, the boy immediately thinks of the road trip to Madame Tussauds waxworks of “men and women who had murdered people ... and who were then murdered in their turn” (23), which was where his parents took him when he was only six years old. Although this is a truly traumatic experience that would leave any child scarred, at that moment the boy can only think about his comic book that the corpse of the miner was sitting on. Not wanting the child to be around, the policeman at the scene lets Lettie take him away and into the farmhouse where he meets the mother and the grandmother, and faces the supernatural for the first time; namely, all three women seem to know more of the crime scene than the policemen scoping the scene itself. Still unsure of what is happening, he wonders “how they knew about the suicide note or what the opal miner had thought as he died” (29). They also realize that the death of the opal miner is only a catalyst for the troubles that are about to come in the shape of Ursula Monkton.

In contrast to the Hempstock women’s plain and sort of gender-neutral appearance, Ursula Monkton is presented as a very attractive woman, whose beauty lures the boy’s father into her monstrous clutches. Towards the end of the book, Lettie and the boy go searching for Ursula in her room and find her there completely naked. Only seven years old, the boy pays little attention to the bare body; however, he does realize that “she really was pretty, for a grown-up, but when you are seven, beauty is an abstraction, not an imperative. I wonder what I would have done if



she had smiled at me like that now: whether I would have handed my mind or my heart or my identity to her for the asking, as my father did” (157). Being an innocent little boy, he does not fall prey to her beauty, but she does take on the role of an evil surrogate-mother, just like Coraline’s other mother: she infests his house and infects his family, then proceeds to threaten and abuse him. She is also what brings out the uncanniness in the book; after meeting the flappy creature beyond this world, the boy meets Ursula Monkton in his own kitchen: “Her dress wasn’t ragged. It was just the fashion of the thing ... I imagined her dress flapping, in that windless kitchen, flapping like the mainsail of a ship, on a lonely ocean, under an orange sky” (71). The character of Ursula Monkton is an image of bad habits and temptations of the world, which are presented in the Bible as coming “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness” (*The New King James Bible*, Mark. 7.20-22). She brings them out in people in exchange for their desires, sexual in the father’s case, financial in the opal miner’s: “Still giving people money ... She finds what they think they need and she tries to give it to them ... Now what she cares about more is people hurting” (*TOEL* 155). Upon crossing into this world and coming to the boy, she uses his biggest fear, fear of adults, against him by taking the shape of an adult nanny: “It did not matter, at that moment, that she was every monster, every witch, every nightmare made flesh. She was also an adult, and when adults fight children, adults always win” (114). Finally, Lettie rationalizes the boy’s fears by conveying messages that are coming from Gaiman himself:

Nobody looks like what they really are on the inside ... People are much more complicated than that ... Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. Some of them are things people are scared of. Some of them are things that look like things people used to be scared of a long time ago. Sometimes monsters are things people should be scared of, but they aren’t ... Grown-ups don’t look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they’re big and thoughtless and they always know what they’re doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. (149-150)

*Coraline* and *TOEL* bear many similarities, including the role of animals, specifically cats and their hunting/playing with the prey: “I was a little thing that amused her. She was playing, just as

... the big orange tomcat, [playing] with a mouse – letting it go, so that it would run, and then pouncing, and batting it down with a paw” (110). Having to cope with his favourite aunt’s death, the boy receives a kitten from his father to comfort him. He immediately takes to it and loves her “utterly and wholeheartedly” (12). Kittens appear throughout the book as both temporary and permanent companions who offer consolation and emotional support. The boy finds a kitten growing as a mandrake in the field they cross on their way back from the very first encounter of Ursula somewhere beyond this world. The kitten follows the boy back and from there on gives him comfort and strength: “There was still a monster in my house, and ... my father had pushed me down into the water of the bath ... But there was a kitten on my pillow, and it was purring in my face and vibrating gently with every purr, and very soon, I slept” (141).

Also similar to *Coraline*, the motif of naming dictates the course of the story itself: upon encountering the creature that is Ursula Monkton for the first time in the strange forest, Lettie attempts to get her name – the first thing she says to the creature is “Name yourself”, which the creature refuses to give: “My name is my own, child. Not yours. Now leave me be”. That names have power is confirmed when Lettie forbids the boy telling Ursula his name: “who’s your friend? ... ‘Don’t say nothing’” (53-54). The only people who have names in the novel are the supernatural beings Ursula Monkton and the Hempstock women. At the very end of their struggle with Ursula, we find out that Lettie’s knowledge of her name scares her: “Gran always calls your sort of thing *fleas*, Skarthach of the Keep” to which Ursula replies fearfully: “I’m not scared” (160). Ursula Monkton is not a real flea, she is rather referred to as one because of her commonness in the universe and her stupidity – she feeds of the chaos she creates and does not consider being careful not to be noticed at all.

#### 2.2.4. Overcoming Fear and Temptation, and the Metaphysical Reward

The real struggle and the biggest test for the boy, however, came after defeating Ursula Monkton. As stated before, she is after all just a flea, a lost creature doing what she must to survive. But because she had infiltrated the boy in order to cross over to this world, a group of cleaners the Old Mrs Hempstock calls *varmints* is called to make sure this world is safe. The situation gets out of hand when the Hempstocks refuse to turn the boy in, and he is left to wait in

a small magical circle in the backyard of his house. As discussed before, Gaiman has always believed in books and the power of words, so in the same manner the boy restrains himself from leaving the circle and dying a horrible death by remembering the books he read: “I remembered poems to distract myself, recited them silently under my breath, mouthing words but making no sound” (177). While sitting there and waiting, varmints appear multiple times in the shapes of people he knows – the boy resists the temptation to believe them and leave the circle until the shape of his father, the person he is truly afraid of the most, appears: “I had stood up to worse things than him in the last few hours. And suddenly, I knew: I didn’t care any more ... I said: ‘Does it make you feel big to make a little boy cry?’” (182-183). Although with difficulty and immense fear, the boy finally confronts the person who has been the bully from the very beginning and shows greater courage than he knew was in him, which is the crucial step toward receiving his metaphysical reward.

The process of reaching the reward is magical, and the Hempstock women help the boy reach it. Just as the Old Mrs Hempstock performs the most ancient magic, Lettie’s magic is that of children. She knows secret paths and casts her magic through nursery rhymes and abandoned toys. She takes care of her ocean, but does not have power over it: the only person who is able to get the ocean to “cooperate” is her grandmother, and even she barely makes it: “It gave Gran such a struggle that she ... [had] to go and have a lie-down afterwards” (189). In order to bring the boy to safety, away from the varmints and the magical circle, Lettie submerges him in her ocean, which opens him to all the secrets of the universe, he suddenly knows and is everything both physical and metaphysical: “Lettie Hempstock’s ocean flowed inside me, and it filled the entire universe, from Egg to Rose ... I saw the world ... I understood how fragile it was, that the reality I knew was a thin layer ... that there were patterns and gates and paths beyond the real” (192). He is suspended in the ocean, without space and time or other limitations of the mind, and is able to grasp the transcendental. According to Immanuel Kant – one of the most influential philosophers in the history of Western philosophy, as interpreted by Matt McCormick, “we cannot have knowledge of the realm beyond the empirical”; whatever is out there can only be sensed or understood if it can be presented spatially and in time – these are necessary as a “form or condition of our intuitions of objects”. “A consciousness that apprehends objects directly, as they are in themselves and not by means of space and time”, McCormick explains further, “is

possible ... but our apprehension of objects is always mediated by the conditions of sensibility” (“Immanuel Kant: Metaphysics”). In *TOEL*, Gaiman offers the god-like consciousness to the boy and shows that there is greater knowledge beyond the first line of what we can experience. He, however, argues through the character of Lettie that even though it is appealing, the ultimate immersion in the knowledge in and beyond this world would be boring, even destructive: “[It would] not kill you. Destroy you. Dissolve you. You wouldn’t die in here ... just a little of you would exist everywhere, all spread out” (194). When asked if she knows everything all at once, Lettie shakes her head. However, in a couple of different scenes, one can see that Gaiman promotes personal development and the coming of age, and presents it as a never-ending process that needs to be nurtured by each person alone. To illustrate, after the boy’s father had tried to drown him and he escaped from the monstrous nanny, Old Mrs Hempstock needs to cut these events from reality so that his parents let him stay with the Hempstocks for a while. When asked if he wants to keep the traumatic memories, the boy responds: “I *want* to remember ... Because it happened to me. And I’m still me” (*TOEL* 133).

In Ancient Greek philosophy, Plato argued that reaching a higher form of knowledge that is beyond the physical world also causes devastation. In his allegory of the cave in Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato presents a dialogue between his teacher, Socrates, and one of his students, Glaucon. They discuss what happens when one’s mind is open to higher ideas, to ideas beyond the mere physical world. He talks about the eyes and blindness caused by the light of these ideas: how the “one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation [the cave]; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?”, which would, in return, cause the people around him to not take him seriously. And if he tried to pull them outside of the cave and introduce them to the light as well, “they would put him to death” (“Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave*”). To all this Glaucon confirms that he thinks that person “would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner” as other people do. In the aforementioned lecture “Why our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming” (*The View from the Cheap Seats*), Gaiman warns against people who have not been introduced to the light of knowledge and wants his readers to be aware of the possibility of creating “a generation convinced that reading is uncool and, worse, unpleasant” (12). He believes fiction is one of the ways of experiencing the world in a different way, or finding out things that are

normally beyond our reach. He says that “once you’ve visited other worlds, like those who ate fairy fruit, you can never be entirely content with the world that you grew up in” (12).

Having overcome his worst fears, beaten Ursula Monkton, and confronted his father’s anger issues, the boy feels a surge of courage and tries to save the world from being devastated by the cleaner birds: “because of me, all these things would be gone ... I did not want to die at all. Understand that” (208). He lets go of Lettie’s hand and runs towards the birds, but is somehow saved and finds himself in Mrs Hempstock’s embrace, with “something wet and warm ... soaking [his] back” (210), which, later, he realizes was Lettie’s body, after she “had given her life for” his (214). The narrator remembers all of this as he is sitting next to the duck pond. He regrets his actions and is ashamed because of Lettie’s selfless sacrifice. Gaiman, through the words of the old woman, gives him (and the reader) one final piece of advice: “You don’t pass or fail at being a person, dear” (231).

### 2.3. *Neverwhere*

Written and released in 1996 as a companion novel based on Lenny Henry’s and Neil Gaiman’s script for the BBC miniseries of the same name, *Neverwhere* was Gaiman’s first novel – with the exception of *Good Omens* written by himself and Terry Pratchett in 1990. 2013 saw the release of a radio play, starring well-known actors such as Sir Christopher Lee, Natalie Dormer, Anthony Head, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Neil Gaiman himself. It is an imaginative, dark story of betrayal, horror, myth, wit, heroism, and villainy. In *Neverwhere*, Gaiman challenges the rules and facts of our world: he opens and hides fantastical dimensions in plain sight. Reminiscent of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Neverwhere* takes us down below London streets, throughout the underground system and its magical world.

In creation of the London Below, Gaiman uses the existing structures of the modern city to develop the unfamiliar underground world that captures the reader’s attention. The protagonist of the novel, Richard Mayhew, enters this uncanny world after an accidental encounter with one of the seemingly homeless, to everyday person invisible inhabitants of the London we know today. The city and the motif of space in it are the dominant aspects of the novel, intensified by the

second protagonist, a girl named Door, who is able to not only open any door, but, as we find out further on in the novel, also to create doors and hence traverse space, including places that are normally non-adjacent.

Perhaps for the reason of having been written after Gaiman had collaborated with Terry Pratchett, *Neverwhere* relies heavily on wit and satire, tools used by Pratchett throughout most of his work, specifically in his *Discworld* series. In contrast to the other two books discussed in this thesis, the change the main protagonist goes through is most visible through the eyes of people he meets and spends time with. The motif of uncanniness is also heavily used in the novel, emphasised by the familiarity of the city itself. According to Roger Luckhurst's article "Occult London", "only ghosts, after all, can walk through walls, breach the boundaries of the increasingly privatized zones of the city, and shimmer impossibly between past and present Londons" (qtd. in "The Ghost in the Machine" 167). In *Neverwhere*, it is the people who have fallen through the cracks of time and space that can traverse the two worlds, open gates where none exist, and use magical means.

### 2.3.1. London Above and Below

The geography in *Neverwhere* is one of the most crucial elements of Richard Mayhew's story. Set in both modern London and the fantastical, darker version of it down below, the story allows characters to shift between the worlds, but essentially only letting them inhabit one of them at once. Just like Lewis Carroll's Alice is not allowed to simply turn back and go home, Richard is prohibited from returning to the life he had lived before falling through the cracks. He finds himself in a dark, dangerous world he knows nothing about, and realizes he possesses no tools, mental or physical to survive the impending horrors London Below promises.

This darkness of the underground world strongly reminds one of London during wartime or the city depicted in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The Second World War transformed the city into "a terrain of blackout, ruins and inferno, the London Underground underwent an astonishing alteration", David Ashford writes (115). For decades, the Tube was just unexplored space of "abstract circulation", a "non-place", eventually becoming

home to “thousands of Londoners overnight”. The most horrifying images from the wartime depict children, as the idea of their innocence being crushed by the horrors of war is an eye-opener. Graham Greene, in his novel *The Ministry of Fear*, describes childhood as the time of simplicity and immortality:

In childhood we live under the brightness of immortality – heaven is as near and actual as the seaside. Behind the complicated details of the world stand the simplicities: God is good, the grown-up man or woman knows the answer to every question, there is such a thing as truth, and justice is as measured and faultless as a clock. Our heroes are simple: they are brave, they tell the truth, they are good swordsmen and they are never in the long run really defeated. (97)

Such innocent notions of life are broken in the underground world of *Neverwhere*. Upon meeting the girl Anaesthesia, Richard realises that the people of the underground are not only monsters and killers; some of them are quite pleasant, genuine people, who much like him, fell through the cracks when life in London Above became too much to bear. Anaesthesia tells him she used to live with her aunt and her boyfriend who abused her physically and sexually: “I told my aunt, an’ she started hitting me. Said I was lying. Said she’d have the police on me. But I wasn’t lying. So I run away” (*Neverwhere*, 87). Alice Jenkins, in her essay “Tunnel Visions and Underground Geography and Fantasy”, discusses the importance of tunnels in creating strong contrast “with the official, sunlit world of the above-ground city and allow for critical comment on its hypocrisy, lack of compassion, or unrecognised disorder” (Jenkins, ch. 1). This is best viewed through the character of Jessica, Richard’s stuck up, materialist girlfriend who keeps Richard safe in a comfortable but boring life. Additionally, Jenkins states that “these tunnels are the spaces of the poor, the dispossessed and the marginalised, and they are accreted rather than constructed” (ch. 3). Furthermore, the world below consists not only of dispossessed people, but also thrives on all “the unwanted parts of London Above: disused sewers, forgotten subway lines, neglected roads” (ch. 3) – when the marquis de Carabas is supposedly killed and his body disposed of in the sewer, the Sewer folk, who “lived in a world of gurgles and drips, the men, the women, and the silent little sewer children” (*Neverwhere*, 265), loot the marquis’s corpse upon finding it slowly floating face down. Their faces beam with happiness for they now “truly had

something of value to sell” (268) or rather exchange, since money means nothing more than plain paper to them.

Jennifer Miller, in her article “Living Below and Between: Interstitiality and Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*”, discusses the importance of movement in the novel. It is “reinforced by the way in which modes and avenues of transportation function as the primary setting of the novel. So much of the novel takes place in subway stations, sewer tunnels, and even subway trains themselves” (Miller). In *Neverwhere* Richard is taken through and to various, both open and long-closed underground stops and locations, as well as fabricated ones. The actual London Tube itself opens up these possibilities to Gaiman. Rod Mengham explains that there are forty ghost stations in the city centre alone: “repositories of gloom, amplifying the distant vibrations, allaying the slight breezes that pulse through the labyrinth, to decelerate as they get further and further away from the rushing air of tunnels where the trains still run” (199). Gaiman uses the abandoned areas to excite the reader’s imagination and therefore constructs the feeling of uncanniness necessary for the creation of Richard’s story. Ashford says that “we see in [these abandoned stations] the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in the modern city, but which we are aware of in some remote corner of our own being” (Ashford 169).

### 2.3.2. Richard Mayhew’s Fall down the Rabbit Hole

Richard Mayhew is neither the hero nor the anti-hero of the story. He is, rather, a regular man leading a simple life, who moved to London to work in “Um, Securities” (*Neverwhere*, 3) three years before the events of the book took place. Those three years living in the city of eight million inhabitants “had not changed Richard” (8) – he took London for granted and even prided “himself on having visited none of the sights of London” (10), at least not until he met Jessica who took him to all sorts of galleries and museums that he absolutely dreaded. While it may be clear why *Coraline* and *TOEL* are coming-of-age novels because their protagonists undergo the process of maturation as children, Mayhew also undergoes this process, only later in his life. Although a grown-up, he is still searching for his own identity, and this is underlined by his teaming up with Door, a girl who is on a quest of her own. Gaiman’s story starts with: “The night before he went to London, Richard Mayhew was not enjoying himself” (1), then further



describing exactly what kind of a person Richard actually is. He is submissive, unassuming, gullible and hence unable to take charge of his life: he lets Jessica drag him to shopping centres and command his life and the decisions he makes. The only thing that makes him stand out at work in an office is his collection of little troll figurines, an accidental hobby comprised of gifts from his colleagues when he found a troll outside and brought it to his office desk to inject “a little personality into his working world” (12). All that changes when he and Jessica stumble upon the girl Door, wounded on the side of a London street. Door becomes the catalyst that propels Richard into the world of London Below, practically erasing him from existence in London Above.

Upon meeting Door and helping her escape the vicious creatures Mister Vandemar and Mister Croup, Richard’s life as he knows it ceases to exist. He, however, does not realize the amount of danger he is in, no matter how many times the people he meets warn him. Although his fear for his life is visible throughout the book, he does not seem to have a high regard for himself as a human being, which most of the people he meets pick up on immediately and some take advantage of. Jessica seeks to make him a man suitable for married life, although her parents have never “entirely approved of him as a future son-in-law” (55); Door calls him an idiot when they first meet; marquis de Carabas talks down to him: “We’re not going to get very far if you keep repeating everything I say, now, are we?” (45); and the other people he meets in the underground world dismiss him as an idiotic outsider. Taxi drivers cannot see him, co-workers act like he never existed in the first place, and random people walk in on him taking a bath in his own apartment and do not acknowledge the naked man at all. Thus, Richard is faced with a challenge: how to survive in the world he knows nothing about without possessions, friends, and most importantly, courage.

David Ashford writes that “as one of the earliest modernist spaces, the London Underground is a prominent symbol of urban alienation”. It is “a space peculiarly open to forgotten places with tremendous myth-making potential” (169). Gaiman uses this in his advantage in creating the curse of invisibility that traps Richard in London Below. He is alienated and, unless he can lift the invisibility, he cannot escape the unknown, dangerous world. Just like Coraline and the boy, who were the main point of interest of the evil presence – the other mother and Ursula Monkton

respectively – and only sought to be left alone, Richard may as well be walking around London Below with a large, neon sign that says “outsider”.

According to Jonas Sébastien Beaudry’s article, Richard’s situation is an all familiar one, regardless of magic: “our identity is partly constituted by social recognition, the exclusion of a person ... can very well make him ‘invisible’ ... People may also ignore other beings because they belong ... to another race, religion or gender” (“Apologizing to a Rat”, 74). Different people react differently to invisibility: at the beginning of the novel, when Door falls down in front of Richard and Jessica, he shows compassion and concern for the hurt girl, while Jessica tugs at him to keep moving then looks “back at the girl on the sidewalk. Priorities: Richard had no priorities” (24). Beaudry argues that it is an “inclination for compassion” that compels the couple to react differently: it “includes other considerations, like our desires and agendas, which may influence us to distort relevant facts about people, such as their needs” (“Apologizing to a Rat”, 80).

### 2.3.3. The Marquis and the Fallen Angel

One of the pivotal, and most controversial characters in the novel is the marquis de Carabas, an old friend of Door’s father whose help Door seeks when chased by Mr Croup and Mr Vandemar. Even though he seems to be a lying, cheating, arrogant scoundrel, he stays with Door until the very end, losing his life for her quest. *Neverwhere*’s Biblical references seem to peek with Carabas, first when he is being “crucified on a large X-shaped wooden construction Mr. Vandemar had knocked together from several old pallets” (237), then later on when he miraculously comes back from the dead. At this point, once again, names in Gaiman’s book become an important key – Carabas reveals the truth about himself:

The marquis de Carabas was not a good man, and he knew himself well enough to be perfectly certain that he was not a brave man. He had long since decided that the world, Above or Below, was a place that wished to be deceived, and, to this end, he had named himself from a lie in a fairy tale, and created himself – his clothes, his manner, his carriage – as a grand joke. (237-238)

Gaiman here alludes to the character of the same name in the story of Puss in Boots, written in 1697 by Charles Perrault. Perrault's Carabas also built his life on lies that his trickster cat used in order to make him wealthy. Moreover, Perrault's character himself was based on Claude Gouffier, a French nobleman from the sixteenth century who collected various artistic, scientific and zoological artefacts ("The Gouffier Family"). Similarly, Gaiman's Carabas moves "like a big cat: a lynx, perhaps, or a huge black panther" (*Neverwhere* 206) and survives in London Below by trading unusual and unique artefacts: "He took one hand out of his pocket and displayed it to Mr. Croup ... It was listed in certain catalogues as *The Spirit of Autumn (Grave Figure)*. It was ... a piece of glazed pottery that had been shaped and painted while Europe was in the Dark Ages" (206).

Christ's crucifixion was a sacrifice for the sins of his people. Carabas lets himself get crucified for information: "It was a brave thing to do, he thought. And a stupid one" (238). He is, much like Christ, fully aware of the consequences, but also aware that it is the right thing to do. At this point, the reader sees the marquis as a modest, brave human being as opposed to the image he has created for himself. Due to his dark characteristics, Door and her group for a long time suspect him to be a traitor, working for the person trying to kill them. His death, although not directly helping Richard in any way, does put him on the right path once he is resurrected. He is led to Richard just in time to save him from Lamia, a vampire-like creature that tries to suck Richard's life out: "The marquis picked Lamia up, one-handed, and brought her face close to his. 'Go near him again, you or any of the Velvet Children, and I'll come by day to your cavern, while you sleep, and I'll burn it to the ground'" (294). Extreme contrast in his manner towards Richard can be seen here, as opposed to his cold, bullying behaviour at the beginning of the novel.

Another unavoidable connection to the Bible comes to the reader in the form of the angel Islington, initially a magnificent, awe-inspiring creature that Door and Richard believe can help them find the answers they seek. When introduced for the first time in the novel, the angel is something else altogether: at first glance, the reader is mesmerised by its beauty and Gaiman once again succeeds in creating an illusion that, once revealed, would shock the reader: "The figure's robe was simple, and white; or more than white. A color, or an absence of all colors, so

bright as to be startling ... Its face was pale and wise, and gentle; and, perhaps, a little lonely. It was very beautiful” (*Neverwhere*, 134). Gaiman also makes it clear that Islington once lived in Atlantis and took care of it before it sunk. Eventually, though, Door and Richard find out that he was the one responsible for its destruction, hence his need to escape the prison he lives in by using the key and Door to get into heaven.

Gaiman’s craftiness in creating interstitial spaces becomes quite obvious with the angel as well. Islington is an actual place in London, it is a residential district, one of its underground stations actually being the Angel tube station. The name Islington, however, comes from the initial settlements of that area that were called “Gislandune, 'Gisla's hill or down' ... [that] gradually changed to Iseldon, which continued in use well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century” (“Islington: Growth”). Interestingly, the word *gísel* itself in Anglo-Saxon meant *a hostage* (“Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary”), which together with the word *don* or *ton* perfectly matches the angel’s doomed cage: hostage hill.

#### 2.3.4. Ordeal, Death and Recreation of Identity

Joseph Campbell writes: “Typically, the hero of the fairy tale achieves a domestic, microcosmic triumph, and the hero of the myth a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph ... the youngest or despised child who becomes the master of extraordinary powers – prevails over his personal oppressors” (30). In this sense, Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* obviously follows the rules commonly seen in a fairy tale. Richard Mayhew is not on his path to save the world, at least not the world we all live in. His journey is taking him towards saving his own micro cosmos – or rather, towards changing the way he perceives and maintains his own inner world.

According to Christopher Vogler, a well-known Hollywood development executive whose work is inspired by Campbell’s teachings, there are 12 steps to the hero’s journey as shown below in fig. 1:

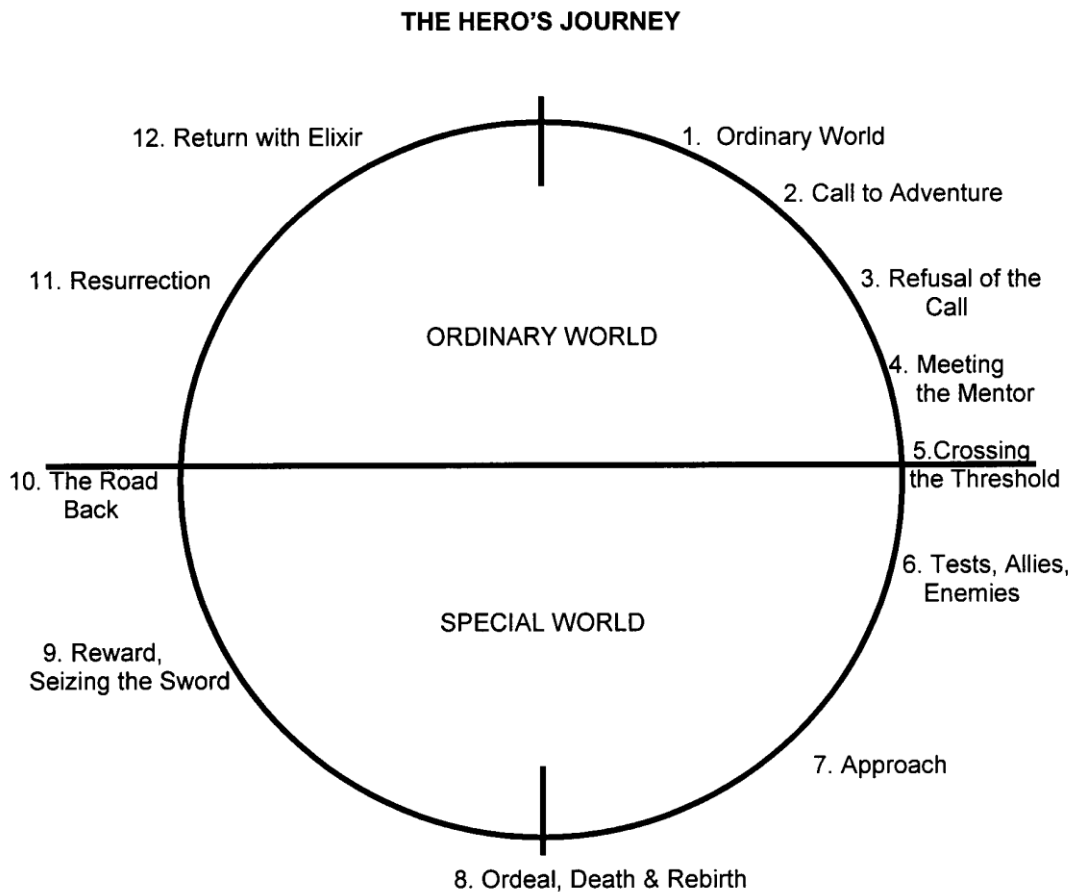


FIG. 1. VOGLER, CHRISTOPHER. "HERO'S JOURNEY". THEWRITERSJOURNEY.COM. WEB. 4 DEC. 2016.  
 <[HTTP://WWW.THEWRITERSJOURNEY.COM/HERO'S\\_JOURNEY.HTM](http://www.thewritersjourney.com/hero's_journey.htm)>.

Richard Mayhew's adventure follows the typical pattern that appears in "drama, storytelling, myth, religious ritual, and psychological development" (Vogler) with little variation. He travels with Door and Hunter in order to find a way back above ground, but instead, due to a series of events he had no control over, he is Door's only chance to pass the ordeal of the Blackfriars and receive the key that they believe will give both of them the answers they seek. Richard is faced with his biggest fear: a realization that he is not worth anything, that his life is a waste and he would be better off dead. His thoughts are projected through the people he meets in the ordeal. They look at him as if he had the plague, and make comments such as "Why do people like that stay alive?" ... 'Not enough guts to end it all'" (*Neverwhere*, 242), or calling him pathetic and insane. As he waits in the underground station, he meets his friend Gary and Jessica who try to convince him that he is "not going through an ordeal", that he is having a "nervous breakdown" (245). Not realizing it, he passes the ordeal by refusing to "become an incident at Blackfriars

Station. To end it all” even though Gary makes it seem like the only way out by saying “Your life’s a joyless, loveless, empty sham. You’ve got no friends” (247), confirming Richard’s greatest fears.

Being the second protagonist of the novel, Door has an ordeal of her own to pass. She needs to find her family’s murderer, which she believes she can do by getting the key Richard receives from the Blackfriars to the Angel Islington. What she does not realize until very late in their adventure, is that the Angel is their killer, and the one who has been pursuing her group all along. Upon revealing his true, dark face, the Angel transforms much like the other mother in *Coraline*: “It was as if the lid had been pulled off something dark and writhing: a place of derangement and fury and utter viciousness ... The angel’s serene beauty cracked; its eyes flashed” (322). It tries to get out of his cage and into heaven, but Door tricks him by opening a door “as far and hard away” as possible, eventually sending him and his assistants Vandemar and Croup off to an unknown dimension.

During both of their ordeals, Richard and Door face “the possibility of death, brought to the brink in a fight with a mythical beast” (Vogler). Vogler compares it to the thrill of a terrifying ride in an amusement park, where the “passengers feel like they’re going to die, and there’s a great thrill that comes with surviving a moment like that”. The near-death experience makes Richard instantly realize how much he has changed in such a short time spent underground. He has a clean slate now, but also utter respect from all the people and creatures that undermined him along the way. He is now ready to receive the reward: the key that is “the key to all reality” which has the power to “take him back to London Above” (341). After facing one final challenge, Door asking him to stay, Richard returns to London Above, temporarily disappointing the reader. He, however, takes charge of his life this time around. He fights for a better apartment, having lost the old one, and is promoted to a Junior Partner. He meets a nice girl and shares his adventures with his friend Gary. None of this fulfils him though. As Graham Greene writes in *The Ministry of Fear*, as we grow up, we learn that “adventure [doesn’t always] follow the literary pattern, that there [aren’t] always happy endings ... [there is sometimes] the awful stirring of pity” that tells us that there is something to be done, “that you [can’t] let things stay as they were” (210). Similarly, having returned home, Richard realizes that things are not right, not

for him, and not anymore. Going home with the girl makes him think of their perfectly planned future: “he would marry the girl from Computer Services, and get another promotion, and they would have two children ... and they would move out to the suburbs ... And it would not be a bad life. He knew that, too. Sometimes there is nothing you can do” (363). For Richard, however, there is still something he can do, and that, in *Neverwhere*, is partially the Return with the Elixir, the final step of the hero’s journey. He is found in his desperate attempts to return to London Below by the marquis, who takes him through the wall and that is the last time the reader sees Richard Mayhew.

## Conclusion

In essence, it can be concluded that in his coming-of age novels Neil Gaiman is reinventing the fairy tale by adding dark and twisted details that nurture the hero and his/her journey. His stories open up unimaginable worlds that bring meaning to everyday struggles his readers experience, and provide a temporary escape that gives the reader new insight, courage, and confidence.

As seen in Gaiman’s speeches published in *The View from the Cheap Seats*, he himself has embarked on a quest to show his readers that anything is possible, as long as there is will. Through the characters of the lonely and neglected Coraline, the boy whose father is cheating on his mother, and Richard Mayhew, a grown man stuck in a boring, empty life, Gaiman provides a

variety of scenarios the reader can identify with. The supernatural aspect of his stories exhibits the power of imagination that ultimately leads to opening up to other worlds and new experiences through which one gains confidence, and eventually, achieves self-actualization. The other mother, the evil nanny, the godlike neighbours, and the familiarity of London erase the invisible barrier between the believable and unbelievable, and allow the reader to feel the stories as hitting “close to home”, just as the term uncanny (German: *unheimlich*) explored in this thesis suggests.

On the whole, the idea of coming of age has been around for centuries. It seems, however, that it is coming to its culmination in contemporary children and young adult literature, as well as cinema. Gaiman strives to preserve the power of books, continues to show the importance of reading, and encourages his readers to “make good art” themselves.

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