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The Image of Contemporary Society in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*

Abstract. Neil Gaiman's urban fantasy novel *Neverwhere* revolves around some problematic aspects prevalent in the contemporary world, such as an iniquitous discrepancy between social classes or a problematic attitude to history. The artistic universes created by Gaiman are instrumental in conveying a complex condition of postmodern society. Although one of the represented worlds, London Above, is realistic and the other, London Below, is fantastic, both are suggestive of the contemporary social situation, citizens' shared values and aspirations. Only when considered together can they reveal a comprehensive image of what the community accepts and what it rejects as no longer consistent with commonly held beliefs.

The disparities in the representations of London Above and London Below refer to the division into the present and the past. The realistically portrayed metropolis is the embodiment of contemporary times. The fantastic London Below epitomises all that is ignored or rejected by London Above.

The present study is going to discuss the main ideas encoded in the semiotic spaces created by Neil Gaiman, on the basis of postmodern theories. I am going to focus on how the characteristic features of postmodern fiction, such as the use of fantasy and the application of the ontological dominant, by highlighting the boundaries between London Above and London Below affect the general purport of the work.

Keywords: Neil Gaiman, postmodernism, ontology, fantasy, contemporary society

Introduction

The paper is going to focus on the urban fantasy novel by Neil Gaiman entitled *Neverwhere*. The depictions of different places located in the fictional reality will be discussed in order to create a general image of the society in the novel, which translates

into an image of contemporary society. Crucial for the analysis is the presence of the features characteristic of postmodernism in literature, such as the shift of the founding dominant from epistemological to ontological or mixing the realistic with the imaginary. They are instrumental in the proper understanding of *Neverwhere* due to their contribution to the treatment of the represented worlds as ‘containers’ for the ideas about the condition of society.

Before proceeding into the details regarding the represented worlds, a short storyline should be presented. The protagonist, Richard leads quite a happy life with his fiancée Jessica in London Above, which is modelled on the real city. One day, he comes across Door, a wounded girl from a fantastic realm. His decision to help her has a dramatic effect – Jessica breaks up with him and his life changes drastically. Richard becomes somehow ‘inexistent’ in his urban space and has no other option but to help Door. He joins her quest in London Below, a fantastic realm located underground, which is oriented towards discovering the mystery of her parents’ murder. Only then can Richard regain his former life and come back to the realistic metropolis.

***Neverwhere* as a postmodern novel**

Neil Gaiman’s urban fantasy novel *Neverwhere* uses a number of strategies characteristic of literary postmodernism. One of them is “the combination of the ‘real’ and the fantastic” (Hoffmann 2005, 629), resulting from postmodern “incredulity towards realism” (Nicol 2009, 17). Realists believed that novels should mirror reality, whereas postmodernists claim that their works are “not meant to inform us about reality but (...) to create an aesthetic world which exists separately from the real world” (Nicol 2009, 21).

Such an approach can be observed in *Neverwhere* when it comes to the construction of two separate urban spaces coexisting in the apparently realistic metropolis. London Above is created in the image of the real city, whereas London Below does not correspond to it at all, since it is purely fantastic. Gaiman does not replicate real London so as to place the protagonist in surroundings familiar to readers; instead, he ‘borrows’ some bits of it to create an atmosphere of surprise when the fantastic elements are introduced. The aim of such an approach is to make the reader conscious of the gap between these two realms. The gap can be translated into the discrepancy between the past and the present.

Another feature that distinguishes modernism from postmodernism is the shift from epistemology to ontology. According to Brian McHale (1991, 9), the former engages with questions such as “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? (...) What is there to be known? (...) And so on.” By contrast, postmodern fiction can be considered as “ontological – that is, concerned with the creation and interrelation of worlds of being” (Connor 2004, 66). What is stressed is the very fact of existence: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? (...) What kinds of world are

there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation?" (McHale 1991, 10)

Indeed, what is highlighted in *Neverwhere* is the existence of London Above and London Below, how they interrelate and what image of societies and structures of values they project. The reader is provided with situations when the boundaries between these two worlds are blurred and the realistic and the fantastic clash in such a way that the ontological dominant, foregrounding the differences between the two fictional realms, becomes more prominent. What is emphasized is the coexistence of two different realms and their mutual relations.

London Above – a reflection of the contemporary world

London Above is largely modelled on real London and, thus, mirrors the physical construction as well as social relations and moral codes that can be met in a twentieth-century metropolis. When it comes to the appearance of the urban space, it is depicted as a place hustling and bustling with life during daylight. Passages are full of vehicles, building up the impression of hectic traffic, which makes the city look chaotic. The roads are open, communal spaces which everyone has access to, as they are not limited by any sort of external boundaries. During the night, on the other hand, it changes into a peaceful place, so unlike the daytime one. There are only a few people in the streets rushing to their destinations as if they wanted to avoid any possible dangers hidden in the night. Such a portrayal might initially evoke an association with an ideal place for establishing one's small enclave – it provides chances for successful professional work as well as fulfilled private, family life. However, it is only a guise.

Human relations as well as inhabitants' mentality are the first examples showing that not everything in London Above is as bright as it might seem. People are shown to accept only what is directly visible to them and what is consistent with their aspirations and systems of values. The citizens seem to shape their lives on the basis of atheistic materialism – they assign meaning to their existence themselves, they define good and evil according to their particular needs, they choose their own moral standards and codes. Moreover, history appears to be deprived of any meaning, so there is no point in contemplating the past or being compassionate since it will not affect citizens' private or financial situation. London Above is shown as "the richly leisured and culturally vibrant city, in which the good life and intellectual pursuits set the tone of every street corner, whilst poverty, misery, and injustice are meticulously swept out of sight and mind" (Elber-Aviram 2013, 4).

This pushing poverty and injustice towards oblivion can be observed in how the society is structured in London Above. Human relations depend largely on the division of society into those who possess properties and those whose only 'home' is the streets. Such a distinction affects and determines mutual perceptions and connections. As Simon Parker (2003, 26) suggests, "[t]he key to all exchange in the modern

metropolis is, of course, money” and this quality is perfectly reflected in the social structure of *Neverwhere*, which draws readers’ attention to the pervasive injustice of contemporary society. The rich are regarded as the most influential and successful class in the social pyramid, possessing all the privileges that are unavailable for the poorer spheres of the populace. The indigent, on the other hand, are treated as the very bottom of society, not worth paying any attention to; they are totally ignored by those who consider themselves superior. Their existence ‘violates’ norms established by ‘the city of rush’ and, thus, a poor person “has no meaning, is not relevant, simply does not exist” (Lotman 2001, 129). The needy people experience the city in a completely different way from the rest of the urbanites, and, as a result, they do not fit into everyday reality. Such citizens are not forced to live in constant rush due to lack of jobs and families, and thus they deviate from the general image of average Londoners. Their ‘invisibility’ is noticeable in the way other people treat the poor. People come and go; no attention is paid to starving or frozen citizens, as if they were literally invisible. When Jessica finally notices the wounded Door, who looks homeless, she remarks: “Oh. I see. If you pay them any attention, Richard, they’ll walk all over you. They all have homes, really. Once she’s slept it off, I’m sure she’ll be fine” (Gaiman 2013, 24). She reacts as if it was nothing unusual to treat such individuals as unseen, as if she did it on a daily basis.

The image of contemporary society is also reflected in the construction of space. One of the most significant areas in London Above is the space of the underground stations, which is shown as epitomizing not only the hectic pace of life but also the values shared by the citizens in the realistically portrayed metropolis. The stations can be interpreted as a metaphor of the crowd; the subway mirrors the relations between people in London Above. Urban dwellers gathered on platforms do not seek contact with others and avoid even small talk. The Tube system “is not really a place at all. It is a process of movement and expectation” (Ackroyd 2012, 99) and during this process there is no place for establishing any rapport. Borrowing the concept from Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2009, 103), the underground station can be considered a ‘non-place.’ “A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger.” While waiting on the platform, passengers focus on the process of travelling from one location to another; they ‘abandon’ their usual roles as businessmen, lawyers, teachers, etc. and ‘play’ the part of an anonymous traveller. “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude” (Augé 2009, 103). People in London Above are “crowds of total strangers (...) herded together in a limited space, forced into a physical proximity that belies their social isolation” (Gelfant 1969, 25). They are so submerged in their thoughts that they do not pay attention to what surrounds them and they do not want to tackle the problems of others. Such behaviour causes “the experience of alones and anonymity” (Gelfant 1969, 27); even though there is a sense of physical contact between citizens, there is no natural intimacy fostering personal relations.

Another public space that carries an important message regarding the condition of society is the British Museum, in which the Angel Exhibition takes place. The main function of museums lies in preserving the past, keeping alive the traditions of many generations. However, in the novel it seems to serve a different role – it is associated with contemporary art portrayed as the preserve of snobbery. The museum is “re-imagined as a citadel of upper-class pretentiousness” (Elber-Aviram 2013, 6), where affluent people with artistic taste meet during private events. It is also “exposed as culturally hollow” (ibid.), since all the significant relics are placed in a dark repository, while at the centre of attention is the contemporary art exhibition. This may imply that what counts the most is the current moment and that brooding about the past is pointless. The past can be ignored in favour of what is visually beautiful; meaningful artefacts of the past testifying to the richness of tradition are replaced by meaningless objects, “eviscerated of [their] substance and history, and reduced to the state of marking a difference” (Baudrillard 1981, 93) between the richer spheres of the society and the rest. A showpiece is what divides society into the rich and the poor rather than what conveys traditions and unites citizens.

In this huge metropolis the private sphere is ascribed only to home, which should be a place defining its residents, the “sacred” place for establishing family, building mutual relations and accumulating memories. Nevertheless, not much attention is paid to Richard’s apartments in the novel. Such an approach may illustrate the point that the main character is not emotionally linked to his homes; that he simply treats them as temporary shelters against the night, cold and outside danger. Home is deprived of its primary function of being a ‘container’ for intimate relationships between relatives; it is rather an individual’s private space separating him or her from the outside world. Instead of being a sanctuary, home is, borrowing the term from Le Corbusier, “a machine to live in” that can be changed “as often as you change your bicycle, your refrigerator, your automobile, (...) without encountering any difficulties” (qtd. in Eliade 1961, 50). Indeed, when Richard is forced to move to another apartment, he does it smoothly and without experiencing any problems at all, since he is not emotionally connected to any of them.

Summing up, the realistically portrayed metropolis is the embodiment of contemporary times, capturing the pace of life, values and ambitions shared by its citizens. Aspects of life that are not consistent with citizens’ beliefs are considered as not worth paying any attention to. Past times and traditions are ignored, since they are regarded as distant and insignificant. Focused on their own preoccupations, people do not seek interpersonal relations. Jessica once mentions: “[i]t was just as well she didn’t have a boyfriend, she would tell her friends. There’d be no time for one even if she had one” (Gaiman 2013, 183); it emphasizes that professional life is set above any relationships and that the importance of family seems to diminish. This growing egocentrism is reflected in the way urbanites perceive individuals other than themselves; they are treated as invisible, relegated to the periphery and finally, forgotten.

London Below – the realm of things lost and forgotten

London Below is a fantastic underground realm surrounded by darkness, looking as if it has been neglected for ages. Gaiman, “by staging ‘close encounters’ between different worlds, placing them in confrontation foregrounds (...) the disparities between them” (McHale 1991, 61). The author of *Neverwhere* pays a lot of attention to the general appearance of the city as a neglected, dark and dangerous space, as if he wanted to emphasise the dramatic contrast between the societies in London Below and London Above. This strongly marked difference between the two separate spaces supports the conclusion that London Below is, in fact, the city of rejected things. It comprises representative samples of past times that are no longer important in the city above. People from London Below are regarded as “the dispossessed, who live below and between, who live in the cracks” of the world (Gaiman 2013, 96).

Artefacts from earlier historical epochs, values attached to them and individuals that do not identify or do not fit into London Above seem to fall underground through ‘crevices’ and are forced to exist in complete oblivion. “These ruins of things, places, people, techniques, and ideas end up both figuratively and literally underground, in the garbage dumps and landfills of the world” (Pike 2005, 13). London Below is such a dumping ground that accepts everything that is ‘thrown out’ as redundant through the cracks in London Above. This world preserves “a past that has been lost to the surface city, wilfully forgotten by its upper-class people” (Elber-Aviram 2013, 5).

Underworld society is composed of such dispossessed individuals rejected by the populace of London Above; citizens who have nothing in common with urbanites preoccupied with ‘trivia’ of everyday life – a constant pursuit of wealth and social position. In Foucauldian terms London Below, to some extent, can be considered as *heterotopia of deviation* “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (Foucault 1997, 354). The dispossessed do not fit into the reality of London Above, their behaviour is not consistent with social norms established there, and, in effect, they are relegated to this other reality, “a world misaligned with respect to normal or everyday space [that] interrupt[s] the apparent continuity and normality” (Stone 2013, 79–80).

Gerhard Hoffmann (2005) mentions that the unbelievable in postmodern fiction contains “the idea of the real” (244) and helps to “give presence to the non-given” (226). This rule can be applied to Borderliners, who are the worst outcasts of the realistic world as derelict shadows of their former selves living on London streets. They neither belong to London Above nor to London Below but in-between these two realities. Like the disadvantaged in the real world, they do not fit into everyday life in the familiar metropolis. As Borderliners are trapped between two realities, the poor are stuck in a void between the world they once belonged to and the state from where there is no rescue or escape, represented by London Below. If provided with appropriate help, they have a chance to come back to their former life, otherwise they end up in the metaphorical Underworld – completely forgotten, cursed with slow death, surrounded by darkness and suffering.

Another public space showing what has passed into oblivion in London Above is the cave, which can be treated as a counterpart for a museum. The repository of past times in London Above is bereft of its function of preserving artefacts and traditions. By contrast, the cave serves as an exemplary museum in terms of its role; the surface beauty and value of artistic works are not taken into consideration, since the place is meant to represent primarily the flow of time.

Richard admired the paintings on the cave walls. Russets and ochres and siennas outlined charging boars and fleeing gazelles, woolly mastodons and giant sloths: he imagined that the paintings had to be thousands of years old, but then they turned a corner, and he noticed that, in the same style, there were lorries, house cats, cars, and - markedly inferior to the other images, as if only glimpsed infrequently, and from a long way away - airplanes (Gaiman 2013, 262).

There is a visible border between paintings depicting past times and contemporary ones which highlights the importance of previous epochs for the development of culture. The pictures from recent times are shown in isolation, as if they do not fit in. The inhabitants of London Above do not focus on the significance of past times; their thoughts are directed towards the beauty of works of art and everyday concerns. The cave, on the other hand, highlights the importance of the flow of time. It emphasises that what is important is not the exclusive beauty of art but the magnitude of history and tradition, since the whole of human existence is based on it.

The last place that suggests London Below is a repository for values rejected in the city above is Door Portico's family house, which can be juxtaposed with Richard's apartments. In contrast to the male protagonist's flats, it is a place that carries the meaning of home as a place of higher values and intimate human relations. Although its exterior is rather gloomy and unappealing, it carries an important message. The dilapidation and darkness visible outside the building signify the oblivion of the value of family, tradition and interpersonal relations; these aspects "fell through the cracks" (Gaiman 2013, 125) of the Up-world and are appreciated only in the underground city. However, the interior hides its real 'face'. Particular parts of the building are "scattered all over the Underside" (Gaiman 2013, 81); each of them is located in a different area of the underground city in order to guarantee safety to its inhabitants. Such a home, although a permanent building, is treated as a living organism that can adjust to its inhabitants, that lives together with the family: "An associative house, every room of which is located somewhere else" (ibid., 82). The physical structure of the mansion reflects the uniqueness of Door's relatives, defines what kind of human beings they are. The residence is also remarkable because memories of its inhabitants are "imprinted in the walls" (ibid., 81), which highlights the importance of family and being together that is not present in Richard's apartment and shows family space as a locus of shared memories and traditions.

Summing up, the fantastic world underground with its murky atmosphere epitomizes the living conditions of the majority of the poor that are ignored in the realistic metropolis; it represents the difficulties they have to deal with on a daily basis. London

Below welcomes everything that is rejected in London Above, from those individuals forgotten in their former lives to indicators of past times. Dilapidated buildings, with doors “roughly boarded up and covered with stained posters for forgotten bands and long-closed nightclubs” (ibid., 79) in the abandoned parts of districts, are dwellings for those who no longer possess any valuable properties.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of ontologically different realities based on contradictions such as ‘now’ and ‘then’, ‘present’ and ‘past’, ‘materialism’ and ‘higher values’ helps to define the negative aspects of the contemporary world. The realistically portrayed metropolis reflects the contemporary social situation. Numerous transformations on economic and social grounds led to a complete change in priorities and systems of values. Individuals pay attention only to what is consistent with their aspirations or moral codes – building careers or climbing up the social ladder; they do not seek any deeper meanings embedded in the surrounding world. The significance of history and higher values is pushed towards oblivion, since these aspects do not fit into contemporary reality.

The fantastic London Below and the darkness enfolding this space, on the other hand, epitomise everything ignored or rejected by London Above. It is a place where the past is not only preserved, but it becomes alive; its importance is emphasized in comparison to the realistic city. Although the underground metropolis is portrayed as unpleasant and murky, it can be treated as a call for changes in contemporary society.

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