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The Child in Gaiman's Works: When the Symbol is the Thing

Isabelle Gras

Neil Gaiman started to write comic books, film scenarios, short stories, and novels for adults in the 1980s, before turning to children's novels and picture books about ten years later. His uppermost interest in myths and tales seems to be a way to bridge the gap between the two audiences. As he states it himself, "[o]ur imaginings (if they are ours) should be based in our own lives and experiences, all our memories. But all of our memories include the tales we were told as children, all the myths, all the fairy tales, all the stories. Without our stories we are incomplete" (Gaiman, "Reflections on Myth" 75). Mythologies, and the different myths they fostered–attempting to describe the creation of the world, or extraordinary circumstances involving supernatural beings and human heroes–were originally intended for adults. Bruno Bettelheim remarks that myths, folk stories and fairy tales were not clearly separated in preliterate societies, where they tended to borrow elements from each other, as myths evolved into fairy tales or incorporated them. He explains: "[b]oth forms embodied the cumulative experience of a society as men wished to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations" (Bettelheim 26). Once myths and fairy tales were written down, changes became impossible, until the 20th century, when authors like Gaiman started to revive myths and tales, re-enacting them in contemporary society.

Bettelheim highlights several differences between myths and fairy tales. Whereas both express inner conflicts in symbolic form, the myth involves superhuman heroes whose achievements are definitely beyond mortal possibilities, while the fairy tale displays human or animal heroes in a homelier way, suggesting simple ways to solve conflicts. Where the myth often ends tragically, the tale provides a "happy though ordinary existence as the outcome of the trials and tribulations involved in the normal growing-up process" (Bettelheim 39). In a tale, the fantasy materials allow the child to identify with the hero–who is not superhuman. Through the hero's quest, the child acknowledges his/her own tasks in order to deal with particular aspects of his/her personality and life. Bettelheim raises the problem of the Oedipus complex in childhood, and the impossibility to resort to the myth to help the child out of his/her oedipal conflicts: "[…] from four until puberty, what a child needs most is to be presented with symbolic images which reassure him that there is a happy solution to his oedipal problems […] provided that he slowly works himself out of them" (Bettelheim 39). This happy solution can be found in fairy tales.

As he likes to explore the uncanny and the border between reality and fantasy, Gaiman doesn't follow the same distinction as Bettelheim. He adapts myths for children or twists

fairy tales for adults. He sees myths as compost, which, when they decompose "[…] become a fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers" (Gaiman, "Reflections on Myth" 76). From this compost, he blends the myths to create new ones, reviving ancient heroes and quests in our time. Similarly, his tales are deeply rooted in the reality and in the fantasy of the contemporary child. Gaiman explains in an interview that he tends to write for a dual audience, addressing both adults and children:

> […] trying to write a book that I know the children will read, I'm… it's not like using a different set of engines, and I'm not going to write a book that's going to exclude adults. I want to write an adult book that kids would enjoy too rather than writing kids' books that adults wouldn't. (Gaiman and Richard)

In *American Gods*—featuring the ancient gods of antique mythologies against the modern myths of 20th century America—the Norse god Loki reveals to the hero's wife: "[…] in this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing" (Gaiman, *American Gods* 526). This article will argue that Gaiman's metaphor provides an entry into the liminal space between reality and fantasy where the author sets many of his stories, while linking the child's view of the world to the adult's. Drawing on Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner, we will first examine the concept of symbol in order to show that Gaiman's metaphor evokes a particular stage of mental development of the child and that it contributes to fostering a childish point of view in the adult heroes of *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, which seems to be a condition to enter the fantasy world. We will then examine how Gaiman's use of symbols to depict the heroine's struggle with her Oedipus complex in *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask* breaks away from the tradition of fairy tales by developing processes that can be found in his adult novels.

The Symbol and the Child

A symbol is defined as a thing that represents or stands for something else ("Oxford Dictionaries"), but in *American Gods*, Gaiman provides a literal interpretation of the metaphor "the symbol *is* the thing." As Cyril Camus writes in his doctoral dissertation with regard to the rules that preside over the supernatural world in this book "[u]ne de ces règles est celle de l'équivalence totale entre valeur symbolique et essence littérale" (Camus, "Mythe et Fabulation"). This total equivalence between symbolic value and literal essence parallels a feature that can be found in very young children who are not able yet to grasp symbolic meanings.

Lev Vygotsky explains that: "[i]n a very young child, there is such an intimate fusion between word and object, and between meaning and what is seen, that a divergence between the meaning field and the visible field is impossible" (Vygotsky). According to him, play and the

imaginary situations it provides allow the child to separate thought and meaning from objects. At a very early age, when representational skills start developing, the child is able to perceive both an object and its meaning, but the object predominates, and the meaning is connected to it.

The separation between object and meaning is achieved progressively through the means of a substitute object that functions as a pivot. This substitute object retains some physical features of the original object which allow the child to remember the meaning. Vygotsky describes this process as a transfer of meaning: "[t]o sever the meaning of horse from a real horse and transfer it to a stick (the necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating) and really acting with the stick as if it were a horse is a vital transitional stage to operating with meaning" (Vygotsky). At this stage, the meaning begins to predominate over the object but it still depends on some physical resemblance. Pretending situations allow the child to change the substitute object until only properties of the original object are retained. When meaning is completely freed from the presence of objects, true symbolism is achieved, and the child is able to distinguish the signifier from the referent object.

Jean Piaget observes a similar developmental process in symbolic play: "[…] le symbole implique la représentation d'un objet absent, puisqu'il est comparaison entre un élément donné et un élément imaginé, et une représentation fictive puisque cette comparaison consiste en une assimilation déformante" (Piaget 118-119). Bruner shows that the development of language as a means of symbolic representation depends on three systems of processing information:

> It is fruitful, I think, to distinguish three systems of processing information by which human beings construct models of their world: through action, through imagery, and through language.[…] Their appearance in the life of the child is in that order, each depending upon the previous one for its development, yet all of them remaining more or less intact throughout life […] (Bruner 1-2).

So, the identification of the symbol with the thing it represents is a feature that belongs to the developmental process of a child toward symbolism.

As we noted in our introduction, Gaiman fully acknowledges the role of childhood in the imaginings of adults. He considers stories as an essential part of every human being, and underlines the fact that many of them originate in childhood. When asked why his writings recurrently involved myths and fairy tales, he answered: "Because they have power" (Gaiman, "Reflections on Myth" 81).

In Gaiman's works, this power doesn't lie in superhuman achievements. Instead it seems to be a consequence of the rule that governs the imaginary world, the symbol metaphor. *American Gods* erases any clear distinction between the world of humans and the world of gods. In the novel, gods are alive as long as humans believe in them. At the end, Laura the hero's wife, meets Loki, the Norse god of deceit, who goes under the name of Mr. World, and she brings him a branch of the tree her husband hanged himself from. When she asks why he wants it, he explains that "It symbolizes a spear [...]" (Gaiman, *American Gods* 526). Laura, who knows that he manipulated her husband, then uses the branch to stab herself and Mr. World to death.

So the literal interpretation of the metaphor explains the power of symbolic objects and characters in Gaiman's works. By making the symbol and the thing one and the same, the author triggers a return to an early development state in childhood, rooted in perception and emotion. This process transfers the primeval power of the senses directly to the symbol-thing. The metaphor "the symbol *is* the thing" is thus a powerful means to summon childhood primeval experiences. How does the metaphor echo or develop the child's point of view in Gaiman's works?

In *American Gods* and in *Neverwhere*, Gaiman's heroes retain some childish features which are made particularly obvious by their taste for games. Richard Mayhew, the hero of *Neverwhere*, is a young executive who started a collection of trolls to shake off the dull monotony of his job as an accountant and of the predictable and organized life he leads with his girlfriend.

> He had found a troll on the sidewalk outside the office, and, in a vain attempt at injecting a little personality into his working world, he had placed it on his computer monitor. The others had followed over the next few months, gifts from colleagues who had noticed that Richard had a penchant for the ugly little creatures. (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 12)

By helping Door—a wounded teenager girl bleeding on a London sidewalk—Richard makes contact with a world unknown to him, that developed in London's sewer tunnels and in abandoned subway stations. In this medieval type of society, where supernatural creatures are part of everyday life, Richard does not need toys anymore. His life becomes a hunting game as he follows Door to help her in her quest. When the marquis de Carabas, a postmodern interpretation of Perrault's sly thief hero and a friend of Door's, barters information with the two thugs who try to catch her, the agreement they come upon sounds like the rule of a game:

> "First, three answers to three questions," he said.
> Croup nodded. "Each way. We get three answers too."
> "Fair enough," said the marquis. "Secondly, I get a safe conduct out of here. And you agree to give me at least an hour's head start" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 208).

On this hunt to find the murderer of Door's family, the subway safety instructions are given a new literal meaning, following the same metaphor as in *American Gods*: "the symbol *is* the thing". As Richard is about to get on the tube, the loudspeaker reminds the passengers of the familiar rule "Mind the gap," which he no longer pays attention to:

> And then it erupted over the side of the platform. It was diaphanous, dreamlike, a ghost-thing, the color of black smoke, and it welled up like silk under water, and, moving astonishingly fast while still seeming to drift almost in slow motion, it wrapped itself tightly around Richard's ankle. (141-142)

The gap between the platform and the train's door thus becomes a living space where dangerous creatures lurk. Similarly, the subway stations' names are to be interpreted literally. The Earl's Court train turns out to be the court of the earl that Door needs to meet to find her next clue: "*Earl's Court*, thought Richard. *Of course*. And then he began to wonder whether there was a baron in Barons Court tube station, or Raven in Ravenscourt or,…" (151-152). The girl Door herself is the impersonation of her special power to create and open doors everywhere. Whereas in *Neverwhere* the whole quest is conceived as a hunting game, in *American Gods* games—and particularly games of chance—are actually present throughout the novel.

Shadow, the 32-year-old hero of *American Gods*, spent three years in prison where he taught himself coin tricks because he "just wanted something to do with his hands" (Gaiman, *American Gods* 6), like a child who needs to be physically busy when he is bored. Unlike Richard, who leaves his troll collection when he enters the fantasy world, Shadow never stops playing with coins. When Wednesday repeatedly asks him to work for him, he tosses a coin to decide what to do.

> Shadow took a quarter from his pocket, tails up. He flicked it up in the air, knocking it against his finger as it left his hand, giving it a wobble as if it were turning, caught it, slapped it down the back of his hand.
> "Call," he said.
> "Why?" asked Wednesday.
> "I don't want to work for anyone with worse luck than me. Call." (34)

Shadow rigs the toss but Wednesday out-rigs it. Thus, the coin is no longer a simple toy; it becomes an instrument of power. Shadows discovers this power when Mad Sweeney, who

works for Wednesday, gives him a golden coin that he picked out of thin air. The hero drops it in his dead wife's grave and a woman presently appears in his motel room:

> "Laura…?"
> She did not look at him. "You've gotten yourself mixed up in some bad things, Shadow. You're going to screw it up, if someone isn't there to watch out for you. I'm watching out for you. And thank you for my present."
> "What present?"
> She reached into the pocket of her blouse and pulled out the gold coin he had thrown into the grave earlier that day. (63)

The golden coin brought Shadow's dead wife back to some kind of life. In contrast, Mad Sweeney dies, probably on Wednesday's order, because he gave Shadow a magical coin.[1] Another coin, taken out of moonlight, and offered by a Slavic night-time goddess, allows Shadow to find his way in the world of the dead, much later. At the same time, the coin retains the playful attribute of a toy, and his link to childhood is asserted every time Shadow notices children looking at him, and plays coin tricks for them. Like Shadow, other characters enjoy playing games. Czernobog, a Slavic god, agrees to support Wednesday's project after losing a game of checkers to Shadow.

Another powerful symbol of childhood is the carousel in the roadside attraction center. Exhibited as the World's Largest Carousel, it is forbidden to the public but all of Wednesday's companions climb on it, and Shadow follows them.

> The rhythm of the "Blue Danube" waltz rippled and rang and sang in his head, the lights of a thousand chandeliers glinted and prismed, and for a heartbeat Shadow was a child again, and all it took to make him happy was to ride the carousel […].
> Then the lights went out and Shadow saw the gods. (129)

The direct reference to Shadow's childhood makes the carousel a symbol of that period of life. As it turns out to be a means of transportation to reach the land of Odin, childhood's memories and emotions become the way to reach the land of the gods, so the carousel represents another instance of the metaphor "the symbol *is* the thing". Games are not, however, the only elements contributing to the childish features present in the heroes. Both Richard and Shadow seem to be lost between the real and the fantasy worlds, as no physical boundary is established, and the heroes make their first contact with the fantasy world in the routine of their everyday life.

In *Neverwhere*, Gaiman distinguishes the two worlds by naming them "London Above" and "London Below" but they have no spatial boundary. The entrance to "London Below" is made

[1] Mad Sweeney introduced himself as a leprechaun, so the gold coin he offered to Shadow came from the leprechaun's legendary pot of gold, hence its magical power

through contact with its inhabitants. Richard first meets them in "London Above," in a dark alleyway or even on a roof. The character of Old Bailey, who deals in birds and information, lives in a tent on a roof and declares: "[…] I don't like the under-places. I'm a roof-man, I am, born and bred" (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 267).

As fantasy and reality come to blur, Richard finds himself unable to live in his own world—the city of London as he knew it—after Door returned to her own world. No one recognizes him, he doesn't seem to exist anymore for his girlfriend, his colleagues or the people in the streets. So he decides to go to "London Below" to ask Door to help him return to his former world.

In *American Gods*, the world of the story constantly blends fantasy and reality, in exact correspondence to the metaphor "the symbol *is* the thing." Wednesday—later revealed as the Norse god Odin—is a grey-haired man in an expensive suit. He meets Shadow on an airplane. Besides the fact that the man knows Shadow's name and expects him on the plane, nothing about him hints at supernatural powers. In the very realistic setting, fantasy enters the novel almost stealthily, so that when Mad Sweeney, who works for Wednesday, introduces himself to Shadow as a supernatural being, it sounds like a joke:

> "What do you do?"
> The bearded man lit his cigarette. "I'm a leprechaun," he said, with a grin.
> Shadow did not smile. "Really?" he said. "Shouldn't you be drinking Guinness? (Gaiman, *American Gods* 36)

Clues are gradually provided about the real nature of the narrative world. When Shadow meets a fat young man in a limousine, who gives him a message for Wednesday, few doubts remain: "Tell him that we have fucking reprogrammed reality. Tell him that language is a virus and that religion is an operating system and that prayers are just so much fucking spam" (53-54).

When they start discovering the fantasy world they had never been aware of before, both Richard in *Neverwhere* and Shadow in *American Gods*, are, to a certain extent, infantilized by the characters who belong to this world. The hero of *Neverwhere* is patronized from the very beginning by his overbearing girlfriend, so the fantasy world appears to the reader as a possible alternative which may allow him to decide for himself. However, his situation proves to be even worse in the fantasy world whose rules he doesn't know, since the inhabitants use him as a servant. When he takes Door to his apartment and tends her wound, she doesn't explain anything to him. As he tries to hit a rat in his living-room, Door scolds him and lets the rat climb into her hand:

> "It's a rat," said Richard.
> "Yes, it is. Are you going to apologize?"
> "What?"
> "Apologize." (Gaiman, *Neverwhere* 42)

Facts unknown to the hero trigger unexpected reactions among the inhabitants of "London Below" which put him in awkward and comical situations. Although he doesn't understand what is happening, Richard complies and apologizes, like a bewildered child who broke a rule he did not know. He later realizes that the rat was a messenger. Door's friend, the marquis de Carabas, addresses him like a schoolboy and flatly refuses to answer any question.

> "Can I ask a question?" said Richard.
> "Certainly not," said the marquis. "You don't ask any questions. You don't get any answers. You don't stray from the path. You don't even think of what is happening to you right now. Got it?"
> "But—"
> "Most important of all: no buts," said de Carabas. (46)

The contrast between the authoritarian tone of Door and her companions, and the naïve attitude of the young executive suddenly cut from his own world creates a comical effect which contributes to relieving some of the tension generated by the man hunting game that structures the novel. The hero's childishness becomes obvious when Door and her companions refuse to let him accompany them in "London Below" and to help him go back to his world. The text mentions: "He felt like a small child, unwanted, following the bigger children around, and that made him irritated" (126). The infantilizing ways of Door's companions trigger in him a childish reaction as he is left behind, in the sewer: "[…] for the first time since his father died, alone in the dark, Richard Mayhew began to cry" (128).

However, if Richard is treated like a child by Door and her companions at the beginning of their quest, their attitude toward him changes as he shows his courage by going successfully through different trials, and the rules of "London Below" start to make sense to him. At the end of the novel, Richard goes back to his former life, but he finds that he no longer wants to live in the monotony and routine of reality, and returns to the fantasy world.

In *American Gods*, where men and gods walk alike, infantilization is not a means to introduce comical relief, it is the way gods deal with humans. Shadow is manipulated by Wednesday, from the very beginning. Like the marquis in *Neverwhere*, Wednesday refuses to answer questions. Shadow wonders about the people they are supposed to meet in a roadside attraction park:

> "So where are we meeting everyone?" asked Shadow. "I thought you said that we were meeting them here. But the place is empty."

> Wednesday grinned his scary grin. "Shadow," he said. "You're asking too many questions. You are not paid to ask questions." (Gaiman, *American Gods* 128)

He is not told Wednesday's real name, and learns his various names when meeting the other gods. Shadow is also infantilized by the other gods. After the gods' meeting, Mr. Nancy—the African spider god Anansi—is irritated by his ignorance:

> "Now we go back to the carousel room," muttered Mr. Nancy. "And old One-Eye buys us all dinner, greases some palms, kisses some babies, and no-one says the gee-word anymore."
> "Gee-word?"
> "*Gods*. What were you doing the day they handed out brains, boy, anyway?" (140)

In contrast to the manipulative gods and their condescending attitude, other supernatural beings provide advice or warning, but they too, tend to send Shadow back to a childish point of view. The buffalo man, who appears in his dreams and speaks for the native Americans, asks him to renounce logic:

> "Believe," said the rumbling voice. "If you are to survive, you must believe."
> "Believe what?" asked Shadow "What should I believe?" [...]
> "*Everything*," roared the buffalo man. (18)

The buffalo man's request is reminiscent of the trusting attitude of children who discover the world and do not yet know the mechanisms of reasoning. As he explains later in the book, he is "the land" (549) and took no part in the gods' schemes of war. His voice, which speaks only in Shadow's dreams, seems to come from a different world, as an invitation to borrow from childhood the only possible way to survive both in the real and in the fantasy world.

In spite of all that patronizing, the hero is constantly learning and trying to understand the ways of the gods, until he is finally able to defeat Wednesday's and Loki's scheme of war and chaos. Nothing childish remains in his attitude, except a tendency to play tricks with coins. In the epilogue, he decides to leave the company of the gods: "He had had enough of gods and their ways to last him several lifetimes. He would take the bus to the airport, he decided, and change his ticket. Get a place to somewhere he had never been" (Gaiman, *American Gods* 586).

In *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, the lack of spatial boundary between reality and fantasy puzzles the heroes, who make their first contact with fantasy in the routine of their everyday life. The protagonists of the fantasy worlds patronize them, and foster the childish point of view already present to a limited extent in their personalities in order to lead them to believe what they see, and accept the rules of the fantasy world, where the symbols are the things they stand for. This allows the heroes to take action, and change the course of things in the

fantasy world. The ability to retain a child's point of view thus seems to be a condition to enter this world. Once they have completed their quest or mission, the heroes are free to return to the real world or not.

The Child as a Struggling, Resistant Figure

Gaiman started to write for children almost ten years after writing for adults and his children's novels and picture books account for a small part of his work, though not a minor one, since he received several children's literature awards. In his books for children, as in his works for adults, he takes his heroes to unchartered territories, where myths and tales intertwine.

According to Maria Nikolajeva, in most fantasy narratives, events can be interpreted as real in the coherent world of magic created by the author, or as the protagonist's "dreams, visions, hallucinations, or imaginings" (Nikolajeva 153). In *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask*, Gaiman creates fantasy worlds which originate in the heroines' imaginings or dream. Borrowing from traditional tales like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White*, the author offers a new development of the heroines' struggle with the Oedipus complex. Bettelheim was one of the first to point out the significance of this complex in traditional tales addressing children: "the Oedipus complex is the central problem of childhood" (Bettelheim 38). He further explains: "a child not only dreams about marrying his parent of the other sex, but actively spins fantasies around it" (Bettelheim 39). As a consequence, the Oedipus complex leads to a struggle for domination in the triad constituted by the mother, the father and the child.

In *The Wolves in the Walls,* Lucy, the child heroine, hears noises in the walls of her house, which she thinks are caused by hidden wolves. Her parents and her brother consider that she just imagines the noises and the wolves, until one night, the wolves come out of the walls and the family runs out of the house to live in the garden.

Drawing on Freud's theory of "the Wolf Man," Christine Wilkie-Stibbs suggests that the wolves Lucy hears in the walls are the projected fantasy of the primal fear, in which the child "perceives in the primal scene that the same-sex parent has usurped its right to an exclusive relationship with the opposite-sex parent" (Wilkie-Stibbs 39). Freud considers the primal fear as a complex which does not need to happen in the actual life of a child but expresses itself in dreams through a projected fantasy. Wilkie-Stibbs interprets the "caveman like line drawings on the walls of Lucy's house as the introduction to a 'zone of something deeply primal and primitive'" (Wilkie-Stibbs 41). In the same picture, Lucy is depicted in front of an open door, and the double direction of her body—her belly protruding forward while her

hands are knotted in her back—displays some indecision. She seems to hesitate to leave the familiar space of the hall, which is behind her, like the past, in order to enter the white space beyond the door in front of her, like the future. She thus appears on a threshold, like a child about to leave childhood.

Obviously, the pictorial choices described above were made by Dave McKean. However, picture book scholars agree on the fact that the concept of picture book rests on "the interdependence of pictures and words" (Bader 1). Gaiman is very precise about what he wants when he collaborates with an artist: "When I'm writing a script, I'm writing a letter to an artist, telling him what I want, what I'm trying to do, what I want in each panel, what effect we're trying to do" (Schweitzer 181).

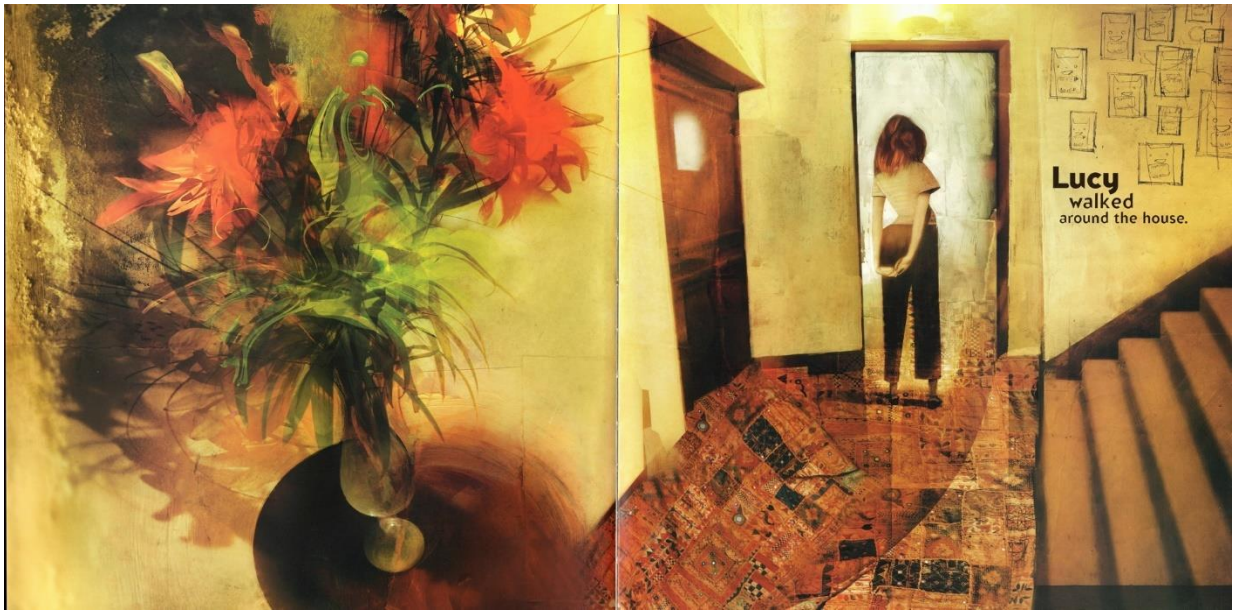

Figure 1 "Walking around the house"
The Wolves in the Walls

Wilkie-Stibbs further considers the depiction of the wolf lying on its back on Lucy's bed, with its legs in the air as "the image of the replete and seducing father" (Wilkie-Stibbs 46-47). In this picture, McKean's choice to represent the wolf akimbo emphasizes the grotesque and seducing appearance of the beast expressed by the text: "a **huge wolf**, fat as **anything**, asleep on her bed" (Gaiman and McKean, *The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag., boldface in original).

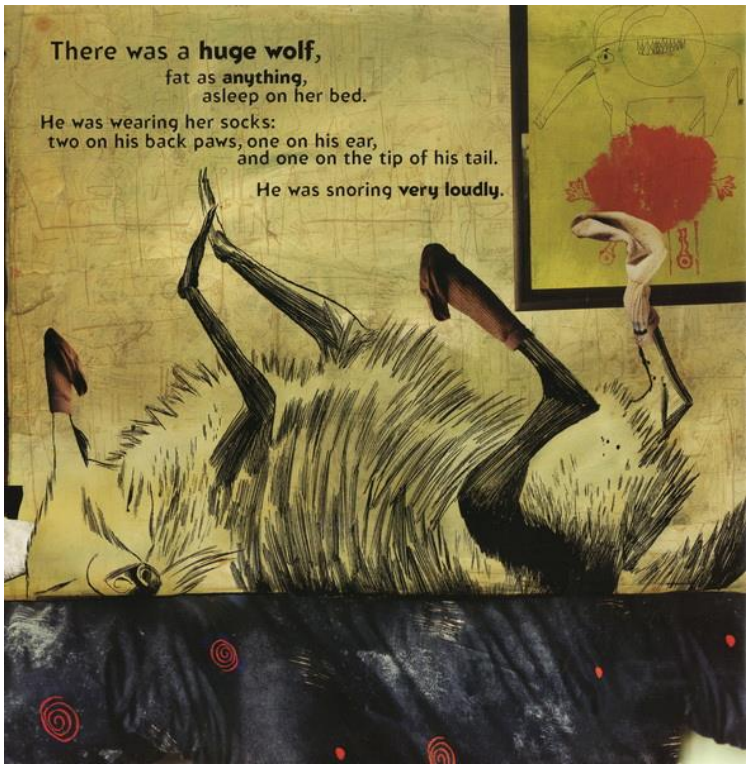

Figure 2 "The wolf on Lucy's bed"
The Wolves in the Walls

This interpretation can be linked to the threat of being devoured associated with the wolf in the traditional tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Bettelheim 169). Gaiman's text hints at such a possibility when Lucy remembers her forgotten pig-puppet as she spends the night in the garden with her family: "'She'll be all alone in that house with the wolves,' she thought. 'They could do dreadful things to her.'" (Gaiman and McKean, *The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag.) The act of devouring is indeed re-enacted in the scene represented by McKean. In this picture, the wolf's head is juxtaposed with Lucy's body, its long legs curled in what looks like an unfinished thought bubble, depicted in ink drawing, in contrast to the realistic photo inclusions of the trees. As Lucy lies awake, the black silhouettes of the garden trees conjure up in her thought the image of a huge wolf's gaping jaws whose protruding tongue is reminiscent of the male organ. According to Bettelheim, the wolf "represents all the asocial, animalistic tendencies within ourselves" (172). The picture thus develops the hint evoked in the text, and the wolf appears as a metaphor of the seducer who threatens to devour Lucy's childhood, symbolized by the pig-puppet, in a vivid impersonation of the metaphor "the symbol *is* the thing".

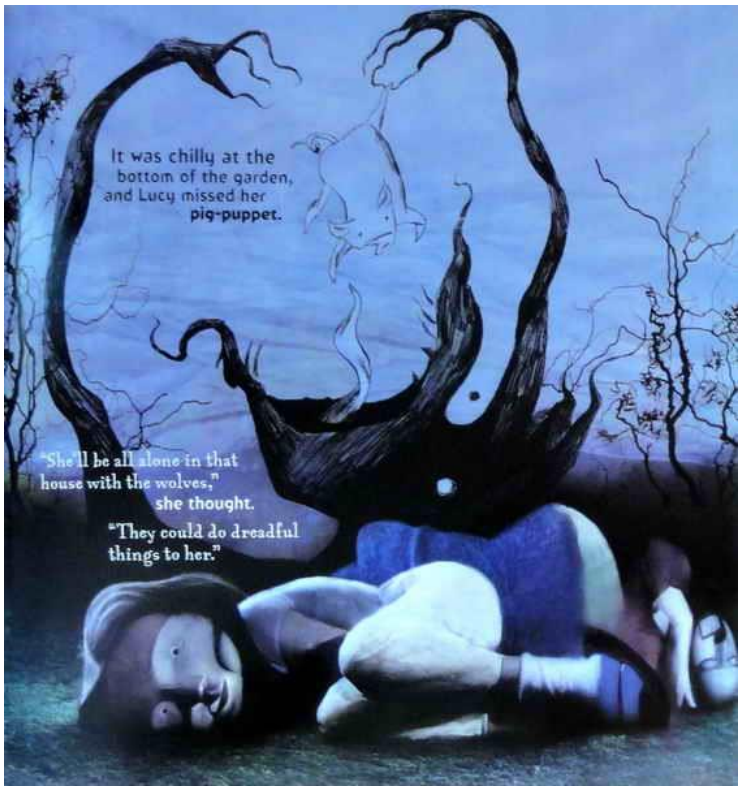

Figure 3 "Swallowing the pig puppet"
The Wolves in the Walls

MirrorMask borrows from Snow White and from antique myths to narrate the struggle of Helena, who is writing her own story and drawing a world of her own, while trying to assert her choices and escape the family tradition. The heroine is a girl on the brink of puberty who dreams of leaving the small family circus of her parents. Her mother falls seriously ill and has to be taken to a hospital for brain surgery. Waiting for the results overnight, Helena feels guilty and responsible because of her tense relationship with her, and starts dreaming of a quest to save her mother, in a world about to collapse because evil threatens to destroy reality. In her dream, Helena's self is fragmented into two characters, the daughter of the White Queen and the daughter of the Queen of the Dark Lands. The two queens mirror the good and terrible aspects of the spectral mother complex (Sprengnether), and parallel the protagonist's own split personality.

Depicted on a black background, looking down at Helena, the Queen of the Dark Lands personifies the preoedipal, phallic mother (Wilkie-Stibbs 46) whose masculine attributes—an armor, a helmet and a saber—reveal her as an oppressor and a destroyer. Under her commanding gaze, Helena feels like "a small, amusing toy" (Gaiman and McKean, *MirrorMask* VI), and she can no longer think for herself: "I was no longer worried. My mama knew everything and she would take care of everything. I ate my ice cream, and a million miles away I sat outside my head waiting for the end of the world" (VI).

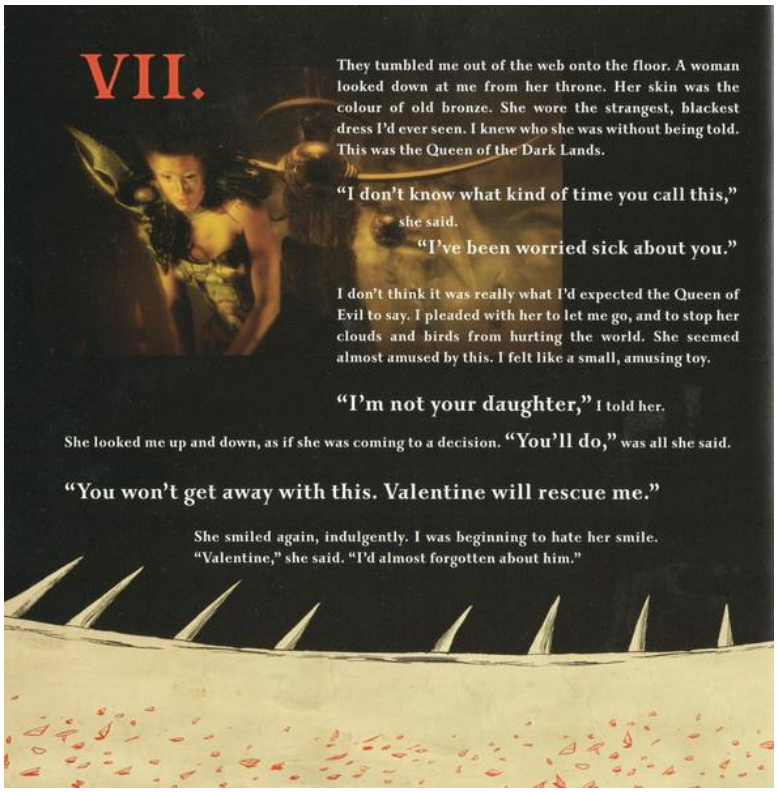

Figure 4 "The Queen of the Dark Lands"
MirrorMask
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Used by permission of Dave McKean.

In contrast, the sleeping White Queen—displayed on a bright background blurred by a flashlight effect, and lying on a hospital bed with Helena's head resting on her chest—personifies the passive, feminine aspect of the spectral mother. In a role-reversal of the Snow White pattern, she was put to sleep by the daughter of the Queen of the Dark lands, who stole the MirrorMask from her.

Figure 5 "The White Queen"
MirrorMask
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To escape the phallic power of the Queen of the Dark Lands, Helena needs help. She finds it in Valentine, a juggler whose very name hints at his role as a prospective boyfriend. From the beginning of the quest, he asserts his function:

> "How big's the reward?" He asked
> "The reward is, we wake the Queen and save the world."
> "No treasure? As your manager I would have made sure that—"
> "You're not my manager," I told him.
> "We can sort out the contractual details after we find the charm." (IV)

Besides considering himself as Helena's manager, the juggler keeps boasting: "Valentine wittered [...] how he was a **Very Important Man** and how he Owned a Tower" (IV, boldface in original), insisting "**It's huge. Enormous"** (V, boldface in original). Valentine thus becomes a substitute for the oedipal father (Wilkie-Stibbs 46). He helps the heroine retrieve her former self, and escape the oppression of the preoedipal mother. Helena then renounces the phallic powers of the Dark Lands, and she replaces them with the passivity of the oedipalized girl as she follows Valentine in his tower which opportunely drops from the sky to save them. This reestablishes the patriarchal order of the family.

In *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask*, Gaiman borrows symbols from traditional tales—the wolf and the wicked queen mother—to take his heroines through the struggle of the Oedipus complex. However, unlike traditional children's tales, Gaiman develops this struggle in a way that constantly blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy.

Traditional tales establish a clear distinction between the real world and the fantasy world through specific introductory and ending expressions. Richard Gooding refers to the narrative pattern featuring a border between the real and the fantasy worlds as "portal" narrative, and describes it as "a pattern that in adolescent fiction allows for the construction of a safe milieu for the playing out of the id fantasies" (Noel-Smith in Gooding 393). He notes that "in the pattern's simplest form, the border is very strict: a dozing Alice passes through the mirror into Looking-glass House, sleep transports Marianne to the world she has drawn during the day, the wardrobe opens to Narnia. The gateway is typically stable, though only intermittently open [...]" (Gooding 393). He argues that in *Coraline*, Gaiman blurs these boundaries by allowing the "psychic forces at play" in the fantasy to seep into the real world from the very beginning of the novel, through the threatening undertones introduced in the description of the old house surrounded by mist, thereby producing uncanny effects.

A similar process can be observed in *The Wolves in the Walls*, where the fantasy world peeps into the real world from the very front cover of the book, as a real wolf's eyes stare at the reader through Lucy's drawing on the wall. In contrast to the rest of the picture which is either painted or drawn, the wolf's eyes are photographed, which makes them stand out as real.

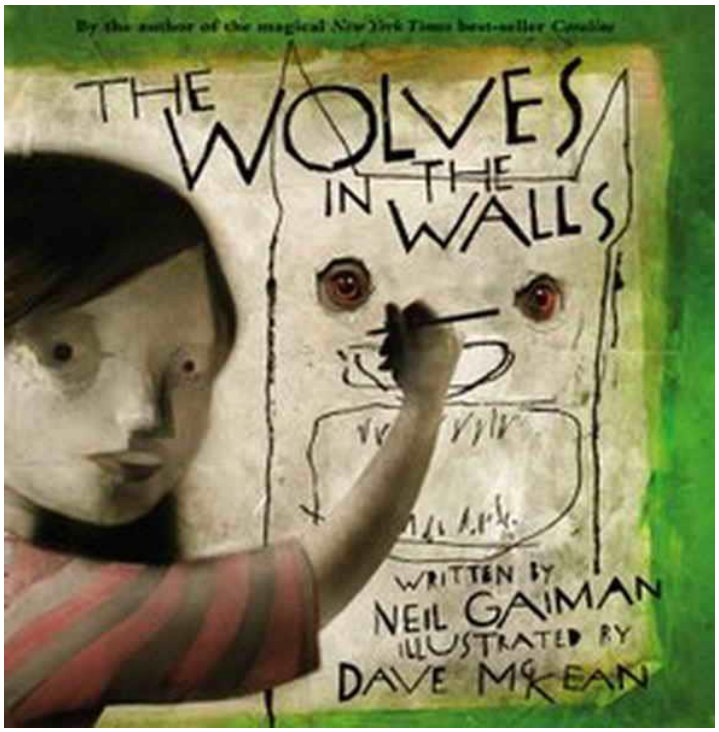

Figure 6 "Front cover"
The Wolves in the Walls
Text copyright © 2003 by Neil Gaiman
Illustration copyright © 2003 by Dave McKean. Used by permission of the artist.

On the first double page (figure 1), Lucy is wandering through the house, and though nothing is said about the wolves, they are already present in her drawings, on the wall of the staircase. By depicting Lucy's wolf drawings on the walls, McKean evokes the heroine's obsessive idea, paving the way for Gaiman's text which progressively discloses the little girl's perception of an uncanny presence: "Lucy heard noises. The noises were coming from inside the **walls**. They were hustling noises and bustling noises. They were crinkling noises and crackling noises. They were sneaking, **creeping, crumpling** noises" (Gaiman and McKean, *The Wolves in the Walls,* emphasis in original). The progression from commotional to conspiratorial and finally intruding noises hints at the permeability of the walls. Progressively, the presence of the wolves becomes more permanent: "In the day, Lucy felt eyes upon her, watching her from the cracks and from the holes in the walls. They peeped through the eyes in paintings" (*The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag.). Lucy's mother, father and brother first discarded her fear of wolves in the walls as improbable, but after a while, they start hearing noises too, which adds credit to Lucy's fear and imaginings:

> The next day the noises were louder.
> "We have to do something about those mice," said her mother.

> "Pesky rats!" said her father. "I'll call someone up about them in the morning." (*The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag.)

The walls feature the boundary between this world and the real one, but this boundary is permeable, as we noticed with the wolves peeping through the holes in the walls. So, when they come out and frighten the family away, the fantasy world becomes dominant. But glimpses of the real world can still be perceived, as Lucy's parents and her brother resume their activities: "The next morning, Lucy's mother went to work, and Lucy's brother went to school, and Lucy and her father sat down at the bottom of the garden. He practiced his tuba, and read travel brochures" (*The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag.).

Fantasy and reality blend in the pictures when the wolves take over the humans' activities inside the house: "The biggest, fattest wolf of all was playing an old wolf melody on Lucy's father's second best tuba" (*The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag.). To represent this blending, McKean used photo inclusions to mark the objects of the house as real, in contrast to the ink drawings representing the wolves, which show that they belong to the fantasy world.

Figure 7 "Wolf playing tuba"
The Wolves in the Walls

The blurring of reality and fantasy allows Lucy to develop a new self, clearly discernable in the pictures. When the wolves come out of the walls she is still a little girl that Gaiman's text equates with her father's best tuba as he "pick[s] her up and run[s] down the stairs with her and his best tuba in his arms" (*The Wolves in the Walls* n.pag.). McKean's picture

representing Lucy and the tuba in parallel positions highlights her accessory status in the patriarchal hierarchy of the family.

Figure 8 "The Family fleeing"
The Wolves in the Walls

In contrast, when she goes back to the house alone, and retrieves her pig-puppet from the wolves, she develops a new self. Her experience gives her enough courage to take her amazed family back into the house, and to chase the wolves out. Thus, she gains a central and dominant position, challenging the patriarchal hierarchy, as can be seen in the picture, where she stands in front of her father, her mouth open, to give the order to chase the wolves away.

Figure 9 "Ready"
The Wolves in the Walls

By depicting the fragmented selves of his heroine, Gaiman breaks away from the traditional tales. But, as soon as the wolves have left, all family members resume their usual activities, and Lucy starts hearing other noises in the walls, and talking to her pig-puppet again. Wilkie-Stibbs considers that she "regresses to her feminine pursuit of playing with her 'pig-puppet'" (41) as the oedipal hierarchy of the family has been restored.

However, Lucy's talk with her pig-puppet seems to be more ambiguous. The puppet remains silent but present through the narrative, until the last pages when Lucy thinks she hears elephant noises:

> She went and got her pig-puppet.
> "Do you think we should tell them," she said, "that we have elephants living in the walls of our house?"
> "I'm sure they'll find out soon enough," said the pig-puppet to Lucy.
> And they did. (Gaiman and McKean *The Wolves in the Walls,* n.pag.)

In this final exchange, the pig-puppet's metafictional remark casts a doubt about the real world, and its hierarchical order, in a way typical of Gaiman's narrations. The puppet seems to be a means for the author to guide Lucy throughout the narrative. It provides her with a motive to enter the house again, which gives her the courage to frighten the wolves out. Then, when the heroine is back in the real world, and the family hierarchy is re-established, the conversation between Lucy and her pig-puppet shows that the boundary between reality and fantasy does not exist. The child knows better than the adults and Lucy's story, which started with noises she only heard, may start again. As Philip Pullman remarks, Gaiman "is much too clever to be caught in the net of a single interpretation" (Pullman in Gooding 404).

In *MirrorMask* too, the entrance in the fantasy world is identified with a boundary, but unlike *The Wolves in the Walls*, the boundary is not a physical, permeable surface. Instead, it is the oneiric limit of Helena's dream on the night when her mother must have her surgery.

> In my dream, my reflection was laughing at me. In my dreams, I was two different girls. In my dream, Mum was on her way to be operated on, and when she opened her eyes, they were as black as glass…
> I woke up. (Gaiman and McKean, *MirrorMask* III, print enlarged in original)

This last sentence, printed in larger characters, introduces the blurring process. As Helena starts meeting Valentine and strange, unreal creatures, we realize that she woke up inside her dream, which is confirmed six pages further down, when the beetles carry her to the palace of light:

> And as they carried me I realized two things. (First) not to look for sense in this place, because (second) I was asleep and this was just a dream. I'd suspected it already, but as the beetle cops carried me through the city I looked through a window and saw a bedroom—my bedroom actually—and saw me in there, fast asleep, in my bed. (III)

But the dream itself is uncertain, as Helena notices when she walks with Valentine:

> When I looked through windows, I saw my bedroom at Aunt Nan's house. But I wasn't there. The room was empty.
> "Shouldn't I be there," I asked, "If I'm dreaming?"
> "You're dreaming?" said Valentine, surprised.
> "Well, yes. I think we've definitely established that."
> "Well, it's not a bedroom," he said, looking through the window. "It's somebody's front room." (III)

Helena's recurrent hesitations throughout the story as to whether she is dreaming or not break the rhythm of the narration, like playful metafictional comments by a character who is making up her own story as she dreams it. These remarks sound like a play with Freud's theory of dreams. Indeed, Gaiman refers to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in Sandman #15 "Into the Night," as Rose Walker asks Dream: "Do you know what Freud said about dreams of flying? It means you're really dreaming about having sex." Dream then answers ironically: "Indeed, tell me, then, what does it mean when you dream about having sex?" (Gaiman, *The Doll's House*, n.pag.)

The windows function like portals, through which Helena can glimpse at the real world. The blurring of locations announces the fragmentation of the self. The windows allow the heroine to see a girl who looks like her, and who screams at her dad. Helena repeatedly states: "Only, she wasn't me" (V), "Dad, she is not me…" but she is not so sure, and she immediately adds "I wasn't so certain about her, though" (VI). The girl on the other side of the window is later identified as the daughter of the Queen of the Dark Lands who escaped her domineering mother, but the text makes it clear that Helena considers her to be a part of herself. Brief scenes with that girl appear like glimpses of the real world, where Helena sees her split self arguing with her father. Between the action scenes and the narrated fragments of dream, those scenes function as metanarrative pauses within the heroine's narration.

In traditional tales, the fragmentation of the self is symbolically represented by different characters—which is the case for Helena's mother in this story. In contrast, as the real and the fantasy worlds blend in Gaiman's text, there is no safe place left for the expression of the id, and the heroine's struggle with her split self is literally displayed, identifying the symbol and the thing. The blending of fantasy and reality also appear in the pictures. When Helena meets the Queen of the Dark Lands (figure 4) the ink and pen spikes, at the bottom of the picture, belong to Helena's drawings which blend with the photo inclusions as she wanders

between fantasy and reality, inside her own drawings, never quite knowing where she is. This feature is even more obvious in McKean's film *MirrorMask*, which preceded the books. In the movie, Helena's drawings become part of the settings in which the actors play, as Camus noticed (Camus, "Les collaborations").

While struggling with the Oedipus complex, the heroine is guided through her quest by an object which turns out to be a character of some sort. Unlike the other books that fly away when Helena and Valentine try to reach them, the "REALLY USEFUL BOOK" (capitals in original) comes to rest on her shoulder. Its red cover suggests a particular significance. Its pages hold only one sentence each, which guides the heroine in her quest. The first message—"WHY DON'T YOU LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW?" (IV)—helps Helena find the sun park where she begins her quest with Valentine. The second message—"DON'T LET THEM SEE THAT YOU'RE AFRAID" (V)—reads like a tip to the heroine, warning her of the sphinxes who are winged cats with very sharp teeth. The third message gives her the means to pacify them: "MY PAGES TASTE EXCELLENT BUT ARE STICKIER THAN TOFFEE AND VERY DIFFICULT TO CHEW" (V). Helena interprets the metaphor literally, as the book pages keep the sphinxes busy chewing them, but it may also be interpreted as a metafictional comment by Gaiman about the story. Since Valentine is unable to make sense of the messages, the REALLY USEFUL BOOK functions as an exclusive messenger to the heroine.

When Helena confronts her split self at the end of the story, she has to choose between the two worlds: "I'm not going back!" (IV), her split self protests. But the MirrorMask, that Helena found with the help of the author's voice in the "REALLY USEFUL BOOK," allows her to blend her two selves into one again and return to the real world. On the last page of her narration, Helena reveals herself as an oedipalized girl who found her place in her family and asserted her personality as well: "[...] Dad's agreed to me going to art college in a few years. [...] There's only one thing I'm missing from my life now, and I'm pretty sure he's out there somewhere" (X). However, oedipalization is only one aspect of Helena's struggle. In her dream, she managed to save her mother by drawing a world where she could make her choices: "It's a lot like being some kind of god, when you wear the MirrorMask. Or it's like writing a book. You can fix things, or you can sort of do something in your head and let them fix themselves" (IX). As a result, she imposed her choice of becoming an artist to her father. *MirrorMask* is as much the story of Helena growing up and struggling to establish a new relationship with her parents as the story of her writing and drawing her own life, as she writes at the beginning of the book: "I drew a sun, certain that if I drew it properly, drew it bright enough and hot enough, it would make everything okay—it would burn away the stuff growing in Mum's head that wasn't meant to be there" (IX).

Conclusion

In the four books for adults or children examined in this paper, Gaiman subverts ancient myths and traditional tales and re-interprets them in contemporary society, blurring the boundary between the real and the fantasy worlds. In *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, the entrance to the fantasy is operated through characters of the fantasy world, as there is no specific portal or dedicated space. In *Neverwhere*, the hero can go from one world to the other but he loses his actuality in the real world, whereas in *American Gods* he lives in a world where reality and fantasy constantly blend. In each book, the hero belongs to the real world at the beginning of the narration, and is patronized by the protagonists of the fantasy worlds until he learns their rules. Both adult heroes retain some childish features—like a taste for toys or games and a submissive attitude—that help them renounce logical knowledge to the benefit of a world where objects, places or creatures are the things they symbolize. This allows them to understand their mission or quest in the fantasy world, and to find their place in it. At the end of the narration, the adult hero is free to remain in the fantasy world or to go back to reality.

In contrast, in *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask*, the fantasy world is identified with the imaginings or dreams of the heroine, where she struggles with her Oedipus complex. The heroine enters and leaves the fantasy world through a portal—the holes in the walls or the dream—which proves to be unstable and constantly open, thus blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy. This process allows Gaiman to display the fragmented self of his heroine literally, instead of evoking it symbolically. He thus identifies the thing and the symbol, making his narratives "fairytales without the masks", according to Wilkie-Stibbs (44). Throughout the narration, the heroine is helped by a specific object or character which seems to be a means for Gaiman to guide his heroines.

Buckley argues that Gaiman, though well acquainted with Freud's theory, does not necessarily subscribe to it—as can be seen in Dream's answer to Rose Walker, mentioned above—and that he makes a playful use of Freudian language in *Coraline*. Buckley's approach seems to apply equally to *The Wolves in the Walls* and *MirrorMask,* in which Gaiman's metafictional devices question the apparent conventional ending, revealing that the power to dream and to change the real world lies with the child, who thus "becomes an insistently playful and resistant figure" (Buckley 75).

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