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# Hyperrealities and Inverted Fakes: The Otherworld Journey in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and American Gods

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HYPERREALITIES AND INVERTED FAKES: THE OTHERWORLD  
JOURNEY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*, *ALICE'S*  
*ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*, AND *AMERICAN GODS*

A Dissertation

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In this dissertation, I will apply Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal and Umberto Eco's notion of the "absolute fake" to three Otherworld journeys from three different time periods: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *American Gods*. Each text uses the Otherworld journey to highlight the hyperreality of a perceived real world—one that has become, essentially, "fake." In *Gawain*, Bertilak's realm serves as an ethical counterpart to Arthur's court, one in which the values of chivalry are faithfully upheld, causing one to question Arthur's position as the idyllic monarch. In *Alice*, Wonderland serves as a vivid and frightening representation of Alice's future, contradicting the idealistic rhetoric upholding middle-class motherhood in Victorian England. In *American Gods*, Shadow learns that the world he has understood to be real is only a small part of the whole. Here, the larger Otherworld is superimposed onto the "absolute fake" of modern America, which, once revealed, causes one to question belief, the human/divine relationship, and even the American Dream.

For the purposes of this proposal, the term "Otherworld" is defined as an alternative realm beyond the initial setting of a story, existing on a different plane and having its own rules of time, space, and behavior. To further this definition, I will use Lacan's definition of the "Real": the absolute, objective "truth we repress," which is immediately lost the moment we start to give it thought and shape. Arguing that society

has caused this “Real” to disappear due to the infinite number of signifiers used to define it, Baudrillard suggests that we live a simulated, or hyperreal, world. According to Eco, “the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.” Essentially, the fake subsumes the “Real” due to its obvious, larger-than-life, and ubiquitous presence. These theoretical concepts set us up to question reality, and the Otherworld journey gives us an alternative upon which to base this questioning. While the Otherworld does not displace the “absolute fake,” it does expose it for what it is: a hypercolor plastic overlay that we treat as “Real.”

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## CHAPTER ONE

### AN INTRODUCTION OF SORTS

*“Sentence first—verdict afterwards!”*

*-The Queen of Hearts*

#### **Statement of Thesis and Definition of Terms**

In this dissertation, I will apply Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal and Umberto Eco’s absolute fake to three otherworld journeys from three very different time periods: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1300s), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and *American Gods* (2001). Each text uses the otherworld journey to highlight the hyperreality of a perceived real world—one that has become, essentially, fake. In *Gawain*, the Otherworld of Bertilak’s realm serves as an ethical counterpart to Arthur’s courtly world, one in which the values of chivalry are faithfully upheld, causing one to question Arthur’s position as the idyllic medieval monarch. In *Alice*, Wonderland serves as a vivid and frightening representation of what Alice’s actual future will feel like, despite the idealistic rhetoric upholding middle-class motherhood in Victorian England. In *American Gods*, Shadow Moon learns that the world he has understood to be real up until this point is only a very small part of the whole. The larger, more complex Otherworld in this case is superimposed onto the absolute fake of modern America, which, once revealed, causes one to question belief, the human/divine relationship, and even the American Dream.

For the purposes of this project, the term “Otherworld” is defined as an alternative realm behind the initial setting of a story, existing on a different plane and having its own rules of time, space, and behavior. At its most basic, an Otherworld is merely any world

in a narrative separate from its understood real world. This juxtaposition will always be presented using these terms: Otherworld / real world. I will articulate these ideas using the works of three seminal theorists: Lacan, Baudrillard and Eco. I will use Jacques Lacan's definition of the "Real" throughout the dissertation: "that to which the fact that I'm thinking about it doesn't matter" (Leitch 1159), the absolute, objective "truth we repress" which is immediately lost the moment we start to give it thought and shape. Arguing that society has caused this absolute "Real" to disappear due to the infinite number of signifiers we use to define it, Baudrillard suggests that we live a simulated, or hyperreal, world that I will newly argue is exemplified by Arthur's court, Victorian England, and Lakeside, Wisconsin. Building upon Baudrillard's theories, Umberto Eco claims that, in the absence of any depth of history, "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake" (8). The British belief in an Arthurian or Victorian ideal, even with thousands of years of history leading up to them, shows this tendency to not be exclusively American. Essentially, the absolute fake subsumes the "Real" due to its obvious, larger-than-life, and ubiquitous presence. These theoretical concepts set us up to question reality, and the otherworld journey gives us an alternative upon which to base this questioning. The Otherworld does not displace the absolute fake, but instead exposes it for what it is: a hypercolor plastic overlay that we treat as "Real."

Both these terms and some additional ones to be used throughout the dissertation are defined here:

- **Absolute Fake (Eco):** the larger-than-life copy of the "Real" which has become so ubiquitous that we take it to be real instead (e.g. the reproduction of an animal

habitat at a zoo becomes the stand-in for the real habitat in our minds, so that if we ever saw the real thing in the wild, we wouldn't believe in its reality)

- **Arthuriana:** having to do with the fictional world of King Arthur as well as all literary and cultural works created regarding this world either as a backdrop or starring its central characters.
- **Celtic Otherworld:** specific to Gaelic and Celtic mythology, a supernatural realm accessible from our own and full of youth, abundance, and beauty. Usually accessed through or under a hill, over the western sea, or up a high mountain.
- **Fairy/Faery/Faerie (all spellings used interchangeably throughout all of my sources):** used as either a noun or an adjective to denote/describe a creature from the Otherworld; when capitalized, used as a title for the otherworldly realm (i.e. The Land of Faerie)
- **Hyperreal (Baudrillard):** In postmodern society, the metaphor is the reality endlessly duplicated. Since language, experience, and reality cannot fully communicate the real, they merely simulate it. The understanding that the metaphorical representation is just that has disappeared in an age so technologically advanced that we cannot tell the difference. This simulation is now where we live—there is nothing else.
- **Otherworld:** an alternative realm beyond the initial setting of a story, existing on a different plane and having its own rules of time, space, and behavior (when used as an adjective, the term will be “**otherworld**” with a small “o”)
- **Otherworld border crossing:** moments when a protagonist moves from the realm of the real to an alternate realm, usually marked by signposts familiar to the

audience (e.g. snow, sudden sleepiness, a fast-moving river, the help of a beautiful fairy mistress, etc.)

- **Portal-Quest Fantasy (Mendlesohn):** a story that “introduces the point-of-view character into a fantasy world, . . . (through, for instance, a wardrobe) . . . . The story is told from this point of origin, and the reader learns about the alien world along with the main character(s)” (Mendlesohn 3).
- **Postmodern (Lyotard):** both a literary period (post-WWII) and a 20th century theory focused on the limitations of language and human sensory experience to embody, understand, communicate, and define the “Real”; postmodernists reject universalist discourse and embrace fragmentation, multiplicity, plurality, otherness, and the playfulness of language
- **real world:** the initial setting of a story, or the narrative “frame,” often presented with a verisimilitude which leads the audience to recognize and accept it as the “norm”
- **Simulacrum (Baudrillard):** a simulation of a simulation infinitely replicated; a sign without a referent which duplicates not a real idea, person, or thing, but the reproduction of that idea, person, or thing
- **The American Dream:** the belief that an individual is free to make life whatever they wish it to be using hard work, dedication, and self-reliance
- **The “Real” (Lacan):** According to Jacques Lacan, “that to which the fact that I’m thinking about it doesn’t matter,” the absolute, objective “truth we repress” which is immediately lost the moment we start to give it thought and shape.

- **Transversion (Lecerle):** Regarding nonsense language. In Wonderland, language is perverted—the inversion of the language of an ideal, “cooperative” world. Instead of converting the perverted language back to the ideal (which would be impossible for one individual to accomplish), nonsense instead deconstructs it in a copycat nature (transverts). In the *Alice* books, Lecerle argues that Alice conforms to nonsense dialogue out of necessity, subverting the rules of her original world as she moves through the landscape (e.g. “Curiouser and curiouser!”). (Lecerle 114)
- **Trawthe:** Middle-English term meaning “word,” “troth,” or “truth,” referring to a knight’s oath to uphold Christian morality and the characteristics of chivalry at all times: honesty, courtesy, generosity, piety, friendship, and purity, as well as loyalty to lord, lady, and God
- **Un-Real:** the opposite of real (the word “fake” too closely recalls Eco’s **absolute fake** and would therefore not work here)

The following paragraphs will outline the theoretical framework for the dissertation, a justification for my three primary works, an explanation of the Celtic Otherworld as the hyperreal vehicle in each, a preview of the three major chapters, and an addendum regarding the specifically American hyperreal situation that must be clarified in order to thoroughly discuss Gaiman’s novel.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Postmodern, The Hyperreal, and The Absolute Fake**

Both Baudrillard and Eco entered into a philosophical and theoretical landscape obsessed with the modern/postmodern debate, and their theories regarding reality worked to change this landscape forever. Underlying both theorists’ views is the concepts of

simulation and replication, rooted firmly in the work of German critic Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. Benjamin's theories serve to illuminate the problem of artistic "usefulness" in the postmodern age of artistic reproduction. He both decried the loss of the authentic, artistic aura and argued that it was human nature to long for it, even when encountering a near-perfect mechanical reproduction: "Everyday the urge grows stronger to get a hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction" (1171). If we cannot have the original, we settle for the next best thing, however cold and muted. Umberto Eco explored this idea even further as he traveled across the United States in search of the "authentic copy." In his travel log, *Travels in Hyperreality*, (originally published in 1986 as *Faith in Fakes*), which often echoes the tone of Washington Irving's *Sketchbook*, Eco notes that the gaudy American copies of great art and natural phenomena are so excessive that they remove one's desire for the original. This, in return, reinforces our existence in an insular, national, American bubble. We would rather have the fake reality, thank you very much; it's much easier to believe. One of his strongest examples is a description of the Palace of Living Arts in Buena Park, Los Angeles. In the Palace, one finds full-scale sculptures reproduced from famous paintings, often with dramatic touches of music, voice recordings, costumes, and elemental additions such as an electric fan making clothing "stir slightly in the breeze." Each sculpture is accompanied by a reproduction of the original painting as well, giving the audience a marginal amount of context in a pale, imitative copy. Eco defines this as the quintessential moment of hyperreality, in that the "Palace's philosophy is not, 'We are giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original,' but rather, 'We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original'" (19). In order to pull this off, "the original has to be idolized,

and hence the kitsch function of the inscriptions and the taped voices, which remind you of the greatness of the art of the past.” While the visitor gets no thoroughly *original* experience, they simultaneously believe they are *and* that whatever is in front of them is even better.

Eco’s visit to Disneyland only served to reinforce this theory, in that our experience of animatronic pirates, haunted mansions, and safari adventures forever ruin our future “real” experiences, while at the same time evoking the memetic process of classical poetics: “The pleasure of imitation, as the ancients knew, is one of the most innate in the human spirit; but here we not only enjoy a perfect imitation, we also enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it” (46). While this desire for the “fake real” is by no means exclusive to America (Eco also uses Ludwig of Bavaria’s Neuschwanstein castle as another example), it certainly seems to be uniquely and libidinally invested in it. Eco tosses some of the blame on the country’s youth. With so little history to draw from, we seek to add depth to our experience, validation of our own importance, in the form of over-the-top fakery: “the frantic desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth” (31). Such imitation lends assurance where there is none.

Eco, in these observations, is clearly making use of Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal. In order to explore the roots of this theory, it is necessary to first define the evolution of the sign, which, from a structuralist perspective, must be both arbitrary and differential. John McGowan calls this understanding of a “free, abstract signifier [. . .] modernist through and through” (26). The work of Jacques Derrida, among others, blew

this rational, mathematical, structuralist perspective to pieces. In a *postmodern, post-structuralist* world, signification is historically produced (not arbitrary), language produces meaning (the signified/signifier relationship bounces back and forth forming a web of infinite signifiers), and meaning itself is unstable (Best and Kellner 21). The focus moves from the objective—unchanging absolutes removed from the influence of human perception—to the subjective—human perception creates reality. To Derrida, the Kantian “thing in itself” is always absent, and “the point becomes that representation, that signifiers, are all that we have” (McGowan 26). From this viewpoint, all language is metaphor, and there is no objective truth—just constructs of various groups.

Enter Jean Baudrillard. According to him, language, experience, and reality itself is no longer the metaphor it once was, but exists instead as a simulation of the real. This simulation is now where we live—there is nothing else. In its original form, the signifier (or image) would reflect the signified as metaphor, developing later into a process that masks the signified. In this second stage, the signifier is what is taken to be real over the signified. The third stage of development masks the fact that there is no longer any signified at all, no “Great and Powerful OZ” behind the curtain. In the final stage, his view of the postmodern world, there is no reality at all, just an existence composed of infinite homeless signifiers and a hyperreal version of reality (6). This is Eco’s absolute fake, and, according to Baudrillard, there is no turning back:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths and origins and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared.

Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence. (7)

This does not mean that we live in a world where all pain, tragedy, sadness, and cruelty are mere simulations and should be written off as constructs of the mind. It *does* mean, though, that the situations which bring about such tragedy are made possible by hyperrealities that we *take* to be real. The effects of the simulacrum can and do hurt.

Baudrillard's clearest example of this theory brings us, yet again, to Disneyland (an example that will recur throughout this dissertation). This iconic location, to Baudrillard, with all of its bright colors, well ordered spaces, orchestrated street performances, and animatronic rides, "functions as a cover for a *simulation of the third order*: Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland" (12). While we think we are entering a completely made up fantasy world, the theme park merely serves as a distraction from the fact that our own perceived realities are themselves simulations. We juxtapose "real" versus "fake" in a way that makes us feel comfortable and in control, while neither signifier denotes anything concrete, just what is taken to be so. This is where the power of the signifier lies: truth is what we *take* to be true. And what we take to be true guides our actions.

Thus, "truth" is no longer stable, but shape-shifts constantly based on the most changeable of entities: sign systems.

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer than of the real, nor that of truth, that era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all

referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (2)

The above paragraph reads like a lamentation—a eulogy for a real that, to Baudrillard, isn't even able to die a natural death but is forever sloppily cloned by fate without its permission. Baudrillard's simulacrum, however, rests quite firmly on our own expectations. When occurrences take place in the world that defy categorization, prediction, and naming, we are nudged back into moments of pure reality that bear the mark of an unremembered past. Not all acts of violence fall into this category, for even those adhere to certain recognizable patterns and behaviors. If a bank hold up is simulated, as Baudrillard posits, without warning the participants about it ahead of time, they will still go through the motions that should, in their mind, correspond to a hold up: hit the ground, cover your head, pray. It makes no difference to them in the moment if that gun is real or not. Television has taught us how to behave, and we comply (20). The moments that shock us out of the simulacra have to be utterly unexpected, often horrific, un-framed acts of terror. Even Baudrillard had to admit that "Terrorism is always that of the real" (47). Sadly, even these moments are now becoming commonplace enough to enter into the simulation. One poignant example would be that when I was attending

elementary and high school in the 1980s and 90s, the idea of needing to protect oneself from a school shooter was unheard of and unexpected; therefore, it was also devoid of a behavioral template. Now that school shootings have become devastatingly common, my own children go through lock-down drills in school and have been taught to behave, not only by these routine simulations but by television interviews and media coverage. The “school shooting” paradigm has now entered into the realm of the simulacrum, even though the consequences are very real and very terrible.

These theories offer a great deal of interpretive options for all three works, even though two out of the three were produced in time periods long before the “postmodern age” (“generally said to have arisen after World War II”) (Murfin and Ray 341). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the latter titular character moves through the story—on both sides of the Otherworld border—as if the laws of the real world do not apply to him. In the real world, he is literally larger-than-life, the picture of handsome knighthood, and can still function normally while decapitated. He behaves very much like he is in *The Matrix* and has figured out that everything around him is a harmless illusion. In the Otherworld he runs a model home full of loyal servants, a beautiful wife, and a host of chivalrous knights, and he does all of this without the slightest effort. Yet it is not Bertilak who needs to be changed by the Otherworld, it is Sir Gawain, the perfect product of the courtly world. At each turn, his belief in the absolute fake of chivalry, courtly values, and the Arthurian ideal are challenged, yet he disappoints us in his inability to fully turn away from it.

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is also confronted by her own ingrained acceptance of the hyperreal, and she too returns home to inevitably become a

part of it. The nonsense of Wonderland, instead of upholding the clarity and order of Victorian England, expose it to be a facade—worse than a facade, a lie. In fact, Wonderland is a true imitation of Alice’s real world, an image of Baudrillard’s first order, but even though Alice shows much promise in rejecting its authority and authenticity, Carroll disappoints us by sentimentally placing her right back into the middle of it at the end. From the beginning of her journey to the end, Alice learns to stand up to grown-ups, transverts the language of Wonderland to her own needs and uses, rejects a motherhood that is thrust upon her without permission, and, even when she is small, commands authority over inferior creatures. She, in essence, is given the tools to dismantle the hyperreal, but she only uses them in Wonderland.

Shadow Moon, from Gaiman’s *American Gods*, is the character who shows the most promise when it comes to recognizing and rejecting the hyperreal. However, regardless of his rejection, he is not able to bring about any fundamental change. To the people of Lakeside, Wisconsin, his realizations were both a blessing and a curse. He exposed the kobold (Hinzelmann) who had been taking a child every year as a sacrifice, but, as a result, Lakeside’s perfect small town veneer fades, leaving its inhabitants to contend with the ills all other small Midwestern towns do (unemployment, decaying infrastructure, drug addiction, despair, and suicide). In discovering the existence of the Otherworld all around him, he just learns that gods can and will lie to him just as much as humans will, that all creatures use all other creatures to their own ends, and that fighting for a cause within an inch of your life doesn’t mean anything noble will come of it. Shadow’s adventure begs the question, “Is it better to remain ignorant and content or

choose to be knowledgeable and unhappy?” It is clearly easier, as all three characters have shown, to remain a part of the absolute fake and embrace it as the one, true reality.

### **A Note Regarding America**

Eco’s collection of essays (and, to a lesser extent, Baudrillard’s) focuses much of its attention on the American culture, mindset, and way of being, as will chapter four of this dissertation. Therefore, even though the absolute fake is clearly present in the British ideals of Arthuriana and Victorian motherhood, it is important to take a moment and set-up a justification for why America in particular is any different in its hyperreality from any other prosperous Western country. As mentioned above, Eco believed that the United States possessed a combination of youth, prosperity, and shallow hubris that makes its landscape and cultural hive mind more susceptible to absolute fakery than others and more explicable using Baudrillard’s hyperreality. This combination is very clearly why the gods in Gaiman’s novel have such a difficult time here—deities require worship in order to survive, and Americans are famously fickle in their devotion to any one thing. This can be seen in their ability to worship the Christian God in such high numbers, while also paying homage to the gods of capitalism, entertainment, and vanity (the close proximity of Thanksgiving, a tribute to gratitude, and Black Friday, a tribute to greed and materialism, is a perfect metaphor for this duality).

So many of humanity’s treasured cultural products were created before the idea of America existed that it must therefore find a way to take ownership, reproduce them, and then sell them, repackaged, back to the world. This America must, by nature, rate all culture (religion, philosophy, music, and art) on the same level plane, whether it is a Beethoven sonata played on the stage at Carnegie Hall or the Coca-Cola jingle plunked

out on a toy piano. According to Eco, this is where “Good, Art, Fairy-Tale, and History, unable to become flesh, must at least become Plastic . . . The ideology of this America wants to establish reassurance through Imitation” (57). Yet, the economic and cultural power it now wields in the world is so astronomical that this Imitation is upheld as authentic and worthwhile. It is, in fact, the exact recipe for spoiling a child. Now imagine that child is destined to become King of the World. And then he does.

“In Europe,” Eco tells us, “when people want to be amused, they go to a ‘house’ of amusement (whether a cinema, theater, or casino); sometimes a ‘park’ is created, which may seem a ‘city,’ but only metaphorically. In the United States, as everyone knows, there exist amusement cities” (39-40). While portions of this concept are now quite dated—people no longer need to leave their homes or even our couches to be amused—the American Amusement City is as popular as ever, from Las Vegas to Branson, Missouri. In fact, if one wishes to never leave such a city, this would be more than possible, thus rendering the Amusement Park equal to the Real World, even for just one person. On a micro level, it is indeed possible to live, work, shop, and even go to school within the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota—a vast, ornate cathedral built to worship the gods of materialism and shopping. Oppositionally, on a macro level, the whole of America is set apart from the real world, an Amusement Nation which we have chosen to believe is authentic reality. People from all over choose to vacation here, see America’s plastic sights, eat its manufactured food, and shop in its shiny malls, but then they cross back over the border to the real world on their way home.

This concept—that of America as hyperreal—sets up what I will argue is a “uniquely-American” paradox outlined and explored in Gaiman’s *American Gods*. There

is a particular ability cultivated by those who live in a Disney-fied world: the ability to believe wholly in fundamentally opposing ideas even when they know better. America, as a whole, can acknowledge the “plaster cast”—the airbrushed picture of a model, the staged living room, the scrumptious pictures of styled food made out of glue and paint—while simultaneously staking its expectations on the truth of the image. Additionally, it is just as susceptible as the rest of the world to believing in a staged history that never existed. A study of the King Arthur ideal in Britain and the Norman Rockwell ideal in America might yield similar results on the surface, yet the former has the benefit of a lengthy and complicated history rooted in real events which the latter does not. America was created to be hyperreal in a way older nations, established through conquest or colonialism, were not, which creates both the freedom to fashion our own identity and also a “vacuum of memories” which needs to be filled up by something (30). Gaiman argues in *American Gods* that this “something” is the monuments to kitsch peppering the Midwestern countryside, and Eco would add that this “something” is the bubbly sugar water of Coca-Cola (“the Real Thing”) consumed in lieu of a nutritious meal. Both are right, of course. And whatever you are thinking of, that is right too.

### **Tracing the Celtic Otherworld**

Defining the term “Otherworld” can be a slippery endeavor. As a basic starting point, as previously stated, it is any realm beyond or separate from the initial world presented by a narrative. If the primary world of a story is Mars, and a character slips into a black hole and finds themselves on Pluto, Pluto is then an Otherworld and might very well have its own cultural and scientific laws governing reality. The term “otherworld” as used here and in all modern scholarship on the topic is a relatively recent construction, its first

citation in the OED occurring in 1804 as the binary opposite of “reality” (Byrne 14); however, the otherworld journey itself stems back many centuries. From its origins in Celtic mythology, to its appearance throughout the Arthurian canon in the middle ages, to its all-too-common use in modern fantasy works, the Celtic Otherworld serves a myriad of purposes and comes in an even wider variety of shapes. Farah Mendlesohn, in her *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, separates these types of stories into four categories: portal-quest (such as *Alice* or Lewis’s *Narnia*), immersive (such as Ursula Le Guin’s *Wizards of Earthsea* or Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*), intrusive (such as *Gawain* or *Harry Potter*), and liminal (such as *American Gods*). A portal-quest fantasy behaves exactly how the term suggests: a door opens up through which the protagonist moves from one world to the next. An intrusive fantasy takes place when the Otherworld bursts into the real world, making itself known to one or many characters at once. A liminal fantasy acts in a similar way to an intrusive, and yet when it becomes known it is with little fanfare and strikes an ironic tone—it seems to always have been there. An immersive fantasy, a term not useful to my study here, merely takes place in a world different from our own, and there is no movement from one realm to the next.

Interestingly, most scholarly writing on the subject of Otherworlds is taxonomic in nature: listing, defining, and presenting examples. While much scholarship has been devoted to explaining the signs of Otherworld border crossings, the significant features of their landscapes, and descriptions of their unpredictable, changeable natures, far less attention has been given to their narrative function within the texts. As pointed out by Aisling Byrne, “since 1950” after the publication of Howard Rollin Patch’s seminal work *The Other World*, “there has been little attempt to address this body of material as a

whole” (3). This, Byrne argues, “is somewhat surprising; particularly, in light of the recent upsurge in interest in the role of the supernatural in medieval literature and in the genre with which such marvels and magic are most frequently associated, romance.” Since the 1980s, the “increased interest in beings, communities, and concepts, traditionally considered marginal,” and also the “preoccupation of various strands of cultural studies with the idea of ‘the Other’” have made it possible to do more with stories of fantastic realms than ever before, and yet “the past few decades have seen comparatively few attempts to address the topic directly” (4). Those who have—John Carey, Jeff Rider, Corinne Saunders, Patrick Sims-Williams, and Byrne herself—are all included here in various capacities, though the focus of my specific work is to show how the Otherworld can be interpreted as a postmodern narrative technique, butting up against the real world of the initial setting and of the audience and causing us to question reality itself.

Byrne has suggested that the act of entering into the Otherworld mirrors the act of entering into a fictional story as a reader, and that we as readers go through a similar transition period as the characters who undertake these journeys. Therefore, by “providing an experience analogous to fiction itself, the otherworld account holds up a mirror to the narrative world and introduces an extra perspective from which to view reality” (27). The Otherworld, then, acts as a tertiary world, with the primary being the real world of the audience and the secondary being that of the narrative. “Tertiary worlds may also function as a means of enhancing the applicability of the text, pushing the secondary world closer to that of the reader by contrasting it with the overwhelming strangeness of the otherworld realm . . . the fantastical working to define the verisimilar.”

However, from what I have found so far, no one has yet posited that the reality of the worlds can be flipped, with the Otherworld encompassing more of what the audience might recognize as true and familiar (whether morally superior, as in *Gawain*, or frighteningly accurate, as in *Alice*) and the real world as the illusion. In this dissertation, my focus on the Otherworld as a literary device—its evolution and purpose—will serve to convey a deeper exploration of the postmodern concept of the “Real” in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *American Gods*. Each story uses one (the Otherworld) to highlight the other (the postmodern “Real”) in an attempt to examine our human understanding of who we are, what we are doing here, and the fundamental absurdity of those questions. In short, I will show how these three stories are a part of a long tradition of Otherworld adventures, but the way they use the convention is distinct and can be explored in postmodern terms.

The obvious place to start a study of otherworld journeys is with medieval Arthuriana, where the audience is already given two realms to compare: “The semi-realism of the kingdom of Logres, which both is and is not Britain, is marked by mysterious ways into and meeting-points with the otherworld” (Saunders 198). When structuring a fantastic otherworld tale, according to John H. Timmerman, there must be a primary world to act as a control: “our primary world is one structured on routine and governed by fact—fact understood as ‘It is so’” (55). This, as Saunder’s statement above shows, establishes the “social order.” However, as Christine Brooke-Rose contends in *A Rhetoric of the Un-Real*, “fact is inaccessible to us, since man can only represent it through his many arbitrary systems” (4). One of these systems, I would argue, is the definition of a literary Otherworld for a modern audience. She goes on to say, “if the

‘real’ has come to seem unreal, it is natural to turn to the ‘unreal’ as real: the two propositions are interrelated. This ‘naturalness’ however is due to man’s need to impose significance on the empirical reality around him, which in itself is without significance” (4). While every element of a story can and should be meaningfully interpreted, “real” life is merely a daily collection of disconnected details. One cannot be superimposed upon the other, and the medieval audience, as argued by Aisling Byrne, seemed to instinctively understand this in a way that evades a modern one.

A major theme running through the original Otherworld of Celtic mythology is that of “a fundamental paradox” (Carey 2). It is set apart mainly from Classical traditions in that it is both firmly rooted in this world (it does not usually function as an afterlife) and it can have any combination of positive, negative, or ambiguous functions, as Corinne Saunders explains: “This is a landscape that can shift from threatening to delightful and back again, and its inhabitants are often distinguished by similarly shifting qualities” (180). It is not usually a punishment, nor is it a reward, and it can take on the form of an island, a mountain, a cave, a mound, or a great plain (Patch 27). In short, the term “otherworld” can mean whatever the story calls for, but the inhabitants of this world follow their own set of rules regarding time, space, and even moral behavior (Carey 8). The most famous otherworld moments in Celtic legend take place in *echtrae*, heroic adventure stories wherein a hero is invited into (or suddenly finds himself in) a faerie realm. In the most common type, “the hero is often enticed by a beautiful woman or wonderful warrior telling of the marvels of a mysterious land” (Mackillop 168). When the hero returns, time may have stopped entirely or decades may have gone by.

These otherworlds crossed over into Arthuriana in some of the earliest stories and are still used in modern day adaptations. The most common archetype is that of a fairy lover (male or female) who addresses a wrong in the world of the real by bestowing their affections on a human unfortunate. Stories such as Marie de France's *Lanval* and *Yonec* fit this definition. Other times, the Otherworld is set up as an "alternative reality" to the world of the court, highlighting some way in which the court has fallen short of its professed ideals, such as Bertilak's realm in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In these moments, the Otherworld "disrupt[s] the order of a peaceful, stable aristocratic world, bring[s] about the hero's departure from that world, and launch[es] the narrative" (Rider 118). Finally, the otherworld characters might need to use heroes from the real world in order to solve a problem, and they do so either by tricking them into it or bargaining. The story of Pwyll in the first branch of the Welsh *Mabinogi* exemplifies this type, while also using the Otherworld as a catalyst to move the story forward. Overall, otherworlds by their very nature defy a clear definition, as they are fundamentally different—other—from everything known and understood. Their existence gives the stories permission to "go off the rails," while imagining a world where pretty much anything is possible and can lead the story in any direction.

As Elizabeth Sklar points out, "The Arthurian legend's inherent generic mélange of historic verisimilitude, romantic idealism and tragic realism, along with its generous and infinitely expandable cast of characters, endows it with extraordinary adaptability" (9), which has most certainly proven to be true in modern times. This adaptability has always made Arthurian tales go hand-in-hand with otherworldly adventure, and the two genres have essentially "grown-up" together. In the earliest stories of King Arthur, he is

merely a warrior, and Merlin merely his prophet. However, between the Battle of Badon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Arthur transformed into the paragon of a virtuous, yet fatally doomed, medieval king, who came to power by a combination of divine right and magical intervention. Merlin became almost synonymous with Tolkien's Gandalf the Grey, able to control the weather, alter people's memory, and conjure spells out of nowhere, all while acting the "wise, old sage" to a perpetually youthful and troubled king. In the modern age, the saga has unfolded in myriad adaptations, elevating some episodes while abandoning others in order to "speak to the times," but this was nothing new. After Malory, there followed an Arthurian "Dark Age," from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which Arthurian material was used, but new versions were relatively abandoned. The obvious exception to this is, of course, Edmund Spenser's allegory *The Faerie Queene*, which relied heavily on Arthurian knowledge and otherworld tropes embedded in the (mostly aristocratic) reader's imagination. John Milton even considered—and the rejected—the myth as the subject of his great epic (Higham 239). Yet, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Arthur experienced a resurgence in popularity. Though already discounted by this time as an historical figure, Arthur "was most often interpreted in mythological terms as a Brittonic culture-hero or demi-god" (1). Additionally, an obsession with aesthetic medievalism moved Romantic poets to honor traditional Arthurian characters as objects of beauty, such as in John Keats' "La belle dame sans merci." As Higham observed, "Each Arthurian manifestation therefore reflects the way in which a particular author and his or her audience thought to fashion their own conceptions of the past, so as to benefit their own positioning in the present" (3). Interestingly, this is also how the Otherworld is used in fantastic tales, Arthurian and

otherwise. Whatever flaw needs to be revealed in the real world, whatever wrong needs to be righted, whatever framing needs to be created in order to justify a political position, an otherworld journey to the Land of Faerie can, by juxtaposition, make this happen.

Additionally, medieval literature, Byrne praises, is fertile ground for serious study of the “marvelous and the fantastical . . . in no small part due to the fact that medieval culture itself is often distinguished by its willingness to take the marvelous seriously” (185). Unfortunately, by the time Lewis Carroll published *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, just in time for Christmas 1865, the idea that fantasy stories were for children had already invaded the public imagination and their range of primary subject matter had moved away from the Arthurian realm (Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* is an important and influential exception, yet even this homage was focused on a youthful target audience). The tendency to assume that “children’s stories” could not deal with serious subject matter was then conflated with the assumption that tales of the “marvelous and fantastical” were just for children. Neither of these notions turned out to be true. The fact that many of Carroll’s original readers were adults (especially scientists and mathematicians) is worth noting (Gardner xiii-xiv).

Additionally, even though Carrollian scholars plead with us not to take the work too seriously, as it is meant to be playful and witty, “No joke is funny unless you see the point of it, and sometimes a point has to be explained” (xiii); the explanation I offer here will focus specifically on *Alice’s* portal-quest fantasy and how it works to unmask the hyperreality of Victorian life, especially for middle-class girls and women. Since the time of Arthurian chivalric romance and adventure, the otherworld tale seems to have been reduced to a parlor trick meant to simultaneously delight small children and maintain the

status quo. *Alice's* contemporaries, such as *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Wizard of OZ*, *Peter Pan*, and others do seem to embrace this position, and yet Carroll infuses his story with an underlying darkness that harkens back to the Otherworlds of old, lending itself “to the treatment of certain themes, such as death, gender, authority, and territorial politics” (Byrne 7). Wonderland is more than mere nonsense, it is a sincere attempt to frighten Alice Liddell away from growing up, and to do so, Carroll gives her an unvarnished view of the adult world—especially the adult *female* world. As Mendlesohn explains, “Carroll opted for an ironic macroréalism, in which the brutality of society is made fantastical as the language of society is made brutal” (28).

Regardless of the title, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is more about the world of Wonderland than what Alice does there: “the book is a series of sequential movements through a landscape in which it is the landscape and its effects rather than an adventure per se, that fascinates” (Mendlesohn 29). This is a sharp deviation from *Gawain*, which relies on our hero's travel to another world, but primarily focuses on what he must do there, the challenges he faces, and how he goes about accomplishing his goal. Alice doesn't even have a goal (not even a Dorothy-esque desire to return home from OZ). She is merely wandering about. One is then moved to focus on the landscape and how it compares to the “reality” of the frame story: Alice's home, her lessons, her cat, her sister, her nurse, and her position as a Victorian-mother-in-training. “The frame world,” according to Mendlesohn, “is a story to be told, as much as the fantasy world is” (31), namely here because Carroll has so much to say about one by using the other.

By the time *American Gods* was published in 2001, there seemed to be few options for innovative use of the Otherworld available, yet Gaiman was able to find a

way. Using a tone already developed in his 1996 novel *Neverwhere*, in which an unsuspecting citizen of London finds himself immersed in a wholly other London existing within the Underground system, Gaiman was able to show how the Otherworld exists alongside and along with the real world, even though most real world inhabitants are unaware. It is already here, but most people are so entrenched in their myopic view of reality that they fail to see the gods as they really are, walking about on Earth. As Shadow Moon opens his eyes to the existence of these deities, he must then decide for himself when they are misleading him and when they are telling the truth—the same as one must with other human beings. The result is a story not about gods and humans but about reality itself. The Otherworld of *American Gods* is not a fantastic one, though it has its moments. It is on the whole mundane, unexceptional, and often disappointing. Imagine meeting the god you worship only to find out he/she was a homeless drunkard or a feeble old woman, filled more with despair and nostalgia than the ability to solve all of your problems. This jarring realization concerning the Otherworld is exactly what makes Shadow so susceptible to their cons, even to the point of flipping the script and dying for *them*. They are just humble enough to be charming, they seem to need him so much, and he is therefore painfully loyal. The use of Gaiman's Otherworld is less clear-cut than the other two, mainly because it is a fundamentally postmodern work which resists moralizing. Overall, however, Gaiman seems to suggest that it would have been easier if Shadow had never drunk Wednesday's mead (his own border crossing), nor entered into Czernobog's pact (his own beheading game), and just kept his real world head down.

## Preview: Chapter 2

The 14th century Arthurian poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a perfect example of this use of Otherworld as a contesting force against the primary world of the court. I would like to argue, however, that its purpose is even more nuanced. The Otherworld, in this case, is actually more real, more chivalrous, and more relatable than that of the court. The organic, visceral, flawed, and less-staged environment of Bertilak's world, where things do not always work out or even make sense, bears a great resemblance to what we generally call "the real world." Identifying this shift may cause the reader to dismiss Arthur's validity altogether and instead embrace the implausible "Other" as the more believable, regarding it as more preferable in nobility, morality, and strength. Reading the story from this perspective opens up new possibilities of interpretation.

It is important to first understand that all English monarchs, in fact most earthly leaders in general, must contend with the simulacrum of Arthur as the template for kingly and knightly perfection. Even though the "historical" Arthur is as fabricated as his many tales, human beings have a tendency to accept story *as* history, and therefore judge our leaders accordingly, even when this comparison is unfair. Chapter two will explore this tendency, and how it is epitomized in the *Gawain* text, through the lens of the courtly world, the Otherworld, and the world of modern reader. In this case, through the eyes of the reader, the courtly world is revealed to be hyperreal (an absolute fake) while the Otherworld takes the place of the real. Each element of the story tends to exist dually in both a real version and a hyperreal version, each upholding the idea that the Otherworld in this case fits the definition of *trawthe* and Arthurian values much more closely than the

courtly world itself. This dualism can be found in the leaders of the two worlds, their consorts, the lands themselves and the border crossing between them, the “villainy” of Morgan Le Fay, and the “heroism” of Gawain.

The values of a knight (the five fives of Gawain’s Pentangle), as well as his loyalties (lord, lady, God), are embodied much more clearly in the character of Lord Bertilak/the Green Knight than in Arthur or even in Sir Gawain. He is more courteous than Arthur and easily braver than Gawain. This odd circumstance calls into question the possibility of the medieval chivalric standard, which is shown to be impossible even in the best of courtly circumstances. I will suggest here that the cause of this impossibility may be the standard itself. While the courtly world (the hyperreal) has a template to follow (the real), which it will forever fail to match, the world of Lord Bertilak has no standard to live up to. It simulates nothing, imitates nothing, and is therefore free to embody whatever qualities it wishes, which it does, effortlessly, in *Matrix*-like style. Not even the rules of life and death apply to the Green Knight in a way that makes sense back home, as he is easily able to walk around, hold conversations, and ride off into the sunset while headless.

After Gawain is humiliated at the Green Chapel toward the end of the story, flinching from the first blow in a cowardly move, it is clear that he has failed to learn the secret of the Green Knight’s (and the Otherworld’s) superior nature. All of the chivalric rules he had mastered in the courtly realm, those which had made him famous and revered the world over, do not apply in the Otherworld. For example, he withstands the chatelaine's aggressive advances in his bedroom for three mornings in a row, easily and courteously diverting the conversation away from temptation without offending her.

However, the temptation was itself an absolute fake as Lady Bertilak had no intention of following through with her offer. His strength in these scenes was meaningless.

Secondly, his severe embarrassment of his own weakness in accepting the green garter highlights his adherence to the courtly rules of chivalry: cowardice is one of the worst sins as it breaks his oath as a knight and also shows a lack of faith in God. However, no one else cared. The Green Knight actually applauded this move as he considered loving one's own life to be a virtue, and the shallow court back home celebrated the whole adventure as quality entertainment. The chivalric code is here revealed to be hyperreal in and of itself, and the protagonist is the only one who values the simulacrum, failing to free himself of its influence.

While Sir Gawain moves from the courtly realm to the Otherworld, the border between the worlds project common “signposts” to the audience which cause us to unwittingly shift our expectations. One such signpost is the guidance of a fairy mistress, which, in Gawain’s case, is Mary the Mother of Jesus, her image emblazoned on the inner portion of his shield. While usually the fairy mistress leads the hero astray, or at least a bit off course, Mary leads Gawain to exactly where he needs to go while also showing that he is doing his best to maintain loyalty to his lord (Arthur) and his God. The moment he prays to her, the castle at Hautdesert is revealed in the distance, where two more women will work to challenge Gawain’s perception of the truth. Lady Bertilak is the perfect wife in the guise of a craven seductress, and Morgan Le Fey is focused on saving Arthur from his future downfall while in the guise of a crafty and ugly witch. Gawain should see both of these women, in the end, as his allies, yet he instead wishes to return swiftly home to the court of a corrupt queen and a weak king, if only to beg their

forgiveness and re-attain their approval. This is made clear by his misogynistic speech to the Green Knight just before his departure in which he absurdly blames his downfall on the chatelaine's womanly wiles. Again, everyone around Gawain seems to see the mirage, and yet our hero still faithfully believes.

While the audience may be moved to question the simulacrum of chivalry and courtly values after the tale ends, our hero clearly does not. The story remains a celebration of a past that never was in order to influence present mood and behavior, even if it is only in subconscious views of heroism, leadership, courage, valor, and even villainy. History, then, is only as strong as the stories readers believe to be true.

### **Preview: Chapter 3**

Lewis Carroll's 1865 children's book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, similarly uses the otherworld adventure to call attention to the real world, only in the opposite direction from *Gawain*. While Bertilak's realm shows what is possible when the codes of chivalry are followed, highlighting the embarrassing shortcomings of the courtly world, Wonderland functions as a terrifying glimpse into what awaits Alice as a grown, middle class, Victorian woman. Wonderland is the world of the grown-up real, which Carroll uses to highlight its unpleasantness and absurdity. The Duchess and the Queen of Hearts present a grotesque version of motherhood which Alice hopes to avoid. She must, however, mirror their violent actions in order to escape, suggesting that Alice's adult future is as inevitable as it is frightening. She is often placed in maternal positions (rescuing the Duchess's "baby" from her toxic house and assuming charge of the Caucus Race prizes), though she is always relieved when she can leave such responsibilities behind. When, in the end, she finally disregards Wonderland's power, she awakens back

in Victorian England and to an ending as puzzling as that of *Gawain*. In a scene added to the manuscript just before its initial publication, Alice's sister imagines how Alice will grow into a woman and remember fondly the happy dreams of her childhood (i.e. Wonderland), a sentiment which could not seem further from the message of the story. Wonderland-as-Otherworld is a frightening projection of her future, grown reality, one she desperately attempts to escape only to find herself back where she started. While Wonderland operates as an Otherworld, just as Bertilak's realm does, it isn't superior to Alice's real world, just more honest. Regardless, Alice will be forced to grow up and live in the absolute fake world of Victorian motherhood in which must act contented and happy.

Wonderland, then, is both sinister and honest, a rendition of her future where she can act out a fantasy of resistance which is utterly futile. This cycle of resistance/failure is seen in her revolt against Wonderland's arbitrary rules, her crisis of identity (and size), and her conflicting emotions toward the creatures and herself. The four stages of the simulacrum, as outlined by Baudrillard, are very clearly shown in Alice's character, as I will articulate in the chapter using images of motherhood from the time period alongside images from Tenniel's famous illustrations. The final result of this study will culminate in Alice as "Household Angel"<sup>1</sup> cradling, not a child, but a pig. This absurdity, through Baudrillardian lens, is actually the truer image than that of the glowing Victorian beauty and her adoring, perfectly behaved offspring. The belief in this simulacrum, the embrace

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<sup>1</sup> This term, and also the phrase "the angel in the house" originated from a popular Victorian poem of the same name by Coventry Patmore in 1862. In it, the poet praises the virtues of his wife (gentleness, quietness, meekness, and agreeability), but it fell out of favor in the following century for "the sentimentality of its ideal of woman and for the oppressive effect of this ideal on women's lives" (Robson and Christ 1613). Virginia Woolf especially took issue with the poem's rhetoric.

of it really, is what keeps girls like Alice—spitfires by nature—in line with the status quo.

Indeed, we are meant to be frustrated with Alice as she travels through this chaotic world, and yet the hilarity and nonsense of the chaos masks the reality that she already lives in one—the masking of an absence of order, or the third stage of Baudrillard’s simulacrum. No matter how many times the Queen screams out rules to be followed, it does not mean they will be nor that anyone will care about this discrepancy. Once Alice realizes this, she is able to dismiss the whole lot of them as “nothing but a pack of cards” and transport herself home, yet the grand reveal ends there. There is no further connection in which Alice applies what she has learned to the “pack of cards” in charge of her own, real life. Wonderland can be read as the nonsensical adult world from the perspective of a child, one in which all of the adults act like children while maintaining all of the power. It can also be read as the patriarchal realm insisting on its own ways as orderly and logical in order to maintain its position of authority. Either way, Wonderland points out that the real world of Alice’s future is a hyperreality, given power only in that its inhabitants believe it is real.

The Tea Party time loop described by the March Hare in Chapter 7 of the book pokes through the story’s nonsense and expresses the underlying despair of Wonderland, where all words mean all of their meanings all of the time and where Time is essentially meaningless (both utterly un-Victorian ideas). Since the characters once stepped out of line and offended the Queen, they are doomed to forever circle the table, drinking cold tea and telling stale jokes. This scene more than any other calls attention to the mundane, cyclical trap of Alice’s future real life. The signs of Victorian life (dress, mannerism,

gender roles, class systems and hierarchy, and even table manners) have no undergirding, yet they must be upheld at all costs. In Wonderland, as her journey progresses, Alice learns to devalue such rituals, especially when she grows physically larger (like a powerful adult or a male authority), even though this devaluing halts the moment she wakes up from her dream.

In addition to questioning authority and the rituals of everyday life, Alice is also moved to question her own identity throughout the story. By the time the Caterpillar asks her his repeated question, “Who are you?” she cannot think of any appropriate way to respond. None of her usual measures (age, size, gender, nationality, family affiliation, knowledge, certainty) seem to fit, and she is left with the answer “I don’t know.” In the end, she is moved to accept that, because she is in Wonderland, and everyone in Wonderland is “mad,” she must be mad too—a label in and of itself purely arbitrary. Therefore, her identity is wrapped up in whether or not her society believes her to exist harmoniously within the simulacrum. Normally, back home, she assimilates quite well, but in Wonderland she fails at every turn. Instead of seeing this as dismantling the premise of “madness” itself, she stamps her foot, cries “nonsense!” and melds immediately back in once she returns home. One is left wondering if Carroll liked his final ending, tacked-on as it is, which celebrated the sentimental simulacrum of Victorian childhood and its Wonderland dream, or if he wished for Alice to reject it all, a nearly impossible act for a powerless creature from within the hyperreal.

#### **Preview: Chapter 4**

As previously discussed, Otherworld crossings have by no means fallen out of fashion since the Golden Age of Arthurian narrative, from Chrétien to Malory, and the

early, 19th century roots of non-didactic literature for children. In fact, since the advent of modern fantasy post-Tolkien, they have become more pervasive and varied. Umberto Eco refers to this return as “dreaming the Middle Ages” in a “quest for our roots,” especially in an America so seemingly devoid of history, forever living in Britain’s shadow (65). From the portal-quest fantasies of Narnia, to the intrusive fantasies of Harry Potter, increased experimentation with the otherworld device has led to new ways for the modern reader to define and understand the reality of the narratives and what they have to say about our own experiences, past, present, and future. Since the early 1990s, Neil Gaiman has developed a distinctive postmodern Otherworld threading itself through the vast majority of his literary works, spanning various genres. Specifically in *American Gods*, the Otherworld needs less of a literal cross-over to be accessed than the typical versions I have so far discussed; there is no “thin place” in the landscape to locate. Gaiman’s characters need only to be made aware that their own world exists as a foredrop to a much more complex, contentious, and often frightening reality. The Otherworld has always already been right in front of us, pulling all the strings, and our perceived reality is at best Plato’s shadows, and at worst deliberately put in place to distract and placate. Gaiman merges the worlds together, highlighting human perception of reality as the cover up, the pretend, the fantasy, the absurd. The Otherworld, in this case, embraces and showcases what American culture truly values, which deities it worships, eschewing the overlay as mere pablum.

As opposed to the other two stories, in *American Gods*, the boundary between the real and other worlds is blurred and the road trip Shadow and Wednesday take across the American landscape leads the reader to consider the hyperreality of America itself,

especially in its ability to embrace cognitive dissonance. The idea that gods created and worshipped hemispheres away from each other rub elbows every day in the New World highlights the American attraction to impossible things, its view of itself as the center of the world, its love of progress over tradition, its careless relationship with the divine, and its unwavering trust in the American Dream. Gaiman is clearly aware of the hyperreality of his story, and often calls attention to it as he speaks directly to the reader. This jarring technique admits that the world we are reading about is impossible, while simultaneously inferring that it's the only "real" that actually matters. For some strange reason, this is exactly what leads the reader to believe him and apply the author's theory of America and its immigrant gods to their own belief systems. We travel along as Shadow does, introduced to each god simultaneously as he is, and see exactly why he decides to play along, eventually giving his life for the cause.

In Gaiman's world, belief is a powerful thing, and it contributes greatly to the continued existence of the hyperreal. In order to survive, each god needs devotees, and it is considered irresponsible to believe in an idea and then abandon it. The plight of the gods here is the exemplification of hyperreality itself. Nothing is real that is not taken to be real, and vice versa. The Lacanian Real, which Shadow seems to be chasing throughout the novel, clearly doesn't matter—belief makes things happen and, therefore, either causes or alleviates pain. Sam Black Crow, Shadow's companion throughout most of the middle portion of the novel, announces in her "I believe" speech her ability to believe in all things all at the same time—just in case. While comedic in nature, the speech cuts to the heart of why it is both easy and difficult to be a god in America—Americans like to believe in things, but they are an unreliable audience of distracted

children whose reality keeps changing based on what captures their attention at any given moment. There is another running theme, however, that both upholds this conclusion and throws it into uncertainty. As Shadow learns when observing the “Drunkard’s Dream” diorama, it is possible that the gods do more for humanity than we are even aware of. It is suggested that there are cosmic wars going on, a tug-of-war really between hungry monsters vying for our attention, all of which we are profoundly unaware. The only thing that saves us from the continuous nightmare of knowledge is our own drunkenness, our choice to remain ignorant of the Otherworld’s existence. The gods are only too happy to keep us there in order to stave off the monsters and subsequently feed off of our dwindling beliefs.

Gaiman’s story and Eco’s theories seem to have been made for each other. As Eco contextualizes the above American mindset with the youth and immaturity of our culture, Gaiman pairs it together with corporeal deities—beings literally made of memories—just trying to survive in a place with a “vacuum of memories.” In fact, some parts of the United States are so blank that they are dangerous for gods to go, while human beings feel no adverse effect at all. For the majority of the novel, Shadow believes he is helping the older gods of religious belief fight back against the new gods of technology, those most easily embraced and worshipped by modern America. By the end of the novel, we realize that the war between the old gods and the new gods is actually a red herring. The only thing that matters at all was attention and belief, without which any “reality” dies. Both groups of gods follow through with the charade not out of altruistic intention but, mainly, because they were bored and longed for some drama. Shadow, just

like Gawain, was used by both sides without his knowledge or permission, and for all of his efforts and for all he has learned about reality, he is no better off than before.

### **Why These Three Stories?**

It would seem that, with the popularity of the otherworld device as well as the hyperreality of the postmodern situation, many stories could be used to exemplify where the two concepts overlap and complement each other. I would argue, however, that these three works are not only better than most in accomplishing this task, but that they each represent a particular moment in time, a cultural turn, in which the hyperreal can be used to show humanity's questioning of the perceived "real world" and its authority. *The Wizard of OZ*, for example, as well as *Peter Pan*, while contemporary works to *Alice*, each uphold their real world as being the superior, preferable option instead of questioning anything about it. The protagonist, and therefore the reader, returns with a new appreciation for the regular world around them. Dorothy truly believes there is "no place like home" and the Darling children return to their idyllic home and adoring parents. In the case of *Gawain*, any of the otherworld tales of Marie de France or Chrétien de Troyes could have been explored here, except they are just as cut-and-dry as *The Wizard of OZ*. In Marie's *Lanval*, for example, the Otherworld is merely used to highlight Arthur's and Guinevere's royal and moral shortcomings, nor more and no less; in opposition, Chrétien's "The Knight of the Cart" uses the Land of Gorre to represent vice and trespass, a world where Lancelot and Guinevere can fulfill their passions without consequence. There is no subtlety here, and no hint of hyperreality. And finally, while *American Gods* exists within a vast array of contemporary otherworld stories, the majority act either as morality tales (such as most superhero fiction), dystopian

landscapes (such as *Ready Player One*), or pure wonder and escapism (such as the *Harry Potter* universe or the *Twilight* series).

My goal here was to collect tales together that confront the same existential questions as the late-1990s films *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*: Is “reality” merely what we take to be real or a separate entity forever postponed? Who decides and what are the stakes? Are we better off staying content within the fantasy or questioning it? What sets these three works apart is how each Otherworld jostles the protagonist’s preconceived ideas about their real world (Gawain in the courtly realm’s ethical standing, Alice in the sanctity of gender and class roles, and Shadow in, among other things, the separation between the mundane and the godly). Even if the protagonist is glad to return home, the reader knows they shouldn’t be.

### **Summary and Statement of Purpose**

In medieval romance, as argued by Jeff Rider, Otherworlds represent a kind of character foil to the world of the Arthurian court, serving as “narrative engines whose representatives, messages or gifts intervene to set a story going, keep it going, or change its direction; they valorize the ideals of the central aristocratic world” (129). They do this by showing an alternative world with its own set of rules and by highlighting how the world of the court has fallen short of its ideal state. If the lawless, amoral Land of Faerie has a king with more *trawthe* than Arthur himself, reality, per se, is unaligned. Not only do we see Arthur fall short, but the court’s entire existence seems to be a farce, while Bertilak’s is the ethical, chivalrous reality. The Otherworld represents what the real should be. In Wonderland, we see not what should be but what is—twisted and terrifying. Here, the idealistic real world is the illusion, while the Otherworld is more accurate. The

“ideals of the central aristocratic world” (Rider 129), instead of relating to the court, are reflected by that of the Victorian middle class, ideals Carroll outs as a fiction girls are duped into accepting. Alternatively, Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* uses an Otherworld that needs less of a literal “cross-over” to be accessed. His characters need only to be made aware that their own world exists as a mere foredrop to a more complex, contentious, and often frightening reality. Gaiman merges the worlds together, highlighting our perception of reality as the cover up, the pretend, the fantasy, the absurd—the American Dream is to believe in the illusion. These three works, their corresponding Otherworlds, and the lenses provided by Baudrillard and Eco together challenge us to nudge our beliefs and assumptions out of the periphery and into plain view. Only then can we begin to question them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE KNIGHT OF THE PENTANGLE TAKES THE RED PILL

According to Umberto Eco, when the Arthurian film *Excalibur* came out in 1981, many Europeans and Americans alike took the movie to be a realistic rendering of life in the Middle Ages (63). Putting aside the focus on magic and sorcery, the raw violence of the images and the filthiness of life before indoor plumbing led the public to embrace its verisimilitude as absolute. However, at the root of this belief was the collective wish for the Arthurian legend to be validated as a real period of history, a golden age, the touchpoint we can look to in order to “Make Camelot Great Again.” We wish for Arthur’s England to be as historically believable as the Middle Ages themselves, to substantiate the myth by glorifying the past. Eco posits that many of our most pressing contemporary worries—politics, technology, religion, even human identity itself—can be directly traced back to this turning point of history (64-65), and so our *Game of Thrones*-fueled obsession with it is understandable. Yet our understanding of the realities of the period are so far off that we are willing to believe magic was a perfectly normal part of medieval life. This tendency to conflate reality and myth, however, is by no means restricted to modern society. Beginning in the thirteenth century, less than fifty years after the first mention of a “round table” in Wace’s *Brut*, Round Table Tournaments became popular pastimes for wealthy European aristocrats. Here, “Arthurian devotees dressed in the appropriate costume to join in feasts, jousts, and dancing in imitation of the King and his knights. In some cases, the participants assumed the names and arms of Arthur’s knights, and more elaborate Round Tables might even include a real castle built for the occasion” (Lacy and Ashe 273). The Winchester Round Table, which currently

hangs in Winchester Castle's great hall in England, was believed to be commissioned for just such a tournament, possibly during the reign of Edward III, himself an Arthurian enthusiast (209). In 1522, in a powerful example of sign and simulation, Henry VIII had it repainted with a Tudor rose in its center and his own likeness where Arthur's should be. Even actual kings had to, in one way or another, measure up to the idea of Arthur, and the implication of assuming his place on the table was clear to anyone who saw it. The story, the image, is a template which leads the un-real to define the real.

We often base our beliefs not on history, but on story: the Arthurian ideal becomes an otherworld mirror for us to hold up our lives to and take stock—and it has always been so. As Jeff Rider puts it, medieval otherworlds “are the place where the acquisitive and utopian longings of their audiences found expression” (122). Leaders are corrupt and greedy, but Arthur was a fair and honest king under whose rule the land and people flourished. War, poverty, and intolerance run rampant, but Arthur gave every knight an equal voice in decision-making and every citizen a champion to fight for them. Evil was easy to detect, and the valiant and brave were rewarded with favor. The fact that this was never the case—that Arthur's realm is just as fictional as Narnia or Middle Earth—doesn't stop us from using it as a template for societal success. Giving in to the burdens of our real life situation is, according to Christine Brooke-Rose, “unbearable” leading us to escape into a reality we choose to endow with “significance by our desire, whatever that might be, and displace the meaningless situation into a mere backdrop” (9).

This is, after all, the nature of the Otherworld, from ancient Celtic folklore to modern-day fantasy books. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an anonymously authored quest poem from the fourteenth century, provides an example of a classic otherworld

journey in the Arthurian universe, and its “intricate structure, its highly wrought verbal art, its symbolism, and its numerological patterns dazzle the reader no matter from which vantage point the poem is considered, encouraging and rewarding examination from various perspectives” (Battles 11). It also, however, showcases the exact real/un-real conflation described above. As Rider further explains, using *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a primary example, medieval otherworlds represent a kind of character foil to the world of the court, serving as “narrative engines whose representatives, messages or gifts intervene to set a story going, keep it going, or change its direction; they valorize the ideals of the central aristocratic world” (129). They do this both by showing an alternative world with its own set of rules, but also by highlighting how the world of the court has fallen short of its ideal state. Rider even calls both worlds “equally fictive.” Two centuries earlier than the *Gawain* poet, in works surely known by him, Marie de France made ample use of the Otherworld to this end in her lais, which allowed her to “treat human nature in microcosm . . . its deep strangeness conveyed in straightforward terms” (Saunders 183). In order to fully explore the meaning of the Otherworld in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and to unpack the “deep strangeness” of both the courtly world (Arthur’s Logres<sup>2</sup>) and the Otherworld (Bertilak’s realm, or Hautdesert), I must also contend with the world of the modern reader (us, here and now). In this chapter, I intend to prove that, in creating a world that more closely aligns with the values and expectations of Arthurian legend than Logres itself, Bertilak’s realm exposes the hyperreality of the courtly world and, furthermore, our own historical view of the time

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<sup>2</sup> “Logres” and “Camelot” will be used interchangeably in this chapter, as they refer to the same realm in Arthurian literature and in many scholarly texts cited here. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, the poet uses “Logres.”

period and its influence over our current sense of reality. This can be seen in a comparison between the leaders of each realm, in the land itself (especially at the exact border between worlds), in Gawain's changeable heroism in the two worlds, the otherworldly characters' indifference to hyperreal dangers, and in the story's *deus ex machina* ending. As a final point, I will show that, in turn, the modern reader's assumptions regarding the medieval world—the “real” Middle Ages—are exposed as hilariously fictive and reflect more of our modern reality than that of medieval Europe. Not only does Arthur and his court live in a Baudrillardian hyperreal dream, but so do we. And we created them both.

On its face, my task seems impossible. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreal in *Simulacra and Simulation* specifically denotes the postmodern condition, signaling a point in history when actual semiotic referentials were lost. In short, words and ideas which point to real experiences, moments in time, and interactions have disappeared forever from modern life. Baudrillard explicitly points us to the time between the world wars and the cold war of the twentieth century: “The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline in strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto a stage of simulation” (43). After such trauma, our history lost all sense of a definite referent and began instead to reproduce simulations of historical mythologies and present-day imaginings, realities which never really existed. Making the argument that current culture has fetishized a hyperreal Arthuriana in order to make sense of its current state is the easy part. Anyone who goes to a Renaissance Festival can see that. I would contend, however, that such a theory can be applied to a work produced before this specifically twentieth century trauma, for we were already producing

simulations of simulations and calling them “authentic” (e.g. thirteenth century Round Table Tournaments). There is no clearer example of this simulacrum than Arthur himself, the chivalric code, and the Golden Age of England. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains a wealth of examples which will help to support this reading. Each of the key players in the story, including the land itself, exists in tandem: king/hyperreal king, hero/hyperreal hero, seductress/hyperreal seductress, monster/hyperreal monster, villain/hyperreal villain. However, the hyperreal version of each pair exists not in the Otherworld but in the courtly one, each a plastic form of what they are supposedly simulating, a Disneyland version of themselves. In the end, this imbalance must be acknowledged but only as a surface detail, as Gawain will assimilate back into the hyperreal of his own accord—a situation which proves frustrating when the reader knows that *he* knows it is fake.

Corinne Saunders claims that, even though otherworldly magic can be full of contradictions and impossibilities without explanation, the Otherworld’s profound effects on the courtly world can be defined and discussed: “The magic of the otherworld never needs to be explained, excused, or enacted through studied practices. Rather, faery enchantment shapes, mis-shapes and transforms human lives, sometimes promoting but most often challenging the social order that romance tends to uphold” (204). *Gawain* is a classic chivalric quest, a medieval masterpiece, but it also leaves the modern reader with many unanswered questions in its ending, opening up many opportunities for interpretation and discussion. There is a very clear courtly world in *Gawain*, along with a very clear Otherworld meant deliberately to mirror each other. There is also a vast amount of literature written about the text, especially as a typical example of an

otherworldly border crossing, but also in how it positively differs in sophistication from contemporary tales in both poetry and plot. Yet it does not seem that anyone has yet explored the extent to which Bertilak's realm, the Otherworld, is free to encompass more of what seems to be true, right, and familiar based on the idealistic moral code of the time (i.e. chivalry), while Arthur's is an Absolute Fake. The reason the Otherworld has this freedom is, first, because it has dismissed the validity of the courtly world as a mere hyperreality, and, second, that it is a simulation of nothing and can therefore be anything it wishes at any time. Analyzing the story based on this difference between worlds could lead us to a new understanding of what we view as "history" and its impact on our present expectations.

### **The Pentangle: Signifying a Knight**

If, at the heart of my chapter, there is a comparison of worlds, one courtly and one other, it is necessary to first establish the criteria by which they are being judged. To *Gawain's* original audience, certain values and character traits would have had obvious connotations, especially regarding morality. As Mendlesohn points out, literature that employs fantastic elements, such as an otherworld journey, "relies on a moral universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be, a belief that the universe should yield to moral precepts" (5). This is very much the case at both the beginning and the end of *Gawain*. The core moral principles for an Arthurian knight, in fact for the court itself, are *trawthe* and the code of chivalry. *Trawthe*, according to Paul Battles, "concerns fidelity to one's pledged word," even if that means death (17). Even though his pact with the Green Knight is presented as a "Crystmas goman" (283), Gawain must stick to his promise to return the following year and take the Green

Knight's blow. Arthur, as king and head of moral society, must also display *trawthe* not only by providing a champion to partake in the challenger's game, but by producing him at the agreed-upon time and place a year hence. A weakness in the king's *trawthe*, or that of his knight, would reflect a weakness in the court itself.

The chivalric ethos of the late Middle Ages consisted of three parts: physical strength, courteousness, and piety (Battles 18). These could also be explained as “‘feudal’ (serving one’s lord), ‘courtly’ (serving one’s lady), and ‘religious’ (serving God).” In order to preserve the integrity of this code, the collective belief was that “a weakness in any single aspect undermines the soundness of the whole” (19), famously symbolized by the golden Pentangle on Sir Gawain’s shield. A five-pointed star created by an endless knot structure, the Pentangle in this poem stands for the five fives of knightly virtue:

Fyrst he was funden fautles in his fyve wyttes,  
And efte fayled never the freke in his fyve fynGRES,  
And alle his aFYaunce upon folde was in the fyve woundes  
That Cryst kaght on the croys, as the crede telles.  
And where-so-ever thys mon in melly was stad,  
His thro thought was in that, thurgh alle other thynges,  
That alle his fornes he feng at the fyve joys  
[. . .]  
The fyft fyve that I finde the frek used  
Was fraunchyse and felawschyp forbe al thyng  
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were never,  
And pite, that passes alle poynes, thyse pure fyve (640-53)

[First he was found faultless in his five senses,  
And next the man never failed in his five fingers,  
And all his faith upon the earth was in the five wounds  
That Christ caught on the cross as the creed tells.  
And wheresoever this man was halted in battle  
His steadfast thought was in the wounds above all other things,  
That all his force he derived from the five joys  
That the gracious queen of heaven had for her child.

[. . .]

The fifth five that the man used  
Was generosity and friendship above all things,  
His cleanliness and his courtesy were never crooked  
And compassion that passes all understanding, these pure five]<sup>3</sup>

Five senses (wit and mental acuity), five fingers (strength), five wounds (faith), five joys (happiness in purity and piety), and five knightly virtues: generosity, friendship, cleanliness, courtesy, and compassion. Not only will these expectations guide Gawain on his quest, but they outline the values of his society by which all leaders and lands are to be judged. Together they also specify how he is to show loyalty to lord, lady, and God simultaneously, without any part of the knot breaking. While many scholars have argued that *Gawain*, due to its focus on virtue, faith, and piety, is a religious allegory, Aronstein argues that these interpretations miss the point: the story is entirely about Arthur's reputation and upholding power (140). Christian devotion is merely an understandable

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<sup>3</sup> All translations are the author's own.

backdrop for a more complex look at a medieval, fictional, ideal. It is also important to remember that the Gawain poet was writing during a time when chivalric ideals and feudal devotion were already things of the past (Borroff 110). As previously discussed, both the author and the original audience would have been unbothered by this gap, as they are quite willing to accept the ideal *as* the real nonetheless, as long as it takes the form of a story.

Balancing these loyalties was a difficult act that medieval authors were “quick to exploit” (Battles 18). The *Gawain* poet is no different, specifically when Sir Gawain is faced with the chatelaine's advances; the poet certainly draws out Gawain's discomfort and the lady's sexual impropriety in order to entertain the audience. However, knowing that this standard was expected of each knight of the realm, while also knowing that they couldn't possibly live up to it, is exactly where the hyperreal peeks through—even Gawain is, by reputation, a “ladies man” according to Lady Bertilak: “And sythen I have in this hous hym that al lykes, / I schal ware my whyle wel, whyl hit lastes” (1234-35) [And then I have in this house he whom everyone loves / I shall use my time as it lasts]. Clearly the standard is there just for show. In contrast, there is no need for such a useless routine in the Otherworld which, ironically, turns out to be morally superior. The court has a shiny veneer, but falls short, while the Otherworld effortlessly succeeds in upholding the standard at every turn—even though it doesn't need to. While the courtly world is a simulation of a false memory, the Otherworld is a reality which simulates nothing at all. And, like the court's reaction to Gawain's return, all audiences, medieval and modern, must contend with this paradox whether or not they are aware of it.

### **Transitioning from Hyperreal to Real: Otherworld Border Crossings**

In works of fantasy, according to Mendlesohn, the main character is always the land itself (28). If this is true, medieval otherworld journeys—the very roots of fantasy literature—provide at least two main characters to compare, and the exact moment when the hero (almost always a mortal male) crosses a border between them has a number of shared characteristics. Whether he is tricked into doing so, traverses of his own volition, or finds himself there by accident, the specific conditions are usually easy to spot: a water barrier, an unusual and sometimes treacherous bridge, snow or mist, sudden and inexplicable drowsiness, birdsong or other musical sound (Patch 4), a mound or hill called a *sid/sidh* (Sims-Williams, 61), forests of specific tree species associated with the faerie realm (Whitaker 35), a counter-clockwise circling motion on the part of the traveler (Menefee 9), and even the luring of a hero by an otherworldly female in the form of a deer or fawn (MacKillop 359). As Byrne points out, the characteristics of an otherworldly border crossing make up the most clear and “tightly knit” motif subgroup in literature and have a tendency to shift an audience’s expectations immediately, and unwittingly, from that of “real world” plausibility to “anything goes.” This gives a new rhetorical power to a story:

If the encounter with the otherworld produces a shift in the horizon of expectations that the reader and the protagonist bring to bear on the action of the text, it may be thought of as analogous to the shift in cognitive expectation that takes place when encountering the fictional text itself. This means that in many narratives, the otherworld can be thought of as a fiction within a fiction. (22)

Byrne calls these motifs “signposts to the text’s audience,” subconsciously telling us to shift what we are ready to accept from a story. For example, “what would be considered supernatural in the actual world is entirely natural in these locations” (5), just as Tolkien would remind us that when a reader is immersed in the land of Faerie, belief in the magic of that world is perfectly natural (43).

What is interesting about *Gawain* is that signs of the otherworld have already breached the courtly world long before Sir Gawain sets off on his quest and crosses the border in question. When the Green Knight disrupts King Arthur’s Christmas feast and challenges his champion to a beheading game, the audience already knows they are not in for a tale of realistic fiction. Not only have they been bombarded by the fantastical image of the Knight himself, but his abilities to surpass the physical rules of the courtly world have been clearly presented:

The fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe,  
That fele hit foyned wyth her fete there hit forth roled.  
The blod brayd fro the body, that blykked on the grene.  
And nawther faltered ne fel the freke never the helder,  
Bot stythly he start forth upon styf schonkes,  
And runyschly he raght out, there as renkkes stoden,  
Laght to his lufty hed and lyft hit up sone,  
And sythen bowes to his blonk, the brydel he cachches,  
Steppes into stel-bawe and strydes alofte,  
And his hede by the here in his honde haldes;  
And sadly the segge hym in his sadel sette

As non unhap had hym ayled, thagh hedles he were (426-38)

[The fair head from the neck hit the earth,

So that many kicked it with their feet where it rolled forth.

The blood burst from the body that shone on the green.

And neither faltered nor fell the man none the more,

But forcefully he started forth upon stiff legs,

And roughly he reached where men stood,

Grabbed his lovely head and lifted it soon up

And then turns to his horse, the bridle he catches,

Steps into the stirrups and strides aloft,

And holds his head in his hand by the hair;

And rigorously the man sits himself in his saddle

As if no mishap had ailed him, even though he were headless]

In this scene, the Green Knight behaves as if the rules of the courtly world neither affect him nor garner any notice. He picks up his severed head, blood flowing everywhere, and moves through his business without flinching. In fact, the brightly colored blood landing on the green of his body is described as aesthetically beautiful (and even festive for the holiday). Clearly the rules he plays by are different, no matter what world he inhabits at any given time. This is reminiscent of the 1999 Wachowski Brothers' film *The Matrix*, a movie which admittedly pays homage to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (Irwin 1-2). In the film, once a character internalizes that the world they live in is merely a simulation of reality, a hyperreal, they are able to both manipulate it and move through it untouched by danger. Here, the Green Knight behaves in an identical manner: dismissing

the power of the court world's hyperreality, he is able to lift his own head from the ground and address the crowd while holding it in his hand. The Otherworld has established itself to be more real, and therefore more powerful, than the illusory courtly realm, and Sir Gawain, bound by *trawthe*, must now cross the border to see if these same rules will apply to him. He has been offered the same "red pill" given to Neo in the film. The fact that he alone is invited to make sense of this unbelievable situation highlights the courtiers' hyperreality even more. They also were present for the Green Knight's otherworldly behavior, and yet they forget about it almost as soon as it is over. Since his actions defy definition within their hyperreality, they move on as if it never had happened. The event immediately becomes story instead of history.

Gawain, then, is not only taking a journey of honor, as he is bound to uphold his end of the bargain and represent his uncle's kingdom, but he is also on a lonely journey of intellectual discovery as he learns that there is more to life than mere knightly deeds. To do so, he must traverse the line between a world he has already mastered (Arthur's court) and a world in which he is almost a child (Bertilak's realm). As Gawain travels between Logres and Hautdesert in search of the Green Chapel, unaware of the lessons he must learn, many of the aforementioned border signals are present, such as snow, circling, sleepiness, and a lady's guidance. Additionally, according to Whitaker, the time of year during which he travels is also significant: "Gawain, like Cuchulainn and other Celtic heroes, begins his journey at Samhain, the time of year when the barriers are down and the *sidh* mounds are open" (35). While all religious holy days indicate either the beginning or end of a journey in medieval romance, Samhain specifically marks a time when the otherworldly border is more porous. All signs point to a moment of dramatic

irony when the audience—medieval and modern—should sit up and pay attention as the rules are about to change. Directly before Gawain’s crossing, the poet informs us that “So many mervayl bi mount ther the mon fyndes, / Hit were to tore for to telle of the tenthe dole” (718-19) [The man found so many marvels there by the mountain, / It would be too difficult to tell the tenth part]. Included in these marvels are “wormes” [dragons], “wolves,” “wodwos” [wild, cave-dwelling men], “bulles, beres, and bores” [bulls, bears, and boars], and finally “etaynes” [giants] (720-23). In these scenes, the fantastic and the mundane are mixed together as equally-plausible fiends with which Gawain must contend, and, as God’s and Arthur’s true champion (two out of the three knightly loyalties) still located in the courtly world, he is always victorious. This mix of creatures gives way to other “signposts” that we are approaching an otherworldly border:

When the colde cler water fro the cloudes schadde  
And fres er hit falle mught to the fale erthe,  
Ner slayn wyth the slete he sleped in his yrnys  
Mo nyghtes then innoghe in naked rokkes,  
Ther-as claterande fro the crest the colde borne rennes  
And hinged heghe over his hede in hard iisse-ikkles. (727-32)  
[When the cold clear water fell from the skies  
And froze before it might fall to the pale earth,  
Nor slain with the sleet he slept in his armor  
More nights than enough on naked rocks,  
Thereas clattering from the mountain crest runs the cold river  
And hung over his head in hard icicles.]

Thus encountering snow, a frozen river, and extreme fatigue, Gawain appeals to his lady, Saint Mary, whose likeness is engraved on his inner shield to remind him of his sworn virtues:

To Mary made his mone  
That ho hym red to ryde  
And wysse hym to sum wone. (736-39)  
[The knight at that time  
To Mary made his prayer  
That she would advise him to ride  
And guide him to some dwelling.]

While she does not appear as a faerie mistress to trick the knight into crossing, it is significant that immediately after praying to her for guidance, the forest opens up to reveal a castle on a mound and his clear path forward. As the emblem of chaste goodness and his Christian faith, Mary is neither a member of the courtly hyperreal nor an otherworld enchantress, and her blessing on his journey over the border shows that fulfilling his *trawthe* by crossing this strange border also shows loyalty to heaven. He is not following a mistress into sin, nor is he becoming distracted from his quest, as many heroes are by the Otherworld. Instead, his otherworld journey *is* his quest, both to God and king, and also to his audience who will immediately, upon comparison to the otherworld, weigh Logres and find it wanting.

The moment Gawain awakens following his prayer, he rides into a forest “Of hore okes ful hoge, a hundreth togeder, / The hasel and the hawthorne were harled al samen, / With roghe, raged mosse rayled aywhere.” (743-45) [Of very huge ancient oaks,

hundreds together / The hazel and the hawthorn were twisted together / With rough ragged moss strewn everywhere]. As Whitaker points out, every part of this forest, especially the species of tree, signifies an enchanted realm of faerie origin (35). Even the castle itself, in the midst of these trees, rests on a mound surrounded by water. There is no doubt that Gawain is now in the Otherworld where, as my thesis argues, the rules he is used to in the hyperreal Logres are no longer in play. Yet it is here that Gawain will be used as a pawn of both worlds.

Martin Puhvel contends that not only does the poet provide border characteristics when Gawain first encounters Hautdesert and Bertilak himself, but also as he leaves the castle to encounter the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. On the night before the encounter, Gawain lies awake listening to a powerful snowstorm outside:

The snawe snitered full snart, that snaped the wylde,  
The werbelande wynde wapped fro the hyghe,  
And drof uche dale ful of dryftes ful grete. (2003-05)  
[The snow fell bitterly, that nipped the wild beasts,  
The whistling wind rushed from the heights,  
And drove each dale full of very great drifts.]

Showing the inevitability of this otherworld encounter, the snowstorm is relentless and, as Puhvel points out, “represents a reflection of the tradition of the elfin storm, . . . intended to be perceived by the audience as part of the testing of Sir Gawain by magic of the fairy kind” (226). As he travels to the Chapel, Gawain encounters a combination of cold mists, mounds of snow, and, oddly, boiling streams he must cross. The Green Chapel itself is situated on “A balw berw bi a bonke, the brymme bysyde” (2172) [A

rounded mound by a bank, the water beside], which suggests a *sid*, or faerie mound, similar to that of Hautdesert Castle. Some, including Richard North, even contend that the Chapel and the Castle are one and the same, Hautdesert dissolving into its true form as the ritual comes to an end, the secret is revealed, and Gawain is confronted with the truth (qtd. in Byrne 60-61). Next to the Chapel, again, “The borne blubred therinneas hit boyled hade” (2174) [The stream bubbled therein as if it had boiled]. The juxtaposition of boiling water and snowy banks, along with the many other border crossing motifs, only heightens the otherworld feeling of this climactic scene, though, according to Byrne, the poet simultaneously accentuates and diminishes the power of these signposts, usually used to drive the audience’s expectations:

Not only is the Green Knight revealed to be identical with the (seemingly) real world Bertilak, but whatever physical and metaphysical significance the conventions of otherworld description would encourage the audience to attach to the ‘boiling’ waters of the river are dissolved with an almost flippant lightness of touch as the Green Knight merely hops over it as he approaches Gawain. (60)

To what ends, however? I would contend that the Green Knight’s ability to disregard the boiling river with one jovial bound is reminiscent of Neo’s ability to dodge bullets in *The Matrix*. The poet is playing with us, and the boiling water is merely a distraction. The otherworldly characters in the story are able to move freely and carelessly around violent snowstorms, swinging axes, boiling streams, and even sexual temptation because they realize that they aren’t real dangers, just a wink at the audience. What matters in this scene is the Great Reveal: when Gawain learns that the whole experience was an act

meant to expose both the errors of Arthur's court and Gawain's lack of true understanding.

It is clear that the courtly nonpareil ever-present in medieval romance is ideological in nature: not even Gawain is able to uphold its standards perfectly, and yet, according to Baudrillard, "Ideology only corresponds to a corruption of reality through signs; simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs" (27). By this view, Gawain has stepped over the border between the short-circuited world to one which dismisses, in fact flat out ignores, the hyperreal. While Arthur's world seems to uphold the chivalric ideology and medieval aristocratic norms, Bertilak's easily disregards the endlessly duplicated, simulated surface. As previously mentioned, this frees up the Otherworld to effortlessly best the courtly world at its own game: true chivalry, *trawthe*, and bravery. Arthur and his court represent only the absence of a sign, a mythology and a dream, which is why Gawain is at a loss trying to uphold its virtues in the Otherworld. The Otherworld not only has its own set of signs signifying its otherness, but it is able to uphold all courtly virtues without any requirement to do so.

### **More King than a King: Arthur and Bertilak**

The first fitt begins with an extensive lineage tying England back to the Trojan wars, presumably to elevate the legitimacy of the kingdom as well as its current ruler, Arthur:

Sithen the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye,  
The borge brittened and brent to brondes and askes,  
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wrought  
Was tried for his tricherie, the trewest on erthe.

Hit was Ennias the athel, and his highe kynde,  
That sithen depreced provinces, and patrounes bicomme  
Welneghe of al the wele in the west iles:

[. . .]

And fer over the French flod Felix Brutus  
On many bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settes (1-14)  
[After the siege and assault at Troy ceased,  
The citadel smashed and burned to cinders and ashes  
The man that wrought the treacherous schemes there  
Was tried for his treachery, the clearest on earth.

It was Anneas the noble and his high descendents  
Who afterward subjugated provinces and became lords  
Of well nigh all the wealth in the west isles:

[. . .]

And far over the French flood Felix Brutus  
On many very broad banks he settles Britain]

As Battles explains, this practice was common in medieval histories, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth, and used by any king who wished to tie themselves first to ancient Rome and then to Arthur (31). Not only does this set up the legitimacy and power of the throne of England, but, in the wheel of this stanza, the poet alludes to the island's problematic past:

Where werre and wrake and wonder  
Bi sythes has wont therinne,

And oft bothe blysse and blunder  
Ful skete has skyfted synne. (16-19)  
[Where war and ruin and wonder  
By turns have dwelt therein,  
And often both bliss and blunder  
Have shifted placed very rapidly since.]

Clearly we are meant to assume that this tale will contribute to its complicated history, both in “bliss” and in “blunder.” This introduction then connects Felix Brutus to Arthur, who, as the “hendest” [most courteous] of kings, successfully united the island into one kingdom. The first issue the reader encounters regarding Arthur is a problematic timeline, one we are expected to embrace, I assume, with a willing suspension of disbelief. The opening Christmas feast, which displays utmost opulence and wealth, is attended by “The most kyd knyghtes under Krystes selven” [The most famous knights below Christ himself] (51) and also by the most beautiful women in the land. “It is a virtually endless party,” Aronstein explains, “occupied by the beautiful people, smug and snug in their wealth and reputation, hosting an over-the-top holiday bash” (135). This is Arthur at the peak of his fame, having united all Britannia, established the Round Table, and proven his knights’ worth with many great deeds.

At the outset, he seems like the model of great kingliness. However, in line 54, the poet tells us “For al was this fayre folk in her first age” [For all of these fair folk were in their youngest years]. How, if this group is in the bloom of their youth, can they also have established a reputation of strength and wisdom throughout the world? How could Arthur be both the “Kyng hyghest mon of wyllle” [the highest man of character] while

still “sumwhat childgered” [somewhat boyish] (57, 85)? One explanation might be that we are to take this detail with the proverbial grain of salt, that the poet is merely setting the stage with a young, beautiful company of revelers at the height of their happiness and power. However, even the Green Knight notices this discrepancy and mocks the crowd for it:

“Nay, frayst I no fyght! In fayth I thee telle,  
Hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdles chylder.  
If I were hasped in armes on a heghe steded,  
Here is no mon me to mach, for myghtes so wayke.” (279-82)

[No, I seek no fight! In faith, I tell thee  
There are about on this bench only beardless children.  
If I were enclosed in arms and on a high steed  
There is no man to match me as they are so weak in might.]

While the Green Knight does admit that Arthur displays the courtesy that he is famous for, he is deeply disappointed that his army, supposedly “The wyghtest and worthyest of the worldes kynde” [The mightiest and the worthiest of the world’s kind] (261), are but hot-headed young boys. In an added moment of insult, the Green Knight, lower in rank than Arthur, addresses the king with the familiar pronoun “thou” instead of the formal “ye” (Battles 43). It seems that Arthur, in these opening scenes, is given too many positive—often mutually exclusive—characteristics for one figurehead to display without incident. He is politically and militarily successful, benevolent, courteous, generous, strong, wise, happy, grim, fearless, and a youthful, beautiful man—a hyperreal version of a medieval king. The Green Knight’s mocking and irreverence shows both that this image

is impossible and that the audience (as well as the poet) is aware of it. The Otherworld is poking through the surface of the courtly world and calling attention to its hyperreality.

Following this scene across the otherworld boundary to Hautdesert, we can compare Arthur's introduction to that of the Green Knight's alter ego, Lord Bertilak. The description of the castle as Gawain rides up also suggests a powerful king, as it is guarded by "garytes ful gaye" [very noble guards] before "A better barbican that burne blusched upon never" [the best barbican that knight had ever seen] (791, 793). The castle itself is "the comlokest that ever knyght aghte" (767) [as comely as a knight could own]. As Marie Borroff reminds us, "We have no reason to think that this judgement excludes Camelot; compare the similar judgement that Bertilak's wife is lovelier than Guenevere [945]" (103). He is greeted at the gate by a host of servants and courtiers eager to serve him, some on their knees, and bring him to the lord of the manor. The great hall is lit by a huge fire, Gawain is waited on hand and foot, and Bertilak's first move is to greet the knight and embrace him as an old friend. The description of the "lorde of the lede" [lord of the people] (843) is filtered through Gawain's own eyes and stands in sharp contrast to the handsome and youthful Arthur:

Gawayn glyght on the gome that godly him gret  
And thught hit a bolde burne that the burgh aghte—  
A hoge hathel for the nones, and of hyghe eldee.  
Brode, bryght, was his berde, and al bever-hued,  
Sturne, stif on the stryththe on stalworth schonkes,  
Felle face as the fyre, and fre of hys speche;  
And wel hym semed, for sothe, as the segge thught,

To lede a lortschyp in lee of leudes ful gode. (842-49)

[Gawain looked at the man that greeted him well

And thought it a bold man who owned the burgh—

A huge man for the occasion and of many years.

Broad, bright was his beard and all beaver-colored,

Stern, firm in his stance on stalwart legs,

Fierce as the fire in his face, and free with his speech;

And well he seemed forsooth, as the knight thought,

To lead a castle of very good men.]

While Arthur is said to possess experience, wisdom, physical strength, prowess, and military might all in a youthful body, Bertilak seems to be the more realistic embodiment of what such a leader would look like and behave—all at an appropriate age. While Arthur's entourage is a silly, party-loving group of medieval frat boys, Bertilak's is noble, sober, loyal, ready to serve, and quick to follow their leader's commands. Even though Arthur readily offers the Green Knight hospitality, no one in his household moves to do so immediately, as Bertilak's does. In each introduction, it is clear that the two leaders are different, not merely in that Bertilak is superior, but in that Arthur-as-advertised is an impossibility. As we will see below, this is the recipe for a simulacrum, while Bertilak is able to exist freely without an image to simulate.

After the Green Knight mocks Arthur's court for their youth and inexperience, tellingly, no one gets up to take offense or challenge him in this assessment. Neither does the group make any move to accept the Knight's game and uphold Arthur's honor. Either of these omissions alone would be enough to shame the court, which the poet makes very

clear to the audience: “If he hemstowned upon fyrst, stiller were thanne / Alle the heredmen in halle, the hygh and the lowe” [If he astonished them at first, even stiller were they then / All the witnesses in the hall, the high and the low] (300-01). The Knight himself is surprised by their cowardly response, famously shouting:

“What, is this Arthures hous,” quoth the hathel thenne,  
“That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?  
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,  
Your grynellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?  
Now is the revel and the renoun of the Rounde Table  
Overwalt wyth a worde of on wyys speche,  
For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!” (309-15)  
[“What, is this Arthur’s house,” quoth the man then,  
Whose fame runs through so many realms?  
Where is your pride now and your conquests,  
Your fierceness and your grimness and your great words?  
Now is the revel and the renown of the Round Table  
Overwhelmed by one word of one man’s speech,  
For all tremble with dread without one blow shown?”]

In response, the crowd remains silent, forcing their king to make the first move in defense of the court’s good name. It isn’t until Arthur holds the Green Knight’s axe aloft, ready to strike, that Gawain rises to volunteer instead. While Arthur shows himself to be a strong leader in this moment, his weakness is in his followers, those he has chosen to surround himself with. They seemed perfectly content to watch their leader pick up the deadly

gauntlet without moving to do so first. In the context of the Pentangle and the three loyalties, the non-action in this scene betrays the lord as well as God by showing discourtesy, cowardice, and a lack of both friendship and faith. The image of a strong, youthful, and beautiful crowd is merely that: a static image incapable of taking action and being useful. In contrast, Bertilak's house is quick to take action the moment the lord has need, often anticipating his whim with an eye to courtesy first. In an Otherworld, the standard for virtue is often separate from the courtly world, as it is able to function on its own set of rules, which may or may not be communicated to the audience (Fries 3).

While the structures of Hautdesert seem ordinary (the castle, the lord, the servants, the food), there is a feeling of extraordinariness: "The sense of heightened reality, extraordinary occurrence, and the combination of the magical or supernatural with the familiar structures and conventions of courtly behavior is typical of romance treatments of otherworldly events" (Saunders 185). That might lead one to paint the *Otherworld* as a hyperreality—more real than real. Only in this case, the scene and the characters are not just familiar, Bertilak outdoes Arthur at every turn, specifically because of the lost referential of Arthuriana. *Gawain's* Arthur has a template based on a fictional ideal, and, as a result, will forever look like he is trying too hard. Neither Bertilak nor his domain have any such expectation and, therefore, come off as merely their true (albeit sometimes green) selves.

The description of the Green Knight when he first bursts onto the scene of Arthur's Christmas feast shows the poet's willingness to take liberties with the otherworld tropes of Arthurian literature in a way that further supports my point. While clearly an otherworldly creature, he is not a grotesque. The Green Knight, according to

Aronstein, “defies categorization. Giants in other Arthurian romances are clearly monstrous in their savagery . . . The Green Knight, on the other hand, apart from his size and color, epitomizes chivalric masculinity” (136). From the very beginning, the Green Knight is out-knighting the knights while maintaining his otherness merely in color and size. In a further show of courtesy and valor, he comes unarmed, unshod, and holding a holly branch representing his intention to challenge the court to a game—not a battle (which he knows he would win if the situation called for it). He is even described as handsome in contrast to Arthur’s boyishness:

And that the myriest in his muckel that myght ride:

For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,

Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,

And alle his fetures folwande, in forme that he hade,

Ful clene; (142-46)

[And namely the handsomest of his size that might ride

Because although of back and of breast all his body was massive,

Both his stomach and his waist were worthily slim,

And all his features proportioned in form that he had

Very handsomely;]

As Saunders reminds us, “Physical difference is one of the most obvious ways of reinforcing identity and the other worlds of romance abound with dwarves, giants, and other physically outlandish creatures whose aberrations circumscribe the physical normality of the central aristocratic world” (127). While the Green Knight certainly aligns with the “physically outlandish” description, by embodying the perfect masculine

form, only more powerful and in a different color, he almost mocks the men in Arthur's entourage for being much less impressive than they think they are. This again is attributed to their simulation of an impossible ideal. While Arthur's knights have to fit an image the story's audience believes to be true, they emerge as a simulacrum, a Ken-doll version of a knight. The Otherworld, however, has no such template and can therefore choose whatever form it wishes—even vaguely mortal. Borroff argues that his “real world” characteristics and otherworldly features combined make the Knight a representation of the “illusory perception” of reality (99). What we (both medieval and modern readers) believe to be real is called into question the moment we encounter his character. The fact that it chooses for the Green Knight to be more manly than the knights, and Bertilak more kingly than Arthur, just adds to the mockery of the courtly world.

After the Green Knight has left the feast and Gawain has sealed his fate, King Arthur, who is secretly troubled, announces that the entire incident was merely a Christmas interlude “to laghe and to syng / Among thise kynde caroles of knyghtes and ladyes” [to laugh and to sing / Among these pleasing carols of knight and ladies] (472-73). The courtiers and knights return to the feast as if nothing has happened, even though some of them had literally kicked around a severed head just moments before. To Aronstein, “the feast is mere whistling in the dark,” and I tend to agree with her: “Unlike other romances, in which the return to the feast marks the successful completion of the knight's quest and either the elimination or integration of the challenger, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* none of these events occur” (139). They know that, in a year's time, Gawain will most likely be killed, but, unable to do anything about it, they return to

strong drink and merry song, and the story swiftly turns to the preparation for Gawain's journey. This eerie, overly-simple shift back to normalcy again reflects a hyperreal situation. The Otherworld intruded upon a well-worn moment of absolute fakery—an Arthurian Christmas feast—and forced it to deal with a moment of intense, albeit supernatural, reality. Once it was over, what could the company do but return to the familiar pattern? As we will see in the next section, however, Gawain did not have this same luxury.

### **More Hero than a Hero: The Simulacrum of Chivalry**

Gawain's first mention in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is that he is seated on the dais directly next to Queen Guinevere, a place of honor indeed, suggesting that of all the knights present he is the most trusted and close to the king, his uncle. When he volunteers to take the Green Knight's challenge, he humbly relates that he has no virtue "bot your blod I in my bode knowe" (357) ["but your [Arthur's] blood is in my body]. The Green Knight even recognizes him by reputation once he learns his name: "Sir Gawan, so mot I thryve, / As I am ferly fayn / This dint that thou schal dryve" (387-89) [Sir Gawain, as I might thrive, / I am quite pleased / That you shall drive this blow]. In a move similar to Marie de France's otherworld lai, *Lanval*, "Even before the fairy enters the scene, the narrative insists that [the knight] is too good for the actual world" (Saunders 62). Gawain's traditional place in the romances of medieval Britain, according to Aronstein, was as the "star" of Arthur's Round Table—one modern audiences usually attribute to Lancelot (132). It is therefore tempting to view Gawain as, by nature, the best knight in the story, destined to go on the Green Knight's adventure due to his goodness and nobility. However, Gawain does not originally act because he is the best knight in the

room or even because his adherence to the virtues of the Pentangle is stronger than anyone else's there. If this had been so, there would have been no hesitation to act and Arthur would never have had time to grab the Green Knight's axe. It wasn't until the last possible moment that he says, "I beseche now with sawes sene / This melly mot be myne" (341-42) [I beseech now with plain words / This battle must be mine.]. He acts because the circumstances led him into a situation where he had no choice but to *act out his role*. He is not a hero here in the courtly world, but a simulacrum of the archetype of a hero: "Not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast" (Eco 7).

The easy assumption here is that Gawain is a flawed hero in the courtly world and learns to be a better one in the Otherworld. However, the better summation would be that hero-ness itself is pulled apart in the Otherworld, which in turn shines a light on the courtly world's hyperreality. Gawain, from the very beginning, believes in and cares deeply about the rules of chivalry, *trawthe*, and the three loyalties of the knightly order, even when he fails to perfectly live up to them. This is shown most clearly when he repents of his cowardice in the final fitt:

For care of thy knokke, cowardyse me taght  
To acorde me with covetyse, my kynde to forsake,  
That is larges and lewte that longes to knyghtes.  
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben ever  
Of trecherye and untrawthe: bothe bityde sorwe  
and care!  
I biknowe yow, knyght, here style,  
Al faety is my fare;" (2379-86)

[For fear of your blow, cowardice taught me,  
In accord with my covetousness, my nature to forsake,  
That is the generosity and loyalty befitting all knights.  
Now I am faulty and false, and have been ever afraid  
Of treachery and dishonestly: may both have sorrow  
and care!  
I confess to you, knight, meekly here,  
All flawed is my conduct;]

When he sets out from the courtly world, he is showered with the best armor, riches, and hopes of the people seemingly because of this unwavering faith in and mastery of the code. However, in the Otherworld, Gawain is only able to uphold some ideals (sexual purity) while failing at others (honesty and courage in the face of danger). Additionally, while Gawain views this failure as his greatest shame, neither the Green Knight in the Otherworld nor Arthur in the courtly world seem to care at all. In fact, he is celebrated for it in both places. How can this be? What Gawain—and the reader—must learn is not that being the best hero wins the day, but that the rules regarding heroism are fluid based entirely on how to entertain the capricious crowd. The court has laid out the rules of chivalry, but he is the only one who cares about defending and living by them indefinitely. The rules themselves are hyperreal, and this realization is his greatest disappointment.

When Baudrillard describes the hyperreality of Disneyland—the most well-known example of his theory—he not only calls out Disneyland for being hyperreal,

which should be obvious, but he then suggests that the hyperreality of Disneyland is actually a cover for the larger illusion:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belongs to the hyperreal order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus saving the reality principle. (12-13)

In *Gawain*, it is the courtly world which corresponds to Disneyland, not the Otherworld, even though the “signposts” laid out earlier in this chapter show Gawain to be crossing into a faerie realm. We don’t have that escapist option, however, in Baudrillard’s America. Our only recourse, if we so choose, is to see Disneyland all around us in the everyday routines we take to be real. Furthermore, Los Angeles, in Baudrillard’s explanation, is no more real than Disneyland itself. It is full of movie sets and beautiful actors retroactively propelled into simulated youth by plastic surgery. The hyperreal moves out from this center in concentric circles: Disneyland, Los Angeles, California, America. There is no escape from these images in Baudrillard’s America, no otherworld border corresponding to Gawain’s journey. Our cities, jobs, families, and hobbies are all part of the simulation, and we are stuck here, whether or not we choose to open our eyes to the hyperreal situation. Gawain’s return home and re-assimilation into the court then mirrors our own, modern, everyday experience.

At the start of his journey, Gawain leaves the courtly world with a long description of his rich and elaborate arming, including that of his horse, a typical sequence which is “in keeping with the emphasis on wealth and power in countless

romances, in which the ideal knight is defined as a strong warrior, richly and beautifully armed” (Aronstein 140). The final touch is the description of his shield and the Pentangle, and yet, once he crosses the otherworld border, these rich descriptions are no longer mentioned. In fact, under the ruse that he is “not wel waryst / Nauther of sostnaunce ne of slepe” (1094-95) [not well recovered / Neither of sustenance nor of sleep], Gawain is relegated to the domestic sphere during his visit instead of invited to hunt with the men. He is here caused to change out of his hyperreal garments and be humbled, all under the guise of courtesy, and he is quick to accept the offer as it does not yet violate his knightly virtues. He immediately tells the household his quest, asking for their help and holding nothing back:

Forthy, sir, this enquest I require yow here,  
That yet me telle with trawthe if ever ye tale herde  
Of the Grene Chapel, where hit on grounde stondes,  
And of the knyght that hit kepes, of colour of grene. (1056-59)  
[Thus, sir, this question I ask you here,  
That you tell me with trawthe if ever you head tell  
Of the Green Chapel where it stands on the ground,  
And of the knight who keeps it, of green color.]

They offer to help him as the entire household is in on the deception, at which time Gawain enters into a pact with Lord Bertilak to be played out while he waits for New Year’s Day to come:

“Yet firre,” quoth the freke, “a forwarde we make:  
What-so-ever I wynne in the wod, hit worthies to youres;

And what chek so ye acheve, chaunge me therforne.  
Swete, swap we so sware with trawthe,  
Whether, leude, so lympe here other better.” (1105-09)  
[“Yet further,” quoth the man, “an accord we make:  
Whatsoever I win in the wood, it becomes yours;  
And what gain you so achieve, change me for it.  
Dear man, let us swap and swear with trawthe,  
Where, lord, it turns out better or worse.”]

The pact is then sealed, in which both men will exchange their winnings each day until Gawain must depart. Bertilak, in the masculine world of the hunt, will give to Gawain whatever he brings home from his ventures, and Gawain swears to exchange with Bertilak whatever he “wins” in the domestic world while they are away. The implication is that whatever affection the chatelaine gives to Gawain, he must then share with Bertilak, but the deeper suggestion is that, while Bertilak will be the “hunter” in his sphere, Gawain will be the “hunted” in his.

The otherworld landscape, as Saunders reminds us, “can shift from threatening to delightful and back again, and its inhabitants are often distinguished by similarly shifting qualities” (180). Gawain learns this on the first morning when, in contrast to the hunting party who heads out early on horseback to the sound of powerful bugles, the knight sleeps in. So soundly he slumbers that he doesn’t even notice when the chatelaine first sneaks into his room. What follows is a comedic description of the beautiful woman crawling into bed with Gawain—“And lenged there selly longe to loke when he wakened” (1194) [And remained there wondrous long to look when he wakened]—and

him, alarmed at the situation, pretending to be asleep as long as he could while figuring out what to do:

And the burne schamed,

And layde hym doun lystyly and let as he slepte

[. . .]

The lede lay lurked a ful longe whyle,

Compast in his concience to what that cace myght

Meve other amount;

[. . .]

Then he wakenede and wroth, and to hir warde torned,

And unlouked his yye-lyddes and let as hym wondered,

And sayned hym, as bi his saw the saver to worthe, (1189-1202)

[And the man was shamed

And he laid himself down craftily and let on as if he slept.

[. . .]

The man lay like this a very long while,

Considered in his conscience to what that situation

Might amount;

[. . .]

Then he wakened and stretched and turned her way

And unlocked his eyelids and let on as if startled

And signed himself as in prayer the saver to save]

This is not a description of a strong, courtly hero, an Arthurian knight. This is a man terrified of impropriety and completely at a loss for how to avoid it. His next move is to beg her to leave him alone while he dresses properly so he “schulde kever the more comfort to karp yow wyth” (1221) [should obtain more comfort to speak with you]. This clumsy fear and inartful dodging becomes Gawain’s typical character throughout his time at Hautdesert and even at the Green Chapel when he arrives there on New Year’s Day, flinching away from the axe’s blow in a way that both shames his hyperreal identity and exposes it for the illusion it is.

According to Saunders, Gawain’s time in the home of Lord Bertilak “depict(s) an otherworldly chase of the enchantress for her prey—but one the hero must resist” (196). This image, however, might put too much agency in the hands of the chatelaine. Typically, in an otherworld journey, the figure of the fairy mistress is central and almost always pulls the strings. In Arthur A. Wachsler’s outline of the “elaborate ruse” motif in Celtic otherworld tales, the fairy mistress usually lures the hero either by her beauty, her riches, or a promise of fame. The hero, blinded by desire, acts “rashly and brings about a loss of face,” forcing him to travel to the Otherworld in an effort to “restore his damaged reputation.” In the end, after accomplishing a task only he is able to fulfill, he marries the fay “who is determined to have him” (42). In certain ways, Lady Bertilak fits this pattern, but not in the way a medieval audience would have been used to. She isn’t powerful enough. Gawain does not travel to the Otherworld for love of her nor by her order. He will not be rewarded with her hand in marriage as she is already married to his courteous host. In fact, she has very little to do with the overall frame of the story at all, but is, herself, a ruse. By hinting at another well-worn motif, the “signposts” are there for the

audience to shift their expectations, but warily. Rather than a terrible ogre holding her prisoner, her husband is the model of a handsome, knightly lord. Rather than living in a locked tower, she moves freely about the rich abundance of her castle and grounds and has liberal, unsupervised access to a handsome young knight for many days in a row. Something must be up. The poet reveals in the end that she is acting on the orders of her husband as opposed to the typical fairy mistress who, such as Lanval's wife for instance, acts on her own impulse and authority, combining the lawless power of the otherworld and the physical and moral vulnerability of medieval femininity (Saunders 192). Throughout the third fitt, Lady Bertilak acts out a Potiphar's Wife routine, threatening Gawain's purity, loyalty, and *trawthe*, but it is all an act to see how virtuous he really is. She therefore turns out to be the ideal wife figure while her assumptive role—that of the fairy seductress—is the Absolute Fake.

These scenes are chock-full of “red herrings” as Byrne calls them, all shifting attention away from the “elaborate ruse” (60). For one thing, the chatelaine is very beautiful and the temptation is real. Indeed, in his thoughts, Gawain favorably compares her beauty to his queen's: “And wener then Wenore, as the wywe thoght” (945) [And more lovely than Guinevere as the man thought]. It is difficult here in this comparison, and later during Gawain's misogynistic speech decrying the moral traps women set for men, not to envision the future collapse of Arthuriana stemming from Queen Guinevere's own adultery:

For so was Adam in erde with one bygyled,  
And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsons—  
Dalya dalt hym hys wyrde—and Davyth thereafter

Was blended with Barsabe, that much bale tholed.  
Now these were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a wyne huge  
To luf hom wel and leve hem not, a leude that couthe.  
For thes wer forne the freest that folwed alle the sele  
Excellently, of alle thyse other under heven-ryche

That mused;

And alle thay were brwyled  
With wymmen that thay used.

Thagh I be now bigyled,

Me think me burde be excused. (2416-28)

[For so was Adam on earth by one misled,

And Solomon with many ones and Samson thereafter—

Delilah dealt him his fate—and David thereafter

Was blinded by Bathsheba who suffered much sorrow.

Since these were harmed by female wiles, it were a huge win

To love them well and trust them not, any man who could

For there were of old the freest who followed all the fortune

Without equal of all these others under mighty heaven

who lived;

And all they were deluded

With women who used them.

That I was not tricked,

I think I should be excused.]

The tone of this speech differs greatly from the young man whose only boast was that he was Arthur's nephew. Why he chooses to give this speech when the sexual temptation of Lady Bertilak had nothing to do with his downfall is difficult to explain, but the distraught Gawain is momentarily making excuses for his weakness in taking the garter. While the greatest men who ever lived were tricked by women (even the future King Arthur), he resisted, and he wishes for that to be taken into account in the face of his failure.

The chatelaine's spotless character, revealed later, makes the above speech even more absurd. In actuality, she combines two archetypal female characters and easily puts all of the women in the courtly and other worlds to shame. Not only is she lovelier than Guinevere, she is more virtuous in her devotion to Lord Bertilak. Additionally, as evidenced by her lengthy conversations with Gawain, she is also more learned and clever, using what Carolyn Larrington describes as women's "countervailing weapon to use against men: the power of words. Women use words to persuade or cajole, but they can also use verbal dexterity to extract promises from men, promises which, under the rules of honor culture, the men are bound to keep" (51). Instead of using these powers for selfish gain, however, as many women do in medieval tales, every action is motivated by her husband's command, making her the model of loyalty. She is also superior to the traditional fairy mistress, who is often motivated by some selfish desire—usually to marry the hero. Just as the Green Knight is impervious to the physical dangers of the hyperreal world, the chatelaine is impervious to the temptations so often attributed to women in medieval stories. Lady Bertilak has every virtue and every luxury, and her role is solely to assist the otherworld in its quest to highlight the courtly world's flaws and

Gawain's misplaced faith in the chivalric code. The fault here lies not with the wiles of women but with the mortal fears of men, which prove in the end to be entirely unnecessary. Even the peril is hyperreal.

After their first morning together, Gawain is prepared for the chatelaine, making sure he is awake and decently dressed before her entry. He is able to keep her at bay with courteous speech and flattery without betraying his host, despite the increasing intensity of her attempts. At this point, Gawain has kept his oath of loyalty to his lord and purity to God, but is having a very difficult time balancing these with the obligations to his lady, who, citing his reputation with women, begs him to teach her what he knows about love and tells him he is welcome to her body. With his doom within reach, however, he gives in to an entirely new weakness. While withstanding sexual temptation seemed easy for Gawain to pull off, she then offers him a token that very well might save his life from the Green Knight's blow:

For what gode so is gorde with this grene lace,  
While he hit hade hemely halches aboute,  
Ther is no hathel under heven tohewe hyn that myght,  
For he myght not bbe slayn for slyght upon erthe. (1851-54)  
[For any man who is so girded with this green belt,  
While he neatly has it fastened about,  
There is no man under heaven that might cut him down,  
For he might not be slain by any trick on earth.]

Fearful of the Green Knight's axe, the temptation is too much for Gawain to resist. Not only does he accept the token, but he withholds this information from Bertilak, thus

violating the terms of their agreement and betraying loyalty to both of his lords: “The exchange of winnings, like the exchange of blows in part I, tests Gawain and, through him as its representative, the exalted reputation of the Arthurian court” (Aronstein 142). In this act, Gawain breaks the rules his courtly self swore to uphold because he views saving his life to be more important. As, in Bertilak’s house, he is acting as a surrogate for his king, this weakness can also be attributed to Arthur and the court at large. Aronstein connects this weakness to the political situation of England’s aristocracy at the time: “By exposing the faults of Arthur’s court, the unfounded rhetorical bases for its power, and the fact that chivalric virtue is not an innate quality, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* played right into the debates about class and power in post-plague England” (147). While this is very true, I, however, would like to extend this comparison beyond history and politics to reality itself. As the Green Knight makes clear in the next scene, Gawain’s gravest flaw is not that he takes the garter, nor even that he flinches away from the blow, but that he takes himself, and his position, too seriously—all signs that he still adheres unquestioningly to the hyperreality of Arthur’s court and the code of chivalry.

Even with this token, otherworld Gawain still behaves in a cowardly fashion in his rematch with the Green Knight. When the Knight takes his first blow, Gawain flinches out of the way and is nicked by the blade, which leads the Knight to bellow “Thou art not Gawayn . . . that is so goud halden, / That never arwed for no here by hylle ne be vale, / And now thou fles for ferde er thou fele harmes!” (2270-72) [You are not Gawain . . . who is hailed as so good, / That never feared any army by hill or by vale, / And now you flinch for fear before you feel harm?]. The next attempt does not miss, but

it is clear that the Knight did not intend to kill, merely wound. Immediately, Gawain leaps up, draws his sword, and demands a fair fight should the Knight wish for another blow. The terms of the contract have been fulfilled, but as Whitaker explains, not the terms Gawain was expecting: “Gawain is summoned to the Otherworld so that his courage and truth may be tested. He expects that the new year’s meeting with the Green Knight at the demonic Green Chapel will be the climax of his quest, but he learned that the more important test has occurred in the castle, as the riddling faeries decreed” (38). At this point, the Knight reveals his identity and that he had purposely sent his wife to tempt Gawain and test his worth. The reactions of each man to this news are both very different and very interesting in light of the simulacrum of chivalry.

The Green Knight laughs joyfully and congratulates Gawain, saying “Bot for ye lufed your lyf; the lasse I yow blame” (2368) [But because you loved your life, the less I blame you]. He is full of compliments for Gawain’s resistance of sexual temptation and hails him as “On the fautlest freke that ever on fote yede— / As perle bi the white pese is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi other gay knyghtes” (2363-65) [One of the most faultless men whoever went on foot— / As pearl by the white pea is of more price, / So is Gawain, in good faith, by other gay knights]. He even invites him back to the castle to rejoice with the household, all in on the game and simultaneously full of affection for the knight. Gawain, in contrast, is humiliated. His face flushes red, and he despairs openly how he has shamed himself and his lord, choosing forever to wear the green belt to remind him of his misconduct and avoid future sins. He refuses Bertilak’s invitation and, instead, chooses to return to Logres to relate his regretful conduct to Arthur. Bertilak’s invitation was meant to allow Gawain to revel in the charade, to celebrate, and

to, basically, laugh it off as the “Crystmas gomen” it was intended to be. Yet this attitude violates the foundation upon which Gawain has built his life and reputation: his red face here is not just due to anger and embarrassment, it is because he seems to be the only one taking his failure to uphold the system seriously. Chivalry, the foundation upon which his existence rests, is being proved useless and fraudulent, or, at the very least, a funny joke. Borroff explains that, since *Gawain* was not a contemporary tale, but a throwback to “a fictional past distant from the time in which the poem was written,” Gawain is “portrayed as an embodiment and upholder of [old-fashioned] ideals” (110). Since “professionalism—money paid for services rendered—had encroached upon the older chivalric ideals of feudal fidelity and Christian selflessness,” the Green Knight’s absolution of Gawain represents the knight’s upholding “in pristine brightness an ideal that the passage of time had tarnished” (111). It is a nostalgic move, not a practical one, and the Green Knight is almost patting Gawain on the head for still believing in such things, like an adult to a child who still believes in Santa Claus. While this about-face can be understood in the lawless and changeable Otherworld, the reaction of Arthur’s court is surprisingly similar:

The kyng comfortes the knyght, and alle the court als  
Laghen loude ther-at, and luflulu acorden  
That lordes and ladis that longes to the Table,  
—Uche burne of the brotherhede—a bauderyk schulde have,  
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryght grene,  
And that, for sake of that segge, in swete to were. (2513-18)

[The king comforted the knight, and all the court also  
Laughed loudly at this, and graciously agreed  
That the lords and ladies that belonged to the Table,  
—each member of the brotherhood—should wear a baldrick,  
A band of bright green about himself,  
And that, for the sake of this knight, together would wear.]

It is the shared laughter in both worlds that cuts the deepest, for Gawain's values are here played off as a game, which, I suppose, we were all told would happen at the very beginning of the story. Because there are such high stakes—the beheading of a great knight, for instance—the audience is just as bewildered as Gawain at the flippant attitude of both the Green Knight and the court. Why do none of them seem to care? Mainly, it seems, because it was a good story. As it turns out, all the vapid courtiers wished to have was amusement—“sum aventutus thyng, an uncouthe tale / of sum mayn mervayle that he myght trawe” (93-94) [some adventurous thing, an unfamiliar tale / of some great marvel that they might believe]—and that is exactly what he delivered. The reader is also cruelly indicted here for desiring only a happy ending, not a steadfast preservation of virtuous ideals, but in a simulacrum, all one's time is taken up by distraction, entertainment, and childish delight, regardless of the perilous stakes outside in the “real” world. Gawain's greatest shame is not that he failed to live up to the chivalric code, but that he was the only one in the room who still paid attention to such things.

### **Enchantress, Seductress, and Queen: A Hyperreal Triple Threat**

There is one more otherworldly issue, however, that is broached only at the end and leads to more confusion than resolution. As Gawain takes leave of Bertilak, the lord

explains that the entire episode was orchestrated by Gawain's aunt and Bertilak's feudal overlord, Morgan Le Fey:

Thurgh myght of Morgne la Fae, that in my hous lenges,

And koyntuse of clergye, bi craftes wel lernes.

The maystres of Merlyn mony has taken,

For ho has dalt drury ful dere sumtyme

With that conable klerk, that knowes alle your knyghtes

at hame;

Morgne the goddes,

Therefore, hit is hir name.

Weldes non so hyghe hawtesse

That ho ne con make ful tame.

Ho wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle

For to assay the surquidre, yif hit soth were

That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table.

Ho wayned me this wonder your wyttes to reve,

For to haf greved Gaynour and gart hir to dyye

With glopnyng of that ilke gome that gostlych speked

With this hede in his honde bfore the hyghe table. (2446-62)

[Through the power of Morgan le Fey, who resides in my house,

And is well learned in knowledge of witchcraft.

The mistress of Merlin has overcome many,

For she has had many passionate love-affairs in the past  
With that honorable clerk, who is known to all your knights  
at home;  
Morgan the goddess,  
Therefore it is her name.  
No one wields so great a haughtiness  
That she cannot be tamed.

She sent me in this way to your goodly hall  
To test the arrogance, if it is true  
The rumors of the Round Table's great renown.  
She sent me in this way to take away your wits,  
To frighten Guinevere and cause her to die  
Of fright of that same man who spoke like a ghost  
With his head in his hand before the high table.]

This admission calls into question the entire “Crystmos gomen.” Up until now, the Green Knight/Bertilak seemed to be in charge, designing the game to challenge and question the validity of Arthur’s might and reign. However, Morgan’s reasoning for the game is much more sinister and confuses the already-established plot. It is important to remember two things, though, as we iron out this confusion: first, that both audiences would already have knowledge of how Arthur’s kingdom will eventually unravel, and second, that both Morgan and Guinevere have a role in this undoing. As Timmerman explains, regarding the Otherworld/courtly world relationship, “In each instance the external threat is

preceded by an internal fracture in the order itself” (66), and Morgan’s seemingly-inflated goal is no different and focused sharply on Guinevere. Both women, and the chatelaine along with them, simultaneously represent the danger of feminine wiles and the hyperreality of such danger.

By the time Morgan is invoked by Bertilak in the end, the audience would already recognize her as the chatelaine’s opposing character at Hautdesert castle:

An other lady hir lad bi the lyft honde,  
That was alder then ho—an auncian hit semed—  
And heghly honoered with hatheles aboute.  
Bot unlyke on to loke tho ladyes were:  
For if the yonge was yep yolwe was that other;  
[. . .]  
Hir body was schort and thik,  
Hir buttokes balw and brode;  
More lykkerwys on to lyk  
Was that schohade on lode. (947-53; 966-69)  
[Another lady led her by the left hand,  
Who was older than she—ancient it seemed—  
And highly honored by men about.  
But unlike to look on those ladies were.  
For if the young was youthful, yellow was the other;  
Rich red on that former one adored everywhere  
Rough, rankled cheeks rolled on the other one;

[. . .]

Her body was short and thick,

Her buttocks big and broad,

More delicious to taste

Was the one she was leading.]

It is clear that the poet needs the hyperbolic beauty of the one figure in order to express the hyperbolic ugliness of the other; they are often described in tandem. According to Whitaker, “The second lady of the castle is so extraordinarily ugly that a medieval audience would have identified her as one who had been magically transformed or as a witch” (37). Even with these “signposts” present, Morgan is given neither power nor purpose until the finale, and even then it seems like an afterthought. While her motivation for creating chaos and uncertainty in Arthur’s court seems similar to that of the Otherworld’s as a whole, why she wishes to frighten Guinevere to death is a mystery. Witches in medieval tales did not need a motivation to cause problems—that was their *raison d’être* (Black 172)—and yet Morgan’s hatred for Arthur’s queen is palpable. While most scholars dismiss this omission as common to the tropes of medieval romance tales (Borroff 108), I believe an explanation can be found in the character/hyperreal character pattern evident throughout the story.

According to Saunders, “Morgan le Fey, as her name implies, spans human and otherworlds” (197). She is a transition figure whose otherworld identity is entwined with the chatelaine’s. The chatelaine and Morgan together represent the height of female power, while Guinevere in the courtly world is a hyperreal figurehead fit for Disney Princess status; she in fact receives little-to-no description throughout the entire poem

and indeed performs no action at all. Combined, the otherworld women have beauty, virtue, fidelity, intelligence, supernatural power, wisdom, craftiness, and even the ear of the superior lord. Guinevere is merely “ful gay” (74) [very beautiful]. Morgan’s goal is to demolish the hyperreal female—the weak, paper doll Guinevere who, as the audience knows full well, will eventually “bring about the fall of the Round Table . . . choos[ing] Lancelot over Arthur” (Aronstein 146). Morgan’s wish to destroy the Absolute Fake, while the Green Knight just wishes to poke fun at it, shows that she views the stakes to be much higher.

As the ugly yet formidable crone in the Otherworld, Gawain does not recognize Morgan, but understands that she is important: “The alder he haylises, heldande ful lowe” (972) [The elder he hails, bowing low]. His failure to investigate this woman further, distracted by the chatelaine’s beauty, is to his own detriment. Morgan’s later-revealed presence as a puppet master seems only to reiterate the main theme of the Otherworld: to expose the chinks in Arthur’s armor (or, in more Baudrillardian terms, to highlight where the hyperreal is peeking through). While the poem “foreshadows the tragic fate of Arthur’s young court, it also questions that court, and through it the ruling class of fourteenth-century England that often based its claims to power and privilege on chivalric ideals” (Aronstein 146-47). Part of the chivalric ideal is loyalty to one’s lady, and Morgan, possibly foreshadowing Arthur’s future downfall, clearly regards Guinevere to be the most dangerous of Absolute Fakes.

### **An Ending Which Deconstructs Itself**

For how much time and text is spent in the beginning to describe Gawain’s armor, the Pentangle, and his long journey to Hautdesert, the ending spends no time at all in

reverse. In a mere ten lines, the shamed and confused Gawain speeds home to accept his punishment and prove that his framework for understanding life is still valid. In being offered a new, otherworldly perspective—to take “the red pill”—the basis for his belief system has been questioned, and yet, upon returning home, he expects chivalry, *trawthe*, and the five fives of the Pentangle to be upheld. The opposite occurs, however. After Gawain relates the story, the court comforts him instead of punishing him, and chooses to wear the sign of his shame—the green garter—as a symbol of honor and solidarity. As Aronstein confirms, “The court redefines the grisly beheading game as an amusing Christmas interlude and the green girdle as a sign of victory. Furthermore, the poem exposes chivalric virtues, which were often used to bolster the aristocracy’s claim to power and privilege, to be convenient rather than constant” (147). In traveling to the Otherworld, Gawain is given the opportunity to see the court as the hyperreality it is, to recognize how its embracing of the Pentangle and order of chivalry is merely a game and ceases to hold meaning once its entertainment value has diminished.

Battles tells us in his introduction to the poem that the ending of *Gawain* “is perfectly in keeping with modern and postmodern sensibilities. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* certainly ends, but it provides no closure” (25). Should Gawain be hailed as a hero, a failure, or simply a man? The Green Knight, Bertilak himself, “goes on to minimize Gawain’s fault in refusing to hand over the love-lace; he acted not from covetousness but from love of life, an understandable motive” (Whitaker 37). And yet Gawain himself is consumed by shame. What should the audience think? A popular view, both articulated and held by Blanch and Wasserman, is that “The poet refuses to impose a neat moral that wraps up the story, a strategy no doubt chosen to provoke debate and

thereby involve the audience more deeply” (qtd. in Battles 25). The fact that he could be viewed as any and all of these options potentially sparks discussion among the original audience, listening to a story told around a hearth, and a modern audience in either a classroom or scholarly discussion. This point’s continued debate seems to uphold their theory.

Through a Baudrillardian lens, however, Sir Gawain ends the story as a disappointment, a Neo who is shown the Matrix and yet chooses to still cling sadly to the old pseudo-reality. Throughout the story, forces much larger and more omniscient than he both use him as a tool and give him the chance to open his eyes, but instead of returning to Bertilak’s table to celebrate the game’s end, he chooses to depart licking his wounds. Bertilak’s ability to out-king Arthur, followed directly by his dismissal of the knightly virtues’ importance, upholds and dismantles chivalry at the same time. In the end, it is mere self-preservation that is celebrated without exception as a common value: “By exposing both this fault and its universality, the Green Knight’s intervention simultaneously gives Gawain and the other knights the opportunity to correct it, reduces the shame attached to it, and increases their solidarity both through this reduction of shame and because they all share the fault” (Rider 119). At court, the symbol of the garter becomes a sign of honor, even though, by taking it, Gawain betrayed the code of chivalry.

When Gawain crosses the border between the courtly world and the Otherworld, complete with literary “signposts” for the audience to shift their subconscious expectations, he is moving away from simulation and toward the real. This is shown by the otherworldly characters’ ability to entirely ignore hyperreal dangers, including bodily

harm and sexual infidelity, and also their lack of a “template” or “pattern” to simulate.

Gawain, however, is unable to follow suit as Aronstein so poignantly put it, “He is simply scared” (147). This fear exposes the simulacrum of chivalry, and, even more significantly, didn’t end up mattering to anyone in either world.

The way the garter itself has infiltrated the “real,” non-fictional world perfectly exemplifies the simulacrum of chivalric and courtly virtues, while also exposing our own human desire to believe in an idealistic Arthurian past. As Battles explains, “The decision to wear a green belt to memorialize Gawain’s adventure parallels the practice of fourteenth-century chivalric orders, which adopted articles of clothing as distinctive devices” (143). While this practice was not originally influenced by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poem certainly reflects it. In fact, around 1348, Edward III (of Round Table Tournament fame) established the Order of the Garter, which still exists today. This order, though many have assumed its connection to *Gawain*, is actually based on a separate courtly tale of a woman embarrassed by a wardrobe malfunction and the knight who eased her shame by making light of the situation (Starkey). The two stories are connected, however, in that the motto of the Order is placed at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: “HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE” [Shame be to him to who thinks evil of it] (Battles 144). Whether it was inscribed by the original poet or added later is disputed by authorities, though this technicality matters very little to my point. These ritualistic practices are visual reminders of a hyperreal situation, a celebration of a past that never was in order to influence our present mood and behavior.

As Gawain moves from the courtly world (insipid and meaningless), to an Otherworld (carefree and powerful), and then back to a hyperreality which celebrates his

failures (the symbol of the garter), the contrast between the real and the Absolute Fake is vividly apparent. According to Baudrillard:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials - worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and shortcircuits all its vicissitudes. (2)

If signs are as malleable as Baudrillard suggests, there should be no confusion over whether the garter is shameful or honorable. It can be both and also neither, as the symbol itself, just like the Round Table, Arthur, and even Logres, are not real. In this way, a hyperreal king, queen, hero, and court count themselves victorious at the end of a quest which dismantles their validity, and generations of audiences will joyfully honor them with their next Halloween costume.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ALICE MOVES THROUGH THE GLASS DARKLY

Since the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 1865, many arguments have been made to not take it too seriously. Indeed Martin Garner, in his "Introduction" to *The Annotated Alice*, foregrounds Gilbert K. Chesterton's 1932 appeal, which even then could not have anticipated critical reception later in the century:

Poor, poor, little Alice! She has not only been caught and made to do lessons; she has been forced to inflict lessons on others. Alice is now not only a schoolgirl but a schoolmistress. The holiday is over and Dodgson is again a don. There will be lots and lots of examination papers, with questions like: (1) What do you know of the following; mimsy, gimble, haddocks' eyes, treacle-wells, beautiful soup? (2) Record all the moves in the chess game in *Through the Looking-Glass*, and give diagram. (3) Outline the practical policy of the White Knight for dealing with the social problem of green whiskers. (4) Distinguish between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. (xiii)

In this satirical plea, Chesterton criticizes the over-academification of *Alice's Adventures* and *Through the Looking Glass*. While the stories were written by an Oxford don, a logician at that, at their core they were meant to entertain children, not to make them feel like they are in school. It is true, many critics were unable to leave the nonsense alone, to concede that Wonderland was created for pure amusement. For decades, scholars have picked apart Carroll's expert word play and biting cultural critique, and some even credit him for anticipating postmodernism. Peter Heath, in 1974, claimed that the *Alice* books can explain "all the philosophies that were ever invented and a good many that hadn't

been invented when it was written” (qtd. in Lopez 102). Gabrielle Schwab claimed in 1994 that Carroll’s work “anticipates and perhaps marks the beginning of those far-reaching challenges to our cultural notions of mimesis and representation which culminate in what we have come to call the simulacrum of postmodernism” (qtd. in Lopez 102). In the same year, Jean-Jacques Lecercle declared how often “literary practice anticipates theory” (166), and his main example of this phenomenon are the *Alice* books. Karen L. Mcgavock even suggests that Victorian children’s authors, namely Carroll, unwittingly “challenge readers to work through conflicts many of which can be identified retrospectively as exhibiting postmodern characteristics,” thus ushering in an age of exploring social, moral, and spiritual dilemmas discussed decades after them (130). All in all, these critics seem to bestow upon Carroll a mantle he never anticipated nor sought—that of a postmodern trailblazer.

Going “down a rabbit-hole,” similar to entering a wardrobe, is one of the most famous references to a portal-quest fantasy in the English language. It invokes both leaving one world and entering another, as well as opening up a whole trove of possibilities one would usually rather avoid. While Alice jumps right on in, eager to see where the White Rabbit, complete with waistcoat and pocket-watch, is off to, the phrase has come to mean opening a door to unpleasant complexities that could foul up one’s understanding of the world.<sup>4</sup> I would argue that this is exactly what Alice finds in the original story. Christine Brooke-Rose contends that fantastic otherworld journeys, such as

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<sup>4</sup> *The Macquarie Dictionary* explains the term as follows: “To enter a period of chaos and confusion (caused by the thing or event specified). A reference to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, in which Alice, in pursuit of the White Rabbit, falls after it down a rabbit hole and arrives in Wonderland.” While the etymological history of its usage is unclear, the phrase seems to have entered into the common vernacular very soon after Carroll’s first book was published (“rabbit hole”).

to Carroll's Wonderland, can help make meaningless, everyday situations more bearable, endowing mundane experiences with significance they don't actually have (9). Being a child on a lazy summer afternoon, for example, gets a lot more interesting if one goes on an adventure as opposed to lying on a riverbank watching one's sister read. However, to apply this label to the *Alice* books would be to ignore their more troubling aspects and how these aspects affect Alice as she moves through the stories.

As discussed in chapter two, the Otherworld in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* simulates what the real, courtly world *should* be. In Alice's two Wonderland journeys—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*—we see not what should be but what *is*, twisted and terrifying, whereas the idealistic, “real” world of Victorian England is a hyperreal simulation of an impossible ideal. The Otherworld in these stories is a more accurate image than the “real” world. Here, the “ideals of the central aristocratic world” (Rider 129), instead of relating to the court, are reflective of the Victorian middle class, ideals Carroll outs as a fiction girls are duped into accepting. Contradictions, in this world, abound, exemplified in the often conflicting gendered beliefs of Queen Victoria herself: “Believing in education for her sex, she gave support and encouragement to the founding of a college for women in 1847. On the other hand, she opposed the concept of votes for women, which she described in a letter as ‘this mad folly’” (Robson and Christ 1608). Additionally, even from her position as the reigning monarch of a powerful nation, the queen firmly believed that women were naturally placed in submission to their husbands, as willed by God Himself. Within this complicated context, Alice's adventures are not mere escapism as modern otherworld journeys are often depicted, but the exposure and confrontation of a lie.

According to Lecercle, this exposure occurs mainly in the nonsensical dialogue. In his *Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lecercle contends that the linguistics of nonsense literature rely on a process he calls *transversion*. The language of Wonderland is perverted—the inversion of an ideal, “cooperative” world. Instead of converting the perverted language back to the ideal (which would be impossible), nonsense instead transverts or deconstructs it in a copycat nature. In the *Alice* books, Lecercle argues that Alice conforms to nonsense dialogue out of necessity, subverting the rules of her original world as she moves through the landscape, and this is where her own personal transformation occurs:

Alice’s acceptance of linguistic behavior is no blind adherence, but rather a show of limited and displaced confidence—literally displaced by her journey through Wonderland that is across the rules and their subversion. (114)

The simplest example of this is the famously repeated phrase, “Curiouser and curiouser!” which the narrator admits is poor grammar but forgives since Alice’s transition from one world to the next has been so startling: “(she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English)” (20). Conforming to Wonderland is, as revealed above, an act of unconscious insecurity, attained not by converting an inverted reality, but by transverting hyperreality. While I would argue that Alice is not personally changed by the experience, as she is only offered a new perspective of her own world, Lecercle’s theory of *transversion* is helpful in interpreting how she unwittingly adapts to Wonderland’s nonsense as it is presented to her. The transversion evident in the Otherworld/real world dialogic calls attention to the hyperreal even though Alice lacks the ability to change anything when she returns home because she has been exposed to it

for too long. The real world of Victorian society is the world that has created her, and she cannot, therefore, dismantle it.

Although it has been established that Lewis Carroll foreshadowed many postmodern themes in his *Alice* books, Claudia Springer suggests that the author “was far from being a proto-postmodernist. Instead, his personality was entirely forged by the Victorian era’s depth and repression” (201). Published in the mid-nineteenth century, these popular books came out when the pervasive social thought was that women “were naturally formed to occupy the more passive, private sphere of the household and home where their inborn emotional talents would serve them best” (Rowbotham 5-6). Regardless of whether or not women enjoyed their “natural” occupation, it was understood that they had a certain role to play and were given little other choice. Endowed with religious significance, they were to be “Household Angels,” simultaneously infantilized and protected while responsible for everyone’s physical and spiritual welfare. A Victorian woman was, according to Sarah Stickney Ellis’s 1843 conduct book for wives, always to “conduct herself, so that all the members of her household shall be united as a Christian family, strengthening and encouraging each other in the service of the Lord” (*Wives* 32-33). All contemporary propaganda led girls to believe they would love every second of this life as the fulfillment of their destinies. Domestic life, reflected in Stickney Ellis’s writing, was supposedly a haven from the outside world, one which a woman should be grateful to inhabit: “Can it be a subject of regret that she is not called upon, so much as a man, to calculate, to compete, to struggle, but rather to occupy a sphere in which the elements of discord cannot with propriety be admitted?” (*Daughters* 14-15). It shouldn’t come as a surprise that they often found this

existence to be less fulfilling than advertised: “Despite the rhetoric about the wife’s ‘domestic empire’ or home as a refuge” argue Hellerstein, Hume, and Offen, “a woman’s daily world was likely to be a single, poorly ventilated room in which an entire family ate and slept, and often worked as well” (118). The domestic dream was not only unattainable for the vast majority of women, even in many middle-class households, but the image itself was a fairytale, and a dangerous one at that. Believing in it, and decrying their own perceived shortcomings, often led women to high incidents of depression, anxiety, and, a popular nineteenth-century catch-all label, “hysteria” (110). This is exactly the set of contradictory expectations Alice-the-child would grow up to experience, one that bears a striking resemblance to Wonderland. The world is arbitrary and chaotic, but she is trained to believe it both makes sense and she is lucky to live in it. Consequently, Wonderland can be read as the honest version of the above-ground situation, only there she doesn’t have to act like it all makes sense. She is permitted to act out.

Alice, despite her flawless Victorian upbringing, is surrounded by “the elements of discord” in Wonderland, both in what she encounters there and how she reacts to it. She swims in her own tears, argues with talking animals, runs off with a duchess’s baby, eats and drinks things of unknown origin, wonders at her own true identity, confronts queens, and speaks with open defiance in a court of law. These challenges to her upbringing are impossible in Alice’s “real” life but necessary to her survival in Wonderland. They are both frightening to the Victorian Alice and empowering to the Wonderland Alice, and her ability to wake up exactly where she started from was both a relief and a disappointment.

My argument is that, in Carroll's stories, the Otherworld *is* the reality while the idealistic/"real" world presents an absolute fake. Wonderland, working as a sinister, yet honest, rendition of the lived experience of (mostly middle-class) Victorian women and girls, highlights realities one would not have dared acknowledge without the cover of humor and nonsense. Baudrillard's and Eco's theories, having marginally infiltrated the academification of *Alice*, give us new permission to, at the very least, recognize and define this façade as the hyperreal, a simulation of a fiction that, while effectively marketed to the public, never actually existed.

Taking into account Stickney Ellis's conduct literature versus the reality of women's daily lives articulated above, Alice's struggles during her time in Wonderland had a very specific relevance to her time and place. Arbitrary rules, conflicting emotions, and a crisis of identity could easily have resonated with Carroll's original audience, made up of middle-class, English, Victorian children and the women who cared for them. Alice's ability to play the maternal role on one hand while still admitting her relief when it was over in the pig-baby scene shows both knowledge of her traditional social place and her frustrations with it. She is eager to perform what she understands is right and proper—such as speaking respectfully to the Dodo and the White Rabbit as her "elders"—but is also uninhibited in showing her aggravation with the established order (or non-order) of Wonderland. The ending paragraphs, however, disregard these negative reflections and place Alice back into the order of her society where we are supposed to believe she will be quite happy. Here, it doesn't matter how one answers the question, "Who are *you*?" Society will tell you, and that is who you will be.

Jean Baudrillard's four stages of the image from *Simulacra and Simulation* explain the process by which modern humanity came to exist in what he would call "the hyperreal." In *Alice's* case, I find it useful to consider these stages one at a time in terms of how they would apply not only to her character but also to her audience. In the first phase, the image "is the reflection of a profound reality" (Baudrillard 6). Here, it is a "good appearance" since "representation is of the sacramental order." In its purest form, the image reminds us of a fundamental, un-tampered-with truth as the iconography of many world religions claim to do. Consider, for example, figure 1 here.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1: Victorian Mother and Child  
(Public Domain)

In this picture of an anonymous Victorian mother and child, despite its problematic nature which we will get to soon, there is a fundamental truth expressed: children depend

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<sup>5</sup> While I was unable to locate an original location and subjects of this photograph, it is valuable to note that it is one of the most popular images for "mother and child" and also "Mother's Day" currently on Pinterest. (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/150026231307288404/?lp=true>, Accessed 12 June 2018)

on mothers and, often, this dependence leads to affection. More fundamentally, though, the image is meant to capture the strict reality of a moment: the exact moment when this little girl kissed this woman's cheek. According to Baudrillard, however, a pure relationship between a sign (or a true pairing of signifier to signified) and its simulation is utterly impossible as there is too much interference between the two to allow for a perfect representation. This picture as we see it, then, fails to communicate a truth (or a pure sign), and we are quickly led to the second phase: the image "masks and denatures a profound reality." Again, using the image above, we can see how this concept plays out. The mother's look is serene and the child's love for her seems endless, even though the kiss is most obviously staged and the child's sideways look either shows that she is anxiously waiting for the cue that she may stop or that she has been drugged into compliance. There is no hint of the difficulties, struggles, or even joys that go along with raising a child. No strong emotion is expressed, no hair is out of place, and even the later-added pink tones of color are perfectly in harmony throughout the picture. This is a child who has never had a tantrum and a mother who has never lost her temper, and even the mother's corseted waistline thoroughly eliminates any evidence of a past pregnancy: the profound realities of child-rearing have been successfully masked. The simulation has erased certain truths about the original sign.

In the third phase, the image "masks the *absence* of a profound reality" (6). When one has been exposed repeatedly to such images, the absence of the above-mentioned realities are no longer noticed. We do not question putting a child in an impractical white gown that could so easily be soiled, the perfect hair, or the gentle calm of the picture. Doubt and skepticism in the viewer of the image have been successfully removed,

leading to the final stage, when the image “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.” What is left is a nostalgia for an image that never occurred in real life. Sure, a little girl probably kissed the cheek of a woman at one point, but the message communicated to viewers of the image (signified + signifier) is a simulacrum. The image above, then, reflects no truth but its own simulation. Once this simulation is perpetuated and believed ad infinitum, it becomes the reality in which we live—people see an image such as this and sigh, thinking reverently of the sacred position of motherhood, perhaps evoking an idealized memory of a mother or grandmother.

Now consider the following image from Sir John Tenniel’s famous illustrations of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (fig. 2):



Figure 1: Pig and Pepper from: Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Norton, 2000), p. 64. (Public Domain)

If we filter this image through the same stages as the last one, it would look something like this. Stage 1: A girl stands in a garden, holding a pig with a bonnet on. No truth is communicated since it is so far removed from our normal experience—this is the nature of nonsense. Stage 2: The girl is awkwardly holding a pig who is unwieldy and gives her no affection, but the little girl has set her jaw and committed to nursing it nonetheless, just like a mother does to her baby. The pure nonsense has already been forced into an everyday mold we can categorize and name. Stage 3: The seemingly calm nature of this picture, including the beautiful flowers in the background and Alice’s *contrapposto* stance, mask the girl’s inner frustrations and any hint of the pig’s writhing and squealing. Stage 4: We don’t even notice the pig anymore, we just see this as an accurate representation of motherhood. Our world consists of pig babies and girls forced to care for them. Everyone is either one or the other.<sup>6</sup>

Carroll’s Wonderland is full of such discordant images which, by their mere existence, dismantle the hyperreality of Victorian life for a girl such as Alice. Yet, in the end, it is just a nonsense tale told for fun and amusement, and it fails to free her in any way from her eventual fate. After Wonderland, Alice “achieves no particular goal in her adventures,” argues Richard Kelly, “nor does she learn a morally uplifting lesson” (24). Baudrillard’s argument concerning modern life is easily transferable to Wonderland, where Alice confronts discord, takes risks, wonders at her own changing self, and behaves in an often violent manner when frustrated. These actions, in Victorian terms, would not have been natural, but backwards or even “mad,” as the Cheshire Cat refers to

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<sup>6</sup> I have to add that, despite its harshness, Carroll very well might have agreed with the above exercise, or at least its conclusion: “It was surely not without malice that Carroll turned a male baby into a pig, for he had a low opinion of little boys” (Gardner 64).

all of Wonderland's creatures. The expectations of Alice's time and place, according to Stanley Coben, would have emphasized "character" above all else, which assumed that a well-bred person would be "dependably self-controlled, punctual, orderly, hardworking, conscientious, sober, respectful of other Victorians' property rights, and ready to postpone immediate gratification to achieve long-term goals" (para. 3)—a difficult standard to uphold at all times. Alice's Wonderland behavior is the antithesis of such values. Yet according to Carroll's ending paragraphs, once back in the real world Alice will abandon such passions for a "simple and loving heart." She will grow up and share this vision with her children as a memory of "happy summer days," similar to how Arthur's court wore the garter of Gawain's shame as a badge of honor. This paradox clearly supports my thesis in that Wonderland, far from being the puzzling dream it is presented to be, *is* reality, an expression of frustrations women were not permitted to recognize about the suppressive, nonsensical rules of Victorian society. The "Household Angel" ideal, then, is the absolute fake that keeps them in line.

### **Arbitrary Rules**

*"All your life, you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye. And when something nudges it into outline, it is like being ambushed by a grotesque."*

-Guillemot, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

According to Baudrillard, "Ideology only corresponds to a corruption of reality through signs; simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs" (27). In Carroll's, and therefore Alice's, nineteenth-century society and class, life's rules were black and white, and this ideology was supported through

repetition and common adherence (Hellerstein et al. 8). Wonderland has no such compass. One of the first moments when Alice must confront her Victorian assumption that (1) Life Has Rules, and (2) They Are to be Universally Followed is during the Caucus Race in Chapter III. After a collection of animals have become trapped in Alice's pool of tears created when she was nine feet high, they start to plan how they are to dry off. A race seems to be the perfect option. The Dodo, who is the well-respected leader of the group for no established reason, dubbed the endeavor a "Caucus Race." When Alice asks for an explanation of what a Caucus Race is, in order to get a handle on the rules of play, the Dodo replies that "the best way to explain it is to do it." What followed was, from Alice's point of view, absolute chaos:

First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle, ("the exact shape doesn't matter," it said,) and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no "One, two, three, and away!" but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out "The race is over!" (31)

This is the first of many moments when Alice must put aside her idea of how a certain thing "ought to behave" in order to survive in Wonderland. No one else seems to have any issue with the lawless nature of the race, and, in the end, the goal of getting dry was certainly achieved. While Martin Gardner notes that the term "caucus" may have been intended "to symbolize the fact that [political] committee members generally do a lot of running around in circles, getting nowhere, and with everybody wanting a political plum," the overall effect just seems to imply anarchy and confusion (which, I suppose,

was his point). It must be pointed out, however, that Carroll uses an abundance of humor in this scene specifically to diffuse the seriousness of its implications, specifically “the limits of knowledge and the elusive purpose of life” (Kelly 23).

Kelly also highlights that this particular confusion, the tension between Alice’s expectations and Wonderland’s actuality, is exactly what makes the book exciting and keeps the reader reading: “Alice is ‘our’ representative, bringing the ideals of reason and morality and a desire for meaning into a world of disorder, contradiction, violence, arbitrariness, cruelty, rudeness, frustration, and amorality” (19). We are meant to be Alice and to feel her frustration within a world without rules. However, my contention here is that she is already living in a world governed by arbitrary, contradictory, and nonsensical rules, and Wonderland is merely juxtaposing itself with the simulacrum on the other side of the Rabbit Hole. This idea is supported by Nina Auerbach when she argues that “The ultimate effect of Alice’s adventures implicates her, female child though she is, in the troubled human condition” (qtd. in Kelly 20). At home, Alice’s world is just as confusing, only it wears a robe of order and reason. Wonderland is stripped of any pretense, a Stage 1 image of reality, sacred in its truthfulness. Life *is* anarchy, and the rules are made up by whoever has power at any given moment.

A brother to this concept has already been explored by theorists, such as Jan. B Gordon, specifically dissecting how Wonderland could be the child world as viewed by adults. Kelly also observes that, in the books, there are no rules of decorum, no politeness, no manners: “Alice is faced with a world of adults who behave like children, despite the variety of intellectual sophistication they exhibit” (14). One has only to read through one of the Queen of Hearts’ temper tantrums—a childish screaming fit coupled

with the deadly consequences of absolute power—to see this point illuminated. This interpretation makes sense from the vantage point of an adult looking at children. However, I would like to take this idea two steps further. First, I contend that Wonderland is, instead, a reflection of how the adult world looks to a child such as Alice: arbitrary, violent, authoritarian, and governed by nonsensical rules. Grown-ups say things they don't mean, wear clothes that are uncomfortable, take part in activities they don't enjoy, spend time with people they don't like, and seem all the more anxious and depressed at the end of the day for following all of the rules they believe make sense. Second, I wish to broaden the discussion out from the child/adult dichotomy to the infantilized female/patriarchal authority dichotomy. As a female, Alice is to wear clothes that hurt, never show discomfort, hop to when an order is barked at her, be sweet and kind to those who treat her as an inferior, never express an opinion that is unpopular, and, at the end of the day, look like (and believe that) this is the fulfillment of her every hope and dream. She is, according to Stickney Ellis's mantra for young girls, to seek above all "[her] own happiness only in the happiness of others" (qtd. in Robson and Christ 1612). Therefore the *Alice* books read like a child's/woman's dream where the difficulties, unfairness, and absurdities of everyday existence are recognized, something they cannot do when they are awake.

These ideas vividly resurface later in the book as Alice takes part in the Mad Tea Party. For all Alice's attempts to show politeness and respect, the entire chapter reads a bit like a duel of wits between her and the other characters, all scoring points for making the others look foolish. When offered non-existent wine, Alice chastises the Hare for offering her something he cannot produce, which he counters with "It wasn't very civil of

you to sit down without being invited” (70). In this, according to Alice’s upbringing, he is very correct and she has no rebuttal. In this scene more than any other, it seems like Wonderland is using her unfailing belief in the hyperreal world against her instead of showing it to be a farce. Alice’s conflation of “I say what I mean” with “I mean what I say” would certainly have upset her sense of logic back home, and the Hatter calls her on this misstep directly: “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’!” The March Hare adds “You might just as well say . . . that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like’!” (71). Nothing embarrasses Alice more than being rationally bested by nonsensical creatures who don’t follow any rules.

The word play in this scene is second to none in cleverness, and Alice has a difficult time making sense out of “the Hatter’s use of language, in which words have become detached from their meanings” (Springer 199). Lecerle’s *transversion* concept works well here in that Alice’s attempts to keep up make her more and more like the lawless creatures of Wonderland: “Rules of language and conventions there are,” says Lecerle, “but one can only conform to them if one has transformed them, if one still transgresses them, or, to borrow a famous phrase, if one supports them, but only under erasure” (114). By invoking Heidegger, Lecerle opens up the possibility that Alice, even when she thinks of a response too late to say it, is transverting and deconstructing the language around her. She is unable to make the language behave like that of her “real” world, so she adapts and transgresses simultaneously. For example, in reply to the Hatter’s correction of her, “You mean you ca’n’t take *less* . . . it’s very easy to take *more* than nothing,” Alice quickly snaps, “Nobody asked *your* opinion.” She has taken on the irreverent tone of the Tea Party while chastising it for being out of line. Unfortunately,

the Hatter immediately retorts with “Who’s making personal remarks now?” and throws her, again, off her game. At every turn, even while transversing the language of Wonderland, she is reminded that she can anticipate nothing here. Yet what she remains unaware of is that her own world, full of the pretense, hypocrisy, and contradictions of Victorian society, is just as unpredictable.

On the whole, despite their joviality, the Hatter, Hare, and Dormouse are three of the most troubled and troubling creatures in Wonderland as they are trapped in an endless time loop. After the Mad Hatter offended Father Time and the Queen of Hearts, the trio live forever in tea time, in this case, 6 o’clock, and they never have a moment to sleep, clean up, or even leave the table. The result is a messy table, but also three characters who, from time to time, let their sadness and despair show through the nonsense, as evidenced by the following conversation:

“I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers”

“If you knew Time as well as I do,” said the Hatter, “you wouldn’t talk about wasting *it*. It’s *him*.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Alice.

“Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously.

“I dare say you never even spoke to Time!”

“Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied; “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.”

“Ah! That accounts for it,” said the Hatter. “He wo’n’t stand beating.

Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he’d do almost anything you liked

with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o'clock in the morning, just in time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!"

("I only wish it was," the March Hare said to itself in a whisper.) (73)

The conversation begins with Alice, after being burned by the riddle with no answer, scolding the Hatter; it then turns into a personification of Time and ensuing word play, and it ends with a quiet reminder of the characters' tea time prison in the March Hare's whispered lamentation. Who knows how long it has been since they had a meal consisting of more than tea, milk, bread, and butter? This progression shows both the nonsense of the moment and the gravity of the situation simultaneously, proving again that Wonderland does, indeed, expose the hyperreal world for what it is. The Victorian obsession with time and punctuality, for example, was a new phenomenon, springing forth from the invention of and dependence on rail travel in the nineteenth century. Consequently, while *Alice* was written "before five-o'clock tea had become the general custom in England," the belief that there were prescribed times for specific activities throughout the day, and that one's adherence to said times reflected their propriety and societal standing, had certainly taken hold (Gardner 75). Yet the fact that this was a new way of thinking that coincided with technological advancement did not challenge this value as absolute in most people's minds, including Alice's. The rules of the real world say that Time and Schedule are adamantine, but this emphasis is artificial, hyperreal even. In Wonderland, Time is shown to be important, but the artificiality of this importance is blown up to satirical proportions. Time is personified, it is "beaten" (a pun on playing music), and it is an old man who is to be respected and honored at all costs.

The conversation hints enough at the real world for Alice to almost understand, but it is, at its core, ridiculous.

There *are* rules here in Wonderland, just not ones Alice is used to. All words mean all of their meanings all the time (a concept that Humpty Dumpty relies on in the sequel), the teller of riddles doesn't need to know the answers, the day is more important than the time on a watch, and there are still powerful people who are dangerous to anger (for instance Time, who controls our linear progression toward death and our ability to do as we please). Even their inability to finish a thought without switching gears makes sense if one takes into account that they have all of the time in the world to come back and finish ideas later. Or not at all. Either way it wouldn't make any difference.

### **Conflicting Emotions**

*“If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days.”*

-Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Alice consistently finds herself in a battle between her upbringing and her comfort throughout the stories, never sure when it is appropriate to show her feelings and learning to follow the lead of Wonderland's characters in unbridling them. This tension can also be understood using Baudrillard's discussion of simulation. In the hyperreality in which she has been raised, Alice is taught to be polite to adults before all else as it maintains order and a belief in the hierarchal norms of society. She must curtsy, use proper titles for her betters, and always defer to their wishes and demands (Hellerstein, Hume, and Offen 96-98), but there is no overall reason for this pomp and circumstance other than

“because this is how a young lady is to behave.” If she fails, she will come off as “more exposed than a delicate woman ought to be” (Ellis, *Daughters*, 231). This veneer of common courtesy, especially between ages, classes, and genders, corresponds to Baudrillard’s description of simulation over representation:

Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interrupting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. (6)

Alice’s “real” Victorian England is a simulation of an endless trail of signs that no longer have any meaning unto themselves. It represents nothing but a reproduction of its own self, its importance depends on its rules being followed and its appearance of being relevant and correct. However, if there ever was a “why” behind the actions she has been trained to do (what, for instance, is the meaning behind a curtsy?), it is long forgotten. As she moves through Wonderland, however, and these rituals are shown to be as made-up and useless as the silly things creatures do in the Otherworld, she starts to slowly let them go in favor of her own comfort and emotional truth.

Chapter VI begins with a perfect example of the meaningless rituals described above as a fish-headed footman delivers an invitation to a frog-headed footman while Alice watches them from the edge of the wood:

The Fish-Footman began by producing from under his arm a great letter, nearly as large as himself, and this he handed over to the other, saying in a solemn tone, "For the Duchess. An invitation from the Queen to play croquet." The Frog-Footman repeated, in the same solemn tone, only changing the order of the words a little, "From the Queen. An invitation for the Duchess to play croquet."

Then they both bowed low, and their curls got entangled together.

Alice laughed so much at this, that she had to run back into the wood for fear of their hearing her; and when she next peeped out, the Fish-Footman was gone, and the other was sitting on the ground near the door, staring stupidly up into the sky. (58)

The ridiculousness of this scene is obvious, from the fact that the footmen have gigantic animal heads, yet still must conduct themselves within the ceremony of "real" world servants, to the fact that they must each say out loud exactly what the invitation says, negating the need for the stupidly large envelope to be delivered at all. In the end, the Duchess's footman doesn't even go inside the house to deliver it, since there is so much noise and chaos going on that no one would care. The act of knocking on the door, another essential gesture of politeness and propriety, is shown to be useless to Alice, since the footman is on the outside right next to her: "There might be some sense in you knocking . . . if we had the door between us. For instance, if you were *inside*, you might knock, and I could let you out, you know."

The polite Alice is at a loss and asks in despair, "But what am *I* to do?" To which the footman replies, "Anything you like" (59). The significance of this retort cannot really be overestimated. To tell a well-brought-up middle class child from Victorian

England, and a female child at that, that there is no prescribed behavior for a situation and she is to do “whatever she likes” would have been unthinkable. But Alice, by this point, is learning quickly. Finally, with all normal rituals of politeness reduced to meaninglessness, Alice does the incredible action of just entering the house without knocking or an invitation in. The scene she walks into sets in motion another strange paradox for our heroine. In a large kitchen, the Duchess sits, violently rocking a baby who was “sneezing and howling alternately without a moment’s pause” as there was too much pepper in the air and in the soup being made by the cook. While Alice tries to make conversation with the Duchess:

the cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby—the fire-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates and dishes. The Duchess took no notice of them even when they hit her; and the baby was howling so much already, that it was quite impossible to say whether the blows hurt it or not. (61)

By the end of the chapter, in an effort to save the child’s life after he has been “flung” at her, Alice takes the baby and escapes the house. “If I don’t take this child away with me,” she thinks, “they’re sure to kill it in a day or two. Wouldn’t it be murder to leave it behind?” Her instinct to save the child, however, lessens as she realizes that she has undertaken a great responsibility: “Now, what am I to do with this creature, when I get it home?” Her simultaneous wish to save the baby and also relieve herself of this duty is a short-lived conflict, in that the baby quickly turns into a pig and trots off into the woods. As she watches this unfold, she thinks to herself, “If it had grown up, . . . it would have made a dreadfully ugly child; but it makes a rather handsome pig, I think.” In this scene,

Alice performs the duties for which she will be trained throughout childhood and youth: nurturing motherhood. And yet, she is neither enthusiastic about the role nor is she any good at it. Wonderland, showing the baby to really be a pig after all, takes this burden from her while also showing an unfiltered image of the difficulties of motherhood no one would have ever admitted out loud. It is literally thrown at Alice without giving her any choice in the matter, and she takes on the responsibility out of fear for the child's life. Once on her own, there is no controlling what the child will become, which, in this case, is a pig who abandons her at the first opportunity. The entire scene flies in the face of her upbringing concerning her destiny as a Victorian mother and housewife, serene, beautiful, and loved by her offspring as the woman whose photograph was pasted earlier in this chapter. For Carroll, whose wish for the real Alice Liddell to cease growing past the age of seven is made clear by Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* (Gardner 211), it is doubtful that this insinuation was accidental.

In the very next moment, Carroll goes on to disregard the importance of the pig-baby's fate by having the Cheshire Cat ask first in an off-handed manner, "By-the-by, what became of the baby?" and then to return a minute later to ask, "Did you say 'pig' or 'fig'?" (67). This last question, according to Kelly, "suggests, in typical Wonderland fashion, that it really does not matter what happened to the baby after all" (28). Clearly, Alice is the only character who cares what happens to the creature, yet even she is relieved to have the "ugly" thing off her hands. The Cat's question, however, reduces the whole experience back to nonsense, as well it should be. A pig, or a fig rather, surely can take care of itself.

The Duchess is at the center of another struggle for Alice between her upbringing and showing her true feelings later on at the Queen's croquet match. After the Queen calls for the Duchess's head, the Duchess takes an opportunity to escape, taking Alice by the arm and walking off with her. Alice's first instinct in reacting to the repulsive woman is not positive, but her upbringing wins out:

Alice did not much like her keeping so close to her: first, because the Duchess was *very* ugly; and secondly, because she was exactly the right height to rest her chin on Alice's shoulder, and it was an uncomfortably sharp chin.

However, she did not like to be rude, so she bore it as well as she could. (91-92).

What follows is a sharp satire of the popular didactic children's literature of the day (Kelly 31), as the Duchess attaches an unlikely, and often nonsensical, moral to absolutely everything they discuss. While Alice continues to keep her sharpest criticism to herself throughout the conversation, as they move away from the crowd and down a path she does not recognize, her tone becomes stronger and she begins to stand up for herself: "'I've a right to think,' said Alice sharply, for was beginning to feel a little worried" (93). She is, however, saved in this moment by the Queen who orders the Duchess to leave and orders Alice to seek out the Mock Turtle and hear his story. Clearly, as Alice moves through Wonderland, her ability to push politeness aside in favor of showing her inner sense of justice, her frustrations, and her desire for self-expression becomes stronger, culminating in her final dismissal of the meaningless hierarchy of power in the trial of the Knave of Hearts: "'Who cares for *you*?' said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!'" (124). Here, Alice destroys any semblance of stability in Wonderland and asserts instead its "mad

sanity” (Kelly 20). This final moment coincides with the dissolution of the Otherworld altogether as she disregards its power.

Another authority figure she struggles with in a similar manner throughout the book is the White Rabbit himself. Her compulsion to follow him in the very first scene sets the story in motion, though she has no idea what she will do if she actually catches him. In their first face-to-face encounter, he mistakes her for the housemaid and orders her to go to his home to find his gloves and fan. Calling her “Mary Ann,” a contemporary euphemism for “servant girl” (Gardner 38), his stern, authoritative tone causes Alice to immediately do as she is told. It never occurs to her to call him on this error and say no to his orders:

He took me for his housemaid, . . . How surprised he’ll be when he finds out who I am! But I’d better take him his fan and gloves—that is, if I can find them. . . . How queer it seems . . . to be going messages for a rabbit! I suppose Dinah’ll be send me on messages next! (38)

Her wish to find the fan and gloves for the White Rabbit falls in line with her training, but there are limits to her complicity. Once she has grown large again and filled up the Rabbit’s house, the various animals in his employ are at a loss as to how to get her out and begin to devise ways to go after her. First, they try to send creatures in through the window and the chimney, and Alice, emboldened by how much bigger she is than the creatures, is no longer following orders. She snatches at the air outside the window with her tremendous hand, terrifying the crowd, and kicks up the chimney with her foot, sending the grounds man, a lizard named Bill, flying through the air: “The first thing she heard was a general chorus of ‘There goes Bill!’ then the Rabbit’s voice alone—‘Catch

him, you by the hedge!” (43). Her final act of defiance comes as they plan to burn her out of the house and she yells, “If you do, I’ll set Dinah at you!” Of course, in Wonderland, these creatures have no idea who her cat is from the “real” world, but they don’t need to. As a stupid mob, they can recognize a threat when they hear one and are sufficiently terrified. And, as a seven-year-old child, it never occurs to her that other people don’t know the details of her everyday life (Gardner 138). Either way, Alice’s following of “real” world rules devolves as (1) she recognizes the rituals are silly and meaningless, (2) her physical comfort is threatened, or (3) she changes in physical size to become more of a threat to the creatures who hold authority over her by their perceived age.

While she is trapped in the White Rabbit’s house, too big to fit through the door, she has a moment to think about her experiences in a way not always available to her as the scenes in the book happen in such rapid succession:

“It was much pleasanter at home,” thought poor Alice, “when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me! When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one—but I’m grown up now,” she added in a sorrowful tone: “at least there is no room to grow up any more *here.*” (39)

Of course, Carroll is playing with us, or, more specifically, he wishes to amuse his audience in creating this small meta-narrative. We are literally reading the book Alice refers to, and we are therefore drawn into her budding identity crisis as participants. This speech echoes an earlier one when, after Alice has grown large for the first time at the bottom of the rabbit-hole, she has time to think over her situation and who she has become:

“Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!” And she began thinking over all the children she knew that were the same age as herself, to see if she could have changed for any of them. (23)

There are two interesting tendencies Alice shows in both of these soliloquies. One is to assume that, if she has changed, she must therefore be a whole different person. The second is that changing in physical size is the same as maturing into an adult. The term “growing up” is then taken literally, as, of course, a child will do. If one is bigger, they are more physically powerful, and therefore are in charge of the situation. Throughout her time in Wonderland, Alice must contend with a shifting identity, which, not yet an adolescent, she hasn’t been forced to do in the “real” world (Kelly 20). To make sense of it, she assumes she is a whole other person, and not just any person, a person she already knows and who already exists. Donald Rankin asserts that her (and the reader’s) “belief

in permanent self-identity is put to the test and eventually demolished in Wonderland” (316). For Alice, these are the two scenes which reflect this demolition.

There is a combination here of nonsense, an endearing commentary on childhood (of which the Victorians were very fond), and hyperreality. Carroll’s stories were, according to Jackie Wullschläger, “born into a society which made a cult of childhood,” whose “vision of children as good, innocent, and in some way connected with spirituality and imagination” was an “idea inherited by the Romantics, but transformed by Victorian morality, and popularized and sentimentalized” (13). It is both silly and sweet to think of conflating physical size with the emotional maturity of adulthood. It is also humorous to conflate “not being oneself” with literally being a different person who already exists; the running gag of assuming she is the stupid friend, Mabel, every time she cannot remember a poem properly is a prime example of this. However, surrounding the humor is a landscape where the surface of the “real” world has been peeled back to reveal something more disturbing. It is almost universally pointed out by critics that the adjustments in Alice’s size throughout the story anticipate her impending adolescence (Kelly 20). As Alice moves forward in time and approaches puberty, her body will grow and change without her permission, and this alteration will place her in a particular position in society, that of a grown female. Alice-the-girl will become Alice-the-woman, still forced to follow orders and, sometimes under threat of violence, to fulfill a pre-ordained role. Only in her “real” world, she does not have the option to talk back, speak out, or call attention to the nonsense of the authority and rituals that guide her every move. Victorian England may be a simulacrum of reality, yes, but there is no other option to live in.

## A Crisis of Identity

*“It’s no use now,” thought poor Alice, “to pretend to be two people. Why there’s hardly enough of me left to make one respectable person!”*

- Alice

Umberto Eco, in *Travels in Hyperreality*, makes clear that reproductions, such as high-end amusement parks or zoo-style jungle adventures, in the long term, replace any need for an original “real.” Not only do they replace originality, but they do so purposefully: “we are giving you the reproduction,” he says, “so you will no longer feel any need for the original” (19). While Victorian sentiment (including the queen’s) believed women’s place to be divinely inspired, it remains true that much of it was constructed over many centuries by common adherence, organized religion, and societal norms. While Victorians may not have been aware that their “reproduction” of a neatly-gendered world *was* a reproduction, it was the only option available and therefore easily hides any other way of thinking. It, in fact, acts as Baudrillard’s image of the third order: masking the absence of a profound reality. Clearly, according to the etiquette literature of the time, a woman’s identity was not something up for debate, and the way a person successfully adhered to these identities could make all the difference in how their life would play out. Identity was not a representation of the real, but it was taken to be the monolithic real itself. There was no other option. In my argument here, the hyperreal *is* the Victorian female ideal, in fact *all* “real” world ideals, presented as a given: reproductions of truth presented as absolutes. Once a woman in this world has a template for how she should behave, complete with dress, speech, and mannerism, she should have

no need to express her identity in any other way. This burden of choice has been removed, even though the need for a template negates the concept of “real” identity.

One example of this identity, as Stickney Ellis states, relates to their place in the hierarchy of society: “As women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength” (*Daughters* 8). The truth of this claim is never in question, and the expectations are laid out clearly and succinctly. This could not be less of the case in Wonderland as, instead of encountering rules and statements, Alice encounters a barrage of contradictions and questions. According to Kelly, “Throughout her adventures, Alice is confronted with the problem of her shifting identity, a problem aggravated and in large part caused by the inconsistencies of Wonderland” (20). Since Wonderland keeps changing, there are no understandable rules to adhere to, and Alice becomes first confused and then empowered as she lets her hyperreal self go.

To Alice, as a child, identity is most closely aligned with size, which changes every time she eats or drinks something. At the end of chapter one, Carroll even jokingly refers to her adjusting so quickly to this part of Wonderland after she ate a bite of cake and stood wondering whether she was about to grow or shrink while her body remained just about the same: “To be sure, this is what generally happens when one eats cake; but Alice had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way” (19). Due to this haphazard size fluctuation, her position in the social hierarchy is always in question, at least to her. When Alice towers over the creatures around her, as she does in the White Rabbit’s house, she displays more courage, kicking Bill and threatening to set

Dinah on the other animals if they try to burn her out. Yet, after she rapidly shrinks, she is forced to flee from those same creatures into the woods. Here she encounters one of the most out-of-place characters in Wonderland: a gigantic puppy. Considering that Alice is only three inches tall in this scene, the puppy is not gigantic at all but a perfectly normal size, which is what makes him seem so wrong in Carroll's setting: "It is simply an oversized creature from the familiar world above ground and its presence disfigures the character of Wonderland that has already been established" (Kelly 24). It does not talk or walk upright, and it wants to do with Alice is what puppies normally want to do, play. This places him soundly in the child position in this scene opposite Alice in the adult position. Yet, their sizes are backwards; Alice is too small to play and must make her escape immediately after the puppy runs off to fetch a stick: "'And yet what a dear little puppy it was!' said Alice, as she leant against a buttercup to rest herself, and fan herself with one of the leaves. 'I should have liked teaching it tricks very much if—if I'd only been the right size to do it! Oh dear! I've nearly forgotten that I've got to grow up again!'" (46).

What seems so out-of-place in this scene only supports Wonderland's exposure of the "real" world's hyperreality. While Alice is clearly outmatched in size by the puppy (Carroll hammers this home by referring to the buttercup she leans against), it is obvious to her, the reader, and even the puppy that she is the one in charge. The puppy's strength and size do not put it in a "natural" place of authority, even though it could easily trample Alice to death. What establishes the relationship is both of their wishes to be themselves and to play. They are only kept apart due to Alice's fear. If she takes the risk and takes part in a game with such an unnatural playmate, she could actually die. The only way to

fix the situation, in Alice's opinion, is for her to figure out a way to change herself, to eat something and, hopefully, grow larger. The adjustment, learned well from her hyperreal world education, must be made on the part of the child/woman, and she goes in search of something to eat or drink.

There is little doubt that the next scene, in which the Caterpillar repeatedly regales her with the question, "Who are *you*?" was intentionally placed on the heels of this identity crisis. According to Kelly, "It is almost as if the Caterpillar has read her anxieties and set this question to torment her" (25). As she first approaches the mushroom, the impression Carroll gives the reader is the she is encountering a cross between a college professor and a spiritual guru:

She stretched herself on tiptoe, and peeped over the edge of the mushroom, and her eyes immediately met those of a large blue caterpillar; that was sitting on the top, with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah, and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice.

"Who are *you*?" said the Caterpillar. (46-47)

This relationship is also clearly established from the outset, and just as with the puppy, it is in no way affected by size—they are exactly the same height (three inches). Instead, it is based on his level of indifference to her, his languid, lazy attitude, the fact that he is male, and his possible advanced age (though this is impossible to tell). He *acts* the superior—is even physically elevated on a platform as if to give a lecture—and therefore

he *is*, a situation available to characters in Wonderland but not aboveground in the hyperreal. There is also power in being the asker of questions as opposed to the answerer of them. When she tries to shift this relationship, the attempt backfires in a very telling way:

“I think you ought to tell me who you are, first.”

“Why?” said the Caterpillar.

Here was another puzzling question; and, as Alice could not think of any good reason, and the Caterpillar seemed to be in a very unpleasant state of mind, she turned away. (49)

Walking away from the conversation seems like the right move, as the Caterpillar immediately asks her to return and hear something “very important.” Thinking this sounds “promising,” she returns only to be told to “Keep your temper.” This is solid, Victorian advice, especially for a female, and Alice tries to react in proper form, “swallowing down her anger as well as she could” (49). To show frustration and emotion in the “real” world would have major consequences, from general unpleasantness to being labeled “hysterical.” In all ways, young girls were to focus on “render[ing] themselves more companionable to men” (Ellis, *Daughters*, 55), and a temper would have been dreadfully unattractive. In Wonderland, as Alice will learn, this suggestion is merely another piece of nonsense she may choose to follow or ignore.

Directly after her conversation with the Caterpillar, she moves from a barrage of “Who are *you*?” questions to a barrage of “What are *you*?” questions. Eating the mushroom made her grow unevenly, giving her a grossly elongated neck, and she then encounters a nervous Pigeon who believes she is a serpent. The best defense Alice can

render, rather un-certainly in her state of shock, is, “I—I’m a little girl.” The Pigeon replies, “I’ve seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You’re a serpent; and there’s no use denying it. I suppose you’ll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg” (55). Of course Alice has to admit she has, and the logic which follows is difficult for her to refute:

“I *have* tasted eggs, certainly,” said Alice, who was a very truthful child; “but little girls each eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.”

“I don’t believe it,” said the Pigeon; “but if they do, why, then they’re a kind of serpent; that’s all I can say.”

This was such a new idea to Alice that she was quite silent for a minute or two. (55-56)

Not until she encounters the Mad Tea Party will she face a similar existential crisis. In her own hyperreality, logic, reason, and order are highly prized, in fact they are the concepts on which most rules of conduct and propriety are based (Hellerstein et al. 2). Acting disorderly or thinking illogically disrupts the common sense of the well-regulated Victorian world. Here, Alice is faced with a logical fallacy, a flawed syllogism, but one which appears to make sense on the surface and is difficult for the little girl to immediately dispute:

Serpents eat eggs.

Little girls eat eggs.

Therefore, little girls are serpents.

It sounds quite reasonable to her in the moment, following a template of order she is used to hearing, but to a very unsettling conclusion, and she is unable to fight back. Her own

hyperreality, however, is based very much on similarly flawed logic. If we are to put some of Stickney Ellis' advice in syllogism form, it could look something like this:

Weaknesses are signs of irrationality.

Women are weaker than men.

Therefore, women are irrational.

Alice sees these forms as so similar that she becomes upset: how can something that sounds so logical support the perception of her as a predatory monster? She would never dream of taking this poor Pigeon's eggs! To the reader, it's an amusing moment, highlighting Alice's childishness and innocence. However, the faulty conclusions upon which Victorian England is based are just as ridiculous, only more successfully hidden by common acceptance and adherence. Flawed logic has negative consequences in both worlds. It is, after all, "the strategy of Wonderland . . . to defeat different systems of logic, to keep details from culminating into some meaningful order" (Kelly 23). To do so would be to admit that life above ground also make sense. It is interesting that after this confrontation, she moves directly to the Duchess's house and her serendipitous encounter with the pig-baby. This transition, from her inability to answer the question "Who are *you*?" to forced motherhood, does not appear to be coincidental.

### **The Role of Madness**

*"Much Madness is divinest Sense—*

*To a discerning Eye—"*

-Emily Dickinson

While Alice struggles with Wonderland's logic, an identity crisis, conflicting emotions, and arbitrary rules—all which indirectly shed light on the absurdity of the

“real” world above—the overall debate she has with the Wonderland’s characters and indeed herself is over the concept of “madness.” Carroll does this mainly through his nonsense discourse, which, could very easily be interpreted as meaningless. But this, according to Alan Lopez, is exactly what is at stake in the books: “a nervousness that there is actually *something* rather than nothing lurking beneath Wonderland, beneath its affable realm of surfaces and appearances” (110). The “surface versus depth” language invoked here relates to the Lyotardian privileging of “multiple histories” over the oppression of unifying forces. If a serious, monolithic language is the totalizing structure, one that fails to speak for all, than nonsense through word play is the way to fight back, or at least call attention to it. One does so not in “depth” but on the “surface,” a word used repeatedly by Carrollian scholars to discuss what is being indirectly confronted in the books—the structure which, as referenced by Springer earlier in my chapter, created Lewis Carroll himself—Victorianism. By using the word “lurking,” Lopez indicates that this depth certainly isn’t positive. I would contend, then, that while it appears the word play is happening on the surface (i.e. Wonderland), to call attention to the lurking depth of the “real” world, both worlds act simultaneously as surface and depth. The fiction of Victorian England (ordered, restrained, tidy, controlled) is the easily palatable veneer, while Wonderland exposes its dark underbelly. In giving us a new perspective, Wonderland acts as the many *petits récits* (small narratives) undergirding the *grand récit* (large narrative) of Alice’s above ground reality. Among these *petits récits* are the normalization of nonsense and madness.

Additionally, for Gilles Deleuze, using nonsense as a surface merely gives Carroll the ability to deal with more subjects/narratives overall:

Carroll's uniqueness is to have allowed nothing to pass through sense, but to have played out everything in nonsense, since the diversity of nonsenses is enough to give an account of the entire universe, its terrors as well as its glories: the depth, the surface, and the volume or rolled surface. (22)

Nonsense, then, is a limitless tool. By using it, Carroll is able to flip the mad/sane dichotomy on its head in every conversation and, by doing so, bring to the surface the very real "terrors" and "glories" of human existence. The Cheshire Cat is the central character who brings this dichotomy to Alice's attention. It is her closest friend and confidant throughout her journey through Wonderland, and highlights the "deep-seated relationship between nonsense and madness" when "he says to Alice: 'we're all mad here'" (Lecerle 204). First meeting him in the Duchess's house as the only creature in the peppery kitchen *not* violently sneezing, he then follows her after she runs off with the pig-baby. At a loss for what to do next, she asks the Cat for advice:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where--" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. (65)

After establishing that all she really wishes for is *somewhere*, the Cat reveals that, in both directions, she is bound to encounter people who are mad. Even the Cat and Alice herself, by virtue of being in Wonderland, are, indeed, mad. Other than location, the other logic he produces in support of this madness is specifically for cats like himself:

"To begin with," said the Cat, "a dog's not mad. You grant that?"

"I suppose so," said Alice.

“Well, then,” the Cat went on, “you see a dog growls when it’s angry, and wags its tail when it’s pleased. Now I growl when I’m pleased, and wag my tail when I’m angry. Therefore, I’m mad.” (66)

Several interesting things are happening in this exchange all at once. First of all, the Cat decides to base its template for sanity not on itself, as most creatures would, but on its antithesis. Its entire goal seems to be to prove its own madness instead, as Alice would expect, to disprove it and show that dogs are the defective bunch. In support of this odd point, it seems that Wonderland does not really have *any* dogs in it, merely the one perfectly normal puppy which Alice tries to play fetch with earlier. From the outset, the discussion is topsy-turvy, as everything seems to be in Wonderland. To place oneself in the position of Other, as the Cat does here, for being outside of the norm of dog-ness, seems backwards. And yet, this is the entire point of Wonderland: to unmask the hyperreality of the “real” world. In the “real” world, acting outside of the norm would be proof of madness, and this proof could get one locked up or, as Emily Dickinson so poignantly put it, “Handled with a Chain—” (848). It’s a dangerous label and one certainly to be avoided. However, acting outside of the norm is expected in Wonderland, even celebrated, as there are no certainties, no truths to uphold. Only nonsense. If one sees Wonderland as the true reflection of the Real, the unvarnished image juxtaposed with the hyperreal, the most normal interaction in Victorian England **must be mad**, and those who disregard the norm are sane.

Alice’s next interaction with the Cheshire Cat occurs during the Queen’s croquet match, after she has lost her hedgehog, her flamingo, and any idea of what to do next. It is interesting to note that Alice clearly feels a close camaraderie with the Cat, as if they

are both removed from the general day-to-day action of the rest of Wonderland, and, when asked how she is “getting on,” she speaks openly as if to an old friend:

“I don’t think they play at all fairly,” Alice began, in rather a complaining tone, “and they all quarrel so dreadfully one ca’n’t hear oneself speak—and they don’t seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them—and you’ve no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive: for instance, there’s the arch I’ve got to go through next walking about at the other end of the ground—and I should have croqueted the Queen’s hedgehog just now, only it ran away when it saw mine coming!” (86)

Even as far as the tenth chapter, it still seems like Alice is judging Wonderland by the rules of the hyperreal, and not by the very Real nonsense which it presents. To assume that, in her own world, people follow all the rules even when they aren’t enforced would be untrue; however, Wonderland rightfully reflects that enforcement is only *real* for a select, unlucky group of people. And as for loud quarreling, one only needs to watch a scene from the “real” world Parliament to judge that the Queen’s croquet game is rather mild. But she has been raised to believe in order and reason, and is endlessly frustrated when it is absent. The culmination of this scene seems to represent this entire point: the King arrives and decides that he doesn’t like the look of the Cheshire Cat’s head hanging in the air without a body, and he therefore wishes to execute it. However, how does one chop off the head of something when it has no body to speak of?

The executioner’s argument was, that you couldn’t cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn’t begin at *his* time of life.

The King's argument was that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren't to talk nonsense. (89)

Of course the Cat can easily disappear while this absurd conversation is going on—no one ever gets truly beheaded in Wonderland after all—but part of the hilarity of the interaction has to do with its gruesome topic. While two buffoons argue over how to bring about the King's irrational wish to behead a Cat he just didn't like the look of, everyone involved just simply walks away. It is the focus of those in power that is highlighted here as absurd and even "mad," which is used not to uphold justice or right wrongs, but to lash out in momentary instances of discomfort, only to forget about them seconds later.

Alice's battle with all four themes—arbitrary rules, conflicting emotions, crisis of identity, and the question of madness—reaches a fever pitch during the trial of the Knave of Hearts at the end of the book. Here, Alice's inner sense of fairness as well as faith in the justice system are both violated by the nonsense surrounding her. There could also be a very real consequence this time: the possible conviction of an innocent man (though we are never meant to really think the Knave was innocent; if anything, we are to consider him a lush and a cad due to his shaded nose and defiant stance in Tenniel's illustrations) (Gardner 124). Unless the creatures of Wonderland properly follow the rules of a court of law, real damage could be done, at least in Alice's trusting sensibility. Upon first entering the room, however, she was full of curiosity:

Alice had never been in a court of justice before, but she had read about them in books, and she was quite pleased to find that she knew that name of

nearly everything there. “That’s the judge,” she said to herself, “because of his great wig.” (110-11)

As she goes on to name and observe the other elements of the room, she notices at least something a little off about each one: the judge was the King himself, the jurors were frantically writing down their names (“for fear they should forget them before the end of the trial”), the accusation was merely a stanza from a well-known poem, and the King wished very much to consider the verdict before any witnesses had taken the stand. Additionally, none of the witnesses who were called knew anything at all about the case and were questioned on irrelevant topics, each under threat of execution if their answers were not up to the King’s standards of speed and eloquence.

While it is impossible to tell if Carroll meant to highlight errors in a “real” world court of law, it almost doesn’t matter. The staged hyperreality of a court, especially in this time and place, practically satirizes itself. As Rankin points out, in this scene, “Form takes precedence over substance, and insignificant details are stressed and important ones overlooked. Justice is as arbitrary as it is whimsical. What is on trial here is the law itself” (324). The wigs, the trumpets, the ceremony, and the somber attitudes are all contrasted with the fact that one juryman’s chalk squeaks, none of them can spell, several of the officials have fallen asleep, the Queen is sentencing one of the witnesses of a separate crime during the trial, there is a call to sentence before a verdict has been decided, and, in the midst of all of it, Alice is growing larger and larger and larger. While she is surprised by her abrupt physical change, it corresponds, as always, to her increased confidence. When Alice is called forward to be a witness, she acts in open disdain and defiance of the court without any fear of consequence, so much so that when the Queen

calls for her head, no one moves. As Lopez claims, “The question posed to us by Carroll . . . is thus the question of how Alice answers the ineluctable void lurking and hiding behind Carroll’s surfaces” (108). The question is answered in her final act, calling the soldiers out for being what they truly are: a flimsy pack of playing cards. Having disregarded any power Wonderland might have had over her, the world dissolves, and she is sent back home. The irony in this statement aligns precisely with my main point: Wonderland never had any power over Alice, just what she assumed based on her hyperreal mindset. Therefore, she was not really rebelling here, merely sending herself back into the cage of Victorian England. To truly rebel, she would need to carry her courtroom attitude back with her, which she clearly does not.

*Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll’s 1872 sequel to *Wonderland*, differs in several ways from the original book, but only one that makes a significant difference to my study. Alice’s path, as opposed to arbitrarily wandering, is highly organized from start to finish and strictly governed by the rules of chess. From one book to the next, Carroll has added an element of structure, if not to the dialogue, then to the journey itself. This technique immediately calls to memory the existential question of “Who is in charge?” On the macro level, of course, it is the author above all else, telling the characters exactly what to think, do, and say. Alice doesn’t have any free will here, but neither do any of the others. The only ones who can choose whether or not to participate—and on what level—are the author and the reader. On the micro-level, the structure of the chess game moves Alice away from the true chaos of Wonderland and into something familiar to the hyperreal. Right away in chapter three, she has a path of

squares to follow, though no clear idea of what will happen on each one, and one goal in mind—to become a queen. The Red Queen explains:

A pawn goes two squares in its first move, you know. So you go very quickly through the Third Square—by railway, I should think—and you’ll find yourself in the Fourth Square in no time. Well, that square belongs to Tweedledum and Tweedledee—the Fifth is mostly water—the Sixth belongs to Humpty Dumpty . . . the Seventh is all forest—however, one of the Knights will show you the way—and in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it’s all feasting and fun! (166)

It seems pretty straightforward, and, indeed her path does follow this exact trajectory. It is the dialogue in this book that is essential to finding the otherworld/hyperreal dichotomy. Starting with the Red Queen, Alice repeatedly feels compelled to tell her how things are done in “*our* country” (Victorian England), hoping the Queen will recognize that her world’s ways are superior. The opposite always occurs. For example, after forcing Alice to run many miles for no particular reason, only to finish in just the place they had started, Alice gets in a word between breaths: ““Well, in *our* country,’ said Alice still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing’” (165). The Queen instantly replies, “A slow sort of country! . . . Now *here*, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.” This may, according to Gardner, be the most-often quoted line in all of the *Alice* books, “(usually in reference to rapidly changing political situations)” (165), and it reads easily as a biting critique of the hyperreality in which Alice lives. Just as the Caucus Race was meant to highlight the very real absurdities of political office (31), what Alice

believes to be nonsense in Wonderland is, in actuality, the way her real world operates—looking very busy to get absolutely nothing done.

At the end of her journey, after Alice has been crowned, she again attempts to school both of the other two queens regarding time. When the White Queen says, “we had *such* a thunderstorm last Tuesday—I mean one of the last set of Tuesdays, you know” (255), Alice replies, puzzled, “In *our* country . . . there’s only one day at a time.” Again, the retort is predictable. Whatever Alice believes is the proper way of doing things must be turned on its head and shown from a different perspective:

That’s a poor thin way of doing things. Now here, we mostly have days and nights two or three at a time, and sometimes in the winter we take as many as five nights together—for warmth, you know.

The conversation seems to follow a direct line of logic, establishing that having five nights at once makes a person five times warmer (or colder), and yet never establishes any relationship between days and temperature. Before Alice can recognize this fallacy, however, the Red Queen shouts, “just as I’m five times as rich as you are, *and* five times as clever!” Her implication here, according to Gardner, is that “rich” and “clever” are opposites in the same way as “hot” and “cold” are. While this conflation is admittedly easy to miss, it brings up an interesting point. We do not automatically see a binary opposition in rich/clever that we see in hot/cold. And yet, as in all things, Wonderland is poking at our understanding of aboveground “reality.” Is it possible, in the ‘real’ world, to be both rich *and* clever? In Carroll’s philosophy, however hidden in nonsense, the answer seems to be a very clear “no.” Through Eco’s lens of the Absolute Fake, this concept highlights humanity’s [man’s] feeling that:

he is infinite, or rather that he is capable of desiring in an unlimited fashion; he desires everything, we might say. But he realizes that he is incapable of achieving what he desires, and therefore he must prefigure an Other (who possesses to an optimum degree what he most desires), to whom he delegates the job of bridging the gap between what is desired and what can be done. (91)

To become rich, or even to be born and raised rich, in our reality often requires a certain amount of myopia, which naturally challenges one's goodness and, in Carroll's mind, also one's cleverness. However, in our hyperreal landscape, we must believe that it is possible to have and be everything, and so the Red Queen's comment comes off as laughably childish and absurd.

While Alice's relationship with the Red Queen is the most volatile and antagonistic, her conversations with the White Queen, who is so mild-mannered and slow that she literally turns into a sheep in Chapter V, reveal a brilliant commentary on the hyperreal. Just as many critics have commented on Carroll's ability to anticipate a postmodern future, the White Queen physically feels and "remembers" what is about to happen before it does, whether it is pleasant or painful. This is a process she calls "living backwards," and she strongly contends that there is at least one advantage to it: "that one's memory works both ways" (196). Not only can the White Queen remember what happened before, but she has premonitions of an inevitable future, which she views as a positive ability. There are two levels to her explanation which occur simultaneously, seen in this exchange:

“For instance now . . . there’s the King’s Messenger. He’s in prison right now, being punished: and the trial doesn’t even begin until next Wednesday: and of course the crime comes last of all.”

“Suppose he never commits the crime?” said Alice.

“That would be all the better, wouldn’t it?” the Queen said, as she bound the plaster round her finger with a bit of ribbon. (196-97)

To Alice, this is not only an unjust way of doing things, but also impractical. If time moves in a linear fashion, then we are punished for what we actually do wrong, not for what we might do. If we decide not to err, then we are rewarded by a lack of punishment. In the Queen’s view, if the crime is never committed, whether or not the punishment has occurred makes no difference at all. Not only is she openly questioning the linear nature of time itself, but she dismisses the pain that could be avoided if one can actually see the future. Even she is not immune from such pain as the plaster she is wrapping around her finger during this very conversation will treat a future injury, one that, to Alice, seems very preventable. As she is just pointing out what is wrong with this logic, the Queen begins to scream that her finger is bleeding and that she has pricked it, and yet nothing has happened yet:

“When I fasten my shawl again,” the poor Queen groaned out: “the brooch will come undone directly. Oh, oh!” As she said the words the brooch flew open, and the Queen clutched wildly at it, and tried to clasp it again.

“Take care!” cried Alice. “You’re holding it all crooked!” And she caught at the brooch: but it was too late: the pin had slipped, and the Queen had pricked her finger.

“That accounts for the bleeding, you see,” she said to Alice with a smile.

“Now you understand the way things happen here.” (198)

Obviously, by saying “here,” the Queen is not just referring to Wonderland’s topsy-turvy ways, but to the hyperreal itself. In this absurdist exchange, we see the classic argument against the free will of human beings: if we know from history that what we are about to do will hurt us, why do we continue to do it? The only logical explanation is that some greater force is controlling us, or else we enjoy giving and receiving pain. The absurdity is not merely evident in our bumbling White Queen, but in the “reality” of the everyday world Alice is used to: of “*our* country.” Once the inevitable has occurred, the Queen no longer screams. From her view, it is all over. The pain occurred only in the anticipation of the act, which, logic would tell us, we should be able to avoid. From a Baudrillardian point of view, this phenomenon is a part of the simulation of reality we have chosen to embrace, which has become the only reality that exists. We no longer “choose” to hurt ourselves in the future; since we have been doing so for so long, the future pain has *become* inevitable—it always has been and it always will be. That is the hyperreal.

### **The Trouble with Happy Endings**

*“There are no happy endings because nothing ends.”*

-Schmendrick the Magician, *The Last Unicorn*

*Through the Looking Glass* ends abruptly with Alice angrily shaking the Red Queen, “whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief” (266), until she realizes that she is back in the drawing room of her own home, holding a kitten instead of the rapidly shrinking Queen. At this point, she has a Cartesian discussion with her kittens on whether “such a nice dream” was hers or the Red King’s, and the book leaves us at that.

The ending to *Wonderland*, however, is abundantly more puzzling, especially when we take into account the critique that can be gleaned as we compare the two worlds in the story: Wonderland (the real) and Victorian England (the hyperreal). After Alice escapes from the courtroom, full of strange creatures all calling for her head, violently kicking at them and denouncing them as the mere “pack of cards” they are, Carroll ends the book on a strangely whimsical note, in the thoughts of Alice’s older sister:

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how should would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (126-27)

According to Jennifer Geer, “The closing paragraph of *Wonderland* is lovely but absurd as it blithely affirms that the tale of Alice’s adventures, in which mothers sing sadistic lullabies, babies turn into pigs, and little girls shout at queens, will lead Alice’s older sister into reveries about delightful children and domestic bliss” (1). Geer goes on to imply that this frame for Carroll’s story, “suggest[s] that the tale of Alice’s dream fosters the happy, loving childhood that will enable her development into a good woman and mother” (2). Equally confusing is the presence of the same scene in Carroll’s earlier manuscript, *Alice’s Adventures Underground*. Geer claims, “The revisions Carroll made to his original manuscript when he decided to publish *Wonderland* suggest a deliberate

attempt to appeal to the public by associating Alice's adventures with conventional ideas about femininity" (4). Yet, this scene, the most domestic vision in the entire story, was not one of those instances. Since Carroll always intended to end the story this way, even before thinking of publishing it, he doesn't get the benefit of this financially-motivated excuse.

Lecerle pushes back against this reading, saying that her remembrance of "happy summer days" is not reflective of "banal memories of childhood," but instead "because she has undergone an experience which has changed her for good" (114). There is quite a bit of truth here, though I would argue that Alice has not truly changed. She has gained, as Gawain did, a new perspective—a momentary glimpse of "the big picture"—that immediately disappears when she returns home. The only course of action in the hyperreal is to oversentimentalize the glimpse instead of considering its implications, which would be too emotionally difficult. Kelly explains the more popular, psychoanalytic interpretation of the scene when he writes, "The dream of Alice's sister, then, is the dream of Carroll himself, who, in his anticipation of Alice Liddell's maturity, may well echo the conclusion of the book, that Alice would 'find pleasure in all [her children's] simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days" (36-37). Perhaps. To this reader, however, it sounds more like giving up. The whole of the story up until this point has called attention to the flaws in her own world, from unfair rules of social hierarchy to problematic patriarchal norms to silly everyday mannerisms. It has also taught her to give in to her natural instincts and fight back against nonsense, especially when it becomes violent and unfair. Sadly, the ending makes clear that the hyperreality of Victorian England is the only truth that matters. People (little girls

included) have been taught to desire it, not question it, and Alice will leave Wonderland behind her as a sweet, imaginary tale. Yet sweetness can be found nowhere in its lines, only “the void that underlies the comfortable structures of the rational world” (Kelly 24).

In short, my goal in this chapter has been to reveal Alice’s (and our own) true existence in Wonderland, while the hyperreality above is the “plaster cast” (Eco’s term) that has so long been our choice and belief. To a certain extent, it seems as though Martin Gardner would have agreed with my thesis:

The last level of metaphor in the Alice books is this: that life, viewed rationally and without illusion, appears to be a nonsense tale told by an idiot mathematician. At the heart of things science finds only a mad, neverending quadrille of Mock Turtle Waves and Gryphon Particles. For a moment the waves and particles dance in grotesque, inconceivably complex patterns capable of reflecting their own absurdity. We all live slapstick lives, under an inexplicable sentence of death, and when we try to find out what the Castle authorities want us to do, we are shifted from one bumbling bureaucrat to another. (xxi)

It might seem, then, that Brooke-Rose was correct, only in the reverse: our *perceived real world* makes our *real Otherworld* existence, of which we are unaware except in our dreams, more bearable. If we were to believe in Wonderland as more than just a dream, we would be forced to contend with absurd and nonsensical norms that are far from harmless.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WILL THE “REAL” AMERICA PLEASE STAND UP?

In his 2016 article “Locating Lakeside, Wisconsin,” Jake La Jeunesse acknowledges an interesting phenomenon among fans of Gaiman’s *American Gods*: “readers of this fantasy novel want Lakeside to exist. Running an online search for ‘American Gods Lakeside’ turns up several pages in which people post ideas arguing for the real-world location, while commenters can counter with their own arguments” (45). La Jeunesse posits that since the novel itself works to “manifest people’s beliefs into the physical realm, . . . the paradoxical geography of the town itself holds meaning” (46). In other words, Lakeside is the simultaneous embodiment of the mundane reality and the fantastical ideal, and it is all the more believable because of its impossibility. The fictional residents of Lakeside work hard to create a Norman Rockwell illusion,<sup>7</sup> and their belief in the town makes it real. Readers, in turn, “mirror this behavior in their desire to find, and travel to, a real-world location with the qualities of American utopia” (46) . . . which, of course, is fictional.

All of this seems to point to one conclusion: that Gaiman’s readers are either insane or masochistic. He *tells* us the town is made-up, he offers contradictory details regarding its location, it’s clearly a pastiche of the many small towns peppering the upper Midwest, and yet here we are, debating strangers at length whether he meant it to be Menomonie or Pelican Lake or Parrish. A fool’s errand. Even when Gaiman’s readers should know better, they don’t seem to care; they can simultaneously acknowledge the

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<sup>7</sup> Rockwell, a popular and prolific illustrator for the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1916 through 1963, while beloved by the general American public, “has long troubled more elitist viewers, who have traditionally dismissed his art as, according to one critic, ‘patriotic escapism’ or ‘candied solace and small-town nostalgia’” (Culbert, para. 1).

façade while searching for its real-life existence. This paradox seems to be one of the many, uniquely-American delusions revealed in the book (See Chapter One: “A Note Regarding America”). It reflects the same desire in many readers of memoir who wish to know how much of a story is “real” and what was embellished to make it into a compelling read. Why not leave it alone then? The answer to this may lie in the human relationship to the real world, or at least what we wish to believe is real.

What sets *American Gods* apart from the journeys of Gawain and Alice is supported by the above paradox: that the line between the Otherworld and the real world is blurry and indistinct. Generally, in an Otherworld journey, the protagonist crosses some kind of boundary—down a rabbit-hole, across a river, through a wardrobe—into a world that loosely mirrors their own. According to Tanya Pell Jones, this movement into the unknown puts characters in a position “where they will forever be altered” based on three possible outcomes: “the character will return to their world changed for the better, changed for the worse, or they will not return at all” (209). While this reduction works moderately well as a framework to analyze characters, it falls short when analyzing the worlds themselves. Alice and Gawain, for example, return relatively unchanged, but the readers now view the characters’ respective “real worlds” with new, skeptical eyes. In *American Gods*, the after effect is the same, but the Otherworld is an undercurrent that always accompanies the real world; it is accessible to all as well as physically present, but it is not visible all of the time. Because of this, the Otherworld isn’t necessarily as strange to the reader as one might think, but comfortable and familiar. The reader’s desire to find it for themselves is hardly surprising.

Across all of Gaiman's works, according to Harley J. Sims, he "portrays both an otherworld and an underworld of fallen idols and icons, an alternate über-reality where the deities born to people continents away and historically unacquainted with one another now rub shoulders as surely as they do in modern dictionaries of gods and myth" (94-95). In the "über-reality" of *American Gods*, the journey to the Otherworld is not across any obvious boundary but across the American landscape of ideals. It's a road trip which highlights the hyperreality of modern American life, namely the affinity for belief in impossible things, the rather adolescent relationship with the divine and the sacred, the privileging of rapid progress over history and tradition, and the unwavering trust in the American Dream. In the novel, the "real world" of human experience is a hyperreality enhanced by technology but devoid of gods, while the divine Otherworld is hidden underneath in a mundane disguise. Only Shadow is able to adjust his vision in order to see both as they are, existing on the same plane, simultaneously powerful and pitiful.

### **Belief in the Impossible**

*"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."*

-The White Queen, *Through the Looking Glass*

One of the most distinct features of *American Gods* is how overtly the novel alerts the reader to its own hyperreality, either through the characters addressing Shadow Moon, the protagonist of the book, or through the omniscient voice of the author speaking directly to the reader:

None of this can actually be happening. If it makes you more comfortable, you could simply think of it as metaphor. Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a father, a city, a house of many

rooms, a watchmaker who left his prize chronometer in the desert, someone who loves you—even, perhaps, against all evidence, a celestial being whose only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers, and triumphs over all opposition.

Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.

So none of this is happening. Such things could not occur. Never a word of it is literally true. Even so, the next thing that happened, happened like this:

(509)

As shown above in the opening to chapter eighteen, Gaiman calls attention to the impossibility of the Otherworld in our rational mind, but then moves ahead with it anyway as the only reality that matters. The result is that the reader believes him, whether or not they need his metaphorical “out,” and the world he creates is fully tangible, fully mundane, and fully full of gods.

The main premise of the book is that, as people traveled to America over the millennia, they brought their gods with them. These gods thrive off of belief. Over time, as their believers changed and adapted to their new home, the belief that kept these manifestations going often faded. In some cases, the believers even left and went back home, abandoning their gods out on the American frontier. Either way, the deities needed to find some other way to survive as the old ways of fear and blood sacrifice were no longer effective. As Mr. Wednesday (Odin) explains, “It’s like bees and honey. It takes thousands of them, millions perhaps, all working together to make the pot of honey you have on your breakfast table. Now imagine that you could eat nothing but honey. That’s

what it's like for my kind of people . . . we feed on belief, on prayers, on love" (287). For a select few, like Jesus ("That boy was one lucky son of a virgin," says Jacquel), the new world is fertile ground to start a new movement, and they are able to prosper. The vast majority of them, however, walk among us, playing to their strengths and gathering worship however they can. Ibis and Jacquel, ancient Egyptian gods, become funeral directors and embalmers. Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, becomes a prostitute who devours her johns in a bizarre "reverse birth" routine after they show their veneration. Odin is a charming old grifter. Mad Sweeney, a leprechaun, is a drunken brawler who hops from bar to bar and does amazing coin tricks ("takes them right from the hoard"), and Easter is a colorful, curvy Southern dame, entertaining all who come to her doorstep with genteel charm and surrounded by springtime flora and fauna. They do the best they can, but they admit that, in the old days, things were better, back when the superstitions of the old world required everyday ritual and routine. America, as is repeated throughout the book, "is a poor place for gods" (248). Yet it is now undergoing a rapid change as the young gods of technology and media become rich and fat on the worship of the masses, and a storm is coming as the two sides prepare for battle.

Shadow, and the reader along with him, struggles for a short time to believe any of this is really happening. His initial incredulity is understandable during his first few days with Mr. Wednesday who knows personal things about him, travels between locations at impossible speeds, effortlessly pulls off a bank heist without getting caught, and scams every young woman he meets into either giving him money or sleeping with him. However, as an ex-con, whose prison sentence has challenged everything he used to believe and whose faithful wife is killed while cheating on him the day he is released,

Shadow is in a unique psychological position, more primed than most to believe the impossible. Once Shadow encounters his dead wife, up and moving around in her decaying body as if nothing happened, he no longer questions his experiences. His mantra becomes, “Wednesday doesn’t pay me to ask questions,” repeated after each unbelievable scene. At the House on the Rock, Shadow, Wednesday, and a small group of gods ride its famous carousel. When the lights unexpectedly go out, and their divine forms are revealed, Shadow perceives each deity in a number of different forms simultaneously, as each one was imagined by its many devotees over the centuries, all brought to America at various times. Mr. Nancy (Anansi) is a spider, but also a small slave boy with a wounded foot, and also a tall, powerful African chief with an ostrich feather crown. How is it possible that Shadow can see them all at once? Just as the author assures us later in the book, Czernobog tells Shadow, “None of this is truly happening . . . Is all in your head. Best not to think of it” (132).

Shadow momentarily thinks that he dreaming—he is a little boy still, lying in bed and having a crazy nightmare—when the author again addresses, not Shadow, but the reader:

All we have to believe with is our senses, the tools we use to perceive the world: our sight, our touch, our memory. If they lie to us, then nothing can be trusted. And even if we do not believe, then we cannot travel in any other way than the road our senses show us; and we must walk that road to the end. (139)

Shadow’s questioning of which world is “real”—either a rag tag group of odd balls riding a carousel or a frightening assembly of all-powerful beings—becomes our questioning of our own perceptions. As human beings, we are limited by our senses, the only tools

available to parse out the difference between reality (real world) and imagination (Otherworld). Yet the delineation between the two, according to the novel, is not clear and simple, and our senses are frightfully limited. Rather than listen to Czernobog's advice, it might be more prudent to listen to the buffalo man who whispers to Shadow later "from somewhere deep beneath the world, in a bass rumble: *Believe everything*" (133).

Sojna Klimek, in her analysis of meta-reference within fantasy fiction, reminds her reader of Tolkien's famous argument: when a reader is fully immersed in the Land of Faerie, belief in the magic of that world is perfectly natural. If it's not, something is very wrong: "fantasy fiction denotes texts that present a coherent Faerie 'Otherworld' which includes magic as a 'natural' element" (79). It should easily go without question that whatever mortally-impossible thing that happens within a realm presented as fantastical should be expected. If Shadow experienced a perfectly normal day, that would be beyond belief. Otherworld journeys not only give us a topsy-turvy world, but they cause us to expect and easily believe it. Klimek goes on to argue that modern readers are more equipped than their historical counterparts to take part in this belief:

Large parts of our society seem to have developed an actual 'meta-awareness' that does not hinder the emotional involvement in the coherent plot which takes place in an obviously fictitious world following its inner logic, as is the case for the Faerie in fantasy fiction. (90)

We, as postmodern readers fully engaged in the hyperreality of "real" life, are perfectly capable of simultaneously participating emotionally in the story and understanding its

fictionality. To gain our belief, an author must simply lay out the rules of their Otherworld.

Belief, in the *American Gods* universe, is a powerful thing, and not just as nectar to feed starving deities. By the end of the novel, Shadow has come to think of it as a powerful weapon people don't even know they wield, and this ignorance makes him angry:

People believe . . . It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine, and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen. (536)

To believe is to create, and to create is to cause. To summon a god/story/theory/fear into existence and then turn one's back on it is both cruel (as it would be to neglect a child) and irresponsible (as it would be to neglect a destructive weapon). Here, belief has substance in the Otherworld that is easy to ignore in the hyperreal, but we do so at our own peril. Additionally, if we remembered our beliefs more often, as Mr. Ibis tells Shadow, we might find the answers to our most puzzling questions.

Shadow comes to think of Ibis, the funeral director, as the great explainer. Ibis often speaks in "a gentle, earnest lecturing that put Shadow in mind of a college professor who used to work out at the Muscle Farm and who could not talk, could only discourse, expound, explain" (193). Every conversation is an oratory, giving Shadow more information on which to base his view of the "big picture." In one of these conversations, Ibis reveals that people have been traveling to America for much, much longer than

scientists believe, and his reaction to this misunderstanding is to pity them for their inability to believe the impossible:

I feel very sorry for the professionals whenever they find another confusing skull, something that belonged to the wrong sort of people, or whenever they find statues or artifacts that confuse them—for they'll talk about the odd, but they won't talk about the impossible, which is where I feel sorry for them, for as soon as something becomes impossible it slips out of belief entirely, whether it's true or not." (197)

The novel is forever daring us to put aside the evidence of our senses, of logic, and of experience in order to embrace the impossible, the otherworldly. Ibis' use of the word "true" in the above quotation is especially interesting, suggesting that truth can be revealed through the impossible in ways that the real, "possible," world limits us. To eschew one for the other is not only unfortunate, but a pitiable offense. Human beings have lost the opportunity to uncover evidence of the "Real," the true, by living in the hyperreal of our senses and our technological advancements.

Additionally, the novel often suggests that this need to believe in mutually exclusive ideas is perfectly suited to the American psyche, and Gaiman himself, as Wagner, Golden, and Bissette propose, is the perfect person to notice: "Given his 'outsider' status (having settled in the United States after spending his formative years in England), and his refined powers of observation, he could be a part of America but remain removed, 'in it, but not of it.'" Therefore, *American Gods* "reflects his deep fascination with and love for his adopted country, but also subtly reflects its harshness, and strangeness, and flaws" (331). Sam Black Crow's much-quoted "I believe" speech in

chapter thirteen presents this uniquely American ability literally in creed form. Some of her beliefs are silly—"I believe in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and Marilyn Monroe and the Beatles and Elvis and Mister Ed"—while some are more serious: "I believe in a woman's right to choose, a baby's right to live, that while all human life is sacred there's nothing wrong with the death penalty if you can trust the legal system, and that no one but a moron would trust the legal system." At one point, she claims, "I believe in a personal god who cares about me and worries and oversees everything I do. I believe in an impersonal god who set the universe in motion and went off to hang with her girlfriends and doesn't even know that I'm alive. I believe in an empty and godless universe of casual chaos, background noise, and sheer blind luck" (395). Throughout the speech, Sam outlines many famous, contradictory theories regarding religion, philosophy, and belief, without adhering to any one in particular. Instead of coming down firmly on one side (since each belief seems to exclude the others), she chooses to embrace them all.

This rebellious attitude encapsulates the Baudrillardian idea that, if all things are a simulation of something long forgotten and presently meaningless, contradictions are no longer valid. America exists in both a "Real" and an "Other" capacity, gods are both real and created by the belief in them, the separation from the divine in the virgin landscape of America is both the country's freedom and its curse, and the old world, which provided the deities in the first place, both envies and derides it for all of this. To take this idea even further, Sam's belief system seems to dismiss outright the concept of "contradiction": there are no oppositional beliefs, just an endless menu of options. What is oddly evident in this speech and throughout the novel is the American ability to reject these binaries ("all men are created equal"), while simultaneously staking its entire

identity on them (“America is the greatest nation on earth!”). As Rut Blomqvist suggests in his discussion of *American Gods*, American “culture is an eternal process of self-reference and thus never refers to a first principle outside itself; it uses itself as proof for its veraciousness” (7). Due to its own newness, it takes part in the logical fallacy of circular reference, which Blomqvist believes to be exactly what Gaiman is mocking. There is no independent rating system that shows American culture to be “the best,” but, if one says it enough times, it becomes truth. As I laid out in Chapter One, America possesses a combination of youth, prosperity and shallow hubris that makes it more susceptible to absolute fakery than others. While it understands the airbrushed model or perfectly-staged living room to be merely pretend, it finds itself demanding them instead of settling for “messy” reality. This leaves America open to acknowledging, even celebrating, hyperreality. Sam’s credo can easily be recited with its customary and nationalistic gusto and pride.

### **The Sacred and the Mundane**

*“The American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.”*

-Umberto Eco

Similar to Shadow and Mr. Wednesday, Umberto Eco took part in a cross-country journey across the American landscape in the early 1980s, chronicling his thoughts in the essay compilation, *Travels in Hyperreality*. In this, he marvels at the American obsession with the absolute fake, which, in its utter *un*-reality, changes one’s understanding of the “Real” itself: “a reality so real that it proclaims its artificiality from the rooftops” (7). Following Baudrillard’s example, he uses Disneyland to exemplify this concept, but also

adds wax museums, amusement parks, and modern castles built to look simultaneously old and new. Due to America's lack of history, its citizens fabricate plastic models of sublime objects that become more real than that which they signify: "imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be inferior to it" (57). Gaiman deals with this phenomenon directly as Shadow and Mr. Wednesday encounter the many kitschy tourist traps strewn across the Midwest (the House on the Rock, Mount Rushmore, and the "Largest Ball of Twine," just to name a few). According to Gaiman's mythology, roadside attractions in the new world are parallel to churches, temples, or stone circles in the old. Here, when people internally recognize that a place is sacred, they respond by carving presidential faces in the side of an ancient cliff, by displaying a fiberglass statue of the fictional Paul Bunyan,

by building a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they have never visited, or by erecting a gigantic bat house in some part of the country that bats have traditionally declined to visit. Roadside attractions: people feel themselves being pulled into places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that. (118)

A common response to being human in a place that, according to Eco, has a "vacuum of memories" is to create an absolute fake: the "offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth" (31). The un-real other becomes *more* real than what our senses tell us should be true, and easier to comprehend and accept. The presence of the

Otherworld in *American Gods* teaches Shadow all of this, while simultaneously challenging him to question it throughout his quest.

While visiting the House on the Rock, Czernobog encourages Shadow to look inside an old fashioned animated diorama called “The Drunkard’s Dream.” In it, an inebriated man on a bench in a graveyard lies unaware as grotesque “wraiths” emerge from the graves around him, threatening and nightmarish, until a priest comes out of the church and frightens them away. The priest then looks disdainfully at the sleeping drunkard before re-entering the church. Shadow is confused and unsettled by the clockwork image, though he doesn’t know exactly why. “That is the world as it is,” says Czernobog. “That is the real world. It is there, in that box” (123). Blomqvist interprets this scene to support that “those who are in some way not included in the center of culture, experience reality in *American Gods*,” such as drunks and the dead (10). Here, Blomqvist argues, “The drunk sees the real world while the priest disdains the truly experienced.” I must take issue with this interpretation, however. What I believe Czernobog suggests here is that Shadow (and all of humanity, really) is the drunkard on the bench, unaware of the dangerous reality hovering around, beneath, ready to strike. The only reason the drunkard is kept safe is because of the watchful protection of the priest, forever standing ready to banish the spirits away, guarding the half-wit, helpless drunkard who clearly doesn’t deserve the effort. The irony reflected in this scene is that what we take to be real—our own drunken haze and illusions of safety—is an absolute fake, a false sense of secure reality confirmed by our limited senses. However, in the end, it never really matters, as there are always those in the know who are willing to step in and keep the “Real” from disrupting our dream and causing harm. We are protected by

our ignorance and by the actions of beings we don't know about or even believe in. For Shadow, however, it is never clear who is playing the part of the priest and who is the wraith.

Throughout the novel, Shadow learns and un-learns information on almost every page. As opposed to *Gawain* and *Alice*, the novel has no "ideal" to confront, but Shadow is consistently left to wonder what (or whom) is simulating what (or whom). To make matters even more confusing, Mr. Wednesday, his guide and employer, is a con man, adept at hoaxes that he expects Shadow to participate in, though his position as scammer or scammed is forever in question. In chapter nine, Wednesday off-handedly describes the Bishop's Game to Shadow, in which two partners, one playing a bishop and one a cop, scam a jeweler out of an expensive necklace. What makes the grift work is that the bishop and the cop pretend to be on opposing sides but are really working together. Wednesday even believably laments that "its time has passed," since society and culture have changed enough to make the grift impossible to adapt. By the end of the novel, Shadow, after learning that Wednesday is actually his father, pieces together that Wednesday and Loki have been playing out this exact scam—"Two men, who appear to be on opposite sides, playing the same game" (532)—against the technology gods, against the entire pantheon of deities in America, and against Shadow himself, a long con set in motion to produce a massacre. The whole reason they sought him out at all was, as Wednesday's biological son, he was needed to make the con work. This entire plotline pays homage to an otherworld motif in ancient Irish literature described here by Arthur A. Wachsler:

The motif in question is one of deception that can best be termed the “elaborate ruse,” for in essence it is a highly involved stratagem or ploy. Its purpose is to bring to the Otherworld a mortal hero needed by a fairy sovereign for one of several reasons: as an ally against a dangerous and seemingly invincible adversary, to receive some apparently vital information, or as a lover. (29).

In Gaiman’s novel, in contrast to classic otherworld journeys, instead of crossing a literal border Shadow learns how to see the Otherworld that is around him. Additionally, for the majority of the novel, Shadow and the reader believe he has been brought on board to fight the bad guy—to defeat the gods of technology. However, Shadow soon learns that Loki and Wednesday are merely tired and bored, and they put their plan into action to start a war and give them what they crave: deaths dedicated to Odin and chaos dedicated to Loki. As a part of the deception, Wednesday is temporarily killed in order to draw all of the gods together, and Laura, Shadow’s zombie-wife, runs Loki through with his own spear to save Shadow. While Shadow confronts the two about their con, Loki is bleeding out on the floor and Wednesday exists merely as “a wraith-shape in the shadows” (533). This choice of words evokes the earlier “Drunkard’s Dream” diorama, in which the wraith comes forth from the grave when the drunkard is asleep and unaware. Only in this case, Wednesday was the opportunist wraith, not the priest or father-figure Shadow had believed him to be. An elaborate ruse indeed.

Possibly the most jarring thing about the whole book is how each god is both pathetically impotent yet frighteningly powerful at the same time. While Shadow is eventually willing to believe he is interacting with deities, what is much more difficult to understand is how utterly different they are than what he expected—they are poor

simulations of what he would have believed “Real” gods to be. Gaiman plays with this concept throughout his book, at one moment showing how each god is merely a shell of what they once were at the height of their power, but also how they exist in multiple natures throughout the world, the lucky ones (like Jesus in America) living where they are still worshipped and adored. Wednesday, then, is simultaneously a powerful simulation of the Odin of Norse mythology, but also exactly who he pretends to be: an elderly, frail trickster in a fancy suit working out a long con. In *Shadow and Wednesday*’s meeting in the “Postscript,” Shadow asks for clarification of this point:

“I saw you die, . . . I stood vigil for your body. You tried to destroy so much for power. You would have sacrificed so much for yourself.”

“I did not do that.”

“Wednesday did. He was you.”

“He was me, yes. But I am not him.” (587)

While based on the same icon, each entity has a certain independence. As Sims puts it, “The originals need not fall for the new stories to stand” (103). Contrary to the scientific method, the novel claims that just because there is new evidence that seems to contradict the old ideas, this does not necessarily discount the old entirely. It is possible for them all to be true. Earlier in the book, Mama-ji hints that she both is and is not the Indian goddess Kali when she says, “We’ve lived in this country for a long time. Some of us do better than others, I agree. I do well. Back in India, there is an incarnation of me who does much better, but so be it. I am not envious” (138). The implication here is that the American incarnation of each god is independent of its counterpart back in the old country. While Kali is for certain much more great and powerful back in India, this noble,

proud woman in a red sari, the one who needs a lift to the restaurant for dinner and a boost to climb up onto the carousel, is a very believable mix of powerful and feeble. Both are simulations of an idea that merely exists as caricature, which can be said about all of the god figures in the story as well as, in the end, Shadow himself. The mundane real world and the Otherworld are combined in the character of each god, and the hyperreal blinds humans from seeing this truth. Even though it falls counter to all that humans are taught to believe, the idea that the gods themselves are very much like us, even at our most pathetic, is the most believable thing of all.

This focus on the sacredness of a location, and America's difficulty recognizing it, is another symbolic thread that runs throughout the entire novel. Akin to most works of Otherworld fantasy, according to Farah Mendlesohn, "it is the landscape and its effects rather than an adventure per se, that fascinates" (29). Five places specifically, Lakeside, Center, the World Tree in Virginia, Lookout Mountain, and Backstage, each contribute to this concept, and I will therefore deal with them here, one at a time.

### **Lakeside**

In the real world, Lakeside, Wisconsin seems way too good to be true. Every character in the novel describes it in the same way: a "*good* town" (563), a "Lovely, sweet, pretty little town where no one ever locks their doors" (169), "If I were just going to pack it all in, I'd move to Lakeside. Prettiest town I've ever seen" (248), "Main street . . . looked old-fashioned in the best sense of the word—as if, for a hundred years, people had been caring for that street and they had not been in a hurry to lose anything they liked" (252). Here, Wednesday sends Shadow to sit tight and wait for him while he collects his army, knowing that he will be protected and hidden. Everyone in this

Midwestern utopia seems employed and happy, “while every other town and city in this county, heck, in this part of the state, is crumbling to nothing” (564). In the midst of a region falling victim to the downward turn in the American economy, it’s a perfect expression of the absolute fake, the Rockwellian image that, even when it first appeared on the *Saturday Evening Post* was a fictional idea.<sup>8</sup> The reader soon learns, however, that the price the town must pay for its perfect prosperity is the disappearance of one child each winter. The town is protected by the god Hinzemann, a kobold, who requires the death of an innocent in order to safeguard its village. Each winter, a child is taken away and (unbeknownst to all but Hinzemann) stowed in the trunk of an old car that crashes through the icy lake in the center of town, a game the town plays to raise money for charity.

It takes Shadow the entire book to learn the truth, and, once he does, Hinzemann is confronted and destroyed and the illusion of Lakeside immediately begins to crumble. While Wednesday knows that, due to its hyperreality, Shadow will be protected while in the town, the terrible truth must inevitably come to light: “They have computers now, Hinzemann,” Shadow says. “They aren’t stupid. They pick up on patterns” (566). Lakeside, here, is a miniature version of America in Gaiman’s mythology. In it, the absolute fake and the Otherworld combine, one layered over the other, the Norman Rockwell image obscuring the lake in which the bodies of countless children are buried. La Jeunesse also argues that the town operates in the same way as the gods of the novel, requiring “belief and worship,” fighting “for its own existence the same way

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<sup>8</sup> In 2001, Rockwell’s granddaughter, Daisy Rockwell, noted that his work was “ubiquitous in our culture: on calendars, wall-hangings, plates, mugs, statuettes, you name it. They have become iconic. They’ve become an ethos, an intangible and *in large part fantastical* aspect of American life; that is, they symbolize the very essence of Americana, the perfect Norman Rockwell world” (Culbert, para. 1; emphasis added).

Wednesday's clan and the New Gods fight for theirs" (63). Lakeside will lose its battle, though, while the gods will go on fighting indefinitely for hearts and minds. While it is possible to believe in an America that lives up to its promises (a fresh start, a new frontier, the melting pot, the home of the free and the brave), it comes at an extreme cost, an existence of pure surface and no depth, allowing evil to pass along unnoticed.

### **Center**

After Wednesday is killed by Mr. World and Mr. Town, the two opposing sides of the god war meet in the exact center of the contiguous United States, a hog farm in Kansas, to exchange his body. While Shadow is nervous to meet up with Town and World, considering they had just double-crossed them and killed Wednesday in cold blood, he is assured by Czernobog that there is no way any more violence can happen in the Center: when a place is of

negative sacredness, . . . they can build no temples. [These are] Places where people will not come, and will leave as soon as they can. Places where gods only walk if they are forced to . . . All of America has it, a little . . . That is why we are not welcome here. But the center . . . The center is the worst. Is like a minefield.

We all tread too carefully there to dare break the truce. (430)

As Czernobog so cryptically explains here in his broken English, the whole of America is a vacuum of sacredness, which makes the entire place dangerous for gods to walk, but the point where the vacuum is the most powerful is the very center, "the cheerless gray of lonesome clouds, empty windows, and lost hearts" of Lebanon, Kansas (428).

The blankness of Center even drives Technology Boy crazy, as he cannot get over how far it is from a McDonald's, how there is no signal, how the electricity has been

turned off. He begins to throw himself against the walls of his hotel room, sobbing, afraid of the silence around him. The old gods are antsy and can't wait to get out of there, and the new are clearly just as nervous. As Blomqvist rightly explains, "Due to the ambiguity of the novel's symbolism and its reference to a center which is absent, it is difficult, or even impossible, to attain an accurate overview of the system" (13). The reader expects the Center to have some kind of intense meaning, the place where all things come together and are explained. However, this cannot happen in an America that has no primary reference on which to base its reality. This "embodies the tendency of myth creation which Gaiman identifies in American society." The gods know this, and, without any central belief system to draw from, are deeply unsettled, like they are standing on a mirror. As Wagner et al. point out, Gaiman purposefully created this absence to reveal the American anti-sacred: the roadside attraction. Monuments like the House on the Rock and other hubs of meaninglessness *are* the new center, non-sacred spaces which Americans now worship *as* sacred. It "exists because it exists. And its existence generates more things around it" (493). So much surface with absolutely no depth.

### **The World Tree, Virginia**

To keep vigil for Wednesday after he is killed, Shadow must hang on a world tree for three days, descend into the underworld for three days, and journey back to earth for three days, as outlined in Norse mythology. There are, according to Czernobog and Mr. Nancy, very few world trees to choose from, and the only one in America is on an abandoned farm in Virginia. While the farm house is "dark and shut up," with a crumbling roof, and the surrounding meadows are overgrown, the tree itself seems like it is from another world entirely. It's perfectly symmetrical, silvery beautiful, and ghostlike,

sitting a ways from the house, and attended by three Fate-like women who speak to Shadow telepathically. Even though most sacred places in the novel are covered over by a hyperreal tourist trap, this one is different. There is no vacation-esque draw, no ticket sales, no parking lot or lines of cars. No one has given it a hypercolor plastic veneer or erected amusement park rides. Its connection to the Otherworld of the gods is simple and somber, and the only ones to travel there are the gods themselves to set the ritual in motion.

After the vigil is over and both Shadow and Wednesday seem to be dead, Mr. Town is sent to the world tree to retrieve a branch for Mr. World (Loki). His perceptions of the scene, however, are very different from the others. For a split second, he:

imagined that he saw three women sitting in the dark parlor. One of them was knitting. One of them was staring directly at him. One of them appeared to be asleep. The woman who was staring at him began to smile, a huge smile that seemed to split her face lengthwise, a smile that crossed from ear to ear. Then she raised a finger and touched it to her neck, and ran it gently from one side of her neck to the other. (498)

One second later, all he sees is an abandoned farmhouse, and he chalks the vision up to not getting enough sleep the night before. However, in this moment, Mr. Town is able to do what Shadow does, break down the imaginary barrier between hyperreality and the Otherworld and see them as they are, existing together. It seems, though, that he is afforded this glimpse by permission of the gods in order to tell him that he is fighting on the wrong side and his days are numbered. When he returns to his car and looks at the clock, he sees that time ran on its own schedule entirely while he was visiting the world

tree: he had either been there for eight hours or for minus one minute. Mr. Town's confused realization here invokes a long-understood characteristic of the Otherworld in traditional Irish tales: that it has its own rules of time and space entirely separate from that of the real world. As John Carey explains, "Otherworld time is not only out of alignment with mortal time, but . . . it is fundamentally different in kind. The moment in which one may be ensnared for centuries, the years which can be hidden within an instant, partake of the character of eternity—a mode of being transcending yet comprehending time and duration" (8). While it seems impossible for both times to exist, that of one can occur *within* that of the other. Gaiman, as C. S. Lewis did before him, uses this characteristic from the traditional tales specifically to show that Mr. Town unknowingly slipped into the Otherworld in both time and space, and he would do well to heed the warnings given to him there.

### **Backstage**

While the real world/Otherworld dichotomy in the novel usually exists intertwined, there is a third, separate space entirely which Wednesday refers to as "behind the scenes" or "backstage." Here, it is apparently possible for gods to move about in a way that keeps them out of sight for a short amount of time. "Think of it as being behind the scenes," Wednesday explains. "Like in a theater or something. I just pulled us out of the audience and now we're walking about backstage. It's a shortcut" (348). From time to time, the characters use this pathway as one would a tesseract or a "secret passageway" in a game of Clue. Backstage, it is always night and the sky is full of stars, it is possible to see what is happening "on the other side of the curtain," and even to read people's minds, but humans cannot stay there for very long or they become ill. To

use Wednesday's metaphor, the real world occurs out on stage where the characters—both human and god—act out their fate for an invisible audience. The gods, however, existing underneath the surface in an otherworld capacity, have the ability to slip offstage from time to time and have a breather. Humans (aside from Shadow) do not. In this analogy, both sides are slaves to a script, yet only one side is fully aware of it.

Irina Rață, I believe wrongly, asserts that Backstage is itself an Otherworld: “the alternative realm of ‘ideas’ and deities, the world ‘behind the scenes’” (110). In her study of the spatial and temporal shifts in *American Gods*, the real world of human existence is one chronotope (the Bakhtinian idea that temporality and spatial indicators are fused together in a narrative) while Backstage exists as another. However, this gives Backstage much more power and credit than it is given by the novel. To her, they are separate places, one where the humans exist and space and time behave as they should, and one where the gods exist in their divine forms and space and time can be bent or even disappear. The old world gods in the novel are able to act as deities within the real world chronotope as well—they are not confined to human limitations. For example, when Hinzelmann reveals himself to Shadow at the end as a true kobold, as the child sacrificed for the good of the village, this happens in the real world, not Backstage. When Wednesday tricks the gas station cashier out of ten dollars, it is not a sleight-of-hand trick but a shapeshifting routine in which he created confusion and evoked pity by appearing to be a befuddled old man. Wherever Easter walks in the real world, flowers spring up and butterflies dance. The miraculous follow the gods around wherever they go, no matter where they are. Backstage seems instead to exist as a tool, a place to remove all real world distraction and travel in a faster, more streamlined way. And as a tool, Backstage is

not a central world within the plot, but a pathway, open to anyone who can shift their vision away from the hyperreal.

### **Rock City/Lookout Mountain**

When the battle finally takes place, it fittingly goes down in a popular American tourist site: Lookout Mountain on the Tennessee/Georgia state line. Legend has it that whoever controls Lookout Mountain, controls the territory, from the Chickamauga Indians to Andrew Jackson to the Union Army. It is a place of power and, as Americans are wont to do, they sensed this power and built a hyperreal paradise on top in the form of Rock City. Each year, millions of tourists come to wander through the well-manicured gardens and descend into the caverns, “where they stare at back-lit dolls arranged into nursery-rhyme and fairy-tale dioramas. When they leave, they leave bemused, uncertain of why they came, of what they have seen, of whether they had a good time or not” (487). While the hyperreality of Rock City is clear, it is significant that this is the location of the—very real—war between old and new.

According to Camillo A. Formigatti, in most of Gaiman’s works, “There are no boundaries anymore between [the gods] and us; and with some effort it is even possible to travel to their world—or is you prefer, to the backstage—and come back” (206). In *American Gods*, no traveling is even necessary, just a shift in perception. The battle of Rock City and Lookout Mountain, for example, happens Backstage, which is why the humans going about their regular business cannot see it. They merely see a powerful thunderstorm and choose to postpone their visit to the park for another day: “There was nothing to see. The place was deserted. It was an empty battlefield,” thinks Shadow before remembering how to shift his perception (534). He crosses no boundary, says no

magical spell, nor moves an inch, he just refocuses as one does with a Magic Eye puzzle. It is essential to understand that the Otherworld, in both the *American Gods* universe and all Otherworld tales, has always already been there. Shadow is just now learning how to see it, another major component of this genre (Mendlesohn 13). The first moment he is able to shift his focus in this new way is exactly when he meets Wednesday for the first time in chapter one. After explaining to Wednesday that his wife had died in a car crash, he briefly sees the Otherworld/real world overlap: “For a moment it seemed to Shadow as if the man was insubstantial; as if the plane had suddenly become more real, while his neighbor had become less so” (23). This moment takes on more significance when the reader later learns that Wednesday had caused the car crash in order to get Shadow to play his role in the con. When Shadow tells Wednesday something he already knows, and Wednesday merely plays the sympathetic role (“The man shook his head, slowly”), Shadow can tell something is off and peers briefly through a crack in the hyperreal veneer. This ability grows over the course of Shadow’s journey through the book, and he is able to see the boundary between the real and Otherworlds blur and disappear.

After Wednesday’s death, as Shadow travels from the Center to his vigil in Virginia, he comes up with a new way to explain his real world/Otherworld understanding:

Hidden Indians . . . The pictures you’d get to color in as kids. “Can you see the hidden Indians in the picture? There are ten Indians in the this picture, can you find them all?” And at first glance you could only see the waterfall and the rocks and trees, then you see that if you just tip the picture on its side that shadow is an Indian . . .” (452).

He thinks, just for this moment before sleep, that this idea is the “funniest thing in the world.” Later on in the novel, at the exact moment when Shadow figures out Wednesday and Loki’s con, when the “big picture” comes into focus and he sees what he has to do, he chuckles to himself and says, “I just saw the hidden Indians. Not all of them. But I saw them anyhow” (514). According to Blomqvist, these moments highlight Shadow’s shift from “an uncritical existence within the symbolic system toward a critical view of it” (14). Before he drinks Wednesday’s mead, he questions nothing; he merely wants to go home after his prison sentence and resume regular life. His “road trip experiences,” however, “such as the visit to the center, awaken questions in him which cannot be answered within the cultural system of meaning” (14). The absolute fake of America gives him no tools to understand the Otherworld taking shape around him, so he must choose to adjust his way of seeing.

### **A Fascination with Progress**

*“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”*

Jean Baudrillard

On its surface, the novel is a clash of old versus new: the gods who are winning (e.g. those of technology) versus those who are obsolete (e.g. ancient fertility gods). Each side needs human belief to feed their power in the real world/Otherworld composite in which they exist. For the old gods, as previously mentioned, those iterations lucky enough to live in places where they are still worshiped and believed-in are living “well” (as Mama-ji puts it) in every sense of the word. The rest of the eclectic pantheon are left to fend for themselves in a land that never had much of a place for them in the first place.

For the new, swift moving gods of technology, all things are cheap, disposable, and synthesized. Technology Boy, the young fat man who kidnaps Shadow in chapter two, smokes synthetic bufotenine toad skins, drinks only Diet Coke, wears shiny, black, man-made fabrics, and even his eyes are “the green of an antique computer monitor” (53). He speaks of all things as data, as the binary of ones and zeroes susceptible to deletion at his whim. However, his existence seems off, hollow. He “appeared barely out of his teens: a spattering of acne glistened on one cheek,” he swears a little too often, shows off his smoking skills a little too eagerly. This immaturity is in stark contrast to the opposing side, many of whom are millennia old.

It is very clear that the new gods believe they are the future while belief and divinity is the past, and, for some reason, it seems very important to them to convince Shadow of this fact. They are the embodiment of the surface world, of hyperreality, everything fast and flashy, practical and modern. Once magic was replaced by science, belief in the old gods took a steep downturn. Yet even the new gods live in constant fear of obsolescence, and, as Lynn Gelfand proposes, “tear down tradition because they fear their own looming demise” (228). During the battle, Shadow admits that he sensed a great fear in the new gods: “They were afraid that unless they kept pace with a changing world, unless they remade and redrew and rebuilt the world in their image, their time would already be over” (537). It wasn’t necessary anymore to collect sacrifice and belief, just to be seen as innovative and useful. In the phrase “rebuild the world in their image,” Gaiman specifically uses the language of the Christian Bible but in the mode of modern America: digital over analog, wireless over plug-in, faster, smaller, smarter, more. While the Otherworld of the old gods is covered over by the hyperreal world of America, the

new gods are adding a whole new layer on top of that, a filter of their own design, constantly changing in order to stave off human boredom. This is how they conjure belief, and it is utterly exhausting.

As the storm of battle gathers, Mr. Wednesday and Shadow, collect the old gods together to fight. Shadow is openly recruited by both sides through the majority of the book, leading Mathilda Slabbert and Leonie Viljoen to regard him as a modern day shaman used by the novel to pierce through the superficial layer of modern life and “reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our souls” (137). Even as “a very average, real human protagonist,” he is an essential connection between the old and the new “who counteracts confrontation in a completely non-violent way” (138). Shadow is a new type of hero, but he is also, in essence, the voice of the reader, assumed to be enveloped by the contradictions of modern life and searching for a way to make sense of things. When Shadow is first kidnapped by the obese, obnoxious Technology Boy, he is tasked with passing along a message to Wednesday:

He has been consigned to the Dumpster of history while people like me ride our limos down the superhighway of tomorrow. . . 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)

Technology Boy’s argument is rather simple: out with the old, in with the new. Americans have a short memory and all they care about is what is flashy, distracting, and impressive: “It’s all about the dominant fucking paradigm, Shadow. Nothing else is important.” On the surface, this seems to hold true, but there is a power this arrogant youth is underestimating—ideas. Over the course of the novel, Shadow sees scores of

gods he has never heard of or seen before, those with no association whatsoever in his well-educated, well-read mind. The suggestion is that, over time, more gods have risen up and fallen into obscurity than we have ever known or heard about. Many existed before writing or even organized storytelling (themselves ancient technologies). As Shadow is informed in a dream, gods can and do die, “And when they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end” (59). Even after a god has dissolved and been forgotten, there are traces of ideas left behind that people keep, not knowing or caring where they originated, and these ideas have power. While Americans might not actively believe in the old gods, they engage in routines and superstitions, ranging from knocking on wood to ward off bad luck (a holdover from druid beliefs) all the way to decorating their homes with chicks, bunnies, and eggs at Easter time (carried over from ancient fertility religions far older than the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection). These are small gestures that pay homage to past devotion, which will never happen for newer technologies once they are past their prime.

When Technology Boy finally dies (stabbed in the neck by Loki), in stark contrast to Wednesday’s death, there is no vigil, no exchange of bodies, no homage or respect. In fact, he is disposed of so quickly and cleanly and in the midst of so many other deaths, it is easy to forget about. As he dies, his artificiality becomes apparent, as there was something leaking from him “that was not actually blood, and a sputtering sparking noise behind the fat kid’s eyes. The smell on the air was that of burning insulation wire” (507). As a modern god, there was no real “meat” to him, merely hardware and data that has ceased to be useful: “He looks as if he just saw a sequence of zeros and ones turn into a

flock of brightly colored birds and fly away.” Loki’s cruel quip here shows clearly what he views to be the superior system and why: technological innovation breaks down the moment it tries to make sense of the impossible, the beautiful, the divine. When the Otherworld breaks through the hyperreal surface, it momentarily shatters and disappears into the ether.

The other technology god in the novel that has the most interaction with Shadow is Media, though he does not always know her by that name. Their first encounter takes place one evening as he tries to fall asleep in a motel room by watching old episodes of “I Love Lucy.” In the middle of an episode, Lucy looks straight at Shadow and starts to speak directly to him: “We’re online malls, while your friends are sitting by the side of the highway selling homegrown produce from a cart. No—they aren’t even fruit sellers. Buggy-whip vendors. Whalebone corset repairers. We are now and tomorrow. Your friends aren’t even yesterday anymore” (176). He easily bats her away, even when she offers to pay him triple what Wednesday has offered, thinking that “he would take a roadside attraction, no matter how cheap, how crooked, or how sad, over a shopping mall any day” (177). This suggests that the Otherworld, no matter how obsolete, tacky, and flawed, is far preferable to the technological hyperreality offered by the incessant progress of America. And, while Shadow’s opinion here is probably shared by the reader, it is also a reliable way to keep the plot moving forward. At this point, Shadow believes he is fighting for the “good guys,” the old ones being shoved aside. He does not yet know that he is being used in a fight of both sides against the middle—himself. As Mendlesohn makes clear regarding the protagonist/reader relationship to the Otherworld, “There can be only one understanding of the world: an understanding that validates the quest” (13).

In this moment, Shadow must embrace the Otherworld and eschew the American hyperreal or else the quest—and the adventure—ends here.

When Media (“Isn’t she the one who killed her children?” asks Shadow. “Different woman,” said Mr. Nancy. “Same deal”) steps back onto the scene, they are in the Center, meeting up to exchange Wednesday’s body. She is described in the same manner as one would imagine a TV anchor: perfectly coiffed, smiling, over-emphasizing her words—a hyperreal version of a human woman. Her offer, and Shadow’s answer, remain the same, though she adds a threat which strongly resembles that of modern social media culture: “We can make it *bad* for you. You could be a bad joke forever, Shadow. Or you could be remembered as a monster. You could be remembered forever, but as a Manson, a Hitler . . . how would you *like* that?” (440). The power she wields here is unmistakable: perception, manipulated by technology, *is* reality, no matter what the truth is behind it. In the old world of the gods, people sacrificed to deities they feared would retaliate if they did not. In the hyperreal world of media, they do the same. People believe what they are told to believe, treating the image on a screen as the god who can instantaneously make them kings or ruin their life, and there is no way to stop it once it starts.

During the hand off of Wednesday’s body in the Center, Technology Boy, in his fugue state, takes the opportunity to recite a portion of W. B. Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming”: “*Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the center cannot hold . . .*” (446). He abruptly stops here, having forgotten the next line, but the various ways this poem applies to the situation are clear. Not only are they literally in the “center” of America, an unstable place for both

human and god, they are standing over the god responsible for leading the resistance, and his death will bring about a now unstoppable war. Things *will* fall apart. They already have. Ironically, though, that self-same god intended for this to happen all along in order to feed off of the blood about to be spilled (“*The blood-dimmed tide is loose,*” remembers Technology Boy, “I think that comes next”). On the surface, Wednesday has been wronged and his people will avenge him. Underneath, this was all a part of the plan. They are both simultaneously true. What was keeping the war at bay before was the good sense of those who knew better, but that is no longer the case. Later on, after Shadow has been resurrected, Gaiman brings back this Yeatsian language saying that Horus, in hawk form, “took to the air, and it swung upward, circling and ascending in a rising gyre, circling the place in the gray clouds where the sun might convincingly be” (516). Shadow not only held vigil for Wednesday, but his own resurrection will bring about an end to the chaos Wednesday put into motion. If the “widening gyre” was previously in a downward spiral, it is now spinning back upwards out of the gray clouds and toward the sun.

Before Wednesday can resurrect, as previously-mentioned, Shadow must hang on the World Tree for three days, travel to the underworld for three, and journey back for three more. During his descent, he is accompanied by Bast, the cat-woman-god, who tells him that he will soon reach a divided path. One direction, Shadow recognizes, is the “endless memorial hall to the gods that were forgotten, and the ones whose very existence had been lost” (477). Bast directs him away from this path and instead to one much more reminiscent of the hyperreal: “There was a Disneyland quality to the corridor: black Plexiglas walls with lights set in them. The colored lights blinked and flashed in the illusion of order, for no particular reason, like the console lights on a television starship”

(477). Not only is the surface of this pathway covered in the futuristic veneer of artificial technology, but there is “a deep vibrating bass drone” underneath everything, “which Shadow could feel in the pit of his stomach.” Even in the underworld, the surface/real dichotomy that runs throughout the book guides Shadow’s choices. Either he can travel to the land of forgotten history and remain there forever, or he can move through a corridor covered in busy-but-useless technology to encounter the “drone” of the real, an undercurrent that subtly breaks through the hyperreal and manifests itself in Shadow’s physical body. Yet he must move through this state first in order to journey back to real life.

When Shadow emerges from the tunnel of pulsing technology and the hyperreal surface fades away, he approaches an underground river and a boatman (Mr. Ibis) ready to ferry him across. In this moment, full of mythological allusions from multiple ancient cultures, Shadow ironically encounters the most mundane of experiences. “Come on board,” instructs Ibis. “You’ll get your feet wet, I’m afraid, but there’s not a thing can be done about that. These are old boats, and if I come in closer I could rip out the bottom” (479). In classic Gaimanesque style, he surprises us with the utter reality of a moment we expect to be haloed in a magical aura. One never imagines Ibis’ (or Charon’s) concern for the soundness of his old ferry, or the wet feet of his passengers, but it is exactly this detail that makes the moment that much more believable. Not even the gods are immune to daily annoyances, and no technology in the world can entirely remove this basic principle.

## **The American Dream . . . and Dreaming While American**

*“This isn’t about what is . . . It’s about what people think is. It’s all imaginary anyway.*

*That’s why it’s important. People only fight over imaginary things.”*

-Wednesday

One of the things that sets Shadow apart from both the humans and the gods in the novel is his ability to dream. Shadow’s dreams exist as an undercurrent running throughout the story, allowing him moments to make sense of his experiences, and he often refers to his dreaming as an Otherworld journey itself: “Darkness: a sensation of falling—as if he were tumbling down a great hole, like Alice” (162). The buffalo man, who has clearly been in America longer than any other character in the book, serves as a guide to him as he sleeps, questioning his assumptions and suggesting new ways to frame his journey. His dreams conjure up real world things from time to time—he is able to make it snow during Wednesday’s bank heist, for example, and Bast’s seduction of him takes place both in his dream and in reality—but mostly they are places of conversation, of revelation:

“Is this true? Are these people really gods? It’s all so . . .” he paused. Then he said “impossible,” which was not exactly the word he had been going for but seemed to be the best he could do.

“What are gods?” asked the buffalo man.

“I don’t know,” said Shadow. (163)

With this one simple question, buffalo man has reframed the entire dilemma. There is no one, agreed-upon definition of “god,” and, once he is called upon to clarify the idea, it is very difficult to do. More so, this question causes Shadow to ask if it even matters if they

are really gods or not—is this even the question he should be asking? The answer won't change Shadow's journey, won't bring his wife back to life, and won't tell him the meaning of his own existence. The buffalo man goes on to ask Shadow where he is going and why. While the answer to the first question is easy and immediate—"Cairo"—the second is much more complicated. He has been told to go there by Wednesday. Why does he need to do what Wednesday demands? Because he drank his mead. Why does that matter? "In Shadow's dream, with the power of dream logic behind it, the obligation seemed unarguable: he drank Wednesday's mead three times, and sealed the pact—what other choice of action did he have?" (162). The dream jostles Shadow's feelings of obligation and, even though he will follow through, leads him to start wondering if there isn't another possibility.

In his next dream journey to the caves of the buffalo man, Shadow is asked, "Do you believe yet?" (245). Shadow admits that he is still unsure of what to believe, and, even more so, he is confused as to why it matters what he believes or not: "Why are you telling me this stuff? . . . I'm not important. I'm not anything. I was an okay physical trainer, a really lousy small-time crook, and maybe not so good a husband as I thought I was" (246). The idea that his little existence would matter in the great scheme of things makes no sense, but he is led to believe throughout this encounter that there is bargaining power in just being himself. While it is repeated that "This is not a land for gods," the buffalo man predicts that the future doesn't belong to either side of this war: "Soon they will fall and the star people will meet the earth people. There will be heroes among them, and men who will slay monsters and bring knowledge, but none of them will be gods. This is a poor place for gods" (248). Whether or not Shadow believes that the gods are

“real,” or have any legitimate power, whether or not he believes technology to be essential or ruinous, the future will be a composite of old and new, and mostly mortal. This composite, and Shadow’s place in the story, is paramount to Gaiman’s entire approach to storytelling, according to Sims: “Gaiman treats the stuff of myth as possessing a hypothetical reality of its own, a reality to be developed as an active explorer rather than reiterated as a passive reteller” (95). To hear a story is to journey through it, as Shadow does, to decide one’s place, one’s beliefs within the “hypothetical reality.” The purpose behind this active journeying is “to add grand new dimensions to preexisting material, reinvigorating ancient texts and icons with modern relevance even as the original material elevates Gaiman’s own creations.” So while we read this novel with a rush or familiarity, since many of these characters we already know, there is a new element added that is entirely Gaiman-esque, the interconnectedness of real world/Otherworld, that makes “all things believable” to Shadow and, eventually, to us.

Regardless of Shadow’s beliefs, many of his dreams prove to be simultaneously in his mind and in the real world. Early on in the novel, we learn that Shadow has the power to create snow with his mind, just by believing it into existence—a very real throwback to the classic Otherworld journey. According to Martin Puhval, the swift, unlikely snowstorm (or “elfin storm”) is a magical tool used in medieval legend to accost heroes on their way to the Otherworld. In fact, they are even used as a way of “testing the hero’s courage”: “Fairies are namely in medieval, and subsequent, popular and literary tradition notorious for their ability to influence the weather, not least to unleash storms, including blizzards” (225). In Shadow’s case, he is both being tested by Wednesday and acting as one with fairy magic himself. At the beginning of Wednesday’s planned bank

heist in chapter five, he tells Shadow to “Concentrate on making those clouds—the ones over there, in the west—making them bigger and darker. Think gray skies and driving winds coming down from the arctic. Think snow” (107). Without questioning, at least aloud, Shadow does just this, and the result is a blizzard: “I think that’s enough don’t you?” says Wednesday. “We don’t want to immobilize the city” (108). He hands the disbelieving Shadow a cup of coffee to stave off the headache that usually follows the channeling of strong magic. In this moment, and many others to follow, the existence of the Otherworld is revealed to Shadow, but also his ability to participate in and manipulate it.

This ability is not private, however, which Shadow learns while hiding out in Lakeside. In one dream, he decides to ask about thunderbirds, thinking this might be the key to bringing Laura back to life. The next moment, he sees them, circling a tall spire of skulls that reach endlessly into the sky upon which he is standing, and he gets close enough to pluck out a feather before he starts to tumble from the height. He abruptly wakes to Mr. Wednesday loudly chastising him for, apparently, dreaming such a dramatic, obvious dream and calling attention to himself: “I know what you were dreaming. Everybody damn well knows what you were dreaming. Christ almighty, What’s the point in hiding you, if you’re going to start to fucking advertise?” (304). If all of the gods are able to sense his dreams, it’s a power that he has to use more subtly, keeping in mind that they are somehow happening, in some capacity, in his mind and in the world at the same time. For the other gods, and those who have learned to see the Otherworld, his dreams are not exclusively his own and should not, therefore, be trusted.

Sleight-of-hand and illusion are everywhere in the novel, and no one person or event (even America itself) is what it initially seems. Mr. Ibis, as Rață further points out, chalks this up to Americans' love affair with their own origin myth, a clear allusion to Baudrillard's simulacra:

The important thing to understand about American history . . . is that it is fictional, a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily board. For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a representation of the thing, and not the thing itself. (92)

In the hyperreal of its own belief, American history has ceased even to be the representation, but *more* the thing than the thing itself—whatever truth there was has ceased to exist. Therefore, in this mindset, the American Dream can be anything at all, even a host of contradictions. Anyone can be anyone they wish to be regardless of wealth, name, race, or socioeconomic class. The world is full of possibility, and there are a myriad of pathways to the top for the self-motivated individual. Despite America's history and lore, the novel questions these assumptions, showing them to be overwhelmingly untrue. Shadow, for instance, is never given the freedom of choice and is used by both humans and gods throughout his journey. He is commanded and controlled by his parentage, the whims of the gods, the power of technology, human emotion, and his own inner sense of morality. However, as Shadow tells Wednesday at the end “rigged games are the easiest to beat” (534). If he is going to be the plaything of fate, or gods, or technology, or the absolute fake, he decides to assert control after the battle in the only way he knows how: he honestly and ethically ties up all the loose ends in his story and then leaves America. He admits, in the end, that he “would rather be a man than a god.

We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do" (539). This quote supports the idea that, while gods are slaves to the honey of belief, humans must keep moving forward, whether we like it or not, and we very rarely get the answers we are looking for the whole human journey. Constructing a hyperreality dominated by technology, entertainment, and constructed meaning makes the journey more palatable and easier to understand. Yet, in the end, Shadow is tired of it.

According to Rață, the entire narrative of *American Gods* "is impossible outside its main chronotope—the United States of America, which is the main character in the novel, as well; tying up this way the disparate narrative episodes to the main plot" ("Space and Time," 112). The landscape, in this argument, along with its general rules of time and space, is a major protagonist, as the multiple storylines come together within its boundaries. This idea is supported by Mendlesohn's assertion that the main character in any Otherworld journey "is the land" (28). Using the land as a character, Rață argues, exposes the American myth, "characterized by duality, alienation, hyperreality, . . . disconnectedness in geography and culture" ("Mythopoeic," 37). This dualism, she goes on, is represented by the repeated image of the coin throughout the novel, from Shadow's mastering of traditional coin tricks, to Mad Sweeney's production of coins "from the hoard," to Zorya Polunochnaya's gift to Shadow of the moon in the shape of a silver Liberty-head dollar. Mr. Ibis attempts to explain this to Shadow as he is escorted to the world of the dead in chapter sixteen: "You people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories. As if you cannot have a river that is also a road, or a song that is also a color" (480). Life and death are, instead, "different sides of the same coin." The gods, the landscape of America, even Shadow himself all exist in

multiple forms throughout the novel, and the result is to make them *more* real and believable as opposed to less.

Laura's character specifically embodies this idea perhaps more than any other. She is literally a walking, talking dead person, whose ironic purpose throughout the novel seems to be to urge Shadow to be more alive. "You're not dead," she tells Shadow, "But I'm not sure that you're alive either. Not really" (370). At the beginning of the book, their love story is as all-American as it gets: a big, strong-but-silent man and a pretty young brunette with a musical laugh are set up by friends over strawberry margaritas. They fall in love, give each other sugary-sweet nicknames, and live simply and happily ever after. While it seems like the perfect ending to a Nicholas Sparks' novel, for Gaiman it is ripe for dismantling. The perfect relationship is an absolute fake once the gods start to meddle. Laura—the ideal wife—cheats on Shadow with his best friend while he is in prison. Shadow—the ideal husband—is really the result of a relationship between Wednesday and his mother, a demi-god created to be a pawn of the gods. Shadow's journey throughout the novel is a process of figuring out this hyperreality and then deciding what to do about it. Once Laura is dead, she loses all pretense and is able to both see and speak the painful truths avoided by the living: "when you're really dead you get to see things clearer. It's like there isn't anyone there. You know? You're like this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world." Laura encourages Shadow to decide which side of the coin he is—alive or dead—a question caused by his lack of origin story. As he learned later, he was created by his father in order to be used. However, that does not mean he must live his life only as Wednesday's pawn. The hyperreal surface and the

Otherworld exist simultaneously. Now that he can see them for what they are, he can choose his own path within them.

Laura's dual existence is an obstacle to Wednesday and Loki's plan to start a war. Had she been alive, or if she had died unbesmirched, Shadow would never have left her behind. Therefore, her entire affair with Robbie, and their violent deaths, were also staged by Loki and Wednesday. Laura's revenge, however, is in her own journey across America to protect Shadow at all costs from the many dangerous figures who hunt him down. In life, she had been a normal, happy woman in her late twenties, married to a man she loved, and full of kindness for strangers. In this hyperreality, Laura and Shadow would have been perfect candidates for an HGTV reality show about a couple house hunting in Seattle. In death, she sheds this hyperreal surface, still aware of life going on around her but feeling nothing. This is evidenced by how easy it is for her to commit murder to protect Shadow: "It's easier to kill people, when you're dead yourself . . . I mean, it's not such a big deal. You're not so prejudiced anymore" (151). Along the way, she kills Mr. Stone, Mr. Wood, Mr. Town, and, finally, Mr. World: Loki himself. Her final murder, that of Loki, is much more important than the others, in that she stabs him through with the branch/spear intended for Shadow. Many sources interpret this to be the mistletoe branch, which, in Norse mythology, Loki obtained in order to kill Baldur, Odin's favorite (and highly moral) son (Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 238-39). If Shadow is supposed to be Baldur, as many believe he is, this connection makes Laura's subsequent dedication of Loki's death to Shadow even more symbolic as she double-crosses the double-crosser with his own weapon of choice.

This killing is accompanied by a puzzling line repeated by both characters. In order to kill Loki, Laura allows him to approach her from behind, thinking she is going to give him the branch. She asks him, “Why do you want it?” and he replies, “It’s a souvenir of this whole sorry mess . . . It symbolizes a spear, and in this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing” (526). This same phrase is repeated by Laura as she is running Loki through with the spear/branch. In a world where the surface *is* reality, like the absolute fake of America, the stand-in, the model, becomes real—a simulacrum. Much earlier in the novel, before Shadow or the reader are able to put the pieces together, Gaiman foreshadows this idea in an off-hand story told by Sam Black Crow. She shares with Shadow a story from her Comparative Religion class wherein Odin requires a sacrifice to calm the seas for a Viking ship to survive. After drawing lots, the Viking king himself is selected, and, instead of actually killing him, they decide to hang him in effigy. However, instead of the king hanging unharmed on a tree, Odin turns the fake rope and spear into real ones and he dies a brutal death. While the moral of the story should be “Don’t double-cross the double-crosser. You are out of your league,” Sam humorously sums up the tale with the following axiom: “White people have some fucked-up gods” (171). However, remembering Loki’s words—“The symbol is the thing”—it’s a very clear, and early, warning from Gaiman. Whatever happens on the surface, whatever seems meaningless or part of the absolute fake, has real consequences. The Otherworld *is* the real. Also, don’t mess with Odin.

This idea, according to Rață, is exactly is what makes the impossible fragments of the novel’s plot merge together into one cohesive whole (“Space and Time,” 112). Within the particular time/space of America, the main character of the novel, the impossible

becomes perfectly reasonable. The reader can see both a brittle tree branch and a powerful and legendary spear from Norse mythology. The gods are exactly what they appear to be in their mundane form and simultaneously divine, Zorya Polnochnaya's coin is both a Liberty dollar and the moon, Laura is both dead and a moving, sentient being, and Lookout Mountain is both a silly tourist trap and the site of a fierce divine battle. Here, the Otherworld and the real world exist in tandem, and every object, person, and idea is harmless and dangerous at the same time.

### **Purposeful Gaps**

*"You're fucked up, Mister. But you're cool."* - Sam Black Crow

*"I believe that's what they call the human condition."* - Shadow

The mythological elements in the novel, according to Slabbert and Viljoen, "participate in the narrative and in the possibility of restoration and healing it offers the contemporary reader through the imaginative evocation of the soul's journey and universal truths about human nature" (138). The progress of the modern world "has made us believe we can do anything, solve anything, cure anything, but the reality is depressingly different" (Magwood qtd. in Slabbert and Viljoen 153). In *American Gods*, Gaiman presents "a plausible alternative" to this dilemma by "a melding of mythology, fictional fantasy and reality"—in my view, by layering the hyperreal of modern life over (and within) the Otherworld of mythological and religious deities, showing how both have worked to create everything we use to define our existence. The inherent human desire to believe in something, anything, manifests itself in an interesting way in America. This idea is what sets the stage for an absolute fake, the feeling that something significant exists, but without a framework with which to define and clarify it, a

simulacrum develops, which then becomes the believed-in reality. For example, when Mad Sweeney pulls gold coins directly from the leprechaun “hoard,” Shadow uses the simulacrum of the coin trick, something he has studied intensively in prison, as a way to make sense of the nonsensical. In the reality of the novel, the simulacrum is only necessary in Shadow’s (and the reader’s) mind as they are not yet capable of seeing the move not as a trick, but simply what it is: “It’s easier to just pick them out of the air” (40). As Shadow keeps insisting on more of an explanation, Sweeney drunkenly tells him, “there’s none so blind . . . as those who will not listen” (43).

*American Gods* also has many comparable, purposeful “gaps” in the storyline, moments Shadow, along with the reader, must accept will never be explained. We don’t get to know all of the “hows” and “whys” that happen behind the scenes, even if we ask very nicely, and I cannot think of anything that more neatly sums up the hyperreal. In the end, these inconsistencies are not even addressed—they just *are*. While readers might crave explanations for every confusing moment, the texts do not always oblige, seeming to suggest that we don’t, as readers peeking into another world-in-progress, have the right to know absolutely *everything*. Authors, god figures themselves, have the right to provide and omit as they please on a “need-to-know” basis, and, as Mendlesohn argues, we have no choice but to take what we are given (38).

“While,” according to Gelfand, “the bloody war in *American Gods* eventually halted through Shadow’s intervention, the overarching issue of mythologies threatened by rapid cultural change remains unresolved” (228). Perhaps a resolution would have seemed too contrived, especially for a fantastical novel readers wish to believe is, in a certain sense, “real.” Cultural change is clearly here to stay, and will perhaps only get

more rapid, but our human wish to engage in myth-making, and myth-believing, in the midst of this change, as evidenced by Gaiman fans' incessant search for the "real" Lakeside, has just as much staying power. The reader's ability to cope with a hyperreality that cannot be unseen is to believe in an otherworldly layer, one where the gods are both pulling the strings and hampered by their own mundane limitations. After all, Gaiman's closing sentence in his preface practically dares us to believe, not in the American ideal, but in the Otherworld itself: "it goes without saying that all of the people, living, dead, and otherwise in this story are fictional or used in a fictional context. Only the gods are real."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OVERLAPS AND INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSIONS

*“Well, it’s all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what’s going on.”*

-Umberto Eco

One seemingly subtle difference between Disney’s 1953 animated version of *Peter Pan* and J. M. Barrie’s 1904 novel *Peter and Wendy* is the inclusion of one short, three-letter word: “the.” When Barrie refers to his famous Otherworld in the book, it is always “the Neverland” instead of just “Neverland,” a moniker used only in the film. While this seems to be a very small change, it is actually quite transformative. In their dreams, each child in the book has his/her own Neverland, each equipped with a personalized adventure, companions, and landscape befitting his/her own tastes; yet *the* Neverland was monolithic and ever present, however it shapeshifts to meet the needs of each dreamer. Some children, such as Wendy, John, and Michael, are lucky enough to physically fly over the border while they are awake, but “the Neverland” is fully available to all the youth of the world via their dreams, and every once in a while, while she is “tidying up their minds,” their mothers also could catch a glimpse. The everyday “pretend” Neverland seems safe, even comforting, but the *real* Otherworld is unnerving, perhaps because of its unlikely reality:

When you play at it by day with the chairs and tablecloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very nearly real. That is why there are night-lights. (Barrie 8)

Dream worlds are understood and accepted—everyone dreams. But visiting *the* dream world while one is wide awake, as Gawain, Alice, and Shadow do, can and should change a person.

The three protagonists of the selections explored in this dissertation had mastered, to a certain extent, their own real worlds. Alice was a polite, agreeable, and educated young girl; Gawain was a great, yet humble, chivalric hero; Shadow had mastered the art of “keeping his head down” and surviving prison. In crossing the border between worlds, each character is forced to adapt to a reality in which they are newborns, making many mistakes along the way, before returning again to their respective realities. Alice and Gawain return disappointingly unchanged, while Shadow is the lone entity in his world (god or human) altered by the War of Lookout Mountain. However personalized their experiences, the Otherworld of each is still the Otherworld of ancient Celtic mythology, in all of its puzzling glory, recycled again and again over time because, as Patch asserts here:

the fascination of at least part of the evidence as it comes down to us is that there is something new after all, sometimes through the personality of the various authors and again through the genuine originality and creative power that mark different uses of the same motifs. (4)

There is a reason *the* Otherworld has endured over the centuries, why its signposts are so clearly recognizable, and I maintain that this endurance lies in our ability to see more clearly our own reality (or *un*-reality) by indulging in the Otherworld’s tangible critiques. In *Gawain*, the Otherworld is how the real world should be; in *Alice*, it is the unvarnished real world itself; *American Gods*, in its postmodern way, dismantles a whole belief

system and the concept of what reality “should” be in the first place. In the hyperreal, there is no “should.”

Shadow Moon’s road trip across America, ending in a Backstage “war” between deities, highlights the hyperreality of modern American life with four main foci: its incessant belief in impossible things, its relatively immature ideas of the divine and the sacred, its fascination with rapid progress at the expense of tradition and memory, and its steadfast faith in the American Dream. Similarly, Alice’s Wonderland works as a troublingly honest reflection of the real life of many Victorian women and girls, unmasking the myth of the “Household Angel.” Its treatment of arbitrary rules, conflicting emotions, crises of identity, and the label of “madness” all work together to dismantle this harmful belief system, even though its overly saccharine ending fails to stick the landing. Finally, in my oldest example, the *Gawain* poet creates an Otherworld that more closely resembles the Arthurian ideal than Arthur’s own court. A comparison of leaders, heroes, border crossings, and the characters’ reactions to hyperreal dangers help to expose the absolute fake of the courtly world as well as how our belief in myth-as-reality shapes our own historical perspective.

### **The Faerie Mistress and the “Elaborate Ruse”**

While these three stories seem disparate in every way except their sharing of the Otherworld journey and its exposure of the hyperreal, there are some overlaps that are worth parsing out. For example, each story creatively twisted the traditional faery mistress and “elaborate ruse” tropes to coax the hero into crossing over the border. The pious Gawain followed Mary the Mother of Jesus, making clear that his journey was the will of God himself. Alice’s faery mistress was the White Rabbit, dressed as a clear

symbol of authority in Victorian England: the prosperous male, nervously conducting his random civic “business,” a slave to the clock. Finally, Shadow’s otherworldly guide is Wednesday, the American projection of Odin the All-Father reduced to a common, aging grifter. There is an air of sadness in these last two that is absent in the first. Since Gawain’s journey seems to uphold his status as “God’s choice,” Alice and Shadow have no such title. In the end, however, it is Shadow who seems to cope best, as he is the only traveler whose ending suggests that he has not forgotten his journey. While Alice and Gawain assimilate back into their hyperreality, Shadow moves forward into the future with a new perspective even though he can do nothing to change what he learns about the world and its great many sadnesses.

### **The Game Motif**

In addition to the faery mistress, each story’s use of games to structure their plot is also worth pointing out. When the Green Knight bursts into Arthur’s court, holly branch in hand, to lay down an otherworldly challenge, his use of the word “gomen” seems an egregious understatement. While the consequences of beheading seem to be a slight inconvenience to him, to a mortal opponent, it would mean certain death. The word “game” implies a friendly competition, a way to pass time together in mutual displays of skill or luck. Here, however, it is a device meant to set up the plot, one which places the Otherworld at an immediate advantage while simultaneously masking the game’s true stakes. While it seems to pit the Green Knight against Sir Gawain, the real game pits the Otherworld against the dying code of chivalry. The skills to be tested seem to be courage and strength, but they are really a challenge to misplaced loyalty and belief. While Gawain believes that his victory will come in upholding the five equally important

qualities of the Pentangle, the Otherworld shows him that some faults are more forgivable than others. The game motif merely sets up the expectations of the protagonist as well as the reader only to shift them as the story progresses. In my view, this is exactly where the real world's absolute fakery is exposed.

Alice's journeys are guided by her desire to play games from the real world, ones she understands and which make sense, yet Wonderland twists each one just enough to frustrate and confuse. While playing croquet, her ball and mallet are unwieldy live animals who refuse to cooperate, and what should be a pleasant game of "fetch" with a gigantic puppy is downright dangerous. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice's movements are a literal game of chess, explained to her from the very beginning by the Red Queen. As a pawn, she must journey from one end of the board to the other in order to become "queened" on the other side. Again, the game gives the illusion of a balanced world guided by rules while the playing of it reveals the exact opposite: a chaotic world under the hyperreal veneer of order. Each scene is more confusing than the last, and being "queened" in the end does not make her more powerful. It just makes her frustrated, which, in turn, sends her home again.

*American Gods* also uses games to outline Shadow Moon's perspective, but more indirectly. As will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, Shadow and Czernobog's fatal game of checkers frames the story, as Shadow's journey officially begins when the game is played and the beheading oath is taken, and it ends when Shadow returns to Czernobog at the end of the novel to kneel before him and take the blow. Additionally, Shadow's use of sleight of hand, once learned as a pastime in prison, sets up his relationship with Mad Sweeney early in the story and serves him well as a tool

throughout his journey. Like Wednesday's gifts, Shadow's coin tricks are a simulacrum in and of themselves. Shadow uses the tricks to make sense of the nonsensical, to restore order to a chaotic world. But as Mad Sweeney teaches him, the trick itself is unnecessary and un-real. If he would just adjust his way of seeing, he could just pluck the coins "out of the air":

"All the ways of doing the Miser's Dream that I've read, you'd be hiding the coins in the hand that holds the glass, and dropping them in while you produce and vanish the coin in your right hand."

"Sounds like a hell of a lot of work to me," said Mad Sweeney. (43)

Zorya Polunochnaya reaffirms this same idea later on when she takes the moon out of the sky in the form of a Liberty-head dollar: "'I did not palm it,' she said. 'I took it'" (91).

The hyperreal makes things unnecessarily difficult, but a small shift in perspective can lift the veil of the absolute fake. In the midst of these lessons, Shadow announces, "I feel . . . like I'm in a world with its own sense of logic. Its own rules. Like when you're in a dream, and you know there are rules you mustn't break. Even if you don't know what they mean. I'm just going along with it, you know?" (90). While Alice's games seem to outline her struggle to force Wonderland into a mold she can understand, Shadow's openness to ambiguity and ignorance makes his journey, not necessarily easier on him, but somewhat more effectual. While Alice re-enters the hyperreal, Shadow moves about within it, unmoved, knowing better.

### **The Beheading Pact**

Alongside the faery mistress and the game motif, the beheading pact is possibly the most interesting overlap of all, as it is not a traditional element of the otherworld tale.

It merely connects together *these three stories* specifically. While each protagonist journeys through a strange and unknown landscape, they each engage in a beheading plot that seems to forcibly march our heroes toward their own inevitable doom. Gawain's and Shadow's pacts are the most similar: while Gawain makes a pact to exchange axe blows with the Green Knight from one New Year's Day to the next, Shadow agrees, if he loses a game of checkers, to let Czernobog<sup>9</sup> hit him in the head with a sledgehammer at the end of his quest:

“If I win, I get to knock your brains out. With a sledgehammer. First you go down on your knees. Then I hit you a blow with it, so you don't get up again.” Shadow looked at the man's old face, trying to read him. He was not joking, Shadow was certain of that: there was a hunger there for something, for pain, or death, or retribution. (Gaiman 81)

In the face of such a ridiculous offer, one that would have him die for an equally meaningless reason as Gawain, Shadow unbelievably accepts. According to Gaiman, “He was not scared of dying. After all, it was not as if he had anything to live for.” What he will gain if he wins is merely that Czernobog will accompany him and Wednesday on their journey; the risk hardly seems worth it. But, similar to Gawain when faced with Arthur's embarrassing need to take up the Green Knight's offer, Shadow is forced here to act out his role. He is a grieving man who has lost everything in one solitary moment, who Wednesday has approached at his most vulnerable hour simply because he cannot *not* accept. He is a stereotype—a George Bailey standing on the bridge—a simulacrum of

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<sup>9</sup> According to Renata Sanken's meticulously-researched glossary of gods from the novel, Czernobog is “the Slavic god of the dead, the night, and chaos . . . ‘Chernobog’ translates literally from Russian as ‘black god’” (para. 18). His alter ego is Bielebog, the god of “happiness, order, and luck,” who replaces his “brother” in the spring.

a broken man, and, as such, is literally up for anything, which works to Wednesday's and Czernobog's advantage.

The *laissez-faire* attitude with which both the Green Knight and Czernobog discuss such violent blows is possibly the most confusing part of both plots. It is implied that they both, to differing extents, belong to the Otherworld, the Green Knight at the height of physical perfection and Czernobog a shell of the powerful deity he used to be. Both Gawain and Shadow have this fate consistently present in their minds throughout each story—they each believe that, in the end, they will be executed for no reason at all other than they were forced into a pact with sadistic mad men. As creatures of the real world, they do not have any power over their situation and are forced to assume the worst, often taking risks, due to this belief, which they otherwise wouldn't have. However, when the moment of truth arrives, the reader is led to think that neither otherworld character ever intended to kill their mortal opponent. The Green Knight delivers a “tap” to Gawain's neck which exposes the knight's weakness, and Czernobog, when his turn came, made a similar gesture:

The head of the sledgehammer was cold, icy cold, and it touched his forehead as gently as a kiss.

‘*Pock!* There,’ said Czernobog. ‘Is done.’ There was a smile on his face that Shadow had never seen before, an easy, comfortable smile, like sunshine on a summer's day. The old man walked over to the case, and he put the hammer away, and closed the bag, and pushed it back under the sideboard. (583)

The threat of grievous injury in each story was, itself, an absolute fake, one devised to motivate our heroes to act in a certain manner. When Shadow made his pact, he was fully

loyal to Wednesday, his employer, and believed the move to be helpful to their cause (which turned out to be bogus). When Gawain made his, he believed he was upholding the honor of king and country (which also turned out to be bogus). By the end, Gawain had shown himself to be more human than he was comfortable with and his cowardice is starkly compared with the Green Knight's generosity. Conversely, Shadow has shown himself to be the most selfless and brave individual—more god-like than the gods he serves—and Czernobog fulfills their agreement with a feather-light touch.

Alice is in no way safe from this plotline either, in that the Queen of Hearts with her “dreadfully savage” cries of “off with her head!” follows her all the way through Wonderland, even though she never engaged in any pact. Usually, these orders are hurled in the direction of Wonderland's citizens, not Alice herself, but it is worth noting that the moment the Queen turns this threat against Alice is the very moment Alice is transported back to the real world:

“Off with her head!” the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

“Who cares for you?” said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). “You're nothing but a pack of cards!”

At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister” (124)

Alice's power over the Otherworld lies in her ability to shrug off its authority. As she grows physically larger, she remembers that these beings are, indeed, just flimsy wisps of

imagination. She should easily be able to bat them away. Alice's confidence, then, acts as Gawain's weakness and Shadow's selflessness: it leads to her release.

So where is the hyperreal? In the human anticipation of a fatal blow or in the Otherworld's dismissal of the blow's impact? In the Queen of Heart's impotent orders or in Alice's rejection of them? A synthesis of the three stories shows that the hyperreal lies behind all four of these scenarios. For example, the Green Knight's great chivalry and Gawain's momentary fear might imply that the Otherworld is indeed greater than the real world, that the courtly world is an absolute fake. However, the Green Knight's belief that Gawain's motivation wasn't weakness at all, just a commendable "love of life," throws this interpretation into question. It isn't Gawain's fear that makes the real world inferior, it is the fact that he has been trained to think it does. The absolute fake, then, is the hyperreal code to which Gawain so faithfully adheres, a firm belief in a history that never was. He returns home unwilling to see this truth, and he is forever trapped by guilt and shame, symbolized by the green garter.

Alice, similar to Gawain, has a particular truth revealed to her in the beheading plot which she strongly embraces in the Otherworld and conveniently forgets in the real world. It is only at the moment of highest mortal peril, and when she has grown to her full size, that she chooses to embrace it. Here, a surface reading would suggest that the real world is superior to the Otherworld in that it follows rules, makes sense, and strikes a less histrionic tone. However, through a hyperreal lens, the two worlds are in fact identically nonsensical and even harmful; the difference between the two merely lies in Alice's reaction to them. When the hyperreality is blown up to unfamiliar proportions, and when Alice is able to show physical strength and superiority, she is willing to fight

against all rules and norms and to call the whole of Wonderland out for what it is: a pack of cards. In the real world, however, she assimilates, chalking the whole revealing experience up to “a wonderful dream” (125). She will, the reader assumes, grow up to embrace her role in Victorian, middle-class society regardless of the many creatures who will chastise her, order her about, incessantly change the rules, monitor her language, dictate her dress, or accuse her of imaginary crimes. While Gawain wears the green garter to remind himself of what he viewed as his otherworldly weakness, Alice “wears” the story of Wonderland, reciting it to her future children as a “curious” childhood dream—even though it includes a scene where her very life is threatened most violently. She does so, however, not as Gawain does—as a cautionary tale—but because she has tricked herself into believing she is happy in this reality. They both miss the point, both to their own detriment.

Shadow, however, had risen to the occasion of essentially becoming a god himself. Alongside Wednesday, he successfully rallied the ancient gods to take on the technological ones, assuming he was helping good fight evil. He even died on a tree for his new friends, many of whom proved themselves to be unworthy of this sacrifice. The whole war turned out to be a grift. This plotline would suggest that Shadow’s real world self was more honorable than the Otherworld’s population of powerless tricksters. However, this reading is also too simplistic. Shadow isn’t stronger or weaker for believing in the cause, and Wednesday isn’t evil for tricking him into it; they both merely played out their role in an inevitable, hyperreal storyline. The plot of *American Gods* pulls apart the binary oppositions of god/human, real world/Otherworld, old/new, and good/evil. Shadow is literally both god and human. Wednesday is both evil and pitiable.

The technological gods are both shallow and necessary. The ancient gods are both loveable and dastardly. To place a hierarchical value on any of these illusory pairings would be, as the novel shows, a waste of time. What Shadow's pact with Czernobog reveals is that free will itself is an absolute fake, and that we all play the role that is laid out for us even when we believe it was our own decision. Even the gods are denied a choice, but at least they are aware of it. The uprising of ancient gods, led by Wednesday, seems to ignite hope in them all, especially Czernobog, whose transformation into Bielebog makes him so lenient in that final blow. He wishes to bring order to the world instead of chaos—good triumphing over evil. However, he would have done so either way since the dualistic Czernobog/Bielebog identity switches off annually with the changing seasons. His altered demeanor occurs not because good has won, but because Beliebog was his necessary identity at that particular time of year. The fact that Shadow shows up at this time to take his blow is sheer dumb luck, just as the ability to “choose a side” is hyperreal. Even the kobold Hinzemann, in the end, is a sympathetic character, stealing Lakeside's children because *that is his function*, and in return, gives the town a Rockwellian, Midwestern utopia. In the end, no one can escape who they are and freedom comes from this acceptance as the novel's ending symbolically implies:

[Shadow] tossed the coin into the air with a flick of his thumb.

It spun golden at the top of its arc, in the sunlight, and it glittered and glinted and hung there in the midsummer sky as if it was never going to come down. Maybe it never would. Shadow didn't wait to see. He walked away and he kept on walking. (588)

If reality has been “short circuited,” as Baudrillard suggests, the hyperreal will continue to duplicate itself through signs, the flip of a coin called as “head I win, tails you lose” (27). Therefore, it is not some great cosmic plan which maps out our individual destinies, it is the simulacrum, and it doesn’t matter in the least whether it comes down heads or tails. The best, albeit most unsatisfying, option is to walk away and try not to think too hard.

### **Returning Home**

So where does this leave us? As each character crosses back into their real world, their choice to contend with their journey, or not, guides us in answering this question. For Alice, the choice is made for her. Her sister, symbolic of Victorian society, chooses to sentimentalize the dream of Wonderland and turns it into an emblem of childhood, one that will someday strengthen her bond with her own children. Wonderland will, in fact, make her a better Victorian mother. This ending disregards the terrors of her journey as well as the many moments when she is forced to question the validity of her real world and her prescribed place in it. The reader is left feeling the same cognitive dissonance attributed to Carroll himself: acceptance of a tale which simultaneously upholds and dismantles the society that had created it/him.

For Gawain, our flawed hero, instead of choosing to stay, reject the hyperreal, and celebrate with Bertilak and his household, he rushes home to repent; only the home he returns to shows him very clearly how little they care for his moralizing. Shadow Moon’s return to the real world is different, however, since his life had, in effect, ended at the beginning of the novel. His wife is dead, his job is no longer waiting for him, and he has

no home to return to. After finishing his business with Czernobog, he ponders what next to do:

He sat down on a grassy bank and looked at the city that surrounded him, and thought, one day he would have to go home. And one day he would have to make a home to go back to. He wondered whether home was a thing that happened to a place after a while, or if it was something that you found in the end, if you simply walked and waited and willed it long enough. (585)

Not only had his life abruptly changed already, but his experience among the gods in the Otherworld had forever altered his view of reality, made apparent by his pondering the difference between a forced, hyperreal home and a “Real” feeling of *home*. In *Shadow* we finally get a character who is willing to look back before looking forward, not to dismantle the hyperreal but at least to acknowledge its existence.

It is clear that the otherworld journey can be used as a filter through which the absolute fake is exposed. What we tend to treat as both presently and historically “Real,” in a Lacanian sense, is instead just a projection of our wishes and hopes. Believing that such a past existed, like Henry VIII’s use of the Winchester Round Table, bolsters us in this belief and can easily leave us open to manipulation. What remains to be seen, however, is if exposing the hyperreal can make any difference at all in, to use Habermas’s term, the life world. For the most part, it seems like we would much rather take *The Matrix*’s blue pill, as Gawain and Alice eventually choose, and stay embedded in the hyperreal. Baudrillard himself believed it was impossible to do anything other than this, and it is unclear whether Eco disagreed with this sentiment. Aisling Byrne, however,

throughout her comprehensive study of medieval otherworlds, expresses a hopeful tone for their ability to induce thoughtful change. In her conclusion, she suggests that:

the otherworld should not be seen as one exotic space among many, but as a new horizon of expectations *within* the text. It is, in a sense, a means of stepping outside the narrative text while remaining in it, a process that does not sound quite so odd when we consider that literature itself provides just such a conduit in its relationship with the actual world. In the same way that fiction provides a means to step out from reality in order to return to it with **a fuller understanding**, the otherworld sets up a third perspective from which to view both the secondary fictional and the primary historical worlds. (185; emphasis added)

While I appreciate her optimism here, and fully support the perspectival portion of her argument, I cannot entirely agree with the full statement. Byrne implies that the value of an otherworld tale lies in the pleasant “There and Back Again” idea of *Hobbit* fame: we leave home, we learn something, and then we return. Even with her implication that the journey can lead one to a “fuller understanding,” I believe that the stakes are much higher and the outlook much more bleak. The Otherworlds addressed in this study have included many moments which should lead to a “fuller understanding,” yet instead lead to an imperfect, disappointing validation of the real world. By Byrne’s definition, they are failures, except for the most savvy of audiences. We should leave *Gawain* questioning the chivalric code, and *Alice* questioning the Victorian domestic ideal, and yet instead we are invited to a celebration of each.

Shadow’s Otherworld and the hyperreal it exposes are strikingly different from the other two, in that they are so directly connected it is difficult to tell them apart in the

end. The consequences of separating the two, of “unmasking images,” as Baudrillard reminds us, “is dangerous . . . as they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them” (5). Essentially, to cross the border into the strange and the magical all one has to do is adjust their way of seeing and acknowledge the void, which Shadow does. During his time in Lakeside, for example, he must believe in it. The moment he confronts its hyperreality in order to destroy the kobold, he must move on. He can then turn this skill on and off as he wishes after the war between the gods is over and he is forced to return to “real life.” In a Baudrillardian landscape of dissolved referents and the endless duplication of signs, this coping mechanism seems to make the most sense. It resists the “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” tone of the other two stories while also avoiding the false hope of smashing the hyperreal landscape altogether.

In discussing the overall theme of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Yale University professor emerita Marie Boroff compares Gawain’s “There and Back Again” journey to that of maturation:

We are led via a series of unpredictable, bewildering, and variously discomfiting situations to what seems the very brink of death, at which point we betray an ideal to which we had confidently dedicated ourselves. After all is over, we are judged benevolently by a person or persons older than we, told that our trials are at an end, and assured that, even though our behavior did not measure up to an absolute standard of perfection, we have been found, not wanting, but acceptable, quite all right, in fact. . . . We have come through intact—indeed, we have done well—but neither we nor the world is as wonderful as we had thought. (109)

This paradigm is certainly a more reassuring one than what I have laid out in these many pages, that the world is not only less wonderful than our previous assumptions led us to believe but that, to a certain extent, it isn't there at all. This should not imply, however, that human pain and suffering are simulations rather than realities—far from it. In fact, it is our embracing of the hyperreal (the chivalric code, Victorian gender roles, Rockwellian America) that often leads to the perpetuation of pain. They prepare an ideologically-charged template of reality that we expect and begin to treat as “normal,” whether or not it leaves certain groups oppressed or causes harm (e.g. war, famine, buses of civilians blowing up on the other side of the world). In the most extreme of examples, since such occurrences as terrorist attacks and school shootings have become common enough to enter into the hyperreal, to become “expected,” and to have a predetermined pattern of reaction (e.g. lock the door, be silent, get on the ground, “thoughts and prayers”), the suffering that results from each event is more frequently dismissed as the norm. Nothing should frighten us more.

I am certain that these three examples are not the only otherworld tales that have worthwhile lessons to teach us in the midst of our hyperreal landscape, but I also understand the appeal of packing up and moving on. It is much easier to turn on our night-lights, tidy up our minds, and insulate ourselves against the frightening Real, forever masked by our comfortable and familiar explanations. Confronting the hyperreal carries the very real risk of us losing our heads.

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