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Fantasy Making the Invisible Visible: Liminality in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*

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FANTASY MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: LIMINALITY IN NEIL
GAIMAN'S *NEVERWHERE* AND *AMERICAN GODS*

by

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Presented to the Faculty of
Bucknell University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

Approved:



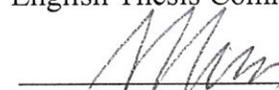
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I, Courtney L. Firman, do grant permission for my thesis to be copied.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the ways in which the fantasy genre is ideally positioned for discussing social issues, such as invisibility and liminality. Elements associated with invisibility, such as poverty, homelessness, and alienation, were explored within two novels by Neil Gaiman: *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*. Gaiman's application of these elements within the fantasy genre were juxtaposed with samples from other genres, including Plato's "Parable of the Cave" and Jennifer Toth's *The Mole People*. Another aim was to contrast Gaiman's use of the 'beast in the sewer' metaphor with previous renditions of the myth, demonstrating how fantasy, paradoxically, offers a unique and privileged view of reality.

Introduction

Poverty, homelessness, disenfranchisement, alienation; these are all elements of our society that act both to elevate some in their contrast, and push down others in their definition. These elements have been explored by numerous authors throughout history; both in support of the resulting stratification they cause, and in critique of a social structure that relies on the fall of some for the maintenance of the rest. Victorian reformers, such as Henry Mayhew, wrote of the poor in London and their bestial habits, uplifting the bourgeois sensibilities of cleanliness and chastity. More recently, Jennifer Toth wrote of the homeless in the tunnels under New York City, highlighting among other things, several ways in which society and the government have failed this social class.

Many works involving the elements I have mentioned, such as poverty and homelessness, focus on the invisibility of those people attached to such designations. Works of realist fiction, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* are effective in depicting what it means to be invisible within society. Ellison fully explores how a man can be invisible in a city the size of New York simply because that society refuses to acknowledge him as a human being. In this situation, Ellison's protagonist is made invisible by the color of his skin, and the racial divides created by society established black people as somehow less than human. The protagonist is cast to the margins of society; or viewing a vertically positioned social ladder, the protagonist is cast into the underground.

While works such as Ellison's may be successful in describing how a person may be cast down to a state of invisibility by society, invisibility itself is still an abstract concept. Within these works, to say one is invisible is a metaphor for being ignored, disregarded, or liminal. If the readers have not experienced what it is like to live in the underground or on the margins of society, then they are simply able to observe life in the underground without understanding it. A reader cannot witness the fall of the subject or witness life after. Readers are being presented with a narrative that, like Ellison's protagonist, is coming from the perspective of one who claims to be invisible, or a non-being within this society. However, if the narrator is truly a non-being then his narrative is a paradox. The narrative should not exist because its narrator is invisible, and the credibility of the story is damaged.

The fantasy genre offers a solution to this problem. A reader of fantasy understands that the elements of the society created do not directly transcribe within a work of fantasy. The societal structure within a fantasy narrative is solely created by the author, and the narrative and narrator maintain credibility as long as the author does not contradict any of the rules he establishes. The author has full control over the creation and integrity of the reality he creates.

Fantasy authors, such as Neil Gaiman, may demonstrate the invisibility of the poor and the alienated without sacrificing the credibility of their narrative. In Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, the protagonist, Richard falls into London Below, the underground community within the novel. Richard, impossibly, becomes literally invisible; however

his narrative credibility goes unquestioned by the reader because within the fantasy world Gaiman has created invisibility is part of the reality.

In the following pages I will argue that the fantasy genre is ideally situated for discussing elements of underground life. Fantasy allows an author the freedom to show his or her readers what, in our society, ought not to be seen. In the first chapter I will demonstrate how Gaiman has explored concepts of invisibility in his novels *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*. I will explore how Gaiman draws on ideas laid out in Plato's "Parable of the Cave," and how all of these elements connect to real-life accounts depicted in Toth's ethnographic study, *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City*.

In the second chapter I will discuss the historical lineage of a mythic trend, commonly known as the beast in the sewer legend. The beast in the sewers trend has long been recognized as a metaphor for discussing the invisible beings in the margins of society and the fear that surrounds them. The fear in the legends revolves around the beast breaking free or possibly breaking free from its lair. This fear echoes society's fear of the invisible beings in the margins revolting against the social structure that cast them down.

In the third and final chapter I will be returning to two of Gaiman's novels, *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*. Both of these works contain elements of a beast in the sewer legend throughout that I will be exploring in detail. By connecting Gaiman's use of the legend within the fantasy genre to those earlier versions appearing in Chapter 2, I

will demonstrate the unique and privileged perspective fantasy offers for seeing the invisible.

The Invisible in Literature: The Voice of the Liminal in *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*

Neil Gaiman begins his novel, *Neverwhere*, with his protagonist, Richard Mayhew in Scotland just prior to Richard's move to London. With the rest of the novel occurring within London (Above and Below), Gaiman begins by establishing Richard as an outsider, a person in transition. Richard's impending move separates him from the collective community. By doing this, Gaiman directs his readers on not only how to view Richard throughout the rest of the narrative, but also on what details are important to note. Gaiman introduces the concepts of invisibility, alienation, and homelessness that guide the novel, combining them in the prologue and centering them on Richard.

Gaiman's novel, *American Gods*, begins in a similar way as *Neverwhere*, in the sense that the protagonist, Shadow, like Richard, is immediately established as an outsider. In the first sentence of the novel Gaiman writes, "Shadow had done three years in prison" (*American* 3). Shadow's prison time alone establishes him as the Other, as prisoners are a disenfranchised population. As with Richard in *Neverwhere*, Gaiman uses the details of Shadow's prison sentence to direct the readers' attention early on to the concepts of invisibility and alienation that will continually resurface throughout the remainder of the novel. Taking *American Gods* one step further than *Neverwhere*, Gaiman uses his protagonist's name, Shadow, as an additional signifier. In an interview regarding the novel Gaiman stated, concerning the process of selecting the name 'Shadow', "'There's a magic to names, after all. I knew his name was descriptive'" (*American* 598). I will explore the meaning of Shadow's name shortly; however, it is

important to note that his name is the first word in the text of the novel. Furthermore, like Richard, Shadow is also in a transitional phase, as it is shortly revealed that he will soon be released from prison to reenter society.

The prologue of *Neverwhere* takes place during Richard's going away party at a small pub in Scotland. Having begun the night enjoying himself, Richard is now seen alone on the curb outside the pub. Gaiman writes, "Inside the pub, Richard's friends continued to celebrate his forthcoming departure with an enthusiasm that, to Richard, was beginning to border on the sinister" (*Neverwhere* 1). Gaiman highlights the extensive celebrations accompanying Richard's departure. The level of excitement his friends are exhibiting leaves Richard feeling as though perhaps they are truly happy to see him go. In his home town Richard begins to feel separated, ostracized, and takes on the role of the outsider. He is no longer a part of the celebrations, "...sitting and shivering on the sidewalk outside the pub..." (*Neverwhere* 1). Despite the conventional appearance Gaiman attributes to his protagonist, Richard is still mistaken for a homeless man by a passing elderly woman. She says to Richard, "I been homeless, so I know what its like...That's why I thought you was'" (*Neverwhere* 2). Having been the outsider, the transitional person on the fringe of society, this elderly woman is able to recognize similar qualities in Richard. Gaiman articulates, with this scene, that homelessness or a lack of place is akin to the Other. Therefore the elderly woman, seeing Richard as a fellow outsider, assumes he is homeless. By describing Richard sitting alone on the sidewalk, over the gutter, Gaiman positions the Other beneath or below those walking by, and alongside the sewers.

The gutter itself represents a boundary, a liminal space, between society above and the sewers below. Victor Turner, in his book *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, describes liminality as one of the three phases of a *rite de passage*. He writes,

...all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*), and aggregation. The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') is ambiguous... (*Forest* 94).

In Gaiman's prologue, Richard is in the first phase of the transition. The going away party is a symbolic act, representing Richard's pending separation from the community. Similarly, Richard actively separates himself from the community by exiting the pub and sitting alone on the curb. The level of excitement exhibited by the community at the party has, as mentioned, led Richard already to feel separated from the celebrations. Gaiman positions Richard over the gutter, a liminal boundary, demonstrating the next phase of transition he must begin. Turner writes, "The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible.' As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture" (*Forest* 95). Richard, by actively separating himself from the community, has begun to pass into this invisible state. Some time elapses before his absence is noticed from the party in his

honor. As noted previously, Richard is acknowledged by a formerly homeless woman. The old woman sees Richard because, as a fellow outsider, she expects to see Richard. She defines Richard's status as homeless because the culture from which she comes defines the liminal person as homeless. She is not surprised to see someone sitting over the gutter, and anyone in such a liminal space must, by societal definitions, be homeless.

The elderly woman's claim at recognizing homelessness because she was once homeless is reminiscent of claims recorded in Jennifer Toth's documentary study, *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City*. One man Toth interviews is the elected mayor of one of the underground communities visited. He is known simply as Mayor and he speaks to the same concepts as the elderly woman Richard encounters:

‘You probably won't be able to see things the way we see them because of your conditioning, but we'll work on that. Take care to open your mind as much as possible and recognize that your eyes physically can't see what we see. It takes weeks for eyes to adjust to the darkness’ (Toth 195).

Mayor explains to Toth that in order to see the invisible, people must look first with their mind, because their eyes are blinded. Mayor describes a literal blindness, caused by the unaccustomed eye's inability to see in the tunnels of New York City. In the same way, the elderly woman is able to see Richard because her mind has already been opened.

Plato discusses the blindness associated with such transitions in his parable of the cave within *The Republic*. He writes, “‘But anyone with any sense...will remember that the eyes may be unsighted in two ways, by a transition either from light to darkness or from darkness to light, and will recognize that the same thing applies to the mind’” (Plato

321). In Plato's parable, he begins with his subject as a prisoner in the darkness with shadows as the only reality. The prisoner is released and then gradually forced out into the light, blinded at first, but eventually recognizing the truth that his previous reality consisted of mere shadows. The released prisoner is a liminal figure, crossing a boundary from a fixed social point as the imprisoned, ignorant one rises to a higher form of enlightenment. In a reversal of this scenario, Toth descends into the tunnels of New York. She is initially blinded by the intense darkness that surrounds her. She writes, "...but beyond six feet I can barely see shadows, fleeting and evasive figures like those I sometimes glimpsed in the higher tunnels but dismissed as imaginary" (Toth 195). Toth, having come from the light and being blinded by the darkness is ready to dismiss this new reality as imaginary. Her eyes, as well as her mind, are not yet capable of understanding the reality of the underground.

In contrast to the excitement surrounding Richard's impending removal from his home in Scotland in the prologue of *Neverwhere*, Gaiman describes Shadow's pending release from prison as gloomy, and surrounded by misfortune. Initially, Shadow expresses a feeling of relief concerning his time in prison, and it follows then that he would be apprehensive about his release. Gaiman writes, "The best thing—in Shadow's opinion, perhaps, the only good thing—about being in prison was a feeling of relief. The feeling that he'd plunged as low as he could plunge and he'd hit bottom" (*American* 3). However, when discussing the death penalty with a fellow prisoner, Shadow reconsiders this initial feeling of relief, noting that even in prison there are still places further down that one could fall to. Gaiman writes, "...he [Shadow] decided, then prison was, at best,

only a temporary reprieve from life, for two reasons. First, life creeps back into prison. There are always places to go further down. Life goes on. And second, if you just hang in there, someday they're going to have to let you out" (*American* 4). Shadow is of the opinion that even in the non-society of prison (in that those inhabiting it are the disenfranchised; existing outside of society), elements of society, such as a social ladder, establish themselves, offering new rungs to sink. The bottom is continually redefined, and there is always a place further down to which one can fall.

Shadow's sentiment of life creeping back in is echoed several times in Toth's study by members of several different underground communities. These communities are analogous to prison communities in their liminality. Describing one community, and a conversation she had with a member there, Toth writes, "Society places the Rotunda homeless outside its traditional concept of community. 'They call us [Rotunda homeless] a subcommunity the same way they say we have a subculture even though we believe we have our own culture in our own community'" (93). Toth demonstrates that although society places this community on the bottom rung of the social ladder, or outside society entirely, they do not view themselves as such. Toth continues, "This culture has its own pecking order. Among other things, the Rotunda homeless feel superior to the homeless who live in tunnels directly underneath them" (93). Bill, one of Toth's contacts within the Rotunda community, says of those living further down, "'Their communities may operate like ours, but they are different...Generally they're not as clean. They're further removed than we are'" (93). Bill is directly describing the sentiments that Shadow has reached. Although by societal standards the Rotunda community, like a prison, exists

outside of society, society still creeps into life there, and there is always a place further down to which one can fall.

Shadow's initial feeling of relief is echoed in Toth's study as well in her chapter discussing different types of outreach programs for the homeless living in the tunnels of New York City. One man, Howard Deamus, worked for an outreach program known as ADAPT; the Association for Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment. Toth writes of her conversation with Deamus, "The irony is that, as Deamus sees it, 'they feel much more human underground, safer, freer to move around. Tranquil, even serene to some of them, despite the trains running by'" (161). Deamus is contrasting these feelings with the feelings the homeless associate with the homeless shelters above ground. While in the shelters the homeless "...can't close their eyes...fearing rape or beating or getting killed'" (Toth 161). The homeless shelters exist within society, and exist there on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Those using the shelters are the homeless and the alienated. They are considered invisible within society. By existing underground, they are essentially raising themselves up by asserting that others exist below them. They are creating an alternate social ladder on which they do not occupy the bottom rung. A police officer Toth interviews asserts, "'There's a city beneath the streets'" (4). He is more accurate than he possibly realizes, as the recreation of social ladders, below ground, establish the social structure for a completely new city.

Returning to *Neverwhere*, in the prologue Gaiman has separated his protagonist from society, beginning to pass him into a state of liminality. In the first chapter, Gaiman weaves together two separate stories; that of Richard and his life after moving to London,

and another concerning a mysterious girl named Door. Despite Richard's anxieties regarding his move to London, he does make the move, and is next seen three years later working in an office and engaged to a woman named Jessica. Richard's life in London throughout this chapter is meant to seem 'normal' as far as the reader understands reality. Most people are able to understand Richard's anxieties over dinner with his fiancée's boss, meeting a deadline at work, and negotiating office politics. All of these things make up what Gaiman refers to as "London Above," "Upside," or the "Upworld" (*Neverwhere* 30, 68, 75).

Despite the normality of Richard's day-to-day life, he still maintains many of the characteristics of a liminal figure. Gaiman depicts Richard, "...trying to find the group of his office friends who had organized the trip" and "trail[ing] behind Jessica" (*Neverwhere* 10,11). Richard has forgotten to make a dinner reservation and is late submitting a report at work. Gaiman writes, "If ever, he [Richard] decided, they made disorganization an Olympic sport, he could be disorganized for Britain" (*Neverwhere* 17). In London, Richard has continued to exist on the fringe of society. He is unable to successfully function within the community he lives in, acting more as an observer than a participant. Richard is still separated from those around him, lingering on the edge of the liminal phase.

Door, on the other hand, represents "London Below" or the "Underside" (*Neverwhere* 88, 81). She is introduced fleeing from pursuers, Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar, and running through "passages and tunnels" and "ducking through tunnels" (*Neverwhere* 6, 18). To add to the mystery of this underground chase, Door possesses an

ability that allows her to create a door in a solid wall, or some other object, and open it, facilitating her escape. This mystical ability is a characteristic of Door's entire family. Her parents are named Portico and Portia; both derivatives of the French word 'porte,' which means 'door.' As her name suggests, Door becomes the character through which Richard enters into London Below and liminality. Richard's first interactions with Door act as the threshold he must cross, allowing him to move fully from the phase of separation to the phase of marginality, fully becoming an invisible or non-existent figure in London Above.

Shadow, though, he too was approaching a transitional phase, about to leave prison, is unable to return to society. Several days prior to his release, Shadow's wife dies in a car accident. The only remaining connection he has been able to maintain with society while in prison is severed by her death, preventing him from ever returning from the liminal phase. Gaiman describes this transition even more thoroughly with Richard, but Shadow also loses his home, his job, his family and his friends. As Shadow is told, "People don't hire ex-cons. You folk make them uncomfortable" (*American* 32). Even though he has served his time in the margins during his prison sentence, there cannot be a true return to society for Shadow. To ensure that factor, Gaiman removes all of the things and the people that could possibly act to return Shadow to society.

Richard's first encounter with Door and London Below reiterates Gaiman's themes of invisibility and alienation. As Richard is being hurried down the sidewalk by Jessica, "...a door opened in the wall, a little way ahead of them. Someone stepped out and stood swaying for one long terrible moment, and then collapsed to the concrete"

(*Neverwhere* 23). Richard is affected by witnessing this figure collapse, and he stops out of concern. Jessica, however, "...stepped over the crumpled form," and continues on with her conversation regarding the dinner they are attending with her boss, Mr. Stockton (*Neverwhere* 23). As the elderly woman was able to see Richard crouched over the gutter, so too is Richard able to see Door collapsed on the sidewalk. Jessica, however, does not expect to see Door, and therefore does not. When Richard stops, forcing Jessica to acknowledge the crumpled form at her feet Jessica says, "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" (*Neverwhere* 24). Richard has forced Jessica to open her eyes and see the figure on the pavement, but Jessica is still unable to open her mind, as she walks over the figure lying on the sidewalk.

Jessica assumes that Richard believes this figure to be homeless because, as mentioned with the elderly woman previously, this is how liminal figures lying in the gutter are defined. Jessica also assumes that she has risen to a higher state of mind in that she will not allow herself to be duped by the figure's 'ploy' of homelessness. For Jessica, the figure on the sidewalk is not only worth disregarding, but is worthy of disdain; a pollutant. Turner writes,

...one would expect to find that transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography) and are at the very least 'betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural

classifications. In fact...liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, 'inoculated' against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state (*Forest* 97).

The figure at her feet is of no more worth to Jessica than refuse. Never having been a liminal figure herself she is incapable of recognizing the figure's pain, and assumes it is someone else's problem. She says, "Someone else will be along; someone else will help her" (*Nowhere* 24). Jessica is discomfited by Richard forcing her to acknowledge this figure, and seeks to quickly move back into her own safe, stable view of reality.

Jessica's reaction is reminiscent of Plato's prisoners being forced into the light. The blinding encounter is also a painful one, with Plato stressing the force that would be necessary to draw the prisoner into the harsh reality of light. Plato writes, "And if he [the prisoner] were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly, which he would think really clearer than the things being shown him'" (Plato 318). In Plato's parable the prisoner's reality is not false, though it may seem so. Rather, it is incomplete. The shadows are the effect, and the light from the fire or the sun the cause. The encounter with the wider picture is the painful one; the realization that things were not as they seem. Plato uses the physical discomfort that arises from eyes unaccustomed to light to illustrate the mental discomfort created during such an encounter. Gaiman's villain, Mr. Croup, expands on this idea. He says,

‘It is saddening to reflect...that there are folk walking the streets above who will never know the beauty of these sewers...These red-brick cathedrals beneath their feet...With cities, as with people...the condition of the bowels is all-important’ (*Neverwhere* 258-259).

Mr. Croup’s description of the ignorance of the people above likens them to the prisoners in Plato’s cave. They are unaware of the complete picture of the reality in which they live. He goes on to point out the importance of the neglected part, the bowels. If the sewers and the rest of the underground (water-pipes, electrical circuits, etc.) did not exist then London Above would not exist in the same way either. Yet, these things remain invisible, separate, out-of-sight, from those above – as the fire or the sun remain out of sight for Plato’s prisoners. They are not aware of what lies below in any concrete sense, and therefore ignore it; or in Jessica’s case, disregard it as false. People do not question how the water is brought to their pipes, just as the prisoners do not question how the shadows are projected on the wall in front of them. They simply are.

In the same way, Jessica refutes the existence of homelessness as a social problem. She says, “They all have homes, really” (*Neverwhere* 24). Gaiman uses Jessica to represent the majority of those living in London Above. Homelessness is not a concept most people can comfortably digest and is therefore relegated to the bowels, the sewers, with all of the other refuse that they prefer not to acknowledge. The pollutants are hidden from sight whenever possible, and ignored as invisible when hiding them becomes an impossible task.

Richard, however, opposes the definition of a pollutant with regard to the injured figure at his feet. By refusing to adhere to the societal definitions, he permanently casts himself into the liminal phase. Having helped Door escape her pursuers and return to London Below in the company of the marquis de Carabas, Richard finds that he has become non-existent in London Above. Gaiman writes,

The taxi slid gently past him, ignoring him completely...Another taxi...This time Richard stepped out into the middle of the road to flag it down. It swerved past him and continued on its way...Then he ran for the nearest Tube station...Every coin he put in went straight through the guts of the machine...No one stopped him; no one seemed to care (*Neverwhere* 57).

Though Richard has witnessed Jessica's reaction to the wounded figure on the sidewalk, he is wholly unprepared for existence in the margins. Despite his own recognition of liminal figures he still must encounter his own transition into liminality in the same, painful way as Plato's prisoners must first encounter light. Gaiman writes,

His [Richard's] life so far...had prepared him perfectly for a job in Securities, for shopping at the supermarket, for watching soccer on the television on the weekends, for turning up the thermostat if he got cold. It had magnificently failed to prepare him for a life as an un-person on the roofs and in the sewers of London, for a life in the cold and the wet and the dark (*Neverwhere* 131).

Richard is overcome with the onslaught of his new reality, and without the helping hand of Door, is only able to curl up in a ball on a ledge in an underground tunnel. Door, like the figure in Plato's parable, has released the prisoner and is forcing him out into the light.

In Plato's parable the shadows on the wall represent reality to the prisoners, as the shadows are all they know. In order to gain enlightenment or to see the whole picture the prisoners must come out of the cave and into the light. In *Neverwhere*, to acquire the whole picture Richard must go down into London Below, into the darkness. In London Above, like the shadows on the cave wall, Richard is only able to see the surface of the whole. In *American Gods*, Shadow is sometimes given the light, and sometimes the dark, and while both prove to be important at different times, as his name suggests, it is the shadows that represent truth. In one scene, Shadow accompanies his employer, Wednesday (also known as Odin), to what is essentially a meeting of old-world gods. Each god attending the meeting possesses more than one shape; they use one human shape to move around in the world unnoticed, but also maintain all of the other shapes that they have represented to their followers. For example, one of the gods Gaiman includes is Anansi, a trickster character in Western African and Caribbean folklore, referred to as Mr. Nancy by Shadow. Gaiman writes,

...Mr. Nancy, an old black man with a pencil mustache, in his check sports jacket and his lemon-yellow gloves...at the same time, in the same place, he [Shadow] saw a jeweled spider as high as a horse...and simultaneously he was looking at an extraordinarily tall man with teak-

colored skin and three sets of arm...and he was also seeing a young black boy, dressed in rags, his left foot all swollen and crawling with black flies; and last of all, and behind all these things, Shadow was looking at a tiny brown spider, hiding under a withered ocher leaf (*American* 131).

Shadow is overwhelmed by the multitude of images that bombard him during this meeting. He is unable to comprehend what he sees. Gaiman writes, "...it was like seeing the world through the multifaceted jeweled eyes of a dragonfly, but each facet saw something completely different, and he [Shadow] was unable to combine the things he was seeing...into a whole that made sense" (*American* 131). As with Plato's prisoners first encounter with light, or Richard's first encounter with London Below, Shadow is dazzled by this new image of truth. Unable to combine it all, he can understand none of it, and is essentially blinded. Looking at Wednesday for some type of guidance, and encountering a similar multifaceted image to that of Anansi, Shadow wonders, "*What should I believe?*" (*American* 133). Shadow has only ever encountered or understood a singular truth, similar to the prisoners only seeing the two-dimensional shadows on a wall. He later expresses a comfort in the simple, thinking "...there was something comforting about the 1965 black-and-white world it painted..." having just turned on an episode of the Dick Van Dyke show (*American* 173). When expected to accept more than the singular he falters, until he hears a response to his question coming from Wednesday. Gaiman writes, "...and the voice came back to him [Shadow] from somewhere deep beneath the world, in a bass rumble: *Believe everything*" (*American* 133). At this point Shadow first realizes that Wednesday is also Odin, and the All-Father,

and others, and though he is still dazzled and confused by what he sees, Shadow understands that it is all truth.

The shadows in *American Gods* are what depict truth. While Shadow is at the meeting of the old-world gods, the meeting actually occurs within Wednesday's mind, for he understands the multi-faceted nature of truth, which Shadow is able to see with Anansi's many forms. However, when he returns to this world, "Shadow was relieved to see that Nancy [Anansi] was now once more an old man wearing yellow gloves..." (*American* 133). The gods have returned to the singular form they must adopt to survive in society. Yet Shadow has now encountered the truth as he saw it in Wednesday's mind, and it cannot be forgotten. As Shadow looks at Mr. Nancy he notices, "...his shadow shook and shivered and changed in the flames of the fire, and what it changed into was not always entirely human" (*American* 133). At this point Shadow realizes that the shadows around him may offer the truth, as the light does for Plato's prisoners and the darkness of London Below does for Richard.

Shadows continue to appear throughout *American Gods*, reiterating the importance Shadow awards them after this first encounter with a multifaceted truth and Mr. Nancy's changing shadow. Shadow later encounters the Egyptian god Thoth, living as a man named Mr. Ibis (appropriately named as the god Thoth was said to be a man with the head of an ibis). Gaiman writes, "His [Mr. Ibis'] shadow on the wall was stretched and birdlike, and as the whiskey flowed Shadow imagined it the head of a huge waterfowl, beak long and curved..." (*American* 227). As with Mr. Nancy, Mr. Ibis' shadow offers the truth of whom he is. Though Shadow has seen this truth he still

continues to wrestle with the acceptance of it. He tries to define something new with the basis of knowledge he already possesses. Gaiman writes, “There was another part of him [Shadow]...who was still trying to figure it all out, trying to see the big picture” (*American* 452). Shadow ultimately draws a metaphor between what he experiences and the hidden picture games children play. Shadow says, “...at first glance you could only see the waterfall and the rocks and the trees, then you see that if you just tip the picture on its side that shadow is an Indian” (*American* 452). Though Shadow expresses the notion that truth is not apparent at face value, and must be sought below the surface, he still centers on the shadow in the image as the place offering truth.

I would like to return briefly to the practice of the old-world gods being forced to take on human shapes in order to get by in society. Once revered and praised, these figures have now been marginalized in the same way that Shadow has as a prisoner, and in the ways familiar to the inhabitants of London Below have. Wednesday, when speaking at the meeting of the old-world gods, says, “We have, let us face it and admit it, little influence. We prey on them, and we take from them, and we get by; we strip and we whore and we drink too much; we pump gas and we steal and we cheat and we exist in the cracks at the edges of society. Old gods, here in this new land without gods” (*American* 137). Wednesday is linking these now marginal figures to other recognizably marginal characters; prostitutes, alcoholics, the poor, the swindlers. He is stating that all these figures exist within the cracks, and his statement echoes the Marquis de Carabas in *Neverwhere*, who stated that London Below was made up of all the places and people that fell through the cracks of London Above (*Neverwhere* 127). His statement also echoes

another character from *Neverwhere*, a friend of Richard's in London Above, Gary, to whom Richard is trying to explain his experience as one who fell through the cracks. Gary says, "I've passed the people who fall through the cracks, Richard: they sleep in shop doorways all down the Strand. They don't go to a special London. They freeze to death in the winter" (*Neverwhere* 366).

As Wednesday points out, in order to survive, one must find a way to get by within the society that exists. Gary seconds this by explaining that if you cannot find your place, you die out. Both of these sentiments are echoed in Toth's study. A man Toth interviews named Buckley says, "You've got to fit into society. You don't have to fit the mold, but you've got to be able to fit so that you can participate. Society is society with all its faults, its still our culture and somehow you've got to be able to tap into it. You may want to change it...but somehow you got to be able to play along the main route" (Toth 94). Perhaps this is why, as Shadow realized in prison, that elements of life and society still find a place in these marginal communities. This is why the underground homeless redefine the social ladders, refusing to see themselves at the bottom, by asserting that there are those further down. The invisible still feel the need to find their own niche in society.

Gaiman's description of Richard's transition into liminality accentuates the ideal positioning of the fantasy genre for discussing topics such as homelessness and invisibility. As Gaiman writes in *American Gods*, "Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes" (*American* 323).

Fantasy, and fiction more broadly, offers us a unique view of an alternate life. Returning

to Toth's study, *The Mole People*, she initially found the people she interviewed unwilling or unable to acknowledge that there were people living in the tunnels under New York City. Toth began speaking with the director of a soup kitchen who replied, "I'm not saying there are such people, but I'm not saying there aren't," and then he directed her to Sergeant Henry with the Metropolitan Transit Police (Toth 3). The soup kitchen director, though clearly aware of the people in the tunnels, was unwilling to voice this knowledge, as if doing so made it real. Similarly, Sgt. Henry responded to Toth's questioning, "No one is living underground...they're just stories" (Toth 3). Until the Sgt. was pressed by Toth, he was unwilling to admit the reality of the tunnel dwellers. Finally Sgt. Henry admitted having photographed some of the tunnel dwellers and presented the evidence in Albany attempting to reach the governor. Toth writes, "He [Sgt. Henry] was advised to keep quiet and told help would come, but it did not" (Toth 4).

The assertive ignorance of the people Sgt. Henry approached in Albany is akin to Jessica's assertion that someone else will take care of the wounded figure on the sidewalk. Gaiman is able to take this act of willful blindness demonstrated by the people in Albany and make it explicit through Jessica's reaction. The reader is forced to confront the raw situation through Jessica and Door in a way that cannot be accomplished with Toth's documentary study. Toth, and the people she interviews – both underground and above – are only able to reflect on their experiences with invisibility and homelessness. They have had time to process those experiences and form opinions based

on them. The reader, then, is offered these processed emotions rather than being able to formulate their own reactions by viewing the interactions first-hand.

One could argue that all fiction is able to depict scenes, such as Gaiman's scene with Jessica and Door; however I would argue that the fantasy genre maintains a uniquely ideal perspective. Many works that are classified as realist fiction have approached topics such as invisibility in an effective way, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Invisible man in Ellison's work continually asserts his own invisibility, and then proceeds to justify why he claims to be invisible. Gaiman, however, is able to discuss invisibility by literally making a character invisible. Gaiman takes the poor, the homeless, the disenfranchised – those “who fell through the cracks in the world” – and creates London Below (*Neverwhere* 127). He then depicts Richard's actual fall into this underground society. Richard's transition into liminality is explicitly described as Richard ceases to exist in London Above. Gaiman combines Richard's reflections on invisibility with a literal vanishing. Gaiman writes,

As a child, Richard had had nightmares in which he simply wasn't there, in which, no matter how much noise he made, no matter what he did, nobody ever noticed him at all. He began to feel like that now, as people pushed in front of him; he was buffeted by the crowd, pushed this way and that by commuters getting off, by others getting on (*Neverwhere* 57-58).

Richard is recalling, what is arguably a common fear that children have at one point or another, and realizing that this fear has come true. He is no longer there in the sense that he has been separated from society. He is the liminal figure. Turner writes, “They

[liminal figures] have physical but not social ‘reality,’ hence they have to be hidden, since it is a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there!” (*Forest* 98). Richard, in this way, is still physically present, as he is able to be buffeted by the crowd, but the crowd cannot actually see him. They do not acknowledge that it is another person they are bumping into. This is also seen previously when Richard attempts to hail a cab by stepping into the street in front of it. The cab recognizes a physical obstruction and swerves to miss it, but the obstruction is not seen as a person. Seeing Richard, a societally-defined invisible figure, would be the scandal that Turner writes of regarding the liminal figure.

As the liminal, the invisible, is also defined as homeless, so too must Richard be made homeless. Turner writes, “A further structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they *have* nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows” (*Forest* 98-99). Thus, Richard as the transitional being, the liminal figure, he is stripped of all of his property. Gaiman offers no sensible explanation for why this occurs because no sensible explanation is needed, and the fantasy genre allows him that freedom. Richard is invisible and therefore homeless. His apartment simply is put on the market, a real estate agent begins showing it, and all of his belongings are removed. The prospective tenants who come to look at Richard’s apartment are startled to see that there are still furnishings in it, but do not at any point question what caused such a hasty evacuation from the previous tenant, and are unable to see Richard as he continually asserts, “This is my apartment. I live here” (*Neverwhere* 64). Since seeing the liminal

figure would be a paradox, Gaiman, through the use of fantasy, has literally made his liminal figure invisible. Through fantasy, Gaiman is able to 'hide' his liminal figure in plain view, allowing the reader the contrasting views of the invisible man and those who refuse to see.

The Beast in the Sewer: Representing the Liminal for Two Millennia

Invisibility and alienation are topics that have been discussed for nearly two millennia. The boundaries transgressed by the liminal figure repeatedly arise in Western Literature. Such boundaries make explicit what is ‘society’ and what is the invisible or the alienated that lies without. In reality, the liminal is invisible, ignored; only in writing may the invisible be observed and categorized. “Writing, then, made the grotesque *visible* whilst keeping it at an *untouchable* distance” (Stallybrass 139). Here the grotesque refers to the liminal figure. Peter Stallybrass and Alon White are, in this particular instance, referring to the poor of the late nineteenth century who were being further segregated by emerging bourgeois notions of cleanliness, chastity, and purity.

In the Victorian period, with the rise of bourgeois mentality there arose a parallel or comparative discussion regarding the lower classes, from a bourgeois perspective. Through writing, such as Henry Mayhew’s study entitled *London Labour and the London Poor*, the bourgeois were given access to the liminal. While writing such as Mayhew’s makes the liminal visible, it does not actually break boundaries, as the grotesque can then be “consumed within the safe confines of the home” (Stallybrass 139). Similarly, this writing itself comes from within society, in that it was written by members of the bourgeoisie, and not being produced by liminal figures. For those bourgeois readers these writings come from a trusted source; it is something that may be understood and related. This is not to say, however, that no writing is produced by liminal figures. A man, interviewed by Jennifer Toth in her work, *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels*

Beneath New York City, expresses this point from a liminal perspective. He says, "...I never want anyone on the outside [of his underground community] to see my work, because they can't understand'" (Toth 201). He does not believe that people within society would be able to comprehend his writing, as they have not had the experience of being liminal figures. He continues, "And writing, no matter what you're writing about, you're coming from the perspective of who you are. If you're invisible, your work means nothing'" (Toth 201). Again, the man is referring to society's designation of himself as invisible, and thus its inability to see or comprehend the importance of what he has to say.

Through non-fiction, authors are able to explore the realm of liminality from the 'safety' of society, both to its aid and detriment, as Toth expresses in *The Mole People*. She writes,

The underground has been portrayed as a threatening underside of aboveground society. Although the symbolic significance has changed dramatically over the centuries, recurring metaphors in social and literary history have spawned widespread and enduring connotations, damaging prejudices, and a simple but deep fear of the dark – all resulting in serious obstacles to helping the underground homeless (170).

Although Toth goes on to explain that scholarly writings are working to alter some of these preconceived notions, the persistence of certain literary trends demonstrate how deeply rooted the boundary between society and the outside actually is.

One such trend concerns what is commonly referred to as the beast in the sewers. This 'beast' has taken on several different shapes: an octopus in the Roman Empire, swine in Victorian Hampstead, and the alligator in modern New York City. Yet the main elements of the stories remain the same. The liminal figure, the beast, transgresses the boundary between society and the wild, usually from some type of sewer, forcing itself to be seen:

...the non-human agent penetrating the human sphere often qualifies in some ways as an aspect of the natural world. In some cases the penetration is literally from the wild, in the form say of poisonous insects and snakes hidden in imported merchandise, or deliberately introduced like the Mexican rat mistaken by American tourists for a miniature dog or the alligator kept as a pet (Pettitt 34).

In many of these examples, as in Toth's description, the liminal figure is coming from underground, crossing a boundary that exists above them. The mythic trend referring to the beast in the sewers actually precedes the introduction of widespread sewer systems, but extends to include legends involving a beast rising up to transgress a boundary that exists above it, from a well or from the ocean. Referring to extensive sewer construction that occurred during the nineteenth century, Thomas Pettitt writes, "...we have achieved a new 'wasteland' beneath our cities, the earlier horizontal relationship between city and wilderness replaced or supplemented by a vertical one, a very close but alien world which in turn can become an effective narrative location and a rich source of narrative symbol" (36-37). When this change from horizontal transgression to vertical occurred the

symbolism of the alienated transgressing class boundaries became more explicit, and therefore more feared. It demonstrates a direct metaphor for the poor undeservedly and forcefully climbing the social ladder.

Like the 'invisible' beings it harbors, the sewer's main benefit to society is its own invisibility. As society progressed, and sewers improved, the unsightly elements of life were rightfully placed out of sight. The sewers bolstered the boundaries between society and the liminal. "The sewer was becoming acceptable because it was locked and patrolled to prevent contamination..." (Stallybrass 143). Yet, the knowledge that this boundary is not impenetrable allows for the existing fear of penetration from below. One tangible reminder of the permeability of such boundaries is smell. "It was, primarily, the sense of smell which engaged social reformers, since smell, whilst, like touch, encoding revulsion had a pervasive and invisible presence difficult to regulate" (Stallybrass 139). The stench of the sewers rises up, infiltrating all social classes. During the late nineteenth century, the stench of the Thames was so foul from the sewage flooding into it that the Houses of Parliament were temporarily closed. The smell, invisible itself, is a constant reminder of the existence of the liminal. In Toth's study, she describes a young girl, writing, "Julie is eight years old with a brilliant smile and tired eyes. She looks much like other girls her age, but perhaps she is a little slimmer...No one at school knows she lives in a tunnel, she whispers" (82-83). Julie believes her secret is safe; that she remains invisible. Yet, the smell she carries with her gives her secret away, and designates her as someone to be avoided. A classmate of Julie's says of her, "She live underground in a tunnel...she nobody's friend. She dirty all the time, and she be stinky

too” (Toth 1). Julie, despite appearing as just another little girl in the public school system is given away by the smell she carries with her. The invisible quality of smell designates her as an invisible being, leaving her ostracized by her classmates. Stallybrass and White write, “Disgust was inseparable from refinement: whilst it designated the ‘depraved’ domain of the poor, it simultaneously established the purified domain of the bourgeoisie” (140). Though Stallybrass and White are writing in reference to the Victorian Era, their statement was true before then, and still maintains validity today, as seen with eight year old Julie in Toth’s study.

Stallybrass and White go on to discuss the similarities in the hierarchy of the body and of the city; “...the axis of the body is transcoded through the axis of the city, and whilst the bodily low is ‘forgotten’, the city’s low becomes a site of obsessive preoccupation which is itself intimately conceptualized in terms of discourses of the body” (145). The sewer then becomes the bowels of the city as a whole. While in one sense the sewer is acting to hide the unsightly elements of life above, on the other hand it stands as a harbinger of those pollutants. Carmela Ingemark writes,

...ambivalence is an equally important characteristic of the attitudes toward the sewers. In ancient Rome they were both the ultimate symbols of Roman greatness and inevitable symbols of filth; in Victorian London they were the symbols of progress and the triumph of hygiene, as well as symbols of filth; in New York, they are perhaps rather the symbols of the invisible – of everything that lurks unseen beneath our feet but they are still also symbols of the filth that produces monstrosities (164).

The sewer, then, possesses all of the attributes of those that it harbors. It is real, yet, invisible, as are the homeless that currently inhabit it.

Stallybrass and White, in their chapter “The Sewer, the Gaze, and the Contaminating Touch,” focus chiefly on the rat as the ‘beast’ transgressing the boundary between society and sewer, yet, as I have stated previously, the particular ‘beast’ used is relatively interchangeable. “To the extent that the poor are constituted in terms of bestiality, the bourgeois subject is positioned as the neutral observer of self-willed degradation” (Stallybrass and White 132). In this case, the ‘poor’ are aligned with the invisible. They are the alienated. The poor throughout history have been written of as bestial beings, and Stallybrass and White point out that the bourgeois during Victorian times believed this to be the fault of the poor, rather than of society. The poor are said to possess the mannerisms of beasts (i.e. unclean, vulgar, living in filth), and are therefore written as such. Thus, they become the beast in the sewers from which the bourgeois fear arises.

This characterization of the poor as beasts is not specific to the bourgeois, or upper-class, view. It has become somewhat of a universal viewpoint of the human population. Toth interviews a man living underground named Bernard who says, “Down here, man becomes an animal. Down here, the true animal in man comes out, evolves” (Toth 104). Another man, Don, living in close proximity to Bernard also holds this belief saying, “The most dangerous animal on earth is man” (Toth 109). Bernard and Don both echo the notion that the underground man is animal. Bernard goes a bit further in his assessment noting that all humans possess this ‘animal’ quality, and that what reveals

it is the underground itself. Once a person crosses the liminal boundary from society to the underground his 'self', as society has named it, becomes invisible. What is left then is the animal. The liminal figure is no longer human, but is beast.

In one early Roman rendition of the beast in the sewer myth, Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History: A Selection*, writes of an octopus that burglarized a small village. "At Carteia an octopus used to come from the open sea into the uncovered tanks of the fish farms and there forage for salted fish (Pliny 133). This version of the myth, while not explicitly using the conduit of the sewers, begins with a beast, in this case an octopus, transgressing the boundary between civilization and the wild. Though a sewer system is not used, the octopus still comes from below, rising up from the ocean. To increase fear of the transgressor, this octopus is described as even more monstrous than an average octopus. "Its size was unheard of, and likewise its colour; it was smeared with brine and had a dreadful smell" (Pliny 134). Pliny emphasizes the stench of the transgressing beast. As mentioned previously, this invisible attribute links the octopus with the liminal, drawing a direct connection with it and the supposedly depraved parts of society.

Similarly, the intruder is given what could be described as some curiously human actions. The octopus is first depicted as climbing a tree to reach the food it has come for, "...and then struck them [the villagers] with its stronger arms, which it used in the manner of clubs" (Pliny 134). A role reversal exists within this account, in that the octopus is described acting as a human might, rather than the alienated being described in bestial terms. The two then may be viewed as interchangeable. The boundary is transgressed, and the transgressor must be beaten back. Ingemark writes, "The octopus is

the most straightforward illustration of the transgression of this boundary between nature and culture [society]: it is squarely situated in the realm of the wild and, unlike pigs and alligators, has never been part of a domestic context” (162). The ‘human’ actions attributed to the octopus earlier then, such as a reference to using tools, are arguably necessary to form the connection between beast and liminal figure.

Another account involving an octopus transgressing boundaries exists in the writings of Aelian, in his collection *On the Characteristics of Animals*. In this account the beast uses a subterranean sewer, rising from below to access society above. Aelian explains that the octopus, “...attained to a monstrous bulk and scorned and despised food from the sea and such pasturage as it provided” (85). Aelian highlights the dissatisfaction the octopus has regarding its lot in life, which leads to the octopus’ attack on the town above him. He writes, “And so this creature actually came out on to the land and seized things there. Now it swam up through a subterranean sewer that discharged the refuse of the aforesaid city into the sea and emerged in a house on the shore...” (Aelian 85). Aelian also refers to the octopus as a robber, giving the beast a human quality as Pliny did when he wrote of an octopus using its arms in the manner of clubs or tools. It is important to first note Aelian’s shock that the octopus [beast] dared to come onto land, transgressing the ‘natural’ boundaries. He repeats his shock again, writing, “And what was so strange was that merchants captured the fish on dry land” (Aelian 87).

Aelian’s shock calls to mind another aspect of Toth’s account of the mole people. Several of the underground homeless Toth interviews actually hold part- or full-time jobs in society. Toth writes of a man named Juan, “By day he works a minimum-wage job at

McDonald's. No one there suspects he lives underground" (Toth 78). This is one of several accounts that Toth cites that, for me, and presumably most readers, evokes the shock that Aelian depicts in his account of the octopus. It is a testament to the literal invisibility of the alienated that such shock is evoked when they suddenly are made visible.

Leaving the Roman Empire and moving to Victorian England, the beast in the sewers again resurfaces, this time in the form of swine. Regarding swine in general during this time, Pettitt writes,

They were domestic in the sense of being raised and fattened for consumption...and were housed in very close proximity to the working class community, whose children sometimes romped with them. Add to this the increasing hairlessness of the domestic breeds which gives them a disturbingly human look, and we have another beast fully qualified for a sewer legend (45).

The beast can and has taken on many forms, yet for the reasons Pettitt describes, the pig may be the most poignant. While the similarities in the visible appearance between humans and pigs Pettitt points out are disturbing, the domestication of the animal can be attributed more heavily to the societal fear of this account, as domestication means that the animals have been deemed 'safe'. The domesticated swine becoming wild after entering the sewers of Victorian Hampstead is akin to Bernard's statement, cited earlier from Toth's study, regarding the animal in man revealing itself in the underground.

The Victorian Era saw an increase in the distinction between the classes. With the rise of the middle class, a more definitive lower class was established, further segregating the poor to the liminal regions of society. Ingemark writes, “The increasing segregation of the bourgeoisie and the poor into the suburb and the slum enabled the separation and branding of the latter as the locus of vice, disease, and filth, while the former was identified with the new virtues of progress and refined sensibilities” (163). The rungs of the social ladder became more clearly defined. The petulant and diseased, as the poor were viewed, were set far apart from the clean and sanitary. Discussing the poor in bestial terms became more prevalent, and the beast in the sewer resurfaces.

Thomas Boyle writes,

It has been said that beasts of chase still roam in the verdant fastnesses of Grosvenor square, that there are undiscovered patches of primaeval forest in Hyde Park and that Hampstead sewers shelter a monstrous breed of black swine, which have propagated and run wild among the slimy feculence, and whose ferocious snouts will one day up-root Highgate archway, while they make Holloway intolerable with their grunting (204).

Boyle points out that these rumors are simply rumors, but because they are so well-known they must be acknowledged. The story of the Hampstead swine was talked of enough during this time to appear in another account written by Henry Mayhew in his work, *London Labour and the London Poor*. Mayhew writes,

There is a strange tale in existence among the shore-workers, of a race of wild hogs inhabiting the sewers in the neighborhood of Hampstead. The

story runs, that a sow in young, by some accident got down the sewer through an opening, and wandering away from the spot, littered and reared her offspring in the drain feeding on the offal and garbage washed into it continually. Here it is alleged, the breed multiplied exceedingly, and have become almost as ferocious as they are numerous (154-155).

Mayhew's and Boyle's accounts differ in a number of small ways. Boyle's account mentions the disturbances caused by the swine grunting, while Mayhew notes that no one he questioned heard grunting, and Boyle specifies that the swine he is writing of are black. Also, Mayhew's account is more descriptive, offering an explanation for why the swine do not come out of the sewer. The swine could only exit the sewers, Mayhew writes, "...by reaching the mouth of the sewer at the river-side...they must necessarily encounter the Fleet ditch, which runs towards the river with great rapidity, and as it is the obstinate nature of a pig to swim *against* the stream, the wild hogs of the sewers invariably are thus never to be seen" (154-155). Mayhew explains that this reasoning was given to him by believers in the swine of the sewers. However, what is at first apparent with this argument is that it provides a justification for the invisibility of the beasts. The swine are the liminal figures in the sewers, as the octopi before them, and they must be invisible until the boundary is transgressed. The believers in these subterranean terrors still stand by the security of their sewer system, arguing that not only can the beasts not be seen, but they cannot escape. The boundary is believed to be impenetrable from the direction of leaving the sewers. In other words, someone or

something may fall to the bowels, but they may not rise back up to infiltrate the upper-classes.

Both Boyle and Mayhew assert that they do not personally believe in the existence of the sewer swine; however, Boyle takes it one step further by acknowledging the metaphor inherent in the rumor. Boyle writes, “Of course, I was aware, the beasts under Hampstead were both unreal and real: metaphors, but metaphors for the real city” (210). Boyle articulates that the Hampstead swine rumor is more than simply a story about some unlucky pigs trapped in a sewer tunnel. The swine are a symbol for a real, yet invisible, part of the city. Bourgeois mentality insisted upon the unsightly or vulgar elements of life remaining unseen. The sewer construction was a great achievement, but its purpose was not to be discussed. Therefore legends arose to fill in these blank spaces. Pettitt writes,

Many of these [legends] probably emerged concurrently with the development of modern sensibilities...what Norbert Elias has called the rise in the ‘shame threshold’...doubtless helped along by the activities of the societies for the improvement of manners, the cleaning up of cities, and a rampant Victorianism which modestly concealed the upper legs even of tables and chairs (33).

Pettitt’s analysis aligns with Boyle’s regarding the purpose of such legends in acting as metaphors for elements of the city that have been segregated to the margins. Pettitt writes of the cleaning of the city that the reformers were attempting; however it appears

that the unsightly elements were simply pushed under a rug and out of sight. They were concealed to offer the appearance of cleanliness. Stallybrass and White write,

In Chadwick, in Mayhew, in countless Victorian reformers, the slum, the labouring poor, the prostitute, the sewer, were recreated for the bourgeois study and drawing room as much as for the urban council chamber.

Indeed, the reformers were central in the construction of the urban geography of the bourgeois Imaginary. As the bourgeoisie produced new forms of regulation and prohibition governing their own bodies, they wrote even more loquaciously of the body of the Other – of the city’s ‘scum’” (125-126).

In a sense, the elements of reform (cleanliness, chastity, etc.) were defined only in contrast to the Other. By setting the Other out of sight, in the margins, the Other becomes essentially invisible. However, through writing, the bourgeois were still able to observe the liminal.

Writing allows the bourgeois access to the unsightly elements of life while in the safety of their homes. Similarly, by writing of the liminal figure, the bourgeois are able to depict these invisible beings as they see fit. Rather than simply writing of the poor in bestial terms they may write of the poor as beasts, creating the beast in the sewers. David Pike, in his book *Subterranean Cities: The World Beneath Paris and London, 1800-1945*, writes, “The world above—the world of law, order, economy, conformity—is given structure and order by what it excludes beneath it as unfit” (7). The rich can only exist if the poor exist as well, and yet the poor are disregarded by the rich as non-beings. This

statement draws a direct connection with Plato's cave parable, as discussed in Chapter 1. The people in the world above that Pike is describing are the prisoners in Plato's parable, viewing shadows on the wall, disregarding the fact that something—the fire or the sun—must exist to cast those shadows. However, the beast in the sewer trend takes this one step further. The people above ground, or rather the people existing within society, understand on some level that the invisible beings below must not wholly be disregarded. They cannot be visible either, as making them visible is acknowledging that defects exist within the societal structure. The society that protects the people above could not possibly allow other people to fall into the dregs of the sewers. Yet, society cannot comprehend a completely empty space, a vacuum. Therefore the space occupied by the liminal figure is filled in with a beast in the sewers, and the stories of these beasts must evoke fear, as the people living above cannot comprehend an invisible being forcing its way up and out.

Revealing the Invisible: Gaiman's Use of the Beast in the Sewer

In the previous chapter I discussed a mythic trend known as the beast in the sewers, several commonly referenced examples of how this trend has evolved, and its lasting importance as a metaphor discussing the invisible margins of society. In Chapter 1 I discussed the ways in which Neil Gaiman uses fantasy, in his novels *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, to demonstrate the contrasting views of the liminal figure and society. The fantasy genre offers Gaiman the freedom to literally make someone invisible, a state that may only be reflected on in works of realist fiction, such as Ellison's *Invisible Man*, or in non-fictional studies, such as Toth's *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City*. In this chapter I will expand on Gaiman's use of fantasy to explore the paradox of seeing the invisible, by focusing specifically on Gaiman's own beast in the sewer myths.

Gaiman's protagonist in *Neverwhere*, Richard Mayhew, shortly after encountering the Lady Door crumpled on the sidewalk, has a nightmare that reoccurs throughout the rest of the novel. As I highlighted in Chapter 1, Door acts as the threshold Richard must cross to enter liminality, as he becomes invisible in London Above. At this point Richard is not consciously aware of his change in status, from visible to invisible; however his subconscious reveals to him the beast in the sewer while in a dream-state. Gaiman writes,

He [Richard] is somewhere deep beneath the ground: in a tunnel, perhaps, or a sewer. Light comes in flickers, defining the darkness, not

dispelling it. He is not alone. There are other people walking beside him, although he cannot see their faces...

He turns a corner, and the beast is waiting for him. It is huge. It fills the space of the sewer: massive head down, bristled body and breath steaming in the chill of the air. Some kind of boar, he thinks at first, and then realizes that no boar could be so huge. It is the size of a bull, of a tiger, of an ox...

He glances at his hand, holding the spear, and observes that it is not his hand: the arm is furred with dark hair, the nails are almost claws.

And then the beast charges.

He throws the spear, but it is already too late... (Neverwhere 28).

Gaiman begins this dream by putting Richard in a tunnel or sewer. There are others around Richard, but as liminal figures are meant to be invisible, Richard is unable to make out the faces of the other people in the sewer. When Richard first sees the beast he notes its massive size. Exaggerating the size of the beast in the sewer has been a common characteristic of this mythic trend, as seen in the examples discussed in the previous chapter. Pliny wrote of the octopus at Carteia, “It’s size was unheard of...” (134). Aelian wrote of the octopus in his account as having “...attained to a monstrous bulk...” (85). Thomas Boyle described the beasts in the sewers of Hampstead as being “...a monstrous breed of black swine...” (204). All of these descriptions are meant to enhance the reader’s fear of the beast, as in Gaiman’s description.

The beast in Gaiman's sewer is first thought by Richard to be a boar. Richard only reconsiders this assessment because of the monstrous size of the beast in front of him. The setting of Gaiman's story being the sewers of London, and the use of a boar (a species of pig) as the beast in those sewers, there can be no coincidence in the fact that Gaiman's protagonist, Richard, shares the surname Mayhew with Henry Mayhew, the social reformer discussed in the previous chapter. Henry Mayhew, along with Thomas Boyle, wrote of the rumors of swine in the Hampstead sewers in a collection studying London's poor.

A last point of interest from Richard's first dream, is connected with the fur and claws that appear on his hand. Richard has at this point come in contact with London Below after saving Door; however he is not yet aware of his liminal status. Standing in the sewers of his dream, as he looks at his hand Richard realizes that he is becoming a beast as well. He holds a spear, a tool that can still arguably link him to humanity, but as he throws the spear Richard realizes it is too late. The beast in the sewers has already reached him, and he too is lost to the margins.

Though *American Gods* does not possess a direct reference to an earlier beast in the sewer myth in the same way that *Neverwhere* does, Shadow, the protagonist of *American Gods*, has a similar experience to Richard's. Shadow too is haunted by a reoccurring dream that takes him deep below the earth's surface. Gaiman writes,

Shadow was in a dark place, and the thing staring at him wore a buffalo's head, rank and furry with huge wet eyes. Its body was a man's body, oiled and slick.

‘Changes are coming,’ said the buffalo without moving its lips.

‘There are certain decisions that will have to be made.’

Firelight flickered from wet cave walls.

‘Where am I?’ Shadow asked.

‘In the earth and under the earth,’ said the buffalo man. ‘You are where the forgotten wait...Believe...If you are to survive, you must believe.’

‘Believe what?’ asked Shadow. ‘What should I believe?’

‘*Everything*,’ roared the buffalo man (*American* 18).

Below the earth, Shadow, like Richard, encounters a beast. This beast, however, is depicted as being half man and half buffalo. It does not evoke intense fear for Shadow as the boar did for Richard in the London sewers. The half-man, half-buffalo beast is an extension of the beast in the sewer myth. For two millennia the beast in the sewers has represented the poor and the disenfranchised. These liminal figures have been written of in bestial terms, finally to be stripped of their humanity altogether, and simply signified as beasts. Gaiman, through the use of fantasy, has partially restored to the beast some of its humanity. Not only is the beast in Shadow’s dream depicted as half-human, but this beast is also capable of speech, and is attempting to both warn and guide Shadow on events yet to pass. The buffalo man, as the beast is referred to, is noted by Shadow not to move its lips as it speaks. This description gives an omnipresent quality to the buffalo man’s words. The buffalo man tells Shadow that he is where the forgotten wait, and it is

as though the words coming from the buffalo man are actually coming from the forgotten collectively.

The forgotten that the buffalo man speaks of are analogous with the underground homeless in Toth's study, *Mole People*, and those who fell through the cracks to the London Below in *Neverwhere*. The forgotten, through the buffalo man, tell Shadow that he must believe everything to survive what is to come. They make this assertion so that Shadow will not disregard things he will come to see simply because society has dictated those things ought not to be there. Shadow must see the invisible as well as the visible, and believe it is all part of reality in order to understand what is to come, and gain enlightenment. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Wednesday also warns Shadow that he must believe everything after Shadow has witnessed the multifaceted truths or forms to the people (gods) around him. Gaiman reiterates this idea of accepting everything one sees, regardless of whether those things fit into a previously constructed view of reality. Wednesday echoes the buffalo-man's assertion, though the buffalo-man focuses on the faceless people Shadow senses around him under the earth. The forgotten, the buffalo man says, wait in this place beneath the earth (*American* 18). They are in a phase of liminality, invisible now, but able to be seen once society opens its eyes and looks.

The next occurrence/encounter of Richard with the beast in the sewers in *Neverwhere* comes during what Richard assumes are hallucinations. He is in London Below crossing the Night's Bridge, where no light can penetrate, and in the darkness Richard is haunted by several visions, one of which is the beast. Gaiman writes,

He [Richard] was deep in the sewers, lost in a labyrinth. The Beast was waiting for him. He could hear a slow drip of water. He knew the Beast was waiting. He gripped his spear...Then a rumbling bellow, deep in its throat, from behind him. He turned. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, it charged at him, through the dark...

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, it charged at him, over and over, through the dark. (Neverwhere 104).

Again, Richard finds himself in the sewers, and without seeing the beast immediately, he still understands the beast to be there. Richard is on the Night's Bridge where no light can penetrate. For this reason, the beast must remain in the sewers repeatedly charging Richard, as light cannot reveal the beast for the metaphor that it is. The hallucinations of the beast charging continue until Richard reaches the other side of the Night's Bridge, and Gaiman writes, "There was a sputter, and a flare so bright it hurt, making Richard squint and stagger...He [Richard] had never known how brightly a single candle could burn" (*Neverwhere* 104). While in the dark Richard is repeatedly attacked by the beast, but the small candle flame is enough to drive the nightmare from his mind.

The next appearance of the beast in the sewer within *Neverwhere* occurs in a conversation between two members of London Below, the Marquis de Carabas and Old Bailey. Gaiman writes,

'Now, they say that back in the first King Charlie's day...before the fire and the plague this was, there was a butcher lived down by the Fleet Ditch, had some poor creature he was going to fatten up for

Christmas. Some says it was a piglet, and some says it wusn't, and there's some...that wusn't never properly certain. One night in December the beast runned away, ran into the Fleet Ditch, and vanished into the sewers. And it fed on the sewage, and it grew, and it grew. And it got meaner, and nastier. They'd send in hunting parties after it, from time to time.'

The marquis pursed his lips. 'It must have died three hundred years ago.'

Old Bailey shook his head. 'Things like that, they're too vicious to die. Too old and big and nasty.'

The marquis sighed. 'I thought it was just a legend,' he said. 'Like the alligators in the sewers of New York City.'

Old Bailey nodded, sagely. 'What, the big white buggers? They're down there. I had a friend lost a head to one of them' (*Neverwhere* 168).

Though Gaiman is dating Old Bailey's account of the "Great Beast of London" prior to both Thomas Boyle's and Henry Mayhew's accounts of the Hampstead swine, he is most assuredly drawing on details from the Victorian legend (*Neverwhere* 167). Gaiman mentions the Fleet Ditch as the beast's point of entry into the sewers, and in Mayhew's account it was noted that the Fleet Ditch would be the only point of egress for the swine, though unusable as pigs will obstinately only swim upstream (Mayhew 154-155). Boyle, Mayhew and Gaiman all describe the beast as attaining a monstrous size by feeding on the refuse within the sewer. The difference between Gaiman's account and those of

Boyle and Mayhew arises from Gaiman's use of fantasy. Within the world Gaiman has created, the 'Great Beast of London' exists. Gaiman still allows his readers a moment of doubt, as the marquis asserts that such a creature would have died long ago. Old Bailey asserts, however, the existence of the beast. Old Bailey proves to be a reliable and credible character throughout the novel, while the marquis is openly shifty. Old Bailey's assertion of the existence of the beast in the sewers of London makes that existence a fact within the fantasy world Gaiman has created.

Turning back to *American Gods*, Shadow next encounters the buffalo man during another dream sequence. Gaiman writes,

Darkness; a sensation of falling—as if he [Shadow] were tumbling down a great hole, like Alice. He fell for a hundred years into darkness. Faces passed him, swimming out of the black, then each face was ripped up and away before he could touch it...

Abruptly, and without transition, he was not falling. Now he was in a cave, and he was no longer alone. Shadow stared into familiar eyes: huge, liquid black eyes. They blinked.

Under the earth: yes. He remembered this place. The stink of wet cow. Firelight flickered on the wet cave walls, illuminating the buffalo head, the man's body, skin the color of brick clay (*American* 162).

As in Shadow's first dream occurring under the earth, he again sees others in this dark place. He is passing others as he falls, but is falling past them too fast to touch them, or to recognize them. As in his first dream he could not make out the faces of the liminal

beings surrounding him. Shadow again finds himself in a cave with firelight flickering on the walls. Both of these references to a cave with firelight act as a direct link to Plato's "Parable of the Cave." However, in Plato's parable, the prisoners in the cave must be forced out into the light to gain enlightenment, while at this point Shadow must continually descend into the cave to be enlightened by the buffalo-man that exists there. The buffalo-man again warns Shadow of an impending crisis that he must prepare for, but once again, does not offer any further knowledge on how or when to expect this crisis to take place.

In *Neverwhere*, Richard too begins to feel that the beast in the sewer he continually dreams of is somehow connected with a crisis to come. Gaiman writes,

Richard knows it waits for them. Each tunnel he goes down, each turning, each branch he walks, the feeling grows in urgency and weight. He knows it is there, waiting, and the sense of impending catastrophe increases with every step. He knows that it should have been a relief when he turns the final corner, and sees it standing there, framed in the tunnel, waiting for him. Instead he feels only dread. In his dream it is the size of the world: there is nothing left in the world but the Beast, its flanks steaming, broken spars and juts of old weapons prickling from its hide. There is dried blood on its horns and on its tusks. It is gross, and vast, and evil. And then it charges.

He raises his hand (but it isn't his hand) and he throws the spear at the creature.

He sees its eyes, wet and vicious and gloating, as they float toward him, all in a fraction of a second that becomes a tiny forever. And then it is upon him... (Neverwhere 217).

Richard believes the impending catastrophe of his dream is the eventual contact he will have with the beast. Richard's anticipation builds as he travels through the labyrinth of tunnels under London, knowing the beast awaits him. He hopes for relief when he finally encounters the beast, but instead is filled with dread at the sheer size of the catastrophe he must face. The beast in all of the sewer legends attains a monstrous size. It is said that the various beasts grow so large by feeding off the refuse of the sewer. As a metaphor, the refuse on which the beast feeds suggests the wasteful nature of those in the society above. So much is cast off and discarded from above to not only allow survival of the beast below, but to increase its strength. Bernard, a man interviewed by Toth in *Mole People*, says, "People think food's the greatest problem down here...It's not. It's pride. They throw away the cream of the cream in New York, which makes scavenging relatively productive. I expect to find the Hope Diamond out there in the street some day. Its dignity that's hard to get'" (Toth 103). Bernard is talking of the wastefulness of New York, but the same may be said of London as well. The refuse the city casts off feeds the beast in the sewers, allowing it to grow larger and stronger. The fear society has of the beast increases as the beast's size increases, leaving the city continually feeding its own fear of the invisible.

In Richard's final encounter with the beast he is awake and in real danger. He is trapped in a labyrinth of tunnels under London with only a spear to fight. Gaiman writes,

Richard saw the Beast come out from the darkness, into the light of the flare. It all happened very slowly. It was like a dream. It was like all his dreams. The Beast was so close he could smell the shit-and-blood animal stench of it, so close he could feel its warmth. And Richard stabbed the spear, as hard as he could, pushing into its side and letting it sink in

A bellow, then, or a roar, of anguish, and hatred, and pain. And then silence. (*Neverwhere* 314).

Richard defeats the beast, which in Gaiman's fantasy is the way to enlightenment. Richard is instructed by one of his companions to smear the beast's blood on his tongue and eyes. Having done so, "...he [Richard] ran straight and true through the labyrinth, which no longer held any mysteries for him" (*Neverwhere* 316). By defeating the beast Richard gains the ability to return to London Above as a visible member of that society. He takes with him all of the knowledge of London Below. By smearing the beast's blood on his eyes, Richard takes the sight of the underground with him, back to London Above.

In *American Gods*, Shadow too finds the way to enlightenment while underground. Again Shadow returns to the cave with the buffalo-man, and he asks directly how he can help his recently-deceased wife, Laura. Laura has appeared several times throughout the novel, dead, but walking around; the ultimate liminal figure. She has begged Shadow to help her return to society, to life, from this liminal state. In response to his question, the buffalo-man,

“...pointed up toward the roof of the cave...There was a thin, wintery light coming from a tiny opening far above” (*American* 246). Shadow realizes that he must come up out of the cave to gain the knowledge he seeks. Gaiman writes, “The pain, on that last awful contraction, was impossible to believe, as he [Shadow] felt himself being squeezed, crushed, and pushed through an unyielding rock gap, his bones shattering, his flesh becoming something shapeless. As his mouth and ruined head cleared the hole he began to scream, in fear and pain” (*American* 247). Plato discusses the physical pain the prisoner would feel in his eyes as he is forced to look into light. Gaiman extends this pain to include Shadow’s entire body, turning the enlightenment into a birth, as contractions force Shadow up out of the cave beneath the earth. Shadow is born into a new, more complete reality as he emerges out of the earth.

Richard is not subjected to the same physical pain at his reemergence in London Above as Shadow is; however Richard is haunted by those invisible beings he leaves behind. Gaiman writes, “The world went dark, and a low roar filled Richard’s head, like the maddened growling of a thousand enraged beasts” (*Neverwhere* 349). As Richard steps out into the sunlight, the world went dark. He is blinded by the sun; and yet, that momentary darkness offers the truth of what Richard has experienced. The thousand enraged beasts represent all of the people who have fallen through the crack of society to the invisible places below. They are angry, perhaps, that Richard is able to leave while they remain, or perhaps more broadly at their forgotten state. They growl as a reminder to him

that life is not simply what one sees on the surface. They growl so that Richard remembers, and so that he takes the knowledge of the forgotten's existence back with him.

Conclusion

I have discussed how Neil Gaiman has made use of the fantasy genre, in his novels *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, to create a more compelling/complete image of the beast in the sewers myth. The ability fantasy offers to recreate the rules of reality (i.e. the ability to make Richard literally invisible) allows Gaiman to present an open discourse of key elements surrounding the beast in the sewer metaphor, with figures both from within society and without, from above and below. Gaiman, in one scene, demonstrates the viewpoints of the liminal figure, a member of society, and the transitional being. Similarly, fantasy allows Gaiman to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of reality, as with Shadow when he first encounters the many forms of the gods surrounding him.

The abilities that the fantasy genre possess offer the reader a unique perspective of the beast in the sewer metaphor. Other genres have explored the topic of invisibility that the beast represents, and the poverty, homelessness and alienation that signify invisibility without our society. Authors of realist fiction, such as Ralph Ellison and Charles Dickens, have sought to portray the plight of the invisible, with success. Yet the writing of an invisible figure (such as the protagonist of *Invisible Man*) is likewise invisible. As the liminal figure may not be regarded by society, his writing may also not be regarded; to do so requires the damage of the integrity of the narrative.

Non-fictional writing can attempt to write stories of underground figures, as in Jennifer Toth's *Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City*. Yet, as with

Ellison's fictional work, the integrity of the liminal figures Toth interviews is still in question. One cannot help but question the sanity of many of Toth's subjects. Other works of non-fiction, such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, seek to offer observations of the poor. However, writings such as these are subject to question as well. First, they attempt to observe the invisible, and secondly they are written by members of society, such as Mayhew, who have no experience with being the alienated.

Fantasy stands as the ideal genre for exploring social issues. Within fantasy the rules of society may be manipulated to allow a privileged view of the margins or the underground that otherwise are societally-defined as non-existent. A liminal figure may be given a voice without sacrificing the integrity of the narrative with fantasy. Gaiman may demonstrate Plato's parable by first sending Shadow into an underground cave with the forgotten and the buffalo-man, and depict his release as a birth from the earth, arriving enlightened in the light.

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