

The motifs of death and resurrection in Neil Gaiman's works

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Abstract: Renowned for his reliance on the rich literary tradition in the form of references to poetry, prose, and popular culture, Neil Gaiman reimagines and reinterprets sources from myth and traditional folklore and modern, contemporary folklore to meet his own ends and match new contexts. He recycles certain themes, motifs, and symbols throughout his oeuvre. This article aims to address death and resurrection motifs, and their associated symbolism in terms of thematic criticism and structuralism, in view of determining their function at the level of the literary text¹.

Keywords: *death, resurrection, motif, theme, symbolism, mythology*

Birth, death and rebirth are probably the most used tropes in world's literature (Kelen 2007: 35). As a literary theme, death is most prominent in tragedy, although it also plays a central role in lyric and narrative forms and even, implicitly at least, in comedy. In Greek tragedy, death is the inevitable limit to the portion of life allotted at one's birth, the obstacle that can never be overcome (Queen 2006: 107). The classical tragic view was fundamentally altered in the West by the emphasis in Christianity on the immortality of the soul. Within the medieval Christian view, death was less important as a fact in itself than as the end of the opportunity for salvation. Death was familiar, universal, and collective, the great leveller that led kings and beggars, hands linked together, in its dance of death (Queen 2006: 108). With the Renaissance, the growing sense of individualism revived the pre-Christian sense of death as the end of individual existence. The essays of Montaigne, particularly “That to Philosophize is to Learn How to Die,” articulated the need to confront one's own death not in the context of an afterlife, but instead within the fabric of one's daily existence. Montaigne's influence is powerfully present in the soliloquies of Prince Hamlet, whose reflections in Shakespeare's play can be seen as a process of “learning how to die” (Queen 2006: 108).

There are literary genres that express pain and sadness, grief and loss caused by death. As an example, elegies and lamentations are written as a result of loss of a loved one, since literature can be used as a coping strategy and source of consolation during mourning period. Death in literature also functions “as a site of many projections and fantasies and as a metaphor of many social issues” (Hakola, Kivistö 2014: ix). Its representation can even transgress its literary confines to embody death-related social issues and emotions. Literature is used as a medium to retain memories and emotions of past lives and therefore give them continuity.

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Literature takes “a form of immortality”, in preserving these memories, past and history that carry on their legacies long after their authors’ demise (Hakola, Kivistö 2014: ix).

Death, as a literary device, is represented in literary texts through metaphors and characterizations, or even as personification. According to Guthke, Western art and folklore have a predilection for personifying death, despite the numerous alternatives available (1999:173). Although originally in Western literature death was depicted either male or female, during the twentieth century death becomes a “gendered cultural product”, as it is predominantly shown as female (Guthke 1999, 4–14, 173). Oftentimes it is portrayed in an idealised or even an eroticised form; death as a lover being a “common or even universal theme” (Hakola, Kivistö 2014: ix).

Thanatological themes also appear frequently in television programming, cinema, the print media, jokes, and even recreational activities. Dead celebrities also play an important role in our popular culture. These thanatological elements of popular culture function as a mechanism to help individuals deal with the disruptive social impacts of death and dying. They help us to redefine death as something other than a terror, and enjoyment of these themes requires some detachment on the part of the individual. It has also been argued that we may be more accepting of death, dying, and the dead because of our frequent exposure to these phenomena through our popular culture (Bryant 2003: 43).

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson states that one of the features of literary fantasies is discarding the “rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death” (2003: 1). In modern fantasy death becomes integral part of the narrative, either as one of the main themes or as one of the secondary themes. In Gaiman’s works death is omnipresent, and most of the time it appears either as a personification or as a motif. As a personification Death can be encountered in *Sandman* graphic novels, in *Death* graphic novels, as well as in the novels *American Gods* and *The Graveyard Book*. Prosopopoeia or personification of death appears in: *Sandman* series (original 1989-1996: *Preludes and Nocturnes* 1988-1989, *The Doll’s House* 1989-1990, *Dream Country* 1990, *Season of Mists* 1990-1991, *A Game of You* 1991-1992, *Fables and Reflections* 1991-1993, (short stories), *Brief Lives* 1992-1993, *World’s End* 1993, *The Kindly Ones* 1993-1995, *The Wake* 1995-1996, the last of the original series; in other *Sandman* universe stories, written by Gaiman: *The Dream Hunters* 1999, *Endless Nights* 2003, and culminating with *Sandman: Overture* 2013-2014, which is a prequel to *Preludes and Nocturnes*), (DC Comics imprint Vertigo), *Death: The High Cost of Living* (1993), and *Death: The Time of Your Life* (1996). Despite the existence of other graphic novels series written about the same characters, they were not written by Gaiman, but by other collaborators of the DC Comics’ imprint Vertigo (Jill Thomson, Matt Wagner, Caitlín R. Kiernan), and therefore are not mentioned above. When it comes to Gaiman, he combines in *Sandman* myths, legends, folklore, historical figures, occult knowledge, as well as DC universe comic characters and their pre-existent stories. Both death and rebirth appear as major themes of the series, among others, like: responsibility, good and evil, dream and reality, plurality of truth, fate, and freedom of choice, etc. Death in the *Sandman* series is one of the Endless, which are metaphorical personifications of metaphysic entities: Dream, Destruction, Desire, Delirium, who was once Delight, Despair, Death and the blind brother, Destiny. Death in *Death: The High Cost of Living* and *Death: The Time of Your Life* is the main character, being the only Endless, other than Sandman to get her own series.

Contrary to the traditional western symbolic image of death, as the Grim Reaper or as the Archangel Michael, Death in Gaiman’s works, in *Sandman*, *Death* and *The Graveyard Book*, is neither male, nor an Angel, nor a skeleton with a black cloak and scythe. It goes along

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with the twentieth-century tendency to represent death as female. In *Sandman* and the subsequent *Death* graphic novels, death is represented as a Goth teenager or young woman, wearing black clothes, with long black hair, an ankh symbol around her neck - the symbol of life (Wilkinson 2003: 38), and the eye of Horus - the symbol of protection (Wilkinson 2003: 134) and power (Bunson 2002: 173), drawn around her right eye. She is not only a personification of death and a psychopomp, but also the one bringing people into this life, when they are born, although none of them remembers that. She is also described as kind, sympathetic, choosing to live one day every century (and die on the same day) among the living, in order to better understand the value of the life she takes. She is omniscient, the most powerful of the Endless, bound by no rules and the only one capable to survive the end of the incarnation of the *Sandman*'s universe. A specific theme throughout *Sandman* is the freedom of choice, which also characterises his death personification. She describes herself, as: "I'm not merciful or blessed. I'm just me. I've got a job to do and I do it....When the first living thing existed, I was there. Waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job will be finished. I'll put the chairs on the tables, turn out the lights and lock the universe behind me when I leave" (Gaiman, *Sandman* no. 20: "Façade"). This quote reveals Death's set of moral principles and her sense of responsibility, as she actively chooses to enforce these principles in her daily activities.

Aside from the graphic novels above, death as a character can be encountered in the novels *The Graveyard Book* and *American Gods*. In *The Graveyard Book*, the death embodiment is named Lady of the Gray. She is portrayed as riding a white stallion, dressed in a gray dress made of cobwebs, with a voice "like the chiming of a hundred tiny silver bells" (Gaiman 2010: 30). Nobody encounters the personification of death two times in the novel. First time she allows Bod to remain in the graveyard, by stating: "the dead should have charity" (Gaiman 2010: 30). It gives Bod the chance to live by escaping his family's killers, but also an abode and an adoptive family in the graveyard. The second time Bod encounters the Lady of the Gray, is when he dances with her, during the *Macabray*. Bod admires her horse and is told that: "he is gentle enough to bear the mightiest of you away on his broad back, and strong enough for the smallest of you as well" (Gaiman 2010: 161), alluding to death's psychopomp duties. The Lady of the Gray promises Bod that one day he would ride her horse, as "Everybody does" (Gaiman 2010: 161). The psychopomp duties of The Lady of the Gray are expanded in *Death*, where these are a part of the everyday life of its main character. In Bod's case both times when he meets with Death, she decides to help him live. The Lady of the Gray in *The Graveyard Book* could be also an acknowledgement on Gaiman's part of Collier's short story *The Lady on the Gray*, published in the collection *Fancies and Goodnights* in 1951. However, Gaiman's Lady is the personification of death and not a witch, as in Collier's *The Lady on the Gray*.

Another death related motif in *The Graveyard Book*, is the *danse macabre* or *Macabray*. The *Danse Macabre* represents a late-medieval allegory of the equality in death. It is a theme consisting of a dance of the dead or with a personified Death (Cuddon 2013: 185). It includes representatives of all social circles - from poor to rich, dancing along to the grave, containing such characters as: a king, a duke, a pope, a bishop, a labourer, an emperor, a child, etc. (Oosterwijk 2004). Although derived from "momento mori" and "ars moriendi" motifs, it evolved as a way of reminding people about the necessity of penitence. It is a largely encountered motif on medieval frescoes, murals, tapestries, paintings, especially in Catholic churches and graveyards. It is also omnipresent in music, poetry and prose, mostly to reference the fleetingness of life. San Saëns' *Danse Macabre* (1874), Holbein's engravings, Goethe's

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Faust (1808) or Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–24) are examples of its presence. During the twentieth century the motif reappears in non-fiction in King's *Danse Macabre* (1981), in cinema in *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979), in poetry in Plath's *Danse Macabre* (1955), in literature in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and in theatre in *Wakefield Mysteries* (1985). In *The Graveyard Book*, the *Macabray* is a rare event, tied to the presence of winter blossoms: "it's the first time the winter blossoms have bloomed in eighty years" (Gaiman 2010: 152). Lady Mayoress and her crew pin these winter blossoms on everybody's coat lapels. These serve as an access token, because only those carrying them can participate in the dance itself. The given explanation being that: "it was a tradition in the Old Town [...] before the city grew up around it. When the winter flowers bloom in the graveyard on the hill they are cut and given out to everybody, man or woman, young or old, rich or poor" (Gaiman 2010: 155), referencing the equality in death – the main theme of *danse macabre*. When the music starts, everybody wearing a winter blossom, heads to the town centre. The dance starts with Josiah Worthington (former politician), representing symbolically the dead, asking Lady Mayoress to the dance, representing the living, in a binary opposition. The living and dead dancing together, is also a reference to the cycle of life and death. The rhyme accompanying the music emphasises the equality in death: "Rich man, poor man, come away. / Come to dance the Macabray/ Time to work and time to play, / Time to dance the Macabray. One and all will hear and stay/ Come and dance the Macabray" (Gaiman 2010: 144-149). During the dance, a white horse carrying the Lady of the Gray enters the town centre. The dancers stop for a minute to curtsy the Lady and the dance resumes: "Step and turn, and walk and stay, / Now we dance the Macabray. / Now the Lady on the Grey/ Leads us in the Macabray" (Gaiman 2010: 150-160). The rhyme parodies the traditional folk rhyme, and transforms the *danse macabre* into its popular version - *Macabray*. The dance itself is driven by the music without the source that "filled Bod's head and chest with a fierce joy, and his feet moved as if they knew the steps already, had known them forever" (Gaiman 2010: 159), suggesting the innate recognition and knowledge of death being a part of life. Among the graveyard inhabitants only Silas, the vampire does not dance the *Macabray*, because you have to be either dead or alive to dance it, and Silas is neither.

Since graveyard is the novel's setting, no wonder there are numerous death references in the novel. Another such reference in *The Graveyard Book* relates to death and burial traditions and rituals. It is the allusion to Charon's obol, the offering of money in exchange for Charon's assistance. When Mrs. Owens, Bod's adoptive mother, offers Bod a penny for his thoughts, the boy replies that she does not have a penny. Mrs. Owens then states: "I've got two in the coffin" (Gaiman 2010: 215). The offering for Charon, originally consisted of one coin that was placed in the deceased mouth. Later however, the tradition evolved into offering another coin for the return trip, inspired from Apuleius *Metamorphoses* (Stevens 1991: 218-219). Therefore the two pennies in the coffin in the novel refer to the money offered to Charon, the ferryman, to convey the soul of the dead person across the Styx River to the Underworld. In the context of Gaiman's works other references to Charon's obol can be encountered in *Sandman*, *The Kindly Ones* and *Death: The High Cost of Living*.

When it comes to *American Gods*, both death and resurrection play an essential role in the novel. The novel is built on two myths that overlap each other. The first is based on the blueprint of the myth of death and resurrection of Balder. The second is a modern re-working of the myth of lost identity, which according to Frye is "the central myth of mankind" (1965: 143). It is represented by Shadow's journey in the novel, which is both literal and symbolic. His identity is symbolic, as he represents every American, the "average Joe", which is the main reason for allowing the reader to know only his nickname – Shadow. There is nothing

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remarkable about him initially, as he is middle-class, married with no children, unaware of his ethnical origins, with no place to call home. His literal journey helps uncover his true identity, as his true name is only symbolically implied. He represents a “dying god”, in an “imaginative alignment between man and nature” (Frye 2000: 36), while still getting a chance at a Hollywood happy ending, “accepted by society of gods” and bringing “acceptance” and “salvation” (Frye 2000: 43). In the novel, Shadow is the incarnation of the Norse god Balder, a martyred god dying on the tree of life - Yggdrasil, where he finally gets the understanding of the “secrets of life and death” and becomes one with the tree, in reaching the “solemn sympathy” of nature (Frye 2000: 36). Yet, in contradiction with the myth, Gaiman’s novel does not end with Shadow’s death or resurrection. It continues with the Apollonian myth of “integration of society of gods” (Frye 2000: 41), thus combining both myths in a pastiche. The novel also follows the Christian myth structure of “Fall” and “Redemption, Crucifixion and Resurrection” (Campbell 2004: 131). It is referenced in the allusions to “the sacrifice of a son” (Gaiman 2001: 414), a Biblical reference, to Jesus, drawing parallels between Shadow’s journey and that of Jesus. As Shadow’s sacrifice prevents a bloodbath, and thus ensures his acceptance by other gods. This comparison between the two is reinforced by the numerous references to Jesus, like: “I don’t want to seem like I’m—Jesus, look ...” (Gaiman 2001: 123), “A man in a suit explained that these were the end times and that Jesus...” (Gaiman 2001: 135), “That boy was one lucky son of a virgin.” “Jesus?” (Gaiman 2001: 161), “So, yeah, Jesus does pretty good over here” (Gaiman 2001: 162). This comparison and contrast become more captivating with Shadow uncovering his father’s plot to kill everyone else for his own benefit.

In *American Gods*, death is depicted by two Egyptian gods: Thoth - Mr. Ibis, and Anubis - Mr. Jacquel. Thoth represents the Egyptian god of wisdom and knowledge, being honoured as the inventor of writing and the founder of branches of learning, such as art, astronomy, medicine, law, and magic. In Egyptian pantheon, he is the god associated with scribes, who documented the ancient Egyptian culture and beliefs. Thoth, considered to be fair and impartial, played a key role in the Egyptian story of the afterlife. He judged the souls of the deceased by weighing their hearts against a feather, representing the truth. He informed Osiris, the ruler of the underworld or land of the dead, whether the individual had led a just life (Stock, Hunt 2009: 989). In *American Gods*, Thoth is the psychopomp crossing Shadow to the land of dead. When they arrive in the Hall of Death, he weighs Shadow’s heart against the feather, assisted by Anubis, who examines Shadow’s past and failings: “Shadow knew that all his faults, all his failings, all his weaknesses were being taken out and weighed and measured; that he was, in some way, being dissected, and sliced, and tasted” (Gaiman 2001: 530). In the early days of ancient Egypt Anubis was considered to be the god of the dead. Later, with Osiris resurrection, Anubis was relegated to overseeing funerals, eventually incorporating all the dead (Wilkinson 2003: 187). He is considered the guardian of the underworld, or land of the dead, where he takes the dead to the hall of judgment (Stock, Hunt 2009: 83). Fittingly, another Egyptian god - Horus, the sun god, aids Shadow’s resurrection. He warms up Shadow’s dead body, healing it, before the actual resurrection takes place. Fittingly, Easter - a goddess, whose name references the Christian feast celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the one that resurrects Shadow, after Horus warmed him up. Her name reinforces the previous references to Jesus and the recognisable similarities between Shadow’s ordeal on the tree and the Passion of Christ. In the novel, Shadow has to die to be able to see through his father’s façade, to be able to see “the hidden Indians” (Gaiman 2001: 353) and to prevent the massacre of old gods.

As a literary device, death in the novel appears as a metaphor for cultural or “paradigm shift” (Gaiman 2001: 219), as the dying gods are replaced by modern gods. The old gods

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consider America a “bad land for gods” (Gaiman 2001: 420). They pertain to different pantheons, and represent different ethnicities and cultures, as well as the Old World they come from. They are the stereotypical representations of these nations or ethnicities. They are depicted as caricatures, parodies of their original selves. Odin is a grifter named Mr. Wednesday. Czernobog is a retired knocker. Queen of Sheba is a prostitute named Bilquis. They struggle to survive and adapt, competing for worshippers with the new gods. As a result, they are dying; their values are facing destruction, confronted by the new, modern gods with suggestive names, like: Media, Mr. World (globalization), Mr. Town (urbanization), and Technical Boy. They are described as: “proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance” (Gaiman 2001: 107). This conflict represents the clash between cultures, races, and generations, in multicultural and multiethnic America, and thus, death motif in this context allows discussion, debate and criticism.

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* death motif plays an important role, allowing debate about the timeless cycle of life and death, symbolic death, and death as transformation allowing resurrection, and recovery from trauma. First, we encounter the motif of death in the novel as a plot device, considering that the literal deaths of the opal miner and of the protagonist’s kitten allow plot progression. Second, the motif of death is represented as a motif for transformation. The protagonist’s journey reflects the loss of innocence in growing up, being confronted by his own mortality, abuse, parent’s infidelity, and cruelty. It represents both symbolic death, and existential crisis, as the protagonist has to grow up and find a meaning to his existence and his place in the world. Then, it allows discussion about the timeless cycle of life and death, by introducing the moon goddess represented in the novel by the Hempstocks. Lettie Hempstock’s name suggests the possibility of an alternative spelling of Lethe, the river of oblivion, which is one of the five rivers of the Greek underworld (Coulter, Turner 2000: 289), and therefore it functions as an indirect allusion to death. On the one hand, her name functions as an allusion to the narrator’s inability to remember a part of his childhood, and on the other hand it could be interpreted as a cultural allusion to Greek mythology. In this context, the three women, central to boy’s adventures could be interpreted as the representations of Greek Erinyes or Moirai (Furies), Roman Parcae, or even as Norse mythology’s Norns. These represent the triple goddess that appears throughout Gaiman’s works. In *Sandman* Moirai punish for the spilling of family’s blood. In *American Gods*, they appear as Norns giving Laura water from the well of time, and as the three witch queens they appear in *Stardust*. In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, they are an incarnation of the Moirai. The fact that the Moirai also represent the triple moon-goddess in her death aspect supports this assumption (Coulter, Turner 2000: 177). The triple moon-goddess is also characterised by her changing aspect, represented in the ever-changing phases of moon and referencing its death and rebirth. Her role in the novel is essential in protagonists’ death and resurrection, allowing his transformation and survival. As a result of his death, which becomes symbolic after the goddess’ intervention, the protagonist gains a new understanding of the world around him.

In *Neverwhere*, death and resurrection are both literal and metaphorical. The literal death in the novel is represented by the death and resurrection of marquis de Carabas, crucified by Croup and Vandermar. The Christian myth structure of “Fall” and “Redemption, Crucifixion and Resurrection” (Campbell 2004: 131) is contested and inverted, as marquis de Carabas is not a god, but “a fraud and a cheat and possibly even something of a monster” (Gaiman 1998: 236). He is resurrected by Old Bailey, who was guarding marquis’ life force or soul, hidden in a duck’s egg. This can be seen as a reference to Slavic folklore and Koshchei the Deathless (Propp 2009: 95), who hid his death in a similar fashion, thus inviting the

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reflection about the cycle of life and death and the search of immortality. However, *marquis* gets his redemption through sacrificing himself for information, resurrecting and then saving *Richard's* life and helping out *Door*. He is willing to sacrifice himself heroically, knowing full well that his demise would be only temporal. His ultimate goal is to pay his debt to *Lord Portico* by helping his daughter, which infers the presence of a conscience behind the arrogant and uncaring façade.

Less spectacular is the death of *Richard* at the hands of *Lamia*. Being a vampire, one of the *Velvet Children*, she drank out *Richard's* life, only giving it back when menaced by *marquis de Carabas*. Death by suicide is invoked in the novel as part of *Richard's* ordeal to obtain the key to Heaven: “as he looked the words on the posters twisted and mutated. New messages: END IT ALL was one of them. PUT YOURSELF OUT OF YOUR MISERY. BE A MAN—DO YOURSELF IN. HAVE A FATAL ACCIDENT TODAY” (Gaiman 1998: 249). The pain that tormented *Richard* during the ordeal had made the self-inflicted expression of death extremely tempting. The moment he made the decision to resist the impulse to end his life, a train came in and stopped. All sorts of fresh corpses, all dead by suicide, filled the platform *Richard* was standing on. In order for him to survive, he had to take the train back, suggesting that the train fulfilled the role of *Charon's* boat crossing into the afterlife. The ordeal transformed *Richard* both physically and spiritually, according to *Hunter*: “He looked less boyish. He looked as if he had begun to grow up” (Gaiman 1998: 235). *Richard Mayhew's* journey can be seen as a visit to the underworld. It is also a journey of self-discovery and transformation, determining a change in his identity and self-perception. After the adventures in the underworld – *London Below*, he returns to the land of the living – *London Above*, only to discover that he does not belong there any longer. His decision to use *Hunter's* knife to carve himself a door could be interpreted as a metaphorical suicide in *London Above*, only to be followed by a rebirth in *London Below*. *Richard Mayhew's* disappearing in *London Above* can be also interpreted as a symbolic, metaphorical death, while his heroic evolution in *London Below*, which grants him status, friends and allies, can be seen as a symbolical resurrection in *London Below*. It transforms him from a lowly accountant in *London Above* into the *Warrior of London Below*, the one who killed the *Beast of London*. Death and rebirth are the two faces of the same coin that can be identified in all *Gaiman's* works, either as a main theme or as a secondary underlying trope.

To conclude, *Gaiman* uses death as a motif used for characters' growth and transformation, as a metaphor, as a personification, and as a plot device. It is an overarching theme in *Gaiman's* works. The motif of death is closely associated with that of rebirth or resurrection in his writings. His personification of *Death* is both responsible with taking the dead to the afterworld and bringing the newborns into the world of living. The motif is rather that of the ending of a stage, but also of the transformation in a never-ending cycle. It adds depth to his stories, as the delicate balance between life and death allows discussion about mortality and immortality, about the timeless cycle of life and death, symbolic deaths, as well as sacrifice and resurrection.

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