The Importance of Space and Time in Neil Gaiman's Novels

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Abstract

Neil Gaiman is a renowned British author of fantasy, science fiction novels, children's books and short stories. In Gaiman's works, time and space are major elements, playing a key-role in his narratives. "The intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" was termed as chronotope by Bakhtin. The chronotope is an important literary element, having narrative, plot-generating, representational, and semantic significance, and providing the basis for distinguishing generic types (Bemong, Borghart 2010). However, the chronotope in fantasy fiction is a rather complex notion. Due to its magic and supernatural elements, fantastic literature employs multiple chronotopes, making a step from a single chronotope of reality (or rather of its representation) to those of alternate worlds or realms. This article aims to examine Gaiman's novels from a spatio-temporal point of view and to analyze the importance of space and time in Stardust, Neverwhere, *and* American Gods, *by using Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, and Foucault's concepts of heterotopia and heterochronia.*

Key words: chronotope, fantasy fiction, multidimensionality, impossible topologies

Traditionally, time and space in literature were analyzed from a narratological point of view: space as a particular place, and time as narrated events' order, duration, frequency, linearity or speed (Genette 1980). More recently, the concept of spacetime or chronotope has been increasingly used instead of just temporal or spatial analysis of narratives. The explanation for the view of narrative space and time as one concept is the fact that: "narrative is always temporal and the narrative representation of space cannot be separated from its representation of time" (Gomel 2014: 26). According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is the fusion of temporal and spatial indicators in the narrative (1981: 84). These indicators have narrative, plot-generating, representational, and semantic significance, they "provide the basis for distinguishing generic types" (Bemong, Borghart 2010: 6). What is specific to the Fantasy genre, it is the fact that it usually employs "impossible" temporal and spatial indicators (Gomel 2014: 11). These are

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impossible from the point of view of Newtonian-Euclidean paradigm of homogenous, uniform, three-dimensional spatiality and linear, chronologic temporality. In other words, these disrupt spatiality and temporality by creating, what Gomel calls impossible chronotopes (2014: 29).

According to Nikolajeva, Fantasy fiction displays three types of chronotopes: the chronotope of multidimensionality realized by transition between chronotopes; the time travelling or time displacement chronotope (which oftentimes involve space displacement, as well); and the chronotope of heterotopia or of a multitude of discordant universes (2003: 141-145). The first type of Fantasy specific chronotope is this transition between Primary World (the chronotope of reality) and the Secondary World (the alternative realm chronotope), thus anchoring the plot in the recognizable reality (2014: 142). The second type of chronotopes, the time distortion chronotope, sometimes called time travelling or time displacement chronotope, involves intricate patterns of time: multitude of possible parallel times; of time going at different paces or even in different directions in separate worlds, its philosophical implications (questions like predestation and free will), and its metaphysical character (mechanisms of time displacement themselves, and various time paradoxes) (Nikolajeva 2003: 142-143). The third type of aforementioned chronotopes is that of heterotopias or of a multitude of discordant universes. It was inspired by Foucault's concept of heterotopias and heterochronies. This chronotope "denotes the ambivalent and unstable spatial and temporal conditions in fiction" (Nikolajeva 2003: 143). It differs from the chronotope of multidimensionality by the total absence of a chronotope of recognizable reality, which even if present in the novel, undergoes a process of defamiliarization, so it becomes unrecognizable (2003:144). Foucault termed heterotopias the "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1984: 3). In his conception these are the places that exist outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. They are "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault 1984: 4). According to Foucault (1984), heterotopology can be described according to six principles. They are (1) forbidden places, that have a (2) determined function in society according to the synchrony of the culture; and are (3) capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places that are in themselves incompatible. They also have (4) a function in relation to all the space that remains, which unfolds between two extreme poles: reality and illusion, which (5) presupposes a system of

opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. And lastly, they are (6) linked to slices in time, which Foucault calls *heterochronies* that exhibit an absolute break with the traditional time. As one can see, Foucault's heterotopias are inevitably affected by time, which makes them relevant in discussing chronotopes, especially the "impossible" chronotopes of postmodern fiction (Gomel 2014). These impossible chronotopes are extensively used in non-realistic genres, and primarily in Fantasy fiction. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) Jackson stated: "literary fantasies have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality, and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death." (Jackson 2003: 1).

In *Narrative Space and Time* (2014) Gomel discusses five ontological strategies, used for the creation of impossible chronotopes that determine the final shape of the storyworld: layering, flickering, embedding, wormholing, and collapsing. The first strategy - layering places a fantastic extradiegetic space "on top" of a realistic diegetic space (2014: 33). The second strategy - flickering, presupposes deployment of an unreliable narrator or of multiple focalizations (2014: 34). Embedding – the third strategy doubles the storyworld by enclosing a separate mini-universe within the diegetic chronotope (2014: 35). The fourth strategy - wormholing implies an actual physical distortion within the utopian spacetime (2014: 36). The last strategy discussed by Gomel is that of collapsing, which entails a superimposition of multiple spaces within a single diegetic locus (2014: 37).

The corpus for analysis consists of three novels written by Neil Gaiman: *Neverwhere, Stardust* and *American Gods*. All three novels are primarily Fantasy fiction; however Gaiman's works are renowned for their generic hybridity. *Neverwhere* is an Urban Fantasy novel (which can be classified as Urban Gothic as well), set in the nineties London. Richard Mayhew, the novel's main character, explores the London's underground, like his namesake Henry Mayhew, the Victorian urban sociologist, who wrote *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). Gaiman depicts the destitute, homeless and poor that live in London Below, "inhabited by the people who fell through the cracks in the world" (1998: 79) as literally invisible. Richard's adventure starts when he helps a wounded, homeless girl, which makes him invisible for the inhabitants of London Above. As a result he follows the girl into the London Below, in order to find his way back into his life in London Above. However, he ultimately rejects his old life for a new one in London Below. London in the novel is a vertical

structure, composed of two cities of London: London Above and London Below. This division introduces the first type of chronotope encountered in Fantasy fiction, represented by the transition between the chronotope of reality (London Above), and the chronotope of alternative realm (London Below). The alternative realm functions differently from the recognizable reality chronotope. London Below is organized in a medievalist, feudal structure. When Door wakes up in Richard's flat, first thing she inquires is: "Whose barony is this? Whose fiefdom?" (Gaiman 1998: 18). Both time and space are warped and distorted in London Below, which introduces the second type of chronotope present in the novel, the chronotope of time displacement. The characters travel between the London Above and London below by opening special doors that function as wormholes between the two dimensions, altering the spatiality and temporality. These either exist organically and certain characters know about their existence (Marquis de Carabas), or are made by opening portals (Door). For example, when Marquis de Carabas takes Richard Mayhew back to his London flat, he takes a shortcut by opening a manhole cover. It is necessary to mention that this happens at nighttime. Afterwards by climbing some steps, they end up on top of Old Bailey's in daylight; and by opening another door on the side of the building, they end up in Richard's apartment building, in a broom closet by his apartment door, back in the nighttime (Gaiman 1998: 29-32). In London Below they also travel by "phantom" Tube trains (Earl's Court train) that stop in unused, closed underground stations (British Museum Station), by walking through the labyrinth, where time and space change continuously (assorted time fragments of London above), etc. The last type of chronotope encountered in the novel is the chronotope of heterotopia or multidimensionality. It can be exemplified by the black hole chronotope (Gomel 2014: 172), which enables present and past spatiality and temporality to coexist. As stated in the novel: "There are little pockets of old time in London, where things and places stay the same, like bubbles in amber" (Gaiman 1998: 142). This chronotope is enabled through the strategy of collapsing, where the two different spaces coexist, and are squeezed in the same diegetic space. In this case the two coexisting spaces are the two representations of London. These two representations are based on binary oppositions. The financial district "a cold and cheerless place of offices" (Gaiman 1998: 102) is opposed to "loud, and brash, and insane, and it was, in many ways, quite wonderful" (1998: 230) crowd at the Floating Market; people at Stockton's exhibition in Armani suits opposed to mudlarks selling garbage and lost property; Harrods opposed to Floating

Market; etc. While London Above is situated in real-world (or rather its representation), and London Below is situated in London Above's underground. The Tube is the border between the two cities, between reality and illusion, which makes it "a handy fiction that made life easier but bore no resemblance to the reality of the shape of the city above" (Gaiman 1998: 4). The London Below is the heterotopic mirrored image of the London Above, a repository of all London history (from its Celtic and Roman roots through Black plague, to the nineties London), people and myths. All the things forgotten and lost can be found in London Below, which is represented paradigmatically, as well as syntagmatically. In London Below the time and places of London Above, even those long gone and disappeared from London Above, still exist. Nothing truly disappears from London Above without leaving a trace. All the traces and memories are buried away in London Below. "There were a hundred other little courts and mews and alleys in London […] tiny spurs of old-time, unchanged for, three hundred years" (Gaiman 1998: 48). E.g. a Roman Legion coexists with an abandoned Victorian Hospital and with the Tube. Each London Tube station has a corresponding London Below place: Knightsbridge, Earl's Court, Islington, Shepherds' Bush, etc. For example, Earl's Court is a real medieval court, set in a Tube train, where alongside the lost possessions of commuters that use the Underground, can be found an actual Earl, his men at arms in chain mail, a falconer, a jester, etc. and where the visitors are served with Coke and Cadbury's Fruit and Nut chocolate bars. London Below is the inverted image of London Above. The old London itself was stripped of its personality, by the impersonal financial district that rose in the place of former castles and cathedrals. "The actual City of London itself was no bigger than a square mile […] a tiny municipality, now home to London's financial institutions, and that that was where it had all begun" (Gaiman 1998: 4). The sterile body of the financial district, where no one lives anymore, is the embodiment of the new depersonalized, soulless city. The cold, modern city of London is inverted in the "carnivalesque", loud, smelly London Below. Where Knightsbridge, one of the most attractive areas of central London, becomes Night's Bridge, one of the most dangerous places of London Below, inhabited by nightmares that gathered there "since the cave times". Angel Underground station and Islington district become in London Below an actual Angel named Islington, and who is the novel's main villain. Blackfriars station becomes an abbey in London Below, inhabited by black friars. The entire London Below is a heterotopia, because it is a non-place,

isolated, with restricted access for outsiders, where time and space function differently. It is a forbidden place for the inhabitants of London Above, which once glimpsed by them would slip their minds, being perceived as an illusion. However, London Below contains other heterotopic spaces as well, like Floating Market, Night's Bridge, Shepherd's Bush, Labyrinth, etc. For example: "the labyrinth […] was a place of pure madness. It was built of lost fragments of London Above: alleys and roads and corridors and sewers that had fallen through the cracks over the millennia, and entered the world of the lost and the forgotten" (Gaiman 1998: 190). While the Floating Market is a heterotopic space, which is difficult to access, bound by specific rules, it is also marked by the chronotope of carnival-time: "animated and illuminated by the ancient public square's spirit of carnival and mystery" (Bakhtin 1981: 249). Not only the entire London Below is a heterotopic space, but London Above contains numerous heterotopias (which are simultaneously heterochronies), as: National Gallery, Tate Gallery, Big Ben, Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Tower of London, etc. Alongside the impossible Fantasy fiction, chronotopes can be identified the alternative history chronotope - "corresponding to the two forms of temporality that Lyotard called 'myth' and 'contingency'" (Gomel 2009: 336); and the chronotope of trauma (Gomel 2014: 173) evoking the traumatic historic events, since "the city is a palimpsest of its history", and it is "haunted by the memory of the cataclysm and the premonition of its return" (2014: 173), (Black plague, "Great stink", "pea-soupers", etc.). Another classical chronotope is the road chronotope, which combined with the motif of meeting, usually leads to adventures, according to Bakhtin (1981: 98). The road chronotope combined with adventure-time chronotope realizes the metaphor of "the path of life" (Bakhtin 2008: 120), which in literature is inherited from folklore. According to Bakhtin, the adventure-time chronotope represents a combination between the Greek adventure-time chronotope, which is "an extratemporal hiatus that appears between two moments of a real time sequence" (1981: 91), and the chronotope of everyday life, which exposes "layers and levels of private life" (Bakhtin 2008: 127). All the separate adventures: the road to Floating Market, the search for the Angelus, the Ordeal of the Key, etc., are parts of Richard's quest and constitute the adventure-time chronotope.

Stardust is a portal-quest Fantasy (that also can be classified as a Steampunk (a variety of Science Fiction), where the main character Tristran Thorn explores the realm of Fairy in a quest for a fallen star, which is in fact a woman, called Yvaine. In *Stardust*, as in *Neverwhere*, one can find the three

types of Fantasy fiction chronotopes discussed above. The chronotope of multidimensionality is the first type of chronotope that can be identified. It is realized through the strategy of layering (Gomel 2014: 39). *Stardust* is set in an alternative Victorian age, in a small village of Wall. The village got its name from the high grey rock wall situated nearby, and which has a gap guarded by village folks round the clock to prevent people entering the Faerie realm or magic beings getting into the village. Beyond the Wall is a meadow and beyond it, the land of Faerie. Every nine years the meadow hosts a fair, where Fair Folk trade with the inhabitants of the village of Wall. The meadow fair embodies the chronotope of carnival-time, while the opening in the wall is marked by the chronotope of "threshold", which "is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life" (Bakhtin 1981: 248). The Primary world is represented by the village of Wall, while the Secondary world - by the land of Faerie. The transition between chronotopes is made through the opening in the wall, which functions as a portal to Faerie. The realm of Faerie is inspired by folklore and fairy tales. In the novel it is a heterotopic space, which presents an unusual spatiality and temporality. The time passes differently in Faerie (in a few hours can be covered the distance of six months travel time), and some of its inhabitants are immortal. Its space is described as being "bigger that the world", because "since the dawn of time, each land that has been forced off the map by explorers and the brave going out and proving it wasn't there has taken refuge in Faerie" (Gaiman 2005: 25-26); and its maps are unreliable, and may not be depended upon. This heterotopic chronotope is the second type of chronotope that can be identified in the novel. The entire Faerie realm is an inverted utopia, or a heterotopia, containing numerous heterotopias, like: the meadow fair, the Serewood, the Lilim's hall, the sky-ships, Diggory's Dyke, Mount Huon, Hall of Ancestors, Mount Head, Mount Shoulder, Mount Belly and Mount Knees, the Chariot Inn, etc. For example, Serewood is a flesh-eating forest, which traps and consumes every living thing that gets into it, leaving only "dry bones". It is a forbidden place, that once entered cannot be exited. In the novel the Serewood trees were "stinging and smarting when they touched Tristran's skin, cutting and slicing at his clothes" (Gaiman 2005: 34). The only thing that saved Tristran was his ability to find his way through the Faerie, inherited from his mother. A further example of heterotopia is the Lilim's Hall, a heterotopic space unlike any other in the novel. At first glance it is a small peasant cottage in the woods inhabited by three old women. However, once entered, the cottage has "a mirror of

black glass, as high as a tall man, as wide as a church door", which shows a completely different image of reality. "There were three other women in the little house. They were slim, and dark, and amused. The hall they inhabited was many times the size of the cottage; the floor was of onyx, and the pillars were of obsidian. There was a courtyard behind them, open to the sky, and stars hung in the night sky above" (Gaiman 2005: 26). Another interesting heterotopic space is the sky-ship Perdita, which flies around Faerie hunting for lightning, and trying to capture it with a copper chest. It takes Tristran and Yvaine from a cloud they ended on, when their Babylon candle burned out, and takes them to a harbor-tree. The sky-ship is an inaccessible space for people, aside from its crew. It does not belong to a certain fixed space, but rather permanently changes its position, in accordance with the storms brewing in the skies. Similarly to a boat, it is "a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity" (Foucault 1984: 9) of the sky. The sky ship also belongs to the third type of Fantasy chronotope that can be identified in the novel - the time and space displacement chronotope. All the magic transportation means in the novel are also means for space and time displacement. For example, Tristran Thorn travels through Faerie in search of his star by candlelight, which is a very fast movement through space and time using a Babylon candle. Unlike the wormhole effect of the opened doors or portals in *Neverwhere*, which is almost instantaneous, this type of travel takes the shortest route to one's destination through caves and mountain passes, through clouds and wild forests, lakes and "lonely crags", but it also takes time and depends upon the speed with which the candle burns out. It enables the main character to cover a distance that takes six months to travel in just mere minutes, as long as it takes to burn just half of a Babylon candle. This travelling method was inspired by the traditional nursery rhyme "How many miles to Babylon?", which is cited in the novel (Gaiman 2005: 32). Other means of transportation in the novel are: by means of the sky-ship Perdita, by means of a Lilim's cart, by unicorn, etc., which are all fast, yet slower than travelling by candlelight. Alongside these Fantasy specific chronotopes, one can also identify the traditional chronotope of the road combined with the motif of meeting, and the adventure-time chronotope, as well. In *Stardust* this adventure-time chronotope begins with the Dunstan's choice to help a stranger and his crossing of the threshold into the Faerie, and ends with Tristran's return to *Stormhold*. The adventure-time is constituted of short segments that form distinct adventures: the *Serewood* episode, the encounter with the unicorn,

the travelling by candlelight, the deaths of princes of *Stormhold*, etc. interwoven with instances of everyday life chronotope. Another chronotope that can be identified in the novel is the alternative history chronotope:

> Queen Victoria was on the throne of England, but she was not yet the black-clad widow of Windsor: she had apples in her cheeks and a spring in her step […] Mr. Charles Dickens was serializing his novel *Oliver Twist*; Mr. Draper had just taken the first photograph of the moon, freezing her pale face on cold paper; Mr. Morse had recently announced a way of transmitting messages down metal wires (Gaiman 2005: 2).

Gaiman uses an assortment of real historical events in a mixture with imagined ones, in an attempt at anchoring the narration in the recognizable reality chronotope, this way enabling the transition between chronopes.

American Gods exhibits probably the most complicated chronotopic structure of the three novels. It is a Fantasy novel, with elements of road trip novel, Americana, detective fiction, Gothic fiction, Science fiction, and Horror. Shadow Moon, the main character of *American Gods* is a former convict, released early from prison, because of his wife's untimely death. He is hired as a bodyguard and embarks on a journey through America, which ultimately ends up being a journey of self-discovery, during which he succeeds in saving the world. Aside from the main plot, the novel contains a series of subplots and a number of narrative episodes titled *Coming to America*. As a result, its chronotopic structure is more complex than those of the previously presented novels. The first type of chronotope is that of multidimensionality, obtained by transition between chronotopes. It is realized by transition between the chronotope of recognizable reality, represented by the nowadays United States of America, and the alternative realm of "ideas" and deities, the world "behind the scenes" (Gaiman 2002: 348). The transition between chronotopes or the chronotope of multidimensionality is obtained by the strategy of sidestepping, which is "the projection of the spatial axis of narrative onto its temporal axis", and implies that "extra spatial dimensions are displaced upon extra timelines" (Gomel 2014: 146). The realm of deities coexists with that of reality, and Shadow can see glimpses of deities' "immortal forms". For example, Mama-ji, the representation of goddess Kali is an old, shriveled woman, but looking at her Shadow gets the vision of a "huge, naked woman with skin as black as a new leather jacket, and lips and tongue the bright red of arterial blood. Around her neck were skulls, and her many hands held

knives, and swords, and severed heads" (Gaiman 2002: 138). In the alternate realm of "behind the scenes" time flows differently than in the recognizable reality chronotope. Several hours spent "behind the scenes" take almost a month in the real world (2002: 343 - 360), and a few steps become miles. This stepping "behind the scenes" also falls into the chronotope of time and space displacement. Another instance of this type of chronotope is that of traveling by means of a Thunderbird, which takes Shadows from the World Tree to the Rock City in mere minutes, or by stepping as through a wormhole, which involves Shadow's trip from the Hall of Death to Whiskey Jack's shack. The third type of chronotope present in the novel is that of heterotopia. There are multiple heterotopias in *American Gods*: the prison, the graveyard, the carousel, the mortuary parlor, motels, inns, the Rock City, the House on the Rock, the Urd's Well, the World Tree, the Lookout Mountain, the abandoned farm, "behind the scenes", etc. Among the traditional chronotopes used, one can identify: the road chronotope, combined with the motif of meeting (since it is also a road-trip novel); the chronotope of threshold (the carousel, the Hall of Death); the idyllic chronotope, which is represented in the novel in the form of a utopia. In the novel the small town of Lakeside, flourishes among the desolation and slow death of the surrounding towns, due to the protection of a kobold. It is, as claims the bus-driver, taking Shadow to Lakeside: a "good town", as well as the "prettiest town" she has ever seen. Nevertheless, this idyllic town hides a dark secret, which is the main reason for its prosperity. This idyllic chronotope is realized through the strategy of wormholing, where the utopia is marked by flaws, hidden carceral zones (Gomel 2014: 35) or heterotopias concealed in its midst. For example, the town of Lakeside is renowned for and got its name from the lake that it surrounds. The same lake that hides the bodies of the town's missing children, claimed as offerings by its kobold. The chronotope of carnival-time marks such places, like: carousel, Rock City, House on the Rock. Other chronotopes present in the novel are: the alternative history chronotope and the trauma chronotope (representing the historic trauma), both found in the narrative episodes *Coming to America*, that depict struggles, loss, and suffering, erased from the embellished and fictionalized history.

> The important thing to understand about American history … is that it is fictional, a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily bored. For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a representation of the thing, and not the thing itself. It is a fine fiction …that America was founded by pilgrims, seeking the freedom to believe

as they wished, that they came to the Americas, spread and bred and filled the empty land (Gaiman 2001: 73).

These episodes present the accounts of the first American settlers that brought their deities to the American land: the story of the twins sold as slaves, Agasu and Wututu; the story of Essie Tregowan sentenced to transportation for life; the story of nomads of the Northern plains, etc. The alternative history chronotope and the trauma chronotope are rooted in postmodern representation of history as fiction, as discourse, and in the concerns raised by this fictionalized history. The novel is organized through a number of narrative segments of everyday life and distinct adventures, which combined, form the adventure-time chronotope. E.g. Shadow's time in prison, Shadow's trip home, Shadow's abduction by spooks, the time he spends in Little Egypt, the trip to the Rock City, etc.

In Neil Gaiman's novels, time and space are of an utmost importance, mostly due to the fact that the alternate world or realm functions as a character, rather than just a setting. His chronotopes are vital to the narrative. For example, in *Neverwhere*, London is the main character. Every allusion, every reference in the novel, be it historical or geographical, literary or mythological, points towards London, its complexity, history, multiculturalism, and plurality. In *Stardust*, which is structured as a fairytale, if you place the plot somewhere else, it falls apart, because the plot events only make sense in the context of the alternate realm of Faerie. In *American Gods*, the entire narrative is impossible outside its main chronotope – 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. Gaiman bends space and time for the purpose of his plots. His "impossible topologies" encountered in the novels define the genres he writes in, and give his writings their specificity, allowing the treatment of such socio-historical controversial issues, as: homelessness, poverty, racism, discrimination, and others. The characters in the novels are also shaped and influenced by the chronotope. The common traits of the spacetime in the analyzed novels are: the use of the impossible chronotopes along with traditional chronotopes; the treatment of history as a fiction, and of maps as "unreliable"; the usage of alternative history and trauma chronotopes. Gaiman relies on the usage of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980, 1986) and on cultural codes, which make the dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem self-evident, timeless, and obvious (Barthes 1977: 127-130), thus anchoring the texts interpretation to the chronotope of the recognizable reality. The differences between the chronotopes encountered

in the novels mainly consist in the employment of different strategies in obtaining these chronotopes.

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