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## **Fantastic Alterities and *The Sandman***

### Introduction

This article explores the ways in which the comics medium enhances our understanding of literary models of the Fantastic.[1] It examines the presence and depiction of multiple worlds in *The Sandman* (Neil Gaiman/various) and discusses the role of the comics medium and its denial of mimesis in creating such alterities. After establishing a contemporary working model of the Fantastic, it considers the ways in which the comics medium supports the creation and sustenance of both the mode and genre of the Fantastic via form and content. It then analyzes the construction of fantastic alterities in *The Sandman* using case studies drawn from *A Game of You* and *The Kindly Ones*. It concludes by identifying and summarizing the ways in which the tenets of comics narratology exemplify the criteria for construction of the Fantastic.

### Defining the Fantastic

The Fantastic frequently eludes definition and resists categorization. Critics remain hesitant as to its status (as a mode or genre) and attempts at definition have focused variously upon its thematic, structural, stylistic or cultural elements. The following summary of the current critical position addresses these various approaches and establishes a working model.

As a forerunner of modern criticism, Northrop Frye's work offers a broad view of literature in identifying archetypes and modes that encompass genres. These operate as overall tendencies in literature rather than historically limited genres, although the issue is frequently confused as the modes themselves are derived from historical genre definitions. For example, Frye situates Myth and naturalism as the opposing poles of literary design, with romance (defined not as a historical genre but as a movement in literature towards the displacement of Myth into the human sphere) found between the two (Frye 1990a, 136). Similar models are found in the work of other critics, for example Robert Scholes's catalogue of seven modes that are derived from historical genre definitions yet encompass these (Scholes 1969, 107).

Although he criticizes the non-literary nature of Frye's categories (Todorov 1975, 16), Tzvetan Todorov's famous structuralist definition of the Fantastic mirrors Frye's work. Todorov situates the Fantastic between the marvellous (supernatural accepted) and the uncanny (supernatural explained), creating a similar three-part structure at the level of genre. In critiquing the ambiguities and omissions of Frye's model, Todorov exposes the distinction between historical and theoretical genres in Frye's catalogue (Todorov 1975, 13). The notion of theoretical genres goes back as far as the theories of Plato or Diomedes and defines genres that may not exist

alongside those that do. Todorov then proceeds to create a similarly theoretical model of the Fantastic. His critique of Frye seems supported (for example by Frye's own insistence in his work on the autonomy of literary criticism (Frye 1990a, 6) while denying any such self-sufficiency to his literary categories), and Todorov's structuralist model remains the cornerstone definition of the Fantastic to date.

Todorov identifies three textual levels within his critical model (the verbal, the syntactical and the semantic) and proposes that the "moment of hesitation" that defines the Fantastic may be located on any of these levels (1975, 20). Whereas previously this hesitation commonly referred to perception (and therefore was most often found in the verbal area – referring to both the utterance itself and its performance, and thereby involving both the speaker/narrator and the listener/reader), Todorov proposes that language has now replaced perception as the defining factor of fantastic discourse. Consequently he concludes that hesitation is also observable both in the syntactical relations between different parts of the text, and in its semantic content (its themes, which he identifies as being either of the self or the other).

By specifically addressing the Fantastic and adding a syntactic dimension, Todorov's study breaks with previous criticism. Much of this touches on the Fantastic only as a part of a wider categorization of literary criticism (Frye) or generic theory—as Robert Scholes describes his own work: situating it between the generalizations of modal theory and the preciseness of genre study (1969, 111). Even those studies specifically directed at the Fantastic (such as John Cawelti's work on deductive genre theory, or the formalist work of Vladimir Propp) focus only on the text's semantics.

Of the preceding studies, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (first published 1928) is perhaps the most significant. It explores the text at the narrative level, focusing on its overt content and themes. Through syntagmatic analysis of individual narratives, Propp identifies thirty-one functions that he claims are common to the narrative structure of all Russian wondertales. By focusing exclusively on this limited body of work, Propp's study also includes an implicit cultural element, although this is not explicitly considered in *Morphology*. However, Propp's later book, *Theory and History of Folklore*, expands upon his earlier observations to consider the semantics of his wondertales in a cultural context: concluding that folklore reinterprets the images of the old social system in order to depict the unusual in impossible dimensions (1984, 11).

Propp also comments (somewhat more widely) that, in this way, genres may be classified according to their relationship with reality:

The character of a genre is determined by the kind of reality it reflects, the means by which reality is expressed, the relation to reality, and its assessment. Unity of form results in unity of content, if by content we understand not only the plot but also the intellectual and emotional world reflected in the work. It follows that unity of form is sustained by everything called content and that the two cannot be separated. (1984, 41)

In this way Propp gives his semantic study a syntactical dimension and, although the resulting model has been criticized (for example by Claude Lévi-Strauss), it has also been successfully defended.[2]

Subsequent criticism has built upon these previous models in various ways. Defining the Fantastic in terms of its relationship with reality is further supported by the work of Kathryn Hume, who defines fantasy as one of the overall impulses (together with mimesis) that underlie all literature (Hume 1984, xii) and subdivides it into four different modes according to its response to

reality (55). While this inclusive definition is certainly non-restrictive it is of small help in defining exactly what fantasy might be except a departure from reality.

Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) seeks "to extend Todorov's investigation from being one limited to the *poetics* of the Fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its forms" (Jackson 1981, 6) in order to consider the cultural formation of the Fantastic. Jackson also defines the Fantastic/fantasy (she uses the two terms interchangeably) as a mode that assumes different generic forms (32) and uses a linguistic metaphor (which parallels Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach to Myth) to clarify this. The mode of the Fantastic is the *langue* from which various *parole* (genres or forms) derive, according to its interpretation and the surrounding historical situation (7).

Jackson has been criticised most for her indiscriminate use of terminology (see for example Traill 1996, 6 and Cornwell 1990, 27), but her work does introduce two important terms: "alterity" and "paraxis." "Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real" (20). Fantastic worlds are therefore alterities – "this world re-placed and dis-located" (19), and Jackson defines this process of transformation and replacement as paraxis – signifying "par-axis," being that which lies alongside the main body (or axis) (19). Jackson further notes the significance of her optical metaphor (paraxis is a technical term referring to an illusory area of perceived unity after light refraction), alerting us to the significance of perception in defining the Fantastic.

In adding a cultural dimension to Todorov's model, Jackson's criticism is largely semantic in nature, and much of her study is concerned with identifying the Fantastic's themes (such as invisibility, transformation, and dualism) and motifs (vampires, mirrors, shadows, ghosts, madness, and dreams) in her selected texts. It is again worth noting that all these revolve around difficulties of perception and the problematization of vision (45). However, she does also apply her criticism, albeit briefly, to the syntactical dimensions of the text, supporting Todorov's model in commenting that anxiety and hesitation may be found in the work's structure (28). Nonetheless, her work is not able to provide a new model for future criticism, but instead uses Todorov's model to inform a series of observations that connect a variety of works in terms of their structural characteristics and underlying semantic themes.

Subsequent criticism has continued to redefine Todorov's model in a similar manner, using stylistic and semantic deconstructions of fantastic literature to justify modifications. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), Christine Brooke-Rose attempts to define the Fantastic stylistically, providing an analysis of previous critical models and genre-based theories. She redefines Todorov's notion of hesitation in terms of the text's implied author and reader (as well as its narrator and narratee) and analyzes the text's related stylistic features. She concludes that the textual codes used are necessarily either over- or under-determined: we are given either too much (conflicting) information, or not enough, which sustains the Fantastic (Brooke-Rose 1981, 112). Not for the first time, attention is drawn to the stylistic strategies common to the Fantastic, such as unreliable narration.

Later critics' work continues in this vein, reassessing and adapting Todorov's model in order to both refine its applicability and inform discussion of the types of strategies common to the Fantastic. A.B. Chanady's *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* (1985) attempts to clarify and distinguish between these two terms, treating them as similar modes. Commenting that "critics do not even agree whether it is a mode, a genre or an attitude towards reality" (1985, 1), Chanady goes on to draw attention to the confusions of Todorov's system (where despite naming the Fantastic as a genre, he nonetheless situates it between two modes (1)). She instead adds the Fantastic to Robert Scholes's catalogue of seven modes and discusses it at this level.

Although she does not adopt Jackson's alterity terminology, Chanady also notes that fantastic literature is set in a world "very similar" (though not identical) to our own (5), in contrast to fairy tale, which takes place in the world of the outright marvellous. She defines three criteria for the presence of the Fantastic/magical realism: the co-presence of the natural and supernatural; antinomy between the two; and authorial reticence (31). The treatment of these factors is, for Chanady, the distinguishing factor between magical realism and the Fantastic: whereas the co-presence of the natural and supernatural is normalized by the presence of a realistic framework in magical realism, this is denied in the Fantastic. The antinomy of the supernatural and natural is thereby resolved in magical realism

and authorial reticence leads to acceptance, whereas such contradictions are foregrounded in fantastic literature and uncertainty prevails (11).

Chanady's attempt to distinguish between the two terms is made less clear for some readers by her use of Spanish-American narratives, which are included without translation. However, her method leads to closer study of the strategies used to enable authorial reticence (such as singularization) and she concludes by suggesting further areas for research that include the character of the narrator, use of subjectivity, characteristics of enunciation, and closer analysis of structural elements such as the use of suspense, suggestion and so forth.

Neil Cornwell's study *The Literary Fantastic* (1990) seeks to link the Fantastic to both gothic and postmodern literature and in so doing offers a comprehensive literature review of many of the models examined thus far. For Cornwell's purposes, Todorov's genre theory of the Fantastic exists within the broader mode that Cornwell names as fantasy, although he notes that fantasy also exists as a sub-genre (for example Tolkien-esque fiction), and in addition defines the Fantastic as a quality that may be found in works such as the uncanny (31).

Cornwell also looks backwards to gothic fiction and aligns David Punter's definition of "paranoiac fiction" with the Fantastic (53). In this sense he again strengthens the case for consideration of the Fantastic as an overall mode rather than a historically limited genre – and goes on to criticise the narrow period from which Todorov's examples are drawn (141). Although it is clear that many of the best examples of fantastic fiction are to be found in certain eras, its applicability to the disparate periods of gothic and postmodernism refutes such a limitation. Cornwell's work therefore aligns with Jackson's in treating the Fantastic as a mode that assumes various forms according to its historical context.

As Cornwell notes, the literary Fantastic has many similarities with the postmodern, a link further supported by his identification of the current preponderance of fantastic literature. Similarly, Scholes's definition of contemporary writing as fragmented and distorted applies equally to both the Fantastic and modernist/postmodernist fiction. Some of the more general surrounding literary criticism further emphasises this point.

This includes *Romancing the Postmodern* (1992), in which Diane Elam links the "excess characteristic" (Elam 1992, 1) of romance to postmodernism: considering romance both as a postmodern genre and as postmodernism itself (12). In so doing, she treats postmodernism not as following modernism, but as its counter-discourse (3), commenting that "postmodernism does not simply happen after modernism but is a series of problems present to modernism in its continuing infancy" (9) and hence focusing on texts that are problematized by their inclusion of romance (4). In my view, by situating romance in opposition to literary realism, defining it as "excess", commenting that its character remains "an uncertainty" (7), and focusing on its problematic tendencies, Elam's treatment of the concept may inform discussion of the Fantastic (if not outright fantasy). She also adds a gender dimension to her study in her consideration of woman "as the figure of the self-excess of romance" (17).

Bruno Latour takes a similar perspective on the coexistence of modernism and postmodernism in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), arguing that the historically limited genres of modernism and postmodernism are illusory and that, in fact, modernism has never existed in accordance with its own constitution. As such, he defines postmodernism not (as it presents itself) as the end of history, but instead locates it in the perpetual impasse of the avant-garde (Latour 1993, 62). In so doing, his work, like Elam's, accords with Jean-François Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, as "not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard 1984, 79).

A similar revelation exists in *The Space of Literature* (1982), in which Maurice Blanchot offers an inverted way of approaching literature as a silent empty space. Blanchot argues against common literary perception in proposing that art is not the real made unreal; that we do not ascend from the real world to art, but instead emerge from art towards what appears to be a mutualized version of our world (Blanchot 1982a, 47). Literature dwells in a silent, empty space and similarly is only able to be defined in terms of its negative attributes, such as the power to stop writing (25). As such, it is inward-looking: concerned only for its own essence (42). The illusory

space accorded to the Fantastic by some of the literary models discussed above, together with the reversal of the real and fictional worlds that underpins Blanchot's framework, again seem to tie his model to the Fantastic.

The idea of literature as that which "has become concerned for its own essence" (42) also evokes the notion of metafiction: a form common to the postmodern. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 1984, 40). However, she also defines it as "a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels" (42) and identifies many metafictional techniques that are shared by the Fantastic, such as the defamiliarization of language, an undermining of the omniscient narrator (49), or the setting up of an opposition between the construction and breaking of illusion (52). In this way metafictional texts explore the concept of fiction and expose reality itself as a mere concept. These elements inform the mode of the Fantastic.

Cultural studies that focus on the historical genre of the Fantastic do, however, provide further information as to its function and enable semantic discussion. John Cawelti notes that, while the genre is universal, the formula behind it is cultural (Cawelti 1984, 57), and as such it may be said that studies such as Propp's *Morphology* can inform on both levels. Cawelti concludes that formula fiction has a ritualistic function: to reaffirm cultural values (100), and Jack Zipes's work on fairy tales offers a similar conclusion (Zipes 1988, 143). Zipes's semantic consideration draws a distinction between the functions of the oral tradition of fairy tale and those of its written form and as such offers a syntactical element that is further enhanced by his observation that the structure of the tale is designed to facilitate recall (for example in its use of tasks as signs, or the absence of names) (Bannerman 2002, npag).

The various works of Marina Warner offer a similar thematic deconstruction of many of the dominant themes, motifs and symbols of fairy tale as Warner traces the historical development of this genre. She identifies changes in the depiction of certain motifs—such as the witch figure (Warner 2000, 12)—and in this way links the semantic content of fairy tale firmly to its historical context.

As this discussion demonstrates, while cultural and semantic theories focus upon cataloguing the motifs and themes of the Fantastic, contemporary syntactic models have refined Todorov's framework to emphasise the textual structure rather than the subjective reader response. This enables consideration of the Fantastic in terms of its relationship with reality (a notion prefigured by Propp and Hume), as in the work of Nancy Traill, who uses a theory of fictional worlds (derived from possible worlds) to examine the stylistic and semantic elements of the Fantastic. Like A.B. Chanady, Traill redefines reader hesitation as the co-presence of the natural and supernatural within the text, arranged in alethic opposition (Traill 1996, 9). She identifies various modes of the Fantastic (such as the disjunctive, outright fantasy, the ambiguous, or the paranormal) and (commenting on Jackson and Todorov's definitions) defines these as being tied to a moment in history while also transcending it (20). She further reviews terms such as realism in this way, distinguishing between the historical movement (realist fiction) and the ahistorical requirement (mimesis) (43).

As such, fantastic-specific criticism has provided (and subsequently modified) a framework for analyzing fantastic texts syntactically that is enhanced by its observations of the narrative techniques common to this model. These include: narrative remove, authorial reticence, over- or under-determination, floating signifiers, the use of figurative rather than literal discourse, and irreversible temporality, to name but a few. The semantic focus of other criticism from this school similarly identifies its relevant themes (such as transformation, invisibility, and dualism) and the symbols and motifs used to emphasise these.

These critical areas seem important to a contemporary conception of the Fantastic, and will hopefully be further informed by this article's subsequent case studies. These will be performed using a model of the Fantastic derived from the critics mentioned above and which is defined as follows: The Fantastic is an overall mode or tendency in fiction that has spawned various historical genres. These genres include those named by Todorov as fantastic, uncanny, or marvellous (which last is also known as magical realism or fantasy), and also the newer genres of the paranormal, science fiction and so forth. From this point on it therefore seems appropriate to distinguish between the (ahistorical) mode of "the Fantastic" and the (historical) genre of "the fantastic," or "fantastic literature" (which is distinct from fantasy or magical realism, as noted).

As this article will examine the mode of the Fantastic at both a syntactical and semantic level it seems appropriate to define the conditions of the Fantastic textually. This follows later critical models in redefining Todorov's notion of hesitation as the co-presence of the natural and supernatural (while noting that this may be indicated by reader hesitation). This is the primary condition for identification of the mode of the Fantastic, which (depending on the treatment of this opposition and other textual and historical factors) may then spawn any of the genres mentioned above – such as magical realism/fantasy (if the co-presence of the natural and supernatural is normalised), or the fantastic/fantastic literature itself (where this juxtaposition is problematized).

### Contemporary status

It seems important to note that the audience for fantastic literature aligns closely with that of comics. Like comics, the genre of fantasy literature is still perceived by many as children's literature. Similarly, fan conventions are events common to both comics and fantasy; and role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* link the Fantastic to the same 'fanboy' or 'nerd' label applied to comics. Offshoots such as live role-playing further emphasize costuming as a common factor and this is again reinforced by the existence of conventions, where costumes (such as Star Trek uniforms or magicians' robes) are commonplace. Finally, fantastic literature, movies and associated merchandise are often sold in comic book shops and in this way the genre literally shares a space with comics – *Forbidden Planet* (one of the largest chains of comic book stores in the UK) describes itself on its website as "the world's LARGEST and BEST-KNOWN science fiction, fantasy and cult entertainment retailer" (see [www.forbiddenplanet.com](http://www.forbiddenplanet.com)).

Fantasy blockbusters such as Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (2001-02) or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (the first of which was published in 1997) may be perceived as breathing new life into the genre; however it can be argued that this is deceptive. Jackson's movies have not legitimized fantasy in a wider sense by bestowing new credibility on older fantasy movies such as *The Beastmaster* (1982) or *Krull* (1983), and Rowling's success, although paving the way for imitators, has not made it any more acceptable for adults to read generic fantasy. In fact her books have been famously repackaged (using black-and-white photographs rather than character illustrations) for those adults who wish to read them in public without embarrassment. Likewise, the credibility that is afforded by the packaging of the glossy graphic novel and trade paperback forms or bestowed upon independent publishers (and even the literary DC Vertigo writers) mirrors this situation – as it should be remembered that this does not yet extend to general public perception of comics.

### Case study: *The Sandman: A Game of You*

*A Game of You* (the fifth *Sandman* trade paperback) tells a story split between two contrasting worlds – the dream world of its heroine, Barbie, and the "real" world of New York.[3] The presence of these two alterities invokes the Fantastic as we struggle to decide which world is most valid: which we should believe in. However, as Samuel Delaney alerts us in his introduction to the trade paperback, it is a mistake to read one world as fantasy and the other as reality. Delaney instead proposes that both worlds are fantasy, citing as evidence the mirroring and doubling of events between worlds and the parallels between characters such as George and Wilkinson, or Wanda and the Tantoblin (Delaney 1993, npag).

The natural and supernatural coexist within the setting of Barbie's dream world (which is known only as "THE LAND") – although in fact its introduction focuses entirely on its natural elements. This is

primarily achieved by showing the opening conversation (between Luz, Prinado, Wilkinson and Martin Tenbones) without revealing the speakers to be talking animals (Gaiman 1993, 1.1.1-1.3.3), and is further reinforced by the subject of their conversation, which indicates that the laws of life and death also apply here. The panels depict the dead body of the Tantoblin, the friend they are discussing (1.1.3).[4] In fact our first encounter with The Land (in *The Doll's House*) emphasizes this point, as it is introduced as: "BARBARA'S RICH DREAM-LIFE, MORE VALID AND TRUE THAN ANYTHING SHE FEELS WHEN WAKING" (Gaiman 1990, 6.15.1). At least initially, the unreal seems more real than the fiction's presentation of "reality."

Conversely, from the very first issue of this story arc, supernatural elements from The Land invade the New York setting. Barbie's escort, Martin Tenbones (a giant dog-like creature) crosses into this world to alert her to danger (1.15.2); ghostly cuckoos appear and then vanish in Barbie's room (1.24.4-5); and in the final panel her neighbor, George, reveals himself to be a servant of the Cuckoo (1.25.8). Following from my model of the Fantastic, these may be best defined as supernatural elements that sit at odds with the natural elements of the New York alterity and are treated as such—the police shoot down Martin Tenbones, believing him to be an escaped animal; Barbie panics upon seeing the cuckoos; and George is defined as abnormal as he is shown eating an entire (live) bird in one mouthful.

Barbie's response to the presence of the supernatural in her world is pure hesitation—she repeats Martin Tenbones's name more than once in disbelief and although his physical presence cannot be denied nonetheless continues: "BUT YOU'RE FROM MY DREAM..." (1.21.4). Similarly, the supernatural events (such as Thessaly's drawing down of the moon so she, Hazel and Foxglove may walk its path into The Land) have natural ramifications – as George (posthumously) tells Wanda: "THESSALY WASN'T JUST DOING SOMETHING UH **SPIRITUAL**. THAT WAS UH **PHYSICAL** TOO" (4.19.7). As such, these unnatural events cannot be dismissed and therefore the New York setting may, as Delaney alerts us, also be read as a fantastic alterity.

However, there is also a third alterity present in *A Game of You* – the world of The Dreaming.[5] This too is introduced in the first issue of the story arc (1.11.1-5, 1.12.1-7), although as Morpheus's domain it is not new to us. As such we know it to be real (within the confines of the text) yet also fantasy (in accordance with the willing suspension of disbelief that is the condition of fiction). As the master shaper and storyteller who will also turn out to be the god of Barbie's dream world and whose name, Murphy, derives from Morpheus (5.31.5), Morpheus and his realm may be read as a point of reference which adds a metafictional dimension to the text.

It seems, therefore, that the mode of the Fantastic informs all of the contrasting alterities within *A Game of You* with varying effects. Whereas in The Land the co-presence of the natural and supernatural is normalized, and as such may be read as representing the magical realism/fantasy genre; the contradictions we perceive in our introduction to the New York alterity alert us to its status as a fantastic setting. The third alterity of The Dreaming further utilises the Fantastic to create metafiction as it is revealed that Morpheus (who is often defined as a storyteller figure) is the literal creator of one of the worlds.

The opposition between the real and the unreal perceived in the worlds of The Land and New York produces a hesitation as we attempt to read this antinomy in various ways and decipher which world is real. The solution provided by the Cuckoo and reaffirmed by Barbie in the book's final pages, is that:

**EVERYBODY** HAS A SECRET **WORLD** INSIDE OF THEM.

i mean **EVERYBODY**. ALL OF THE PEOPLE IN THE WHOLE WORLD – NO MATTER **HOW** DULL AND BORING THEY ARE ON THE OUTSIDE.

inside them they've **ALL** GOT UNIMAGINABLE, MAGNIFICENT, WONDERFUL, STUPID, AMAZING **WORLDS**... NOT JUST ONE WORLD. **HUNDREDS** OF THEM. **THOUSANDS**, MAYBE. (6.19.2-4).

However, it may be said that by offering such a non-physical explanation this solution is problematical not magical: supporting a view of the text as fantastic literature.

Intertextual references further blur the line between fantasy/reality and fiction/metafiction in all three worlds. These include Barbie's frequent mentions of *The Wizard of Oz* (4.18.2, 6.6.2, 6.10.1, 6.23.4) and her observation that "I FELT LIKE BILBO IN MIRKWOOD, IN THAT BIT WHERE THE GIANT SPIDERS GET THEM" (see fig. 1). Her question to Wilkinson and his answering confirmation that giant spiders do indeed exist in The Land plays expertly with the medium by using the gutter (between panels 3 and 4) to mislead the reader, before subverting their expectations (both regarding the existence of giant spiders and as to their "good" and "timid" nature). In this sense both medium and content support and sustain the hesitation necessary to the Fantastic.

Aside from the co-presence of the natural and supernatural, other textual features of *A Game of You* also reveal the Fantastic. Although a third person, omniscient narrative voice is used initially to describe some of the New York setting (2.9.1-5, 3.12.1-8), this is only used to introduce the setting of "THE LAND" and Barbie's voice provides all subsequent narration for this alterity (4.1.1 onwards). Unreliable narration is also overtly used in the New York setting: for example Martin Tenbones's description of the "high stone cliffs" (1.18.2) of the city, or the voice of Barbara Wong on WRAT radio; her comment that there's "**NO CHANCE**" the hurricane is returning is literally shown as false by the storm tearing down New York in the surrounding pictures (5.8.1-4). By the end of the trade paperback the omniscient narrator has been completely removed and, after her return from The Land, Barbie narrates the sixth and final section.

The defamiliarization of language is another technique common to the Fantastic, and is also used here in a number of ways. It exists in Martin Tenbones's misinterpretation of the city's buildings as stone cliffs, and a slight resonance may be found in the doubling of Barbara our heroine and the ill-informed radio presenter Barbara Wong, whose full name also references a character briefly introduced in *Preludes and Nocturnes* (Gaiman 1991, 7.8.1). The main focus of this technique is upon this notion of naming.

The anonymous nature of "THE LAND" is sustained by its elements, such as the underdetermined signifiers of the mysterious "HIEROGRAM," the "PORPENTINE," and the "TANTOBLIN." [6] That unseen speakers with equally strange and unexplained names introduce these further emphasizes this effect (1.1.1-1.3.3). Explanation is not forthcoming as the text progresses; when asked what the Hierogram is, Wilkinson is only able to respond "*It's um. Well, it's um. It's sort of more like an um. Well...*" (4.11.5). Similarly, the threat of "THE CUCKOO" remains unidentified until the fifth chapter – in answer to the question "WHAT **IS** THE CUCKOO?" George is only able to reply: "I...DO NOT...KNOW...IT IS THE CUCKOO..." (3.15.5). Insufficient information defamiliarizes these words so they become thingless names. Simultaneously, the visual nature of comics also enables many of these characters and figures to appear as nameless things, for example the initial depiction of the Tantoblin (1.1.3), the glowing eyes which are all that represent the opening speakers (1.3.3), or the first appearance of Martin Tenbones (1.15.2). Both the visual and verbal are under-determined.

In stark contrast, the real world suffers from an over-determination, specifically in its use of naming. Barbie's name has commercial and gender-based implications in invoking the popular children's doll, a link that her comments about her ex-husband Ken and his new girlfriend Sindy only emphasise (1.17.6). [7] Similarly, characters such as the transsexual Wanda are revealed as having multiple names and identities: as she explains, "**WANDA'S MY REAL NAME, BARBIE-BABY. ALVIN'S JUST THE NAME I WAS BORN WITH**" (1.17.8). Barbie's gesture at the end, amending her friend's tombstone with lipstick to read "WANDA" instead of "ALVIN" (6.21.4), further emphasizes this over-determination by demonstrating the mutability of names.

Other characters such as Thessaly, whose name refers to her origins as a Thessalian witch rather than a personal identity – Morpheus and the moon both address her as "THESSALIAN" (3.19.1, 3.19.5, 6.4.1), also emphasize the insufficiency of a name as an identity. The rat Wilkinson's speech further stresses this point:

*I loved bein' a kid. I was one of seventeen children.*

We were all named Wilkinson – I suppose it was roughest on the girls, but we all got used to it in the end. [...]

*I would've **liked** to've bin an only child. That way when someone shouts **Wilkinson**, you know if it's you or not.*

Mustn't grumble. Our parents were the salt of the earth.

Lovely people. It was just when they found a name they liked, they stuck with it. (4.13.1) This again alerts us to the links between naming, gender and identity.

Samuel Delaney provides a Marxist reading of *A Game of You* that probes its apparent support of a dominant ideology. This hinges on his observations that the only black character (Maisie Hill) and the only transsexual (Wanda) are killed off at the end of the comic "so that we can feel sorry for them, then forget about them." He concludes that: "Making the supernatural forces in the tale the enforcers of a dominant ideology is what makes it a fantasy – and a rather nasty one at that. And it remains just a nasty fantasy unless, in our reading of it, we can find some irony, something that subverts it, something that resists that fantasy" (Delaney 1993, npag).

However, Delaney does find the sort of irony he deems necessary in order for this ideology to be subverted—initially in the motifs and themes that are doubled and echo throughout both of his identified alterities. He aligns the initial references to the "**CUTE FROG MUG**" (Gaiman 1993, 1.8.6) that Wanda uses for Barbie's coffee with the Cuckoo's question "I'M AWFUL SWEET, AREN'T I? I'M **AWFUL** CUTE" and Barbie's response "YOU'RE ... CUTE ... AS A... / ...BUTTON..." (5.6.5). This allows him to conclude that the supernatural forces' apparent support of the dominant ideology (to the reader's dismay, as Wanda is a likeable character) is actually no more than a comment on its sustenance by our natural world.

It seems to me that this parallel may in fact be taken a step further, as Barbie's observation "YECCHY COFFEE. / CUTE MUG, THOUGH" (1.10.6) can inform our later perceptions of the Cuckoo. Though she seems sweet and innocent on the outside; that which is inside is certainly not, as she plans to fly out of Barbie's dream world "INTO LITTLE GIRLS' MINDS AND LAY EGGS OF MY **OWN** THERE..." (5.27.2), in the "SECRET WORLDS" (5.23.4) that we all have inside ourselves. It seems that Gaiman uses the Fantastic in this way to explore an ideology that focuses specifically on notions of gendering. The Cuckoo explains:

BOYS AND GIRLS ARE DIFFERENT, YOU KNOW THAT?

little boys have fantasies in which they're faster, or smarter, or able to fly.

where they hide their faces in secret identities, and listen to the people who despise them admiring their remarkable deeds.

pathetic, bespectacled, rejected perry porter is secretly **THE AMAZING SPIDER**. GAWKY,

BESPECTACLED, UNLOVED CLINT CLARKE IS REALLY **HYPERMAN**. **YES?** [...]

NOW, LITTLE **GIRLS**, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAVE DIFFERENT FANTASIES. MUCH LESS CONVOLUTED. THEIR PARENTS ARE NOT THEIR PARENTS. THEIR LIVES ARE NOT THEIR LIVES.

they are **PRINCESSES**.

lost princesses from distant lands.

and one day the king and queen, their **REAL** PARENTS, WILL TAKE THEM BACK TO THEIR LAND, AND

THEN THEY'LL BE HAPPY FOR EVER AND EVER.

little cuckoos. (5.4.5-5.5.2)

Gendered identity is clear at the beginning of the trade paperback, where the dominant ideology is enforced – Wanda's nightmare shows her confusion at her identity in revealing her self-image to be male while insisting she's a woman: "MY NAME ISN'T ALVIN. IT'S WANDA. / I'M A WOMAN" (2.12.6). As Wanda's nightmare continues, the visual medium further emphasises this; as the panels depict her as increasingly muscled and masculine (2.13.2). Similarly, Wanda's description of her adolescent fantasy of being a Weirdzo (an intertextual reference to the Bizarros)[8] is, according to the Cuckoo's rules quoted above, a masculine rather than a feminine fantasy.

Both society and nature align in their support of a rigid and unalterable gender taxonomy. Just as the moon will not let Wanda walk its path, "IT'S **CHROMOSOMES** AS MUCH AS ANYTHING" (4.19.5), Wanda's Aunt Dora says: "GOD GIVES YOU A BODY, IT'S YOUR DUTY TO DO WELL BY IT. HE MAKES YOU A BOY, YOU DRESS IN BLUE, HE MAKES YOU A GIRL, YOU DRESS IN PINK. / YOU MUSTN'T GO TRYING TO **CHANGE** THINGS" (6.14.3). Events such as Wanda's untimely death further support this, and even Morpheus says (speaking of the Cuckoo): "She acts according to her nature. / Is that evil?" (6.2.2). As Delaney notes, both the natural and supernatural elements of the comic reinforce the dominant ideology.

However, by the end of *A Game of You* the rules of identity formation have begun to shift and become less rigid. This may be seen in the focus on naming already discussed, but is made more overt as the book continues by comments such as "IDENTITY BLURS ON THE MOON'S ROAD" (5.9.1), or Barbie's regretful "I REALISE THAT I'M **ALREADY** BEGINNING TO FORGET WHAT WANDA LOOKED LIKE. / IS IDENTITY **THAT** FRAGILE?" (6.17.5). This shift in viewpoint is achieved through a motif of transformation, the treatment of which specifically relies upon consideration of the book's three alterities.

This motif of transformation most obviously invokes the Fantastic. As Marina Warner comments, tales of metamorphosis "embody the transformational power of storytelling itself, revealing stories as activators of change" (Warner 2002, 210). Barbie's amendment of Wanda's tombstone with lipstick (6.21.4) is, as noted, a transforming gesture, but it should also be acknowledged that it is an impermanent one: rain will wash the lipstick away in no time. However, the dream Barbie recalls from her coach journey to Kansas provides a different vision of Wanda as "PERFECT. DROP DEAD GORGEOUS. THERE'S NOTHING CAMP ABOUT HER, NOTHING ARTIFICIAL. AND SHE LOOKS HAPPY" (6.23.4). The presence of Death (Morpheus's elder sister) as her companion validates this vision of Wanda, and other visual elements of the panel further support it. Although comics' style of art can be used to fictionalize (such as Barbie's painted-on veil which is indistinguishable from the real thing), close perusal of Wanda's depiction at the start of the comic reveals clues as to her masculine identity, whereas in this final illustration she is indeed entirely feminine (see fig. 2).

Following from this, it may be argued that the actual structure of *A Game of You* is transformational, that two fantastic worlds have merged by the end of the comic. Textual indicators such as the continuation of Barbie's narration (rather than a return to an omniscient narrator) or the preponderance of intertextual fantasy references in the final chapter further support this – Barbie decides to take "THE DOROTHY OPTION" (6.6.2) to get her and her friends home safely from The Land; Wanda's funeral actually takes place in small-town Kansas (6.10.1); and in Barbie's dream the feminised Wanda "REMINDS ME OF GLINDA IN THE OZ MOVIE" (6.23.4). It may not even be too

much to suggest that Barbie's observation of her fellow Greyhound passengers—"THE MAN IN THE SEAT IN FRONT OF ME KEEPS WHISPERING, 'MR. WIGGLY HASN'T GOT NO NOSE' TO HIMSELF, THEN BURSTING INTO TEARS" (6.23.2)—may be another of Gaiman's literary jokes and refers to Nikolai Gogol's story *The Nose* (1835).[9] This story has often been aligned with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as a problematic example of the pure fantastic.

Barbie's comment on the names of the Kansas towns she passes—"THEY SOUND LIKE THE NAMES OF MAGIC KINGDOMS" (6.18.4)—again seems to indicate that the waking world has become fantastic, that the two spheres have merged. The transformative structure is most clearly evidenced by Wanda's now-possible gender transformation, and similarly by the Cuckoo's metamorphosis into the bird she so desperately longs to be (6.7.1-3). The result is that static notions (such as identity or home) are redefined as fluid and changeable, as in Barbie's comment that "I DON'T THINK HOME'S A PLACE ANYMORE. I THINK IT'S A STATE OF MIND" (6.15.3). This in itself again calls to mind A.B. Chanady's observation that "critics do not even agree whether it [the Fantastic] is a mode, a genre or an attitude towards reality" (Chanady 1985, 1). That Gaiman has also introduced alterities such as his land of Faerie—"WHICH IS A **PLACE**, BUT PERHAPS ALSO, I LIKE TO THINK, AN **ATTITUDE**" (Gaiman 1996, 10.9.1)—in this way further supports this reading.

Finally, notions of metafiction are supported by both the structure and content of the comic. Cornwell notes that metafiction "forms a part of the general uncertainty and discontinuity of much recent fiction" (Cornwell 1990, 158) and Gaiman's use of Morpheus as a point of reference to contrast with the uncertainties of the other worlds in *A Game of You* further supports this. Morpheus's presence validates certain worlds (such as Barbie's final vision of Wanda) and, read in this way, his creation (and subsequent uncreation) of The Land redefines *A Game of You* as metafiction about the power of fantasy worlds (or fiction) to change real life. This view is further informed by Maurice Blanchot's treatise on the space of literature, and specifically his observations that literature/fiction leads to reality (and not vice versa) (Blanchot 1982a, 47). As Mark Currie says: "the realistic novel constructs, rather than reflects, the real world, or, to put it another way, [that] the outside world is always mediated by language and narrative, however much it is naturalized by the transparency of realistic language" (Currie 1998, 62). The fantasy alterities of *A Game of You* support this view of literature as the source of our construction and understanding of reality and identity.

#### Case study: *The Sandman: The Kindly Ones*

*The Kindly Ones* (the ninth *Sandman* graphic novel) tells the story of Lyta Hall's quest to find her son Daniel and revenge herself on Morpheus.[10] As such, it employs many of the same motifs and themes identified in *A Game of You*, specifically those relating to notions of gender and identity. However, the treatment of these varies wildly in places: whereas the alterities of *A Game of You* are distinct and equally valid, *The Kindly Ones* places us in doubt as to the mere existence of many of the fantastic worlds it depicts. It is hoped that the previous case study may therefore inform this discussion.

It should initially be noted that the fantastic elements of *The Kindly Ones* are, unlike those of *A Game of You*, drawn from established myths. These include the triple goddess (a pagan figure that has been thoroughly documented, for example by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*); the Norse gods (whose names are familiar from legend); and well-known fairy-tale and literary characters such as Puss-in-Boots (Gaiman 1996, 4.10.1) or the Puck.[11] The fantastic elements of the text are, in this sense, simultaneously validated and revealed as pure fiction.

It may not be too much to suggest that using intertextuality and legend in this way validates other elements of

the text—for example the Three tell Lyta that "THERE'S A DOWNSTAIRS IN EVERYBODY. THAT'S WHERE **WE LIVE**" (2.15.2). This supports the notion (that there are multiple worlds inside everybody) previously expressed in *A Game of You*. Other observations such as Larissa's statement "NOTHING IS TOO CUTE AND SWEET TO BE DANGEROUS" (7.14.5) also refer back to this text. [12] Comments on the inevitability of acting according to one's nature are also reiterated by characters including the Corinthian and Matthew (5.11.1-2) and the Puck (10.13.2).

Similarly, the doubling of characters observed by Samuel Delaney in *A Game of You* is repeated here—for example the gorgons Stheno and Euryale (4.16.4)—are paralleled visually with "real" characters such as Chantal and Zelda who were first introduced to us in *The Doll's House* (Gaiman 1990, 6.2.4). Characters such as the witch Thessaly (now calling herself Larissa) also reappear, and her new identity alerts us to the importance of naming, a motif repeated in this text. Apparent in the thingless name that is the recreated Corinthian, or the snake Geryon's discourse on the etymology of Lyta's name (4.18.3), the implications of naming are however explored most deeply (and, again, tied to notions of gender and ideology) when Lyta finally encounters the Kindly Ones:

LYTA I AM SEEKING THE FURIES.  
MOTHER **NOT** THE FURIES, MY LOBELIA. THAT'S SUCH A **NASTY** NAME. IT'S ONE OF THE THINGS THEY **CALL WOMEN**, TO PUT US IN OUR **PLACE**...  
THE THREE TERMAGANT.  
shrew.  
virago.  
vixen.  
witch.  
bitch. (7.21.5-6)

The titular Kindly Ones are also referred to as the Furies, the Erinyes, the Eumenides, the Hounds of Hades, the Dirae and the Morrigan. By using these Greek, Roman and Celtic names interchangeably, Gaiman establishes their function as primary rather than their name, and as such they may also be read as nameless things.

Notions of transience are also explicitly mentioned in the text (5.6.2) and the transformation motif appears many times – most obviously and literally in Daniel's transformation into Morpheus (13.22.1-6), but also in Loki's fight with the Corinthian, during which he changes form many times (9.12.1-6); or when Lyta sees Larissa as a white bird (7.3.3-6). These last two emphasize the role of perception within the Fantastic. Transformation also exists on a structural level, as Morpheus's humanization is shown to be the catalyst for all the events of *The Kindly Ones*. As he says: "I told Ishtar that she was wrong. That I was not changed. That I did not change. But in truth, I think I lied to her" (11.6.7), and his newfound humanity is also evidenced visually when the Furies inflict physical harm upon him (11.19.4).

Like naming, transformation is also linked to gender, for example in the revelation that the character of Vixen LaBitch is Rose Walker's old landlord Hal (12.10.1). It should also be noted that the very first panel of the trade paperback begins "*THERE'S A DREAM IN WHICH HUGE FACELESS WOMEN WITH WOLVES ASTRIDE THEM ARE CHEWING AT MY ENTRAILS AND LEGS*" (1996, 'Prologue' 1.1). Although unlinked to the rest of the book this initial image of faceless women resonates with the multiple, confused female identities that are subsequently explored in the text.

Lyta herself is doubled and multiplied in various ways: initially when she sees her reflection in a shop window and engages in debate with two identical versions of herself: "WHO **ARE YOU?**" "TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT" (5.21.2). She later engages in similar conversation in front of another mirror, seeing herself in a variety of forms – as the sophisticated Lyta of the first few pages of the book; as a

child; as the Fury; and in her current deranged state, daubed with Larissa's protective potion (7.17.2-6). These contradictory visions of Lyta cast doubt on the existence of the various alterities she has wandered through; as these seem to coexist in the same physical space, we may conclude that Lyta's body remains in the waking world/reality.

After entering what can be perceived as either a world of myth or a hallucination, the panel where she wakes is triplicated (fig. 3). We see Lyta as she appears in the waking world, Lyta as she appears in her hallucination or "myth world," and Lyta as she appears in *The Dreaming*, as one of the Furies. One effect of this is to validate all three perspectives, encouraging the reader not to dismiss two of the three versions as unreal. The reader is forced to hesitate throughout *The Kindly Ones* as pictures of Lyta in her myth world are doubled with the waking world. This hesitation is frequently mirrored in the semantics of the tale: themes of perception are emphasized again and again, most overtly when Morpheus dies and we are repeatedly told that what is being mourned is no more than "A PUH-POINT OF VIEW" (Gaiman 1997, 44.4).

As also seen in *A Game of You*, two alterities are set up alongside *The Dreaming*, which remains as a fictive point of reference. Although the hallucinatory quality of Lyta's myth world, the doubling of its characters with people and objects in reality (see fig. 4; also 6.19.6-8) could imply that it is entirely fictional, other events belie this. For example, a homeless man comments of Lyta: "SHE'S GOT SNAKES IN HER HAIR. AND SHE'S NOT ALONE IN HER HEAD ANY MORE" (5.17.8), which is how she does indeed appear in her myth world.

**Again, the myth world seems to comment on the real-world alterity – while the Three appear in many forms, their existence may most obviously be linked to the three main characters such as Zelda (the crone), Lyta (the mother) and Rose (the maiden). All the female characters of the book fit into this sort of triple-part structure –not only do the Three appear as the Fates and the Furies but also as mortals when Rose Walker returns to the nursing home where her grandmother spent her life (Gaiman 1996, 6.8.3). Of these three old ladies, Helena (whose last name is unpronounceable, according to the other two) may well represent Lyta's mother, Helena Kosmatos, the golden-age Fury.[13]** In response to a story, Helena comments that:

ACTS OF REVENGE ARE SANCTIFIED. I HAVE ALSO DONE IT. I SPENT TWO DECADES LOOKING FOR THE MAN WHO HAD KILLED A PERSON I LOVED. I HOUNDED HIM FOR YEAR AFTER YEAR AFTER YEAR, ACROSS THE WORLD... [...]

EVENTUALLY, I KILLED HIM. FIRST, THOUGH, I DESTROYED HIS LIFE. (6.19.1-2)

This certainly fits with the idea and the purpose surrounding the Furies, and Helena's subsequent denial and then affirmation of her story (6.19.3) further comments on the impossibility of establishing truth with any certainty.

Similarly, notions of reality are completely denied more than once, whether this is indicated subtly (Larissa reads a book entitled "WHEN REAL THINGS HAPPEN TO IMAGINARY PEOPLE" (13.20.2) whose title signifies Harold S. Kushner's popular bestseller while replacing its notions of "bad" and "good" with these concepts) or more obviously, as when *Delirium* threatens Mazikeen: "IF YOU DON'T LET ME **IN** I WILL TURN YOU INTO A DEMON HALF-FACE WAITRESS NIGHT-CLUB LADY WITH A CRUSH ON HER BOSS [Lucifer], AND I'LL MAKE IT SO YOU'VE **BEEN** THAT FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME TO NOW AND YOU'LL NEVER **EVER** KNOW IF YOU WERE ANYTHING **ELSE** AND IT WILL ITCH INSIDE YOUR HEAD WORSE THAN LITTLE BUGSES" (12.7.3). Of course, this is precisely what Mazikeen is. Such a statement refutes any notion of an objective, unalterable reality, further confirming that we should read the settings as fantastic alterities.

Perhaps this is the one of the fundamentals that underlies the medium itself: to write a comic book is not a way

of telling a story with illustrations replicating the world it is set in, but a creation of that fantastic world from scratch. In this sense the medium evokes the hyperreal and supports Blanchot and Currie's view of literature as previously mentioned.

As seen from the intertextual references identified above, the irony of Lyta/Fury working with the Furies is obvious; however, Gaiman again uses the medium to emphasize this. In basing his pictures of both the Fates and the Furies on the three witches from the 1970s DC title *The Witching Hour*, Gaiman grounds his version of the Furies within his industry and within the DC universe, itself an alterity that exists in a state of the hyperreal. In this way, intertextuality is used to further emphasize the role of the Fantastic.

While the disturbing presence of multiple worlds is enhanced by the visual nature of the medium (a good example is the splash page at 4.7), its verbal elements are equally disconcerting. Underdetermined and unexplained signifiers such as Morpheus's "reflectory" (11.24.2) or the "NIMBIC GLIMMERING" (5.15.4) haunt the text, as do the overdetermined—words with multiple meanings are mentioned but undefined (10.19.4); as when the Puck says to the Corinthian: "I SHALL RESTRAIN MYSELF FROM ENQUIRING WHETHER YOU TAKE YOUR NAME FROM THE LETTERS, THE PILLARS, THE LEATHER, THE PLACE, OR THE MODE OF BEHAVIOUR..." (10.3.1).

Other textual features such as unreliable narration (provided by Lyta) further evidence the existence of the Fantastic. In fact, this narrative strategy is taken to a new level as the narration provided by Destiny's book, which throughout *The Sandman* has prefigured the comic's narration, and, as such, emphasized its validity (11.14.3-4) is shown to be uncharacteristically uncertain by the existence of multiple Destinies (3.10.1-2; 7.11.2; 11.14.2; 11.15.1-2). Both the metafictional function of Destiny's narration and its sudden unreliability are typical of the Fantastic.

All these textual features evidence the Fantastic, which is again linked to notions of gender. Lyta's quest to find her son is semantically, if not structurally, feminized: the fairy-tale figures she encounters include a female Puss-in-Boots (contrary to the Perrault version of the tale, though present in Strapola and Basile's versions), a female Cyclops, and a maiden who is attempting to free her prince from his imprisonment in a castle (4.10.1-5; 4.9.1-4; 4.8.1-6).[14] These standardized figures support Propp's model of the wondertale (which focuses on functions rather than characters) and also enable metafictional comment on the nature of fairy tale, for example as when Puss tells Lyta:

PUSS        I INTEND TO WAGER THE SILVER COLLAR AROUND MY NECK THAT THE OGRE  
              CANNOT CHANGE ITSELF INTO THREE THINGS THAT I SHALL NAME FOR IT.  
LYTA        WILL THE **THIRD** SHAPE BE A **MOUSE**?  
PUSS        OF COURSE  
LYTA        BUT ... DON'T THEY **EVER** LEARN?  
PUSS        THEY **CAN'T**. THEY'RE PART OF THE STORY, JUST AS I AM.  
(4.10.4-5)

Mark Currie states that "theoretical fiction is a performative rather than a constative narratology, meaning that it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative" (Currie 1998, 52). As theoretical fiction, *The Sandman* concerns itself with the telling of stories and invokes the Fantastic in this regard, as seen from the textual features examined thus far. In both these trade paperbacks *The Dreaming* is contrasted with various alterities, whose fantastic elements comment on their mimetic ones. As seen in the work of Maurice Blanchot, here fiction informs fact: supporting Diane Elam's observation that "romance threatens to expose 'reality' as a constructed referent rather than a 'natural' state of existence to which we all naturally, textually,

refer" (Elam 1992, 8).

A debate on nature, change and gender seems to underlie both stories, as Gaiman repeatedly questions the idea of identity and being true to one's nature. While many characters ostensibly believe that nature is fixed and unchanging this is persistently belied by many of the texts' themes and motifs, such as the focus on transformation or the presence of characters such as Loki.[15] The conclusion of *The Kindly Ones* does not provide any real answers to this debate: we are aware that Morpheus's destruction has been caused by both the changes he has made in himself as a consequence of his eighty-year imprisonment (in *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*) and his inability to change enough (Gaiman 1996, 13.6.3-6).[16] Similarly, although we are given the impression throughout the text that Lyta is acting outside any notion of fate (as indicated by the conflicting Destinies that appear), Morpheus's death has in fact been prophesized by Cluracan and we have already seen his funeral procession (Gaiman 1994, 6.18.1; 6.19.1-3). In prolonging such thematic uncertainty *The Sandman* again evokes the Fantastic.

## Conclusion

In the broadest possible terms, the Fantastic is based around a notion of hesitation between reality and the marvelous (Todorov 1975, 25), achieved through the co-presence of natural and supernatural elements. It takes place in an alterity that may be defined in terms of its relationship with reality; however, Diane Elam comments further that: "Romance does not offer alternative realities, rather it underscores the fictionality of the 'real' and the unreality of culture" (Elam 1992, 49-50). As such, the fantastical coexistence of the natural and supernatural within *The Sandman* destabilizes our understanding of both reality and fantasy, leading us towards a linguistic situation where meaning cannot ever be firmly established.

Such indefinite, multiple linguistic meanings also reference postmodernism and, it therefore seems that another way of approaching this hesitation is in postmodern terms. In this sense, hesitation becomes a response to the lack of a grand narrative dictating the conventions of subject and form to establish reality. Like the Fantastic, the comics medium exposes the notion of "reality" as a constructed referent, which the text's alterities comment on. The nature of the medium allows for the construction and sustenance of multiple worlds without recourse to a stable notion of reality. This uncertainty extends to other elements of the text and, as the reader's hesitation destabilizes interpretation of reality versus fantasy, absolute meaning is denied. It therefore seems that comics offer what might be best described as a postmodern vision of the Fantastic.

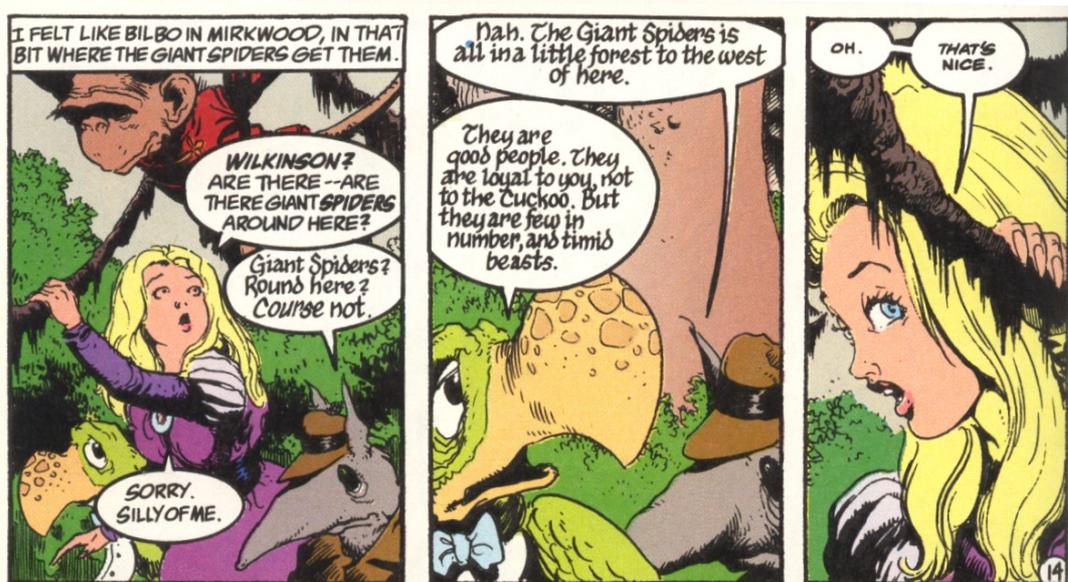
## Biographical information

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## Illustrations

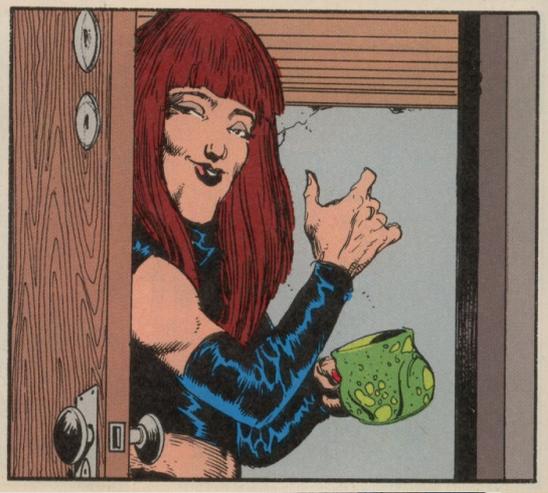
All images © DC Comics. As very brief extracts in proportion to the text, these should fall within the criteria for fair use, which cite scholarship, research and criticism as permissible.

Fig. 1



Neil Gaiman and Shawn McManus (Gaiman 1993, 4.14.3-5)

Fig. 2



| By Neil Gaiman and Shawn McManus |  
| (Gaiman 1993, 1.9.6) |

| By Neil Gaiman and Shawn McManus |  
| (Gaiman 1993, 6.23.6) |

Fig. 3



By Neil Gaiman and Marc Hempel (Gaiman 1996, 13.7.2-4)

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[1] Throughout I shall use the term 'comics' to refer to the medium itself (McCloud 1993, 4). Although it takes the form of a plural noun, the common usage when referring to comics as a medium is to treat it as singular.

[2] In 'Structure and Form' (an essay responding to *Morphology*) Lévi-Strauss states that Propp errs in his treatment of signifier and signified; that is, by attempting to separate grammar and vocabulary (in discarding the specifics of content (vocabulary) to focus on the stages of the structure (grammar)). Lévi-Strauss argues that these are inseparable in Myth since (as a metalanguage) it has no recourse to any level not created by its own rules. Therefore, everything is syntax, but simultaneously everything within is also vocabulary since the distinctive elements are words (Lévi-Strauss 1984, 188). However, Propp's response ('The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale') defends his approach, denying that he divides form and content since his analysis focuses on both plot and composition. His argument is that plot incorporates content and composition reflects form, so his work analyses both simultaneously (Propp 1984, 77). He goes on to turn Lévi-Strauss's own arguments against him: saying that, if content and form are inseparable, then he who analyses one is also analysing the other (77), and arguing that Lévi-Strauss overextends Propp's work to a generalised, abstracted level in order to critique it, when Propp's conclusions only refer to individual narratives and their specific laws (74).

[3] Barbie (first introduced to us in *The Doll's House*) is troubled when her old fantasy dream world (which she has not visited in some time) starts to invade her waking life. Due to interference from agents of the Cuckoo (The Land's evil ruler) she becomes trapped in this alterity. Her friends Hazel, Foxglove and Thessaly travel to her dream world to save her, calling down the moon to do so, which causes a hurricane to hit New York. They defeat the Cuckoo and return safely, although Barbie's transsexual friend Wanda (who remained behind in reality) and the other occupants of her apartment building are all killed by its collapse during the hurricane. The book concludes with Barbie travelling to Kansas to attend Wanda/Alvin's funeral, during which she dreams of a new world where Wanda's transformation is complete.

[4] In some trade paperbacks page numbering is retained from individual issues. In these instances I shall cite references as here, where 1.1.1 corresponds to part 1, page 1, panel 1. When quoting from comics I have used '/' or a new line to indicate divisions between speech balloons or narrative boxes, and imitated the use of font and style so far as is possible in order to avoid inflicting my own capitalisation, punctuation and so forth on the text.

[5] Home of the titular Sandman, Morpheus, one of seven deities known as The Endless and responsible for the domain of dreams.

[6] Although Gaiman is aware of the meaning of at least one of these words (Bender 1999, 120), as they remain unexplained within the text I feel justified in describing them as underdetermined. However, all date from the seventeenth century and variously refer to a sacred symbol ("hierogram"); an Elizabethan word for porcupine

- ("porpentine"); and a cake or tart ("tantoblin"), later also to become a slang word for excrement – the origin of which meaning is perhaps also hinted at in *A Game of You* by the "Old Wilkinson family saying" (4.11.6).
- [7] Sindy was a British doll produced by Pedigree Dolls & Toys in 1963 in response to the popularity of the Barbie doll, launched by the American company Mattel in 1959.
- [8] A Superman spin-off series from the late 1950s. The Bizarros are flawed copies of Superman and other characters, created by Lex Luthor's imperfect duplication ray. They live on the square planet Htrae: a mad version of Earth where everything is done backwards and all words have the opposite meaning.
- [9] The story of Major Kovalyov's search for his mischievous missing nose, which has taken on a life of its own and run away.
- [10] A heavily pregnant Lyta Hall and her dead husband Hector were introduced to us in *The Dolls House*, where they lived inside the mind of Rose Walker's brother Jed for two years, having been fooled by two of Morpheus's escaped servants into believing that Hector was the Sandman himself. Upon discovering this Morpheus restored them to reality (meaning death for Hector), and told Lyta that the child she carried for so long in dreams would someday belong to him. *The Kindly Ones* begins three years later, showing us a paranoid, obsessive Lyta who has barely let her son Daniel out of her sight since his birth. When he is subsequently kidnapped a completely unhinged Lyta begins her quest to track him down and revenge herself on Morpheus. She invokes the Furies, or Kindly Ones, in this regard: an act that is only made possible by Morpheus himself (as legend has it the Furies are only empowered to hound those who spill family blood) since years back Morpheus killed his son Orpheus in an act of mercy after he was ripped apart by the Bacchae (Gaiman retells this Greek myth in *The Sandman: Fables and Reflections*). Although Lyta does not regain her son (who was initially kidnapped by the Norse god Loki and the faerie Puck for their own reasons, and whose mortality was burnt away before Morpheus could track him down), her quest for revenge is ultimately successful and the Morpheus we know dies in #69. However, as he is one of the Endless another aspect of Morpheus instantly takes his place – the transfigured form of Daniel.
- [11] Although only one appears in *The Sandman*, Gaiman accords with the accepted meaning of "puck" "puck" as a generic word (Holland 1994, 35) as the character refers to himself as "A PUCK" and also speaks of "WE PUCKS" (1996, 10.2.7).
- [12] Larissa was introduced to us as the witch Thessaly in *A Game of You* and the recurrence of this character, as well as such comments, therefore recall this text.
- [13] Prior to the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* retcon (a 12-issue series published 1985-86 which rewrote much of the DC universe), Lyta Trevor was Fury, daughter of the golden-age Wonder Woman and pilot Steve Trevor. Lyta and her husband Hector Hall/Silver Scarab joined the supergroup Infinity Inc. while at University. As per her history in *The Sandman*, she fell pregnant by Hector Hall, who then died. When he became the second silver-age Sandman, Lyta went to live with him in the Dream Stream (which is where Gaiman picks up the story in *The Doll's House*). Post-*Crisis* her origins were rewritten by Roy Thomas as the daughter of Helena Kosmatos (the golden-age Fury, who received her powers from the Greek Furies to avenge her husband's death and who was also created at this time to be part of *The Young All-Stars*, in a rewrite of the golden age) (Niederhausen 1999, npag). Lyta was adopted by Derek and Joan Trevor after her mother's mysterious disappearance and while at University took the name Fury and joined Infinity Inc. with her fiancé Hector Hall, until he was killed and Lyta herself vanished, pregnant with their child.
- [14] As noted above, these characters are juxtaposed with their waking world equivalents: a stray cat (4.9.6), a traffic light (4.9.5) and a stranger who gives Lyta money (4.8.7).
- [15] In Norse myth Loki often represents change.
- [16] The Furies are able to hound Morpheus because he killed his son, Orpheus, in an act of mercy that went against Morpheus's previous decision to abandon him. Morpheus is, however, unable to change enough to disregard the rules a second time (for example, he could simply kill Lyta; or remain safe in *The Dreaming* despite being summoned by Nuala in accordance with the boon he granted her), which causes his death.