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The Fantastic in Short Stories
Theories and the Practice of Neil Gaiman

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................... 1

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 2

2. The theory of fantasy and the fantastic ................................................................. 4
   2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4
   2.2 The fundamentals ....................................................................................................... 6
   2.3 The construction of fantasy ...................................................................................... 12
      2.3.1 The portal-quest fantasy ..................................................................................... 13
      2.3.2 The immersive fantasy ....................................................................................... 15
      2.3.3 The intrusion fantasy ......................................................................................... 18
      2.3.4 The liminal fantasy ........................................................................................... 20
   2.4 The construction of the fantastic ............................................................................ 21
      2.4.1 Building the primary world .............................................................................. 24
      2.4.2 Characterization ................................................................................................. 25
      2.4.3 Specific uses of language .................................................................................. 27
      2.4.4 The Narrator ........................................................................................................ 29
      2.4.5 Composition ....................................................................................................... 31
      2.4.6 The liminal: a special kind of fantastic ........................................................... 32
   2.5 Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 34

3. The short story .............................................................................................................. 35
   3.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 35
   3.2 Defining the genre ..................................................................................................... 36
   3.3 General characteristics of the short story ............................................................... 37
   3.4 Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 43
   3.5 The fantastic in short stories .................................................................................... 44

4. The short stories of Neil Gaiman .............................................................................. 46
   4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 46
   4.2 Analyses ....................................................................................................................... 48
      4.2.1 “Murder Mysteries” ......................................................................................... 48
      4.2.2 “Closing Time” ................................................................................................. 51
      4.2.3 “October in the Chair” ..................................................................................... 55
      4.2.4 “Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar” ............................................................................... 57
      4.2.5 “How Do You Think It Feels?” ...................................................................... 61
      4.2.6 “Chivalry” and “When We Went to See the End of the World” ................. 63
   4.3 Conclusions ................................................................................................................ 67

5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 69

6. Works cited .................................................................................................................... 71
1. Introduction

The discussion on the definition of the fantasy genre over the last forty years has resulted in what Farah Mendlesohn\(^1\) calls a “fuzzy set” of definitions that more or less encompass the many branches of the genre (2008:xiii). The main consensus in these definitions is that fantasy creates other, impossible, worlds or that it introduces impossible elements in a mimetic, “real” world. As a popular notion, fantasy is most often equated with Tolkienesque adventures, in which the hero ventures through a vast magical world on a quest to save it, encountering elves, dwarves, and wizards along the way.

However, fantasy is not always that straightforward. Not only do fantasies vary greatly on the surface, but the fictional creation and introduction of the world can also happen in several ways. In her *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn, for example, distinguishes four types of fantasy texts, “determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world” (2008:xiv). On the other hand, critics such as Rosemary Jackson\(^2\) or Nicholas Ruddick\(^3\) classify fantasy based on its function.

On the edge of the genre are texts that consciously defy a categorization in either the mimetic or the fantasy genre. These texts were first classified by Tzvetan Todorov under the term “littérature fantastique” in 1970\(^4\), which was translated, perhaps somewhat unfortunately, to “fantastic literature”. Following Todorov, the fantastic is very specifically defined as “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (1975:25). An epistemological doubt experienced by the reader is crucial here as to the status of the fictional event and even though the strict lines

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Todorov drew to define the fantastic have been loosened by other critics, this meaning of the fantastic is still at issue in the study of fantasy. It is the Todorovian fantastic that will be discussed in this thesis.

It is clear that maintaining the ambiguity between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the fantastic is not easily accomplished and indeed, Todorov himself admits that texts in which the fantastic is not resolved are rare (1975:41-42). In the long novel form especially, it is hard to hide the reality status of events as new pieces of information will inevitably enter the text. The short story form, on the other hand seems almost naturally inclined to generate and support the fantastic. Its compressed form gives the short story an air of mystery, which seems to fit the fantastic perfectly. However, this seemingly natural connection between the short story and the fantastic has not been discussed in either fields of study.

To elaborate on this connection this paper will provide a theoretical discussion of both genres and also a practical illustration of the fantastic in short stories. This illustration will center on Neil Gaiman, a contemporary author of mostly fantasy and SF. The choice for Gaiman’s short fiction is motivated by most of his stories being grounded in a seemingly everyday reality in which supernatural events occur, as this is one of the main demands for Todorov’s fantastic. In addition, Gaiman is well known for his experimental approach to genres and this will also prove to be of importance for the fantastic. The investigation of Gaiman’s short stories will focus on the ways in which the fantastic is constructed and in what ways the short story form plays a role in this.

In order to properly analyze Gaiman’s short stories, an interpretative frame has to be constructed. Therefore, I will propose a set of theoretical tools drawn from fantasy, fantastic and short story criticism. This “toolbox” will be specifically geared for the analysis of how different types of fantasy are constructed and in what way reader hesitation, the central element of the fantastic, can enter the narrative. My analysis will contain intratextual elements
such as the status of the narrator, the context in which the story is told, the setting of the story itself and the use of specific language. However, reader hesitation will inevitably also be influenced by extratextual elements such as reader expectations. Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) will be a principal guideline in building this analytical toolbox, as it provides in-depth pragmatic analyses of almost the entire fantasy genre, including what she calls “liminal fantasies” (xiv), which include, for her, Todorov’s genre of the fantastic. Besides Mendlesohn, several other authors will be discussed that focus specifically on the Todorovian fantastic.

This paper will consist of two mutually supporting parts. The first part will be a theoretical approach to fantasy, the fantastic and the short story. This will contain (1) a further elaboration on the distinction and relationship between fantasy and the fantastic, (2) a study of how fantasy and the fantastic can be constructed, (3) an introduction to the short story genre, and (4) an exploration of the connection between the short story and the fantastic. This first part will not only provide us with the first theoretical connections between those two forms, but also with the tools to analyze the stories of Neil Gaiman. This second part will not only illustrate the theory introduced in the first part, but the results from the study of Neil Gaiman’s short fiction will also be used to provide additional conclusions on the relationship between the fantastic and the short story form and on the strategies used to construct the fantastic.

2. The theory of fantasy and the fantastic

2.1 Introduction

In order to answer questions concerning the *how* of fantastic literature, an answer has to be formulated on the question *what is* fantastic literature? The fundamentals of the genre have to be identified before the specifics can be handled. The serious critical discussion on the basic nature of fantasy started in the middle of 1970s, with critics like Todorov, but also
W.R. Irwin, Eric Rabkin, and C.N. Manlove each attempting to create holistic genre definitions\(^5\). However, in a review of these works, Ziolkowski\(^6\) still puts forward Tolkien’s 1939 definition of fantasy as “the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds” as the most useful for the discussion of fantasy (1978:122). And Fredericks\(^7\) mentions, considering the problems of fantasy criticism, that there are “obvious contradictions among the various systems” (1978:34). The problem of defining fantasy was advanced, but not solved when Marxist and psychoanalytical views, such as Rosemary Jackson’s were published.

As mentioned in the introduction, the current consensus is that we now work from a “‘fuzzy set,’ a range of critical definitions of fantasy” from which scholars “will pick and choose […] according to the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested” (Mendlesohn:xiii). The lack of a single, clear definition is of course not a sign of the weakness of the literary criticism surrounding fantasy, but more an indication of the broad spectrum of works it encompasses. Therefore, this section will not attempt at formulating a new holistic theory on the subject, but rather identify what is useful and produce a working toolkit of theoretical approaches for a discussion of the fantastic in the short story.

Nonetheless, the fundamental discussion on the relationship between fantasy and the fantastic will have to be considered. This is mainly important for making the distinction between fantasy as a genre, and the fantastic as an element associated with, but not equal to, fantasy, but also between fantasy and other related genres such as science fiction. This literature review will also make clear what paths of fantasy criticism will not be taken. The texts in this section are deliberately picked from the discussions on fantasy in the seventies and eighties, because these older critical works share an interest in the fundamental nature of the genre. These works mainly include magazine articles, as the dynamic of the discussions in

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magazines, such as *Science Fiction Studies*, reveals useful insights on the ambivalent nature of fantasy and the fantastic. It is in this period that the use of these terms was discussed and codified. My first question will not be what fantasy or fantastic literature *is*, but rather what will *be meant* by those terms in this paper.

Once these most basic concepts are clarified, a closer study of the construction of fantasy and the fantastic can be made and finer tools for text analysis can be defined. I will mainly use Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), in which she provides a descriptive taxonomy of fantasy, based on the analysis of a large set of fantasy texts. The rhetorical figures and the tropes she identifies are ideal tools for the analysis of any given text in the broadest definitions of the genre. While these are not always related to the fantastic, an understanding of the construction of fantasy is vital for the proper discussion of Neil Gaiman’s short stories, the construction of a specific type of fantastic, and also because fantasy and the fantastic share similar strategies by apply them to different end. A second key theorist will be Claire Whitehead, who focusses solely on the Todorovian fantastic in her discussion of Chekov’s “The Black Monk” (2007) and Odoevskii’s “The Sylph” (2003). In those studies, she identifies various “syntactic and narrative techniques” that work in favor of the fantastic (2003:398).

At the conclusion of this chapter, the toolbox I am trying to assemble for the analysis of Neil Gaiman’s short stories will be nearly full. The theoretical frame of the fantastic will have been constructed, so that it can be compared with short story theories in order to explicitly identify the elements of each that resonate in the other.

### 2.2 The fundamentals

Fantasy is different from other literary genres in its specific creation of a fictional world. In his study *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, W.R. Irwin defines

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fantasy worlds simply as worlds in which there has been an “introjection of any ‘antireal’ subject matter” (1976:8), and C.N. Manlove insists on “substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural” (1975:1) It is clear that fantasy worlds “take as their point of departure the deliberate violation of norms and facts” in relation to our normal conception of reality (Fredericks 1978:37) and that “the laws of physical science have been suspended” (Malmgren 1988:261). The creation of an impossible otherworld is the primary and fundamental criteria for identifying fantasy.

It is this impossible element that differentiates fantasy from the often associated genre of science fiction (SF). According to Darko Suvin, the imaginary element of SF should conform to a scientific reasoning and should therefore be at least an “ideal possibility” (1979:37). Therefore, while both genres deal with “things that are not,” SF deals with things “that can be” and fantasy with things “that cannot be” (Suvin 1979:40). Not all critics insist on such a strict requirement for SF, as some also consider impossible worlds constructed in a scientific rhetoric as part of the genre (Fredericks 1978). These could be considered as what Malmgren calls “science fantasies,” a hybrid form that allows for a transgression of what is really possible, but requires that such a transgression is treated in a scientific manner once it has occurred (1988). In this thesis, the strict distinction proposed by Suvin will be used and any seemingly hybrid form will be considered as fantasy.

While fantasy does not need to conform to scientific reasoning, this does not mean that fantasy worlds are incoherent. On the contrary, fantasy mostly relies on the acceptance of the impossible by the reader, and so the creation of a consistent otherworld is often one of the main concerns of the genre. The reader has to be able to accept the otherworld “on its own terms” (Fredericks 1978:37). Whether the reader is confronted with a new continent like Tolkien’s Middle Earth, or with a seemingly mimetic world infused with magic, fantasy

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narratives always strive to convince the reader of the reality of these elements in the fictional world.

This naturalization of the impossible in fantasy is in shrill contrast to the epistemological doubt experienced by the reader that is essential in Todorov’s theory of the fantastic. As Ziolkowski also notices, fantasy and the Todorovian fantastic are mutually exclusive (1978:125). In common English, fantastic elements would be the constituting elements of fantasy literature but in this paper the fantastic will be exclusively used in a modified Todorovian way. As broadly as I have described the genre of fantasy, so narrowly shall the fantastic be defined.

In his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (English version 1975), Todorov defines the fantastic as follows:

“In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.” (1975:25)

This basically means that in a seemingly mimetic world, a seemingly supernatural event occurs. This event causes doubt as to the nature of the fictional world and the fantastic “occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (25). Todorov postulates three requirements for the fantastic. The first and most important requirement is that the reader hesitates between a natural or supernatural explanation. Secondly, “this hesitation may also be experienced by a character” (33, my italics). In this case, the reader’s role is taken over by a character, but this requirement does not have to be fulfilled, although it often is. The third requirement is that the reader “will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations” (33). If the text is read allegorically, the reader will never doubt the supernatural event, as he will interpret it as an
element that must be read as a specific meaning. In poetic language, the reader will also read the supernatural rather as a figure of speech than as an element worth doubting.

As Zgorzelski\(^{11}\) puts it, the fantastic lies in the confrontation of a natural and a supernatural world model (1979 and 1984). If this confrontation is resolved and the reader is convinced to choose between either the supernatural or the natural explanation, the text will cease to be fantastic and belong to the “marvelous” or the “uncanny” respectively (Todorov 1975:41). Todorov proposes an axis between these two extreme poles, on which the fantastic genre occupies the middle position. In the truly marvelous, the supernatural events are accepted from the start, eliciting no particular response from the reader. The uncanny on the other hand, can “provok[e] in the character and the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have” (46). In this case, the seemingly supernatural event can readily be explained rationally, but is still extraordinary and choking. In between are the categories of the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvelous. These are narratives that only in the end reveal their nature as either natural or supernatural. The fantastic-uncanny narrative can therefore reveal that the events can be rationally explained, or that they only existed in the narrator’s imagination, what Rudwin\(^{12}\) already identified in 1925 as “Pathological Supernaturalism” (10).

One of the main flaws of Todorov’s theory is that he uses the fantastic as a literary genre. In one of the most virulent attacks on Todorov, Stanislaw Lem\(^{13}\) dismisses the fantastic as a genre, because it only takes into consideration one of the many decisions readers have to make when reading (1974:233). Both Astle\(^{14}\) and Brooke-Rose\(^{15}\) defend Todorov’s theory as


a theoretically possible model, rather than a description of a historical genre. Although Lem’s criticism is personal and largely based on a different understanding of the same concepts\textsuperscript{16}, considering the fantastic as a genre leads to more confusion over terminology. Therefore, several critics prefer to see the fantastic as mode (Jackson 1981, Ziolkowski 1978) or as an element that is introduced in the text and that Todorov uses to define a theoretical genre (Brook-Rose 1976:151). In this thesis, the fantastic will also be considered as the moment of reader hesitation or the element that causes it by entering the text.

The second alteration to Todorov’s fantastic for this thesis concerns the base world to which the fantastic is related. For Todorov, the fictional world in which the fantastic enters should be mimetic; it should be “our world, the one we know” (1975:254). In this paper, however, the fictional world for the fantastic can be of any nature. The only necessary restriction to ensure the possibility of reader doubt is that the base world is logically coherent. The confrontation between a natural or mimetic world model with a supernatural world model, as Zgorzelski defines fantastic literature (1984:302 and 1979:298), can be considered as only a specification of the confrontation between two different world models. As fantasy worlds also strive to be convincing otherworlds, these can also be confronted with other world models. It would be a severe underestimation of the genre to say that it allows for anything to happen in individual otherworlds, as each of them work by their own internal rules that are, as a rule, not transgressed. Of course, not all fictional worlds will be equally open to the intrusion of the fantastic, but that has more to do with the construction of the fictional world and the type of fantasy, as will be discussed later. A short example from popular fantasy that has a potential for the fantastic could be the hit series \textit{Game of Thrones}\textsuperscript{17}, based on George R.R. Martin’s \textit{A Song of Fire and Ice}. \textit{GoT} is undoubtedly a very recognizable example of fantasy as it is set in an entirely different world and the reader or audience will expect magic.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Game of Thrones}. HBO. April 17 2011.
However, from the onset, the otherworld is described realistically and magic is simply not accepted by many of the otherworlds inhabitants. When there is any belief in the legends of old, there is in most cases a definite conviction that magic has now left the world. The audience is made to doubt the reality of the magical elements that are encountered. Granted that most of these elements are later discovered to be real in the otherworld, in other words marvelous, reader hesitation has nonetheless been invoked.

Moving away from the real world as the necessary base world for the fantastic also moves this paper away from the movement of criticism that explores fantastic literature as a subversive literature. The hallmark study for this movement is Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), in which she attempts “to extend Todorov’s investigation from being one limited to the poetics of the fantastic into one aware of the politics of its form” (6). While following Todorov, she also widens the fantastic to basically include all fantasies that deal with supernatural intrusions into the real world and exclude fantasies that build entirely new worlds. In Jackson’s work, the emphasis on reader hesitation is lost, and a new focus on the reality oriented function of the fantastic is created.

Jackson takes a very interesting Marxist and psychoanalytical approach to fantasy, but this point of view will be of little use to the present study. Although it can certainly serve to expose elements of the world in a way impossible to “realistic” fiction (cf. Johnson 1993 on Thomas Hardy18), I do not belief that fantastic literature is the only one capable of subversion. Even mainstream fantasy, which Jackson dismisses as “faery” (1981:24) has been given the role of being a mirror for reality, capable of reflecting more than merely the surface (cf. Fredericks 1978, Malmgren 1988) and according to Darko Suvin19, it is also a central function of SF20 (1972). Continuing in the same tradition as Jackson, Nicholas Ruddick, in an

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introduction to a bundle of essays on the fantastic in the arts, asserts that “the fantastic is (or ought to be) subversive” (1992:xiii, my italics). The emphasis makes clear that subversion is also used as a distinction between good and bad fantasies. On top of that, as this study will try to find a connection between the short story form and the fantastic based on reader hesitation, their focus on subversion as the main defining quality of the fantastic places this school of criticism outside of this study’s interest.

2.3 The construction of fantasy

Now that the fantastic and the genre of fantasy are distinguished and defined, their workings need to be discussed. Since this paper is focused on the connection between the short story and the fantastic, it can seem redundant to also investigate the workings of fantasy. However, this connection will be both illustrated and investigated by a study of the short fiction of Neil Gaiman, who mostly writes fantasies. As will be shown, the fantastic can also result from elements disturbing the frames activated by a narrative, which is why understanding the fantasy frames of Gaiman’s worlds is important. That is the first reason the construction of fantasy worlds will also be considered. Secondly, the strategies and techniques used to create otherworlds or introduce fantasy elements are closely linked to the construction of the fantastic in narratives. It should be noted that unlike the former section, the following will not be an attempt to define, but rather to describe and catalogue these different techniques. These will then form the greater part of the toolbox this paper is working towards.

Providing a toolkit to work with fantasy was exactly the intent of Farah Mendlesohn when she wrote her *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), which provides a pragmatic take on fantasy criticism. Based on how fantasy elements are introduced in the narrative and “the reader’s relationship to the framework” (xviii), Mendlesohn distinguishes four categories: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal fantasy (xiv). Each of these has a set of rhetorical structures and techniques that works best for it. If, for example, a portal-quest
fantasy is told with the rhetorics of an immersive fantasy, the effect will most likely be less than optimal. To stress the importance of the reader, she compares fantasy to “a perspective puzzle, if the reader stands in the ‘wrong place,’ the image/experience will not resolve” (xviii). Therefore, the text will preferably guide the reader to the right point of view.

2.3.1 The portal-quest fantasy

The form that is least prone to include fantastic elements is the portal-quest fantasy, in which “a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place” (1). Although there is clearly a confrontation between two different world models, a typical portal-quest will cause no doubt in the reader concerning the reality of the confronted world. On the contrary, the world the protagonist enters will be naturalized by strategies similar to those of realism. The fantasy world will also not “leak” into the base world of the narrative. By containing its otherworld, the portal-quest fantasy will present it as another world that has to be explored and understood in its own terms. The protagonist enters the world like a kind of tourist, telling what he sees when he passes through the land. The understanding of the otherworld comes from information downloads the protagonist receives from guides and documents along the way. In the portal-quest fantasy, the information provided from these sources can hardly be doubted, and the narrative will be closed off from different interpretations. The epistemology of these fantasies is therefore “fixed and sealed” (57), discouraging reader hesitation.

This closing effect is strengthened by the use of the so called “club narrative” (5), which Clute\(^{21}\) defines as “a tale or tales recounted orally to a group of listeners foregathered in a venue safe from interruption” (2002:421). In this setting, the storyteller is “uninterruptable and incontestable” (Mendlesohn 2008:6), he is presented with the highest authority and reliability. The portal-quest fantasy encourages the protagonist, and therefore

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the reader, to accept this authority, which is transmitted to the narrator and the guide(s). It will “construct an element of isolation and a focus on ‘the club’” (8).

To illustrate the workings of the portal-quest fantasy, one of the most familiar and typical of these fantasies, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* \(^\text{22}\) will be used. Not only because it is an archetypal narrative for many later portal-quest fantasies, but also because it illustrates the possibility of a confrontation between two otherworlds well. The base world, or frame world, of *The Lord of the Rings* is the Shire, which Tolkien introduces in the prologue. There, he creates depth for this world, giving it a history, geography, and a very distinct kind of inhabitants. He even adds a chapter on pipe-weed. His mundane style of narrating makes the Shire even more real. In later chapters, this familiar frame world is referenced back to by the stories the Hobbits tell, in a colloquial way, to their companions. The moment they leave the Shire and embark on their quest, the Hobbits step through the portal in an unfamiliar world. While the Shire was first introduced by an omniscient narrator in the prologue, it is then further explored through the Hobbits themselves. The world outside the Shire and its history is, by contrast, made available through the stories of the authoritative voices of characters such as Gandalf, Aragorn, and Elrond. When any of those “formal storytelling sessions” (33) begin, the style switches and the club narrative is invoked. The bigger picture and the importance of the quest are narrated by these authoritative figures. But the reality of the otherworld also depends on the Hobbits, who wonder at what they see passing through the landscape and put our attention to the practicalities of the undertaking. Also, as they function as the primary point of view for the reader, their acceptance of the authority of the other characters is transmitted to the reader.

2.3.2 The immersive fantasy

In contrast to the portal-quest fantasy, the world of an immersive fantasy is the only world presented and it is “built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world” (59). It constructs an “irony of mimesis” and “must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as are those being read about” (59). As in realism, the world is not presented as strange, but as normal. Just as the Hobbits don’t feel wonder in the Shire, the protagonist of the immersive fantasy is not the tourist, but the local. He knows the world and will not marvel at what he sees and will not tell the reader of the differences between his world and our “real” world. The immersive fantasy is played out in a “consensus reality” (60), and the characters can interact with the world on an equal footing and engage with its deeper workings. Unlike the Hobbits on their quest, protagonists of immersive fantasies can interrogate the world themselves and do not have to take for granted the information handed to them from more authoritative figures.

The strategies and difficulties to construct immersive worlds are strongly linked to the construction of the fantastic. Looking back at Todorov’s demand for the fantastic to enter in “a world which is indeed our world, the one we know” (1975:25), it is clear that this is exactly the kind of world model that the immersive fantasy is also trying to create. The reader should feel as though the world he enters when reading is also his world, that it is the natural world. If this world is consequentially confronted with a different world model, there is an opening for reader hesitation. The reader will not hesitate whether the fantastic is supernatural to the world surrounding him, but to the world in which he is immersed. Considering Mendlesohn’s statement that “all literature builds worlds, but some genres are more honest about it than others” (59), understanding the construction of immersive worlds, in this case fantasy worlds, is of fundamental importance as they form the required base for the fantastic to appear.

A first strategy can be to rationalize the fantasy in order to create greater depth in the world, and thus, an easier immersion. This strategy focusses on providing a coherent and
logical system for its fantasy elements. For example, the use of magic is completely arbitrary in a lot of fantasies. There is spell \( y \) with consequence \( x \) or potion \( a \) with consequence \( b \). To naturalize fantasy, the text will create a logical link between cause and effect. This does not mean that it should therefore confirm to scientific reality, but that it should confirm to the basic rules of logic. By doing this, the characters can actually study and understand the system of the world using the same devices as a scientist. Rationalizing the world also means that it is susceptible to mundane problems, such as starvation and political struggle, and that magic is not always the main problem or solution of the story.

Secondly, one of the main difficulties in building an immersive fantasy is how to explain a world which is presumed to be known by the characters, to the reader. Since the protagonist is also of that world, he has no reason at all to explain anything about it to the reader. Information downloads, or “infodumps” (68), would feel very artificial and unneeded. One solution to this is to cast the protagonist as a rebel or an outsider in his own world. To return to the Shire, we learn about social etiquette not only from the narrator, but also from the “unacceptable” behavior of Frodo and Bilbo. Similarly, if the protagonist is a rebel, he will most likely have to explain the system he is rebelling against. Or if he is a scientist, he will explain the world by investigating it. Another technique is to cast him as an outsider, an immigrant from some other part of the fantasy world. It should be noted that the immigrant should not be mistaken with the quester, as the first will live in the world he enters, while the second is merely passing through it. In these strategies, the role of the protagonist is transformed into the role of an antagonist.

Other strategies to present the world use the relationship between the reader and the protagonist. This relationship is also important in securing the reader’s position as a supposed member of the immersive world. The reader needs to “learn what it makes sense within the context for the protagonist to want to know” (69-70). In other words, the reader must be convinced that the characters in the book reveal their world only on their own volition, not
because the narrator made them. One common strategy is to provide the clever protagonist with a less clever assistant, so that he has a reason to explain what is going on. Another trick to naturalize information downloads is focalizing through the authoritative figure himself and expose his knowledge, but also his doubts. It is only natural that the inhabitants of a world do not understand everything completely themselves and showing this creates a more convincing world. It should be no surprise that a strong character focalization and the first person perspective are powerful tools to drag readers into a new world, as it is imperative that the reader is not provided with more information than they should naturally be receiving through an external narrator.

Further, casualizing the fantasy elements or, inversely, making the ordinary baroque are also techniques of the immersive fantasy. Because the characters belong to their worlds, the description of fantasy elements will often be dealt with in the most casual way and are described in a demotic voice. They can be introduced alongside other parts of the world that are also normal for the reader, so that they go by almost unnoticed. The fantasy elements and the, for the reader, normal elements are placed alongside each other. This even happens in seemingly typical information downloads; when a teacher or guide explains a part of the fantasy, the basic elements of it are always taken for granted. This strategy can simple be described as “describing first, explaining later” (83), or in some extreme cases, not even explaining. The reader has to understand the fantasy from the context, rather than the text. The feeling that there is more to the world than is said creates a greater sense of depth. The inverse procedure of casualizing the fantastic is “baroquing” (79) the world. Instead of downplaying the fantasy, it overplays the ordinary, resulting in a world that feels like a fantasy world. By using overwrought language, “the fantastic world overwhelms […] the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal” (80). The conscious over- and underplaying language blurs the lines between what is real and what is not and in the immersive fantasy this draws the reader deeper into a seemingly real world.

Ben Van Eetvelt – The Fantastic in Short Stories
Finally, the author can make use of reader expectations to create an immersive reality. Here, a universe is created “within the worlds and stories the reader already knows” (99). Known genre conventions or stories are used as the skeletons for these fantasies. By taking a known world and turning it into an immersive world, the project of these novels seems metafictional from the start.

2.3.3 The intrusion fantasy

In the intrusion fantasy, the world is intruded by an element that does not belong to the primary world, whether mimetic or immersive. While the section on the immersive fantasy discussed some techniques for creating worlds that have the possibility to host the fantastic, this section will discuss some characteristics of intrusions, which have the possibility to be fantastic elements. Most cases Mendlesohn describes, however, will not be fantastic because the range of possible intrusions is very wide. Most of the works discussed here would perfectly fit in Rosemary Jackson’s definition of fantasy, but even the “Dark Lord” of the typical portal-quest fantasy could also be considered an intrusion, since he is situated as not entirely of this world in most cases (114). Keeping in mind the focus of this paper on the fantastic, I will limit the discussion on the intrusion fantasy to elements that are in some way related to it. Some necessary “steps in between” will be impossible to avoid, however.

“The basic trajectory of the intrusion fantasy,” Mendlesohn says, “is straightforward: the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled” (115). The parallel trajectory in the protagonist is “from denial to acceptance” (115). This structure is constant throughout this entire genre of fantasy; its peculiarities lie especially in its rhetorics.

Similar to the portal-quest fantasies, the intrusion fantasy uses the form of the club story, but in the intrusion fantasy the storyteller “requires faith in the sub-surface [of the world], the sense that there is always something lurking” (116). In the intrusion fantasy, the period of escalation towards the lurking supernatural is called “latency: the withholding, not
of information, but of visuals or events” (116). Throughout the fantasy, the intrusion will always escalate to a certain point before it is dealt with. After the moment where the tension built up during the period of latency has been released, the story can only go in an anti-climax (unless of course a new intrusion enters the scene).

Mendlesohn sums up the tropes of the intrusion fantasy as follows:

“the belief in what cannot be seen but is sensed, the preference for what the senses tell one ‘knowledge’ (Van Belkom 12); the unreasoning nature of the threat; the feeling that the real pleasure is in the latency of the threat; and that “feeling (I deliberately eschew “emotion” here; that is not quite what is happening) is the heart of experience; the remorselessness and escalation of the horrors, and the need for the audience to respond to all of these with sensibility not intellect. […] Finally, there is the aurality of the text […] The intrusion fantasy creates response directly through the sound of the world, the sound of horror, of fear, or of surprise.” (121)

On top of these, she adds some more elements that add to the tension and the escalation of the intrusion fantasy. One of these is the protagonist’s gradual movement away from the known world, represented by friends and family, towards the intrusion. As an emphasis on the importance of sense over science, animals usually take notice of the intrusion before the human characters do. Another element, accredited to Edgar Allan Poe, is “the visceral of the obsessive” (133). Here, the escalation is not necessarily in the events, but in the narrator’s growing obsession with his surroundings.

Mendlesohn does not consider the intrusion fantasies to contain any fantastic elements as this paper has defined them. Most of the texts she considers are indeed horror novels, which can hardly count on any reader hesitation. Nonetheless, fantastic elements are, by definition, intrusions into the base world of the narrative. Considering Mendlesohn’s discussion, there are a couple of elements that are useful for this paper. First of all, in the period of latency, if the actual horror has not yet arrived or might not even arrive, there is room for reader hesitation on the condition that the narrative is not too deep in typical horror conventions and imagery. Secondly, the reliance on the senses, on what is rather than on what
should be, also opens up space for the fantastic. In the face of a seemingly supernatural element, this kind of trope can disrupt the reader’s judgment. Where in a fictional world drenched in scientific reasoning a certain element might be an object for study, in a fictional world that puts the senses first, it can evoke hesitation, rather than interest. Thirdly, all other genre tropes identified by Mendlesohn work towards making the world an “eerie” and magical place. In constructing the fantastic, therefore, these tropes can be manipulated to create the expectation of a magical world. The expectation can then also be undermined in order to create the fantastic.

2.3.4 The liminal fantasy

The last category Mendlesohn identifies is “that form of fantasy which estranges the reader from the fantastic” (182). The liminal fantasy consciously distorts its own fantasy, creating confusion and doubt. It can be seen as a fantastic category, although it is markedly different from Todorov’s vision of fantastic literature. The liminal fantasy’s confusion is generated by a dissonance between the responses of the reader and the protagonist or between genre expectations and what the text actually does. This is in sharp contrast with the protagonist and the reader sharing hesitation as a cause of genre tropes. Also, the liminal fantasy does not always cause hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the fantastic element. Instead, it causes a more general sense of confusion and opens the text to different readings. The liminal fantasy operates on more levels than only the marvelous-uncanny opposition, but the effects of the liminal are also grounded in an epistemological deficiency. Therefore, the liminal fantasy as described by Mendlesohn will not be excluded but accepted as a special type of the fantastic.

The narrative strategies used to construct liminal fantasies are irony and equipoise. The success of these “depends on knowingness” (183) on the part of the reader. The reader must be familiar with the strategies and tropes of fantasy because the effects of a liminal fantasy rely on their subversion. This makes the “dialectic between reader and author” (183)
the center of its construction. Reverting to Mendlesohn’s metaphor of the perspective puzzle, in the liminal fantasy the author consciously leads the reader to wrong position. Whereas the reader who is not “knowing” will see nothing strange, but the genre reader has seen these kinds of puzzles before and will expect to see a particular kind of image based on the author’s directions, but is instead shown a whole other picture, causing confusion. Because I will consider the liminal as a fantastic category, the techniques used to mislead and confuse the reader will be discussed in the following section of my thesis.

2.4 The construction of the fantastic

The following section will discuss different techniques used to construct the fantastic. In The Fantastic Todorov already puts forward some significant techniques, but remains fairly limited. Most techniques will be drawn from close readings of nineteenth century literature. These will be Claire Whitehead’s readings of Chekhov’s “The Black Monk” and Odoevskii’s “The Sylph,” Dorothy Kelly on Nodier’s “Inès de Las Sierras,” and Suzanne R. Johnson on Hardy’s “The Withered Arm.”23 It is worth noticing that these are all short fictions, but none of the studies mention this in their discussion on how the texts generate reader hesitation. The strategies to construct the fantastic they use will be divided into 5 categories. The first category will focus how the world is build, the second on characterization, the third on the actual language used, the fourth will deal the influence of narrators, focalization, and specific narrative forms, and the fifth with the composition of the narrative. A sixth category will focus on Mendlesohn’s category of the liminal fantasy and the importance of frames and reader expectation. This category will also draw on Smadar

Ben Van Eetvelt – The Fantastic in Short Stories

Shiffman\textsuperscript{24} whose category of the “metafantastic” leans closely to the liminal fantasy, but also to the immersive fantasy.

In order to ensure that the following discussion remains clear, it is necessary to first very concisely provide plot summaries of the works that are discussed. Otherwise, references will be unclear and the discussion bogged down by an exaggeration of general terminology. The first story is Chekhov’s 1894 “The Black Monk,” which centers on Kovrin, who has retreated himself to the countryside to get some rest. There, he starts seeing a black monk, the apparently supernatural element of the story. This coincides with Kovrin’s growing megalomania and it is eventually revealed that the black monk is actually a part of Kovrin’s mind. In the meantime, he has married a local woman, who recognizes his madness and arranges him to be cured by psychiatrists. This means that “The Black Monk,” as Whitehead says, is no “a degree-zero example of the fantastic” (604), but Chekhov does trigger doubt in the first part of the story and even restores the fantastic to a certain degree in the last part. The second work discussed by Whitehead is Odoevskii’s “The Sylph” of 1837, a story that mixes the diary and the epistolary form. The protagonist is Mikhail Platonovich, who, similar to Kovrin, has come from the city to the countryside and remains at his deceased uncle’s house. There, he finds cabbalistic books and start experimenting with them, more out of boredom than out of hope for an actual result. During such an experiment however, he sees a sylph, the supernatural event. The second voice is Mikhail’s prospective father-in-law Rezhenskii, who believes Mikhail used to be a rational man, but that he has fallen to a mental illness. These two voices are expressed in letters that are addressed to the “publisher,” the third voice of the story. The publisher is introduced through his journal and appears to be a rational and unbiased person. In the end, Mikhail is also cured, but this is not enough to wholly convince the reader of the uncanny nature of the sylph. Charles Nodier’s “Inès de Las Sierras” consists of two parts, the first suggesting a marvelous and the second an uncanny explanation for the

events, but neither is conclusive. In the first part a ghost story is told, that happened to the narrator and his companions several years earlier. On their way to Barcelona, they are forced to stay the night in a castle. There, one of the companions relates the castle’s ghastly history. This history took place two centuries earlier, when the castle lord Ghismondo stabbed his mistress, Inès de Las Sierras, in the heart on Christmas Eve. Since then she haunted the dreams of Ghismondo and the other men who witnessed her death, before returning one year later to eat and dance with them, only to kill them later by laying her burning hand upon their heart. Inès and the men she killed that night have haunted the castle ever since. In their merriment, the narrator and his company toast to Inès, who suddenly appears to eat and dance with them, as in the legend. She shows them the scar of her stab wound and tries to seduce one of the companions, who is only withheld by his friends from following her in what they are now convinced to be sudden death. After the apparent manifestation of the ghost of Inès, they vow never to talk of that night again, until they come up with a logical explanation of the event. The fact that the narrator has just told us the story already implies the logical explanation following in the second part of the story. The woman the narrator and his companions had met that evening several years earlier turns out to be a descendant of Inès de Las Sierras, who bears the same name and belongs to the family who own the castle. The contemporary Inès was forced to make a living as a dancer after she was left by her lover Gaëtano. Inès, however, was very successful and Gaëtano returned to live of her profits. This was notwithstanding Inès, who suspected his motives and confronted him, causing Gaëtano to stab her in the chest and run. While Inès survived, she had lost her mind and had somehow made her way to the castle on the night the narrator’s company was there. This rational explanation, however, will prove to be unsatisfactory to eliminate the fantastic. The last story that will be discussed is Thomas Hardy’s 1888 “The Withered Arm.” The story centers on Rhoda, a milkmaid who had a liaison with the rich farmer Lodge that resulted in her having to raise a son on her own. Rhoda and Lodge no longer speak to each other, but it appears that
they have come to an understanding regarding their past, until Lodge brings home his new, younger fiancée Gertrude. In a dream, Rhoda is assaulted by an incubus, resembling Gertrude, which she throws to the ground. Although it only seemed a dream, the following day Gertrude’s arm is bruised and starts withering away. Rhoda’s vision seems to have become real. Later in the story, Gertrude seeks help in magic herself to restore her arm. She is told by a conjurer that the touch of a hanged man’s neck will cure her. The person eventually, and wrongfully, hanged is Rhoda’s son and Gertrude is indeed cured at the touch of his neck. In the end, Rhoda’s vision of Gertrude as a threat has become reality and, mirroring her earlier vision, Rhoda throws Gertrude to the wall. As Johnson says, “the story resists all realistic explanations for the strange events it chronicles while never actually endorsing the alternative, other-worldly dimension implied by those event” (1993:131).

None of these stories are pure examples of the fantastic, but the argument could be raised that nearly no texts at all are. All of these texts, on the other hand, make use of techniques that cause the reader to hesitate between the different interpretations of the seemingly supernatural element. In the following sections these will be grouped thematically.

2.4.1 Building the primary world

Echoing Todorov’s demand for fantastic stories to be set in a fictional world that is “our world, the one we know” (1975:25), Whitehead asserts that “if a work is to provoke hesitation concerning apparently supernatural events, it needs first to convince the reader that the world in which such events occur is essentially ‘natural’” (2007:604). This demand has been altered for this thesis to include fantasy worlds. Although Whitehead does not consider fantasy worlds, convincing the reader that the presented world is “essentially ‘natural’” is exactly the goal of the immersive fantasy. As a consequence, the techniques for creating an immersive fantasy can also help build a realistic fictional world and vice versa.

One technique used to create a more realistic world is adding detail to the descriptions, so that the world appears to be more real. In “The Black Monk,” Kovrin, a horticulturalist,
provides the reader with an extensive description of the gardens and orchards in his new town. In “The Sylph,” Mikhail also describes his new surroundings in one of his letters. Unlike the perhaps too elaborate descriptions of Kovrin, Mikhail’s description is one of simple house and garden assets, which is perhaps even more effective in creating a contrast between this normal, everyday world and the ensuing supernatural events. Considering the rhetorics of the immersive fantasy, the status of both Kovrin and Mikhail as urban outsiders is also important in the building of the world, as it gives them an excuse to explain their new surroundings to the reader.

The narrator can also have a function in creating a realistic world, as Whitehead demonstrates in “The Black Monk.” The story is told by a heterodiegetic narrator who is straightforward and informative. He is reliable and strengthens the sense of realism by providing specific temporal and geographical details. Also, the narrator knows Kovrin’s thoughts, both present and past. This kind of almost omniscient narrator is potentially deadly to the fantastic in most cases, but here it provides “a rational, organizing framework” (605). How Chekhov deals with this omniscient narrator will be dealt with in a following paragraph. It should be noted that since all texts discussed here are set in a realistic setting, it is not overly difficult to facilitate the need for a coherent and believable world, as that is its default state.

**2.4.2 Characterization**

In the fantastic, there is generally either a first person narrator or a strong focalization through the protagonists. This means that the reader is dependent on them for the interpretation of the seemingly supernatural event. As a consequence, the characterization of the protagonist is very important for the construction of reader hesitation. As an example, a sceptic protagonist could turn the almost obviously supernatural into the fantastic, while superstitious protagonists might well turn the obviously natural into the seemingly supernatural.
Both Kovrin and Mikhail can be seen as typical protagonists for the fantastic. They are rational gentlemen from the city, who at some point start losing their senses. Perhaps Kovrin is even the most archetypical of the pair. From the beginning “the reader is prompted to harbor contradictory expectations about Kovrin’s personality” (Whitehead 2007:608). On the one hand, he is a man of science, a rational man and in the beginning his future father-in-law thinks highly of him. On the other hand, mental issues are the reason he left the city and his reliability is undermined by the narrator. Therefore, all information coming from Kovrin, rather than from the narrator is received with suspicion. The escalation of Kovrin’s megalomania and madness also starts getting picked up by other characters, which further debilitates him as a reliable protagonist.

The characterization of Mikhail is done by himself in his letters. Unlike Kovrin, Mikhail is introduced as a modern and sane man from the city who elevates himself over the simple rural people he has come to live with. He does not believe in their superstition regarding the cabalist books his uncle had studied and his aunt had sealed away for safety. He opens the seal and “in so doing, [he] illustrates his refusal either to believe in or to be intimidated by superstition” (Whitehead 2003:402). However, while the descriptions of himself and the initial impressions of Mikhail are that of a scientist, he slides away into irrationality in his later letters. By the time the sylph appears, the reader does not trust him enough to simply accept the fact. Mikhail’s reliability is then further undermined by his future father-in-law and by the judgment of a doctor in the journal of the publisher. Eventually the publisher will be presented as the real voice of reason, taking over all reliability in the story.

Hardy’s Rhoda is not the typical mentally troubled character of the former two stories. She is not an outsider seeking shelter in the rural area either, although she does exist on the margins of her community. It seems that after the shameful events concerning farmer Lodge, Rhoda has retreated herself from the community, but remains a strong woman exactly by living by herself and not relying on any support from Lodge. She has always remained angry
though and when Gertrude arrives, she becomes very jealous and finally faces “the anger which she had not allowed to express for twelve years” (Johnson 1993:134). These strong feelings, her vision, and the withering of Gertrude’s arm coincide. The question here is not whether Rhoda is a reliable witness, but whether she is the cause of a seemingly supernatural event. Is Gertrude’s withering arm an expression of Rhoda’s internal anger? Therefore she does not need to be characterized as unreliable, but rather as a woman of feelings strong enough to physically manifest themselves.

About the narrator of “Inès de Las Sierras” I will be relatively brief, as the implications of the first person perspective will be dealt with in a following paragraph. As in “The Black Monk” and “The Sylph” the question again concerns whether an event did or did not happen. Therefore, the strategy in the characterizing of the narrator, and by expansion his company is again to discredit them. Because the narrator can hardly discredit himself when he is telling the story, this can only happen indirectly. In the first place, the narrator is a soldier and is by that not expected to be a rational man, like Mikhail and Kovrin. Secondly, the company had been out drinking and had then dressed themselves up like the characters of the ghost story of Inès de Las Sierras they had just heard. Using a drinking soldier as his first person narrator, Nodier already limits our confidence in him.

2.4.3 Specific uses of language

In this paragraph two categories of techniques often used in fantastic narratives will be discussed that originate in the use of language itself. The first is based on figures of speech, while the second will rely on the specific use of individual words, verbs or phrases, and related to that, the interplay of casual and baroque language that has already been introduced in the discussion on fantasy will be considered.

This first category is described by Todorov as “a certain use of figurative discourse” (1975:76). More specifically, the supernatural appears “as an extension of a rhetorical figure” (77) or the “the fantastic realizes the literal sense of a figurative expression” (79). Here, a
moment of doubt is created when the narrative seems to literally execute what the reader knows is just a figure of speech. By balancing on the edge of literal meaning and metaphor the reader has a hard time conclusively interpreting the meaning of the language. This is also the reason why Todorov’s third requirement excludes any metaphorical readings from the fantastic, because such readings negate any possible reading of the supernatural event as “real.” The literal execution of language is not limited to figures of speech; both Kelly and Johnson distinguish a sort of “operative language” in their stories. In “Inès de Las Sierras” “language seems to bring about the results at the time of its utterance” (Kelly 1982:50). But Nodier does not just literally realize language. In an early part of the story, the company is moving through town in a heavy rain and the air is compared to water, slightly later there has been a “complete metaphorical substitution of water for air” and a curse spoken earlier seems to have been effected (Kelly 1982:47-48). Instead of just literalizing the language, Nodier builds it up from a normal metaphor. Another instance of operative language are the toasts made by Inès the night in the castle, which are all told to have come true. In “The Withered Arm” it is not a curse, but Gertrude’s prayer for the hanging of an innocent that seems to be literally effectuated.

In the second category specific language is used to cloud the border between what has and what has not happened. In The Fantastic, Todorov only identifies the use of a “modalizing formula” (1975:80) such as “he seemed” or “as if,” but the modals are not the only way to blur reality. Whitehead summarizes that any devices that “deny the provision of specific, unambiguous information” are typical for the fantastic (2007:611). The devices mentioned are indefinite articles, adjectives, and adverbs. A more unusual suspect identified here by Whitehead are reflexive verbs. “They mask the agent responsible for the action,” which allows the narrator not to attribute any definite actions to seemingly supernatural characters (2007:615). Essentially, these utterances will typically infuse the entire text, usually in a higher concentration around the fantastic element, to simply deny the reader any
positive knowledge about the events. Related to these is a strategy already discussed in the study of the immersive fantasy. As mentioned, the conscious overplaying of the ordinary and underplaying of the fantastic also fogs the line between the real and the marvelous. In the immersive fantasy this strategy was used to naturalize the supernatural and that can also be its intention in fantastic literature, but it can also be used to denaturalize the natural and make the normal fantastic.

**2.4.4 The Narrator**

The choice of narrator has a big influence on the construction of the fantastic. For Todorov, only a first person narrator can really carry the fantastic. He bases his argument on the assumption that a non-represented narrator will always be followed by the reader, as the reader does not subject him to “the test of truth” (1975:83). The reader can only consider “the speech of the characters [as] true or false, as in everyday life” (1975:83, my emphasis) and therefore the narrator should be a partaking character of the story. It would be hard to deny that the first person narrator has advantages to encourage a fantastic reaction, but Todorov is too restrictive here. He seems to forget focalization and narrators that are not omniscient. In postmodern fiction it is not too uncommon for a narrator to fake omniscience, but in a lot of literature, the narrator does not even pretend to be omniscient and is therefore also able to narrate the fantastic. On top of that, focalization can vary in intensity and allow the character’s point of view to dominate the narrative without assuming the first person. While the success of the first person narrator to evoke the fantastic has been proven time and again by writers like Edgar Allan Poe, the sample texts used here only include one pure first person narration, namely “Inès de Las Sierras.” “The Sylph” is a partly epistolary novel, which has a lot in common with the first person, and “The Black Monk” and “The Withered Arm” simply use heterodiegetic narrators. The consequences of the choice for these narrators will now be discussed.
The narrator of “The Black Monk” is, as already mentioned, heterodiegetic and seems to be omniscient. For Todorov, this would make it impossible for the narrator to construct a fantastic narrative, since what he tells has to be accepted as the truth. This problem is solved by making it hard to distinguish between the objective narrator and the narration colored by Kovrin. At times, Kovrin’s thoughts and the narratorial voice even merge into a free indirect discourse. There is a “discernible shift in point of view” (Whitehead 2007:613) when the black monk first emerges. While still told by the same narrator, he is focalizing so strongly through Kovrin that they are indistinguishable. “The Black Monk” fully utilizes the strengths of a nearly omniscient heterodiegetic narrator in his world building, and uses focalization shifts to temper this omniscience at the times the fantastic enters the narrative. Hardy’s narrator functions in a similar way, always abstaining from giving definite claims as to what happened. Instead, the narrator even stimulates a fantastic reading by giving ambiguous comments on the events.

Odoevskii, on the other hand, uses multiple voices in his narrative, which has a serious impact on reader hesitation. Two narrators are voiced in letters, while the third is voiced through diary fragments. The letters are very similar to the first person narrative in effect on the reader. They address the reader personally, creating a connection that strengthens the reader’s volition to believe the narrator, but letters are also subject to scrutiny because their author is as much a character as he is a narrator. The epistolary form also has another negative impact on the authority of the narrator. In most cases, the narrator is expected to know the continuation and the end of the story he is telling, but this is not the case in letters. The narrator can only tell parts of the story which damages his authority, because “the reader will bestow greater authority on posterior narration precisely because of the impression of completeness that this temporality gives” (Whitehead 2003:400). The diary fragments go a step beyond letters, because they have no intended reader. This means the narrator writes freely, without the pressure of a receiver. The intimacy between narrator and reader will also

Ben Van Eetvelt – The Fantastic in Short Stories
be stronger, because instead of being addressed, the reader is made part of the narrator’s thoughts. But the most interesting part about the narration in “The Sylph” is not this slightly adjusted version of the typical first person speaker. More interesting is the interaction of three voices that generates additional reader hesitation. The first part of the novel is monopolized by Kovrin’s letters, essentially bringing his own story. Although there is hesitation in believing Kovrin even when he tells us himself, the following letter by Rezhenskii “breaks the monopoly of Mikhail Platonovich’s voice” (Whitehead 2003:410). He is unable to wholly convince the reader of Mikhail’s madness because this narrator is very limited in the space of the story. Eventually, the third voice of the publisher comes to dominate the narrative and rules that the sylph has been a figment of Mikhail’s imagination. However, there is no conclusive hierarchy between the narrators, who still hold to their opposite beliefs in the end. The reader is provoked to accept the explanation of the publisher, as he is characterized as the sanest of the two, but on the basis of the text no definite conclusion can be reached and the text remains near the fantastic.

2.4.5 Composition

The third category that Todorov also discusses in The Fantastic discusses the “syntactical aspect” (1975:86), but this section of his work can also be expanded. Inspired by Poe, Todorov explains the fantastic narrative is focused entirely on its end and the only compositional feature he identifies is the “irreversibility of time” (1975:89). By this, he means that once the end of the story is known a reader cannot undergo the fantastic experience again. Working up to that end, he finds in some, but not all fantastic texts an escalation of events that is comparable to the escalation of the intrusion fantasy. While not unique to fantastic stories, the importance of the unknown end cannot be understated for the effects of the fantastic. The weakness of Todorov’s theory is that if the ending of the story eliminates the fantastic once it is known, the narrative cannot be seen as a proponent of the pure fantastic. Therefore, knowing the end of the story should not matter for the truly fantastic experience, because it
should not resolve the hesitation of the reader. It seems to me that a fantastic story could have no real end; that the mystery remains. However, Todorov’s remark should be considered as an indication of the importance of the end of a story. Since none of the studies on the sample texts used for this section focus on how the ending is narrated, it will certainly be a point of interest when Neil Gaiman will be investigated.

What does appear in the sample texts is a strong foreshadowing or even mirroring of the events that will happen by the use of embedded stories. In “The Black Monk” Kovrin tells the legend of a little girl hearing a holy harmony which only she can see, directly mirroring Kovrin’s belief that he is chosen by God. In “Inès de Las Sierras” there is an even stronger connection, as the events happen almost exactly as they are told. This ties in with the use of operative language in the fantastic, but such premonitions are “less common a feature in the fantastic,” says Whitehead, because they “tend to undermine the reliability attributed to subsequent descriptions which realize the fate foretold” (2007:611). Predictions being fulfilled are indeed more a fairy tale trope, but every technique that either enhances or undermines reliability can be used to keep the fantastic “in the middle.”

Maintaining that balance seems to be the most important element in the composition of a fantastic story. This is illustrated quite rigidly in “Inès de Las Sierras,” which consists of one half supporting the marvelous and a second half supporting the uncanny interpretation of what happened. Returning once more to the metaphor of the perspective puzzle, the composition of the story has to keep on moving the reader and changing his perspective, so that every time the “correct” solution seems to materialize, the reader is pulled back and the solution dissolves again.

2.4.6 The liminal: a special kind of fantastic.

In contrast to the strategies for constructing the fantastic discussed above, the liminal fantastic does not rely on relatively straightforward intratextual techniques. Instead, it relies on the reader’s knowledge of the conventions of literature, both genre specific and general,
which are than subverted to generate reader hesitation. The liminal fantastic creates dissonances between what the reader expects to encounter and what is actually happening in the narrative. As mentioned before, this process is broader than just creating doubt about a single fantastic element and it works on more dimensions than just the uncanny-marvelous axis. It is also harder to analyze, as the effects of the narrative are dependent on the “knowingness” (Mendlesohn 2008:183) of the reader. This subjectivity can be seen in Smadar Shiffman’s study of Meir Shalev’s *The Blue Mountain*. Everything in Shiffman’s analysis indicates that *The Blue Mountain* is fundamentally immersive, but the fantasy elements are only revealed to be so at a later stage of the story. In that way the reader is made to believe a certain character is a human, but is actually a mule. Shiffman says, “one hardly notices the first few deviations from reality” (1993:261) and when the deviations become obvious, the nature of the fictional world is uncertain. Shiffman calls this text “metafantastic,” which is similar to the liminal, but certain readers will not share his doubts and just read *The Blue Mountain* as an immersive fantasy. Liminality, as Mendlesohn suggests, is entirely “dependent on recognition” (2008:195).

There are many ways in which an author can play with reader expectations I will only suggest two general strategies, as the complex interplay between author and reader is best studied in separate case studies. A first strategy is creating a frame that almost demands fantasy, but then denying it to the reader. Such frames can be activated by using typical storylines, such as the damsel in distress, or creating a setting that is linked to a certain genre, such as a dark and isolated castle. This can create a story that feels like fantasy even though nothing supernatural ever occurs. The fantasy reader will also be anxious and “desperate for for [their] dose of [fantasy]” (189). The fantasy can also be obviously present in the world, but ignored by its inhabitants. This time, it are the characters through which is focalized that deny the reader the fantasy. In a second strategy, the reader and the protagonist are positioned in different ways towards the supernatural, creating dissonant reactions. Mendlesohn uses
Joan Aiken’s “Yes, But Today is Tuesday” as an example. In this story, there appears a unicorn on the family’s lawn, at which the reader responds with surprise at this element of fantasy. The family themselves also show surprise, because magical things only happen on Monday. As is illustrated here, there is a difference in reaction between the reader and the protagonists of the story. This dissonance makes it unclear whether something supernatural really happened or not. The liminal fantasy is often a game between the author and the experienced reader and as such is often results in comical stories, but as shall be illustrated in one of the readings in the second chapter, the effects of this dissonance can also be used to a more serious effect.

2.5 Conclusion

This section of the paper has focused on providing a set of working definitions of fantasy and the fantastic, as well as discussing the rhetorics of the fantasy and analyzing some examples of the fantastic to learn more about how they are constructed. This theoretical framework will now be used in the following chapters to explore the connection between the fantastic and the short story and it has provided us with a toolkit to deal with the stories of Neil Gaiman in the final chapter.

It has become clear from the discussion above that many strategies for constructing a full fantasy world are used in the construction of the fantastic. Not only is the recognition of these strategies necessary for the liminal fantasy to work, but the strategies themselves are also employed in different ways for creating the fantastic. This is because all of the rhetorics of fantasy are used to create a certain world, which is mostly stable. The fantastic, however, uses these constructions to deliberately destabilize its world and blur the lines between what can be seen as natural or supernatural. This includes the elements of world building that have been discussed in the immersive fantasy, or the placing what is sensed over what is known in the intrusion fantasy. The portal-quest and its closed structure seems the least likely to ever

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deal with the fantastic, but it will be illustrated that its typical protagonist that relies on the information of others and cannot see past the surface of the world himself can also be used to generate the fantastic.

In the fantastic stories that have been discussed, there were also other elements that serve to make to world’s nature ambiguous, such as indefinite and operative uses of language. Essentially, any element can help in constructing the fantastic, as long as it does not provide the reader with clear answers. It has also been shown that the placing of these elements to maintain a balance between the natural and the supernatural is important. In the following section, mainly the central theoretical elements of the fantastic will be discussed in comparison to the short story. These two sets of theory will then be applied to the fiction of Neil Gaiman, whose contemporary short stories will update our conceptions of the fantastic.

3. The short story

3.1 Introduction

The connection between the short story and the fantastic is often taken as self-evident. Almost all studies on fantastic literature focus on short stories and Mendlesohn asserts that maintaining liminality in the short form is “unexceptionable” (2008:199). Considering that the fantastic is based on a shortage of information, it is indeed logical that maintaining it over a long narrative is not simple and that therefore the fantastic fits well into a shorter form. But this intuitive connection is unsatisfactory and should be made explicit and discussed. I will argue that the seemingly natural connection between the short story and the fantastic is more profound than it appears on first sight. However, the starting point for this argument will not be the fantastic in the short story form, but rather the short story by itself. The reason for this is double. Firstly, it helps to avoid selectively looking for connections between the two elements, because that would inevitably lead to overgeneralizations. Secondly, it is not the intention of this paper to prove that the short story is well equipped for fantastic stories, but
rather that the short story form *by itself* generates effects that are similar to the fantastic. Therefore, the short story form will be studied first, and only then will the interplay between the short and the fantastic be discussed.

### 3.2 Defining the genre

The short story genre is broad and varied. Its manifestations throughout literary history are so diverse that even its fundamental aspects seem to elude definition. Voicing his frustration with the contradictory nature of short story criticism, Charles May\(^{26}\), a prominent scholar in the field, says:

> “The short story has been called the oldest form of verbal expression, as well as the most recent; it has been called the most natural form of verbal expression, as well as the most conventional and artificial; it has been called the literary form that most adequately reflect human reality as it is actually experienced, as well as the form that reflects only an arbitrary view of human reality.” (May 1995:113)

Because the story has been around “since our hairy grandparents set around the fire in the long winters of the stone age,” as Allende\(^{27}\) prosaically puts it, it has taken on many different forms. But even if only the modern short story as it originated in the nineteenth century with Poe is considered, thereby removing May’s first opposition, Valerie Shaw\(^{28}\) is right in saying that “it seems reasonable to say that a firm definition of the short story is impossible […] The only constant feature seems to be the achievement of a narrative purpose in a comparatively brief space” (1983:21).

Nonetheless, Pasco\(^{29}\) attempts to formulate a “central, identifiable set of characteristics” (1991:407) to define the genre. Unsurprisingly, his initial definition is: “a short story is a *short, literary prose fiction*.” (411). This seems to be a rather redundant definition, but it does indicate some preliminary defining characteristics of the genre. Classifying the short story under fiction already separates it from a large bulk of other

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literature, but it is also more inclusive than demanding a short story to be a plotted story, which would be untenable, especially considering modernist short fiction. With the term literary, Pasco does not aim to discriminate between high and low literature. Rather, the short story must be made “with the apparent intention of making something beautiful” (414). How this is done varies from author to author and from time to time, following the aesthetic trends that have succeeded each other. Defining the short story as prose, Pasco inevitably has to define poetry. Again, he avoids any restrictive definitions and, in a formalist tradition, he argues that meter and rhythm should not be the dominant elements of a short story. He allows, however, for personal aesthetics to define the actual border between prose and poetry. The shortness of the short story is “the most difficult touchstone” (416), because it can hardly be defined arbitrarily. Therefore Pasco relies on Poe’s rule that the short story should be able to be read in one sitting. Several critics have remarked comically on the problems of hard chairs and tender bottoms (Head 1992:9), but Poe’s rule is widely accepted as a general guideline to a short stories length. While not being the only argument in defining the short story, the shortness of the form does have several consequences which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

3.3 General characteristics of the short story

The scope of Pasco’s definition of the short story might be very wide, but it seems these elements are indeed the only ones constituting the unchangeable center of this very mutable genre. There are, however, also several elements that reappear in the different branches of the short story that are apparently inherent to the genre. These “prevailing tendencies” (Head 1993:4) are often studied in a historical survey of the genre. Although this paper does not have the intention to provide the entire history of the short story, making certain distinctions between periods will be unavoidable when discussing the general

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characteristics of the short story. Just like any other changing form, the history of the short also consists of works relying on or reacting against the existing tradition and any survey inevitably encounters contradictions. Therefore, parallel to former sections, this section will not focus on trying to define what the short story form is, but focus on the same central question Valerie Shaw asks herself: “What does the short story do especially well?” (1983:vi).

The beginnings of the modern short story are generally placed at the work of Edgar Allan Poe, whose fiction and criticism still remain an immense influence. While his theories on the short story are slightly outdated, his criticism has been fundamental to this literary field and provides a good starting point from which to elaborate. In “Twice-Told Tales,” a review of Hawthorne written in 1842, Poe touches upon four crucial elements of the “brief prose tale” (39). The first is Poe’s insistence on “a certain single effect” (396) towards which all elements of the story should work. This unity of effect quickly became a doctrine amongst his followers, turning Poe’s demand into a dogma. This resulted in authors who wrote relying on formulae for the ideal story, which led to a depreciation of Poe’s concepts. However, as Erik Van Achter argues, with this reader-oriented criticism, Poe remains of actual importance. The second element Poe mentions is a direct consequence of his demand for a single effect, as every element in the short story should work towards this effect. There is no room for redundant elements in the short story, as “in the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design” (396). The third element is that, as already mentioned, the short story should be read in one sitting, to fully undergo the intended effect. Any interruption can destroy “the true unity” (395) of the story. These demands are the same that Poe puts on short lyrical poetry,

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which for him was one of the highest forms of literature. Therefore Poe positions the short story as a form that exists in between the novel and the lyric, sharing the medium of prose with the former and the compression and intensity of the latter.

One of the reasons Poe places the short story on the same line as poetry is certainly an attempt to elevate the genre from the lower regions of literature to which it is still often assigned, but it the comparison can also illustrate why the short story is considered an intense form. Just as lyrical poetry, the short story has to be carefully constructed to contain just the right elements, because the reader expects that everything he reads will be of significance for the work. The author therefore has to strictly control his material because, as May says, “the least touch of irrelevance, the least chill of inattention, will instantly undo the spell” (1995:117). Both forms cannot deal with redundancies. It is in this context that John Barth\(^{34}\) says that the short story tends towards exclusion (1993:26), eliminating those elements that do not work in its favor. The elements that do remain in the eventual telling of the story are therefore highlighted. This is the intensifying effect that is attributed to the short story. Even though it can deal with the most mundane of events, “[these] are never allowed to remain so” (Patea 2012:12)\(^{35}\).

While the elements that are included in the short story are intensified, attention is also drawn to what is excluded. In contrast to the novel, the short story compresses its narrative, leaving open several elements of the story, but these are present in their absence. The short story is a suggestive form which provides little, but that does “expand in the reader’s mind” (Shaw 1983:14-15). It cannot provide elaborate characterization, plot motivation, and strong sequences of cause and effect. Instead, it works with “oblique expression through image and symbol” (Head 1993:7). Because so much is left for the reader to imagine, there is often a sense of an unseen, underlying world in short stories. Although Head disapproves of it as a


critical notion, he does recognize that one of the defining elements of the short story is this sense of mystery (1993:27).

These empty spaces in the short story can also undermine Poe’s demand for unity. In his work on the modernist short story, Dominic Head (1993) rightfully argues that criticism often focuses too much on the elements that are presented. The emphasis is then on how all of these elements fit to arrive at the single meaning or the single effect of the story. But the short story does not need to be a monovalent unity. On the contrary, the suggestiveness of its compressed form can generate multiple meanings. For Head, the short story actively cultivates paradox and ambiguity (185). So while it is generally accepted that the short story is limited in its narrative and that it can only deal with one dramatic event, this does not mean that there should be singleness in meaning to the story.

The modernists adapted the traditional short story to their artistic agenda, often showcasing new techniques and narrative intricacies, and focusing on the inner reality of their characters. This psychological turn is at odds with the traditionally plotted nature of the short story, which stems from its oldest origins of orally told mythical “brief episodic narratives” (May 1993:1). However, throughout its evolution the short story has had to confirm to general literary trends such as realism and there is an apparent split in the genre that grows throughout the twentieth century, but in many ways it “has remained close to its primal mythic source” (May 1993:1). Supernatural elements drawn from legend, myth, and religion were the key source for early short fiction. With the general secularization of culture, these elements were internalized but they remained present. Even with the growing demand for realism in the nineteenth century, the short story was influenced by its mythic past. Melville, seen as the start of the realistic short story, “still maintains the sense of a mysterious romantic underlying significance and suggestiveness, which is not to be found in the realistic novel” (May 1993:9). It is only in the twentieth century that the split between two distinct branches of the short story occurs. The first branch is more mythical and plotted; more in line with its older
traditions, while the second branch becomes more psychological and realistic. Shaw suggests the distinction between realist and romantic short stories (1983:229), but there is always a tension between this realistic branch of short fiction and its compactness and origins. This results in the feeling that short story is never quite realistic.

The short stories’ resistance to traditional realism is also the consequence of its oral nature. While the supernatural subject matter disappeared from the realistic short stories, the influence of oral storytelling is still noticeable. Unlike narrative forms that originate from prose, most typically the novel, the oral story does not focus on giving information and explanation. Instead, “the truth of story is communicated by a patterned recounting of a concrete experience in such a way that the truth is embodied, rather than explained” (May 2001:40). Where the realistic novel tries to encompass the world with rational means, the story concerns itself more with the “basic mysteries of human experience” (May 2001:40). Walter Benjamin makes the comparison with the historian and the chronicler. The historian’s task is to explain what has happened, forming causal relationships between events. But the chronicler deals with interpretation, “which is not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world” (1968:8). For Benjamin, the storyteller is the profane counterpart of the religious chronicler, both not concerned with explanation, but interpretation. These theories make some rather bold and sweeping claims as to the nature of the oral story and are often unreasonably one-sided in their criticism on the novel, but the fascination for storytellers with mystery has nonetheless been attested over and over again. Even the realistic fiction of a storyteller like Raymond Carver has this kind of mysterious deeper reality, as is convincingly argued by Charles May (2001). “To make the reader see what does not exist in the world of external perception” (May 2001:49) seems to be the main urge of the storyteller.

Besides the tendency towards the mysterious, the short stories oral origins also have some more practical implications. Firstly, a storyteller will always be a performer, trying to draw the audience into his story. His need to immediately capture the attention of his listeners results in favoring exceptional over normal subject matter, as May also indicates (1995:117). Furthermore, the performative nature of the told tale also causes the need for unique retellings, as the story will probably already have been told before (see also Attebery 1992). This calls for technical innovations and a firm control over the narrative elements that need to be manipulated. Another very important element is the proximity between the storyteller and his audience that is necessary for the oral transmission of stories. There is an intimate relationship between narrator and narratee, which gives the story more credibility. A second consequence of the orally presented story is that the audience should be paying attention. This immediately invokes the club narrative which has been discussed in the chapter on fantasy. However, the club is not the only place that houses story. Stories can be told in a number of different circumstances, which all impact on how the story is received. An oral story could also be a quickly whispered gossip or just a random anecdote told to a stranger, and these are also seen in the short genre.

Of course, the modern short story no longer is an oral form. It has taken on the medium of print, just like the novel, but is has retained some of the basic elements from the oral story. On the other hand, the short story has also been influenced by the journals in which Short stories often appeared and they put strict page limitations on its contributors. While not as romantic a notion as the most primitive form of storytelling, this might just have had the same influence on the form of the short story as it has evolved (see also Shaw 1983:7). But while the medium is different, the goal of the professional short story writer is not that different from that of the storyteller. The need to quickly capture the attention and to keep the story vivid is shared by both, but the strategies that are linked to the compression of the short
story might be influenced more by the practical restrictions of the newspaper, than by the listening capacities of an audience.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The very old tradition of the short story has made it into one of the most varied forms of writing, reacting or conforming to the many changes in worldview and literature along its way. This makes that defining the short story is impossible, except in very general terms. The genre traditionally consists of heavily plotted narratives, but since modernism it also consists of psychological stories; its origins are the oldest of all literature, but it has only emerged as separate category in the nineteenth century. All but the most fundamental claims seem too generalizing for the short story. But there are certain characteristics of the form that appear to be present to some extent in even the most opposite of its manifestations. These characteristics are consequences of the form’s brevity and history. Concerning its subject matter the short story barely discriminates, but it does favor the extraordinary over the ordinary and certain traditions still invest in the supernatural. It is also generally accepted that the short story has to limit its scope to a single narrative event and effect, although it has been shown that this does not mean that the short story should be single in meaning. The compression of this event into a very limited space makes the short story an exclusive and intense genre, as it demands a coherence of all elements towards the central thesis of the story. This highlights or intensifies the elements that are mentioned, while the unavoidable use of compressive techniques like ellipsis and the use images also give the genre a mysterious air. This effect is intensified with the short story’s preference to show its world instead of explaining it. A last typical element of the genre is the very present storyteller, a remnant from its oral past. This storyteller is typically closer to the reader than the mostly distance narrator of longer prose.
3.5 The fantastic in short stories

The fantastic, as have been explained above, is that moment of doubt that follows a confrontation occurs between two different world models in which it is unclear to the reader which of these models should be applied to the text. The most standard operation to create the fantastic is to introduce a seemingly supernatural element in the fictional world that can neither be accepted as supernatural nor explained to be natural. Besides this standard strategy, there is also the liminal fantastic, which estranges the reader from the fantastic and mainly relies on the knowingness of the reader to achieve its intended effect. All of the strategies to construct and maintain the fantastic are based on blurring the lines between the real and the unreal. On all levels of the narrative the world is clouded in uncertainty, leaving the reader no solid arguments to decide exactly what kind of a world he encounters.

Since the fantastic is based on an epistemological doubt it is easily linked to short prose forms, simply because the information deficit does not have to be maintained for too long. Therefore, the short story is the form of choice for many fantastic writers. But the short story is not simply an adequate form to contain the fantastic, it also actively helps in building it. It would go too far to claim that the short story is a fantastic genre, but similar effects are active even in short stories that do not contain any seemingly supernatural elements. Despite the different terminology used, a lot of short story theory strongly resembles the theories on the fantastic. The seemingly natural connection that is often assumed between the two forms is indeed more complex than the simple quantitative factor.

Perhaps the most fundamental element that links the fantastic and the short story is the latter’s mysterious nature. As discussed above, the short story always seems to portray a world that goes beyond normal reality. This is also partly cause by the compression of the short story, which causes it to be suggestive of things beyond the text, or as Shaw has it, the short story conveys “a sense of unwritten, or even unwriteable things” (1983:264). These “things” lurking in the background of the short story do not need to be fantastic, but the short
story does work like the fantastic in blurring the world; in suggesting there is something beyond reality. Even though it can remain in the background, the short story always creates a world beyond the natural, taking half the step towards the fantastic. The short story seems to actively reach out to the fantastic, instead of just providing a good space for it to exist in.

Another interesting connection lies in the shared origins of the short story and fantasy in oral storytelling (Atteberry 1992:17). It has already been mentioned that the short story has for a long time invested heavily in the supernatural and the branch of fantasy and fantastic short stories still continues. Works in that branch of short stories are obviously expected to contain these elements so in those cases the connection between the two forms is rather historical than inherent. More generally, the short story favors extraordinary subject matter. Most likely, it focusses “on a moment that meaningfully breaks up the routine of everyday life” (May 1995:20). Considering also that the short story is an intensifying form, even for the mundane, there is a link to a technique used in both the fantastic and the immersive fantasy. The linguistic over- or underplaying of events is often used to either naturalize the supernatural or make the real appear unreal. The short stories choice for the exceptional as subject matter and its intensifying effect again aligns it with the fantastic.

Returning to the oral origins of the short story, there is another element that links it to the fantastic and that is its narrator. The typical narrator for a fantastic story is the first person narrator who relates the incredible events that have happened to him. Even when there is another kind of narrator, the basic characteristics of the first person narrator are approached through the use of focalization. The narrator of the fantastic is often strongly related to the storyteller of the short story. This storyteller, as has been discussed, is less concerned with information than with interpretation, making him a more suitable narrator for the fantastic than the distanced authorial narrator that is typical for the realistic novel. While this

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Ben Van Eetvelt – The Fantastic in Short Stories
connection is not always fulfilled, the oral qualities of the short story are an undeniable asset to any fantastic text. The figure of the storyteller has also evolved over time and is no longer considered as sage-like as he is portrayed by scholars like Walter Benjamin. This becomes clear when opening almost any of Poe’s work. There, the storyteller is still present, but in a much less reliable form. It will become clear in the discussion of Neil Gaiman’s work that the storyteller is still very much present, but that he has been transformed and has taken on many different manifestations.

4. The short stories of Neil Gaiman

4.1 Introduction
In the previous chapter of this thesis, I have explored the relationship between the fantastic and the short story from a theoretical point of view. I have argued that the short story and its central characteristics lean towards the same effects as the fantastic, so that even very realistic short story writers, such as Raymond Carver, make this world strange simply by writing in the short story form (see May 2001). This chapter will move from theory to practice and focus on exploring this connection through the analysis of the short fiction of Neil Gaiman. Because Gaiman’s work often involves fantasy, the study of the construction of the different types of fantasy will be used here. Considering the remarks made on the liminal fantastic, an understanding of fantasy will not only be needed to properly analyze Gaiman’s fiction, but also to identify this particular kind of fantastic. After this discussion, this thesis will again move to the theoretical level and attempt to incorporate what the analyses have yielded. This chapter’s aim is therefore twofold. The first aim is to acquire a better understanding of the connection between the short story and the fantastic. The second aim is better understanding of how Neil Gaiman’s short fiction incorporates the fantastic.

Neil Gaiman is a popular contemporary genre writer and the winner of several awards for horror, fantasy, and science-fiction. He has written graphic novels, children’s novels, adult
novels, short stories, worked for television, most notably on Dr. Who, and several of his works were adapted for film. His works are appreciated for their well told stories and imagination. In his writing, Gaiman draws on a very broad spectrum of sources, including many different mythologies, folk and fairy tales, but also from contemporary genre authors such as H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, to name only two. Therefore, it is no surprise that Gaiman is very conscious of the traditions he is working with. He is also not the typical example of a fantasy writer, instead he is known for his “defiance of conventions” (Parsons 2008:372). His experimental handling of genres and traditions has attracted some criticism to his works and will also be of interest for this thesis.

The short stories that will be analyzed are published in Gaiman’s two short story collections: *Smoke and Mirrors* published in 1999 and *Fragile Things* from 2006. These collections are not intended as short story cycles wherein the stories work towards a common goal. On the contrary, many of these stories were written and published for specific occasions, such as “A Study in Emerald,” a Lovecraft-Doyle crossover specifically written for a magazine on Sherlock Holmes. There is also quite some variation in his stories. There are stories about relationships and affairs, but also about werewolves, hell on earth, and even “Murder Mysteries” in heaven. This diversity means that the connection between the fantastic and the short story can be examined under several different circumstances. Although this chapter will only focus on one author, Gaiman’s work is varied enough to provide with an interesting dataset. An additional reason for only working with Gaiman’s fiction is that while remaining focused on the main topic of this paper, it is possible to also present a useful study of this interesting author.

To analyze Gaiman’s short stories, I will use the toolkit that has been presented in the first chapter of this thesis. As demonstrated, the fantastic relies on several techniques to

destabilize the foundations of the fictional world, leaving the reader in doubt as to its reality status. The strategies for constructing fantasy worlds will therefore be of importance. The characteristics of the portal-quest, but mainly of the intrusion and immersive fantasy and how they are used or subverted will useful for the analyses. There will also be a focus on the techniques that have been identified in constructing the fantastic through language use, the narrator, characterization, composition, and liminality. The question will always be how these texts work towards the fantastic and how their short story form is of importance.

4.2 Analyses

4.2.1 “Murder Mysteries”

“Murder Mysteries” is one of the most interesting stories in dealing with the storyteller and it evokes several kinds of fantasy, although not a single supernatural really enters the main story. In short, it is the story of an Englishman who is stuck in Los Angeles as a consequence of the bad weather in England, who meets a stranger that tells him a story of the first murder in the kingdom of heaven in exchange for a cigarette. This second narrator is hinted to actually be the angel of vengeance, whose story he is telling. Vengeance, as I shall call this narrator, has to solve this murder, which is revealed to be committed by another angel but plotted by God himself to show his most trusted angel Lucifer that God is not always just. It is implied that God has consciously instigated Lucifer’s rebellion and that evil is also a part of God’s great plan. But the story’s religious meaning is not the most important part of “Murder Mysteries.” Instead, it is the power of story and the fantastic nature of Vengeance that make this short story interesting.

One of the strategies that makes Vengeance and his story fantastic is the context of the frame narrative. First of all, the original events are distanced by the narrator. They have occurred “ten years ago, give or take a year” on a different continent. At the time of the frame narrative the narrator considers himself an entirely different person who has left the past


Ben Van Eetvelt – The Fantastic in Short Stories
behind. Distancing the unexplainable events is a strategy to make them more ambiguous. On the one hand, the narrator becomes less reliable, especially since he calls memory “the great deceiver” (341), but by placing an event in a different time and place, the world itself will sooner be accepted as supernatural, an effect comparable to the “once upon a time” of fairy tales. This effect is also achieved by casting the narrator as an outsider to the world. “Los Angeles was at that time a complete mystery” (340) to him and he cannot go past the surface of this world. He only remembers the city as “boundless profusion of tiny lights” (341) he saw from on top of a hill. In effect, the narrator’s situation is much like that of the protagonist of a portal-quest fantasy. He cannot understand the world he is in, but the portal back home is closed. The similarity to the portal-quest fantasy is also in his actions. Like the Hobbits in Mirkwood\(^\text{43}\), the narrator is afraid of getting lost if he should venture into the unknown world around him. When everything is over, the narrator is quick to return to his familiar home. Casting the narrator in a similar way as a portal-quest protagonist also sets up for his acceptance of the story that will be told.

However, these effects are balanced out by the matter-of-fact realism that is also present in the section leading up to the frame narrative. On the day he met Vengeance, he had received a phone call from a “sort-of-girlfriend” to meet again. Once he gets there, they start making out, but there little romanticism is involved. Eventually she simply states, “we can’t fuck. I’m on my period,” and then “I can give you a blowjob, if you’d like” (342). Quickly thereafter the narrator is back at his apartment, the entire scene only lasting roughly a page and the blowjob even less. The narrator’s dry description of what happened creates a sense of realism for the frame narrative.

When the narrator goes outside of his hotel, always keeping an eye on a palm tree to not get lost, a stranger, Vengeance, appears that wants to buy a cigarette of him. Since the narrator does not accept his quarter as payment, Vengeance decides to pay him with a story.

since “stories always used to be good payments” (344). So Vengeance starts telling how he woke up in the kingdom of heaven and was eventually summoned by the angel Lucifer to solve a murder, as that was his intended purpose. During the introduction of this embedded story, Vengeance interrupts himself to ask the narrator if he understands what he is saying. For a moment, the narrator grounds us back into reality by commenting on how his crotch did not feel right, but right after that remark, it becomes clear that the narrator is starting to believe Vengeance, saying, “it occurred to me then that the man might not be mad; I found this far more disquieting than the alternative” (346).

Although set in the city of angels, the rest of the story works out like a short detective story. In this city, the angels are all working on the universe and the narrator interrupts Vengeance to ask what this universe looked like. Vengeance’s answer is short, but the narrator “didn’t care if it was true or not; it was a story [he] needed to hear all through to the end” (351). Now the narrator does not only think that Vengeance is not really mad, but that the story might be true as well, he is starting to experience the fantastic and his doubt will only increase as the story continues.

The magic of the moment seems to be broken when the story is over and Vengeance stands up and says “There you go, pal. That’s your story.” (367) By then, the narrator is completely submerged in the story and asks “But what happened next? How did you…I mean, if…” (367). It is clear that the narrator has a hard time deciding whether Vengeance’s story is real or not. The ambiguity is kept up when Vengeance answers the narrator he just left his home, but does not tell whether this was on Earth or in heaven. When he eventually leaves, Vengeance kisses the narrator, whispering “I never fell. I don’t care what they say. I’m still doing my job, as I see it” (367). The action always swings the reader back between the uncanny and the supernatural. In the aftermath of the story, one his way home, there are other coincidences that suggest that the angel of vengeance left some of its power on the narrator in his kiss, as he sees more than he should in his dreams. But this is highly ambiguous, because
the narrator’s lack of sleep had put him in a state “in which reality seems scraped thin and threadbare” (368).

The embedded story provides a nice example of oral storytelling and evokes the club story. Vengeance succeeds in capturing the attention of the narrator, but it is the narrator that gives him the permission to begin his story. Like in the club narrative, this means that the listener should not interrupt our doubt the story that is being told. But this story is not told in its usual setting, but at midnight on a bench in Los Angeles. Therefore it takes a while for the narrator to accept his role as a listener. When he questions Vengeance fairly early in the story, the apparent angel tells him to “shut up and listen” if he wants to hear the story, asserting his authority. After that, the story goes on without any real interruptions.

The interruptions that do occur also illustrate the difference in the use of language between the frame and the embedded narrative. Vengeance’s story is told in a more formal, higher register than the frame narrative. Consider the following fragment:

“‘Saraquael was in the highest of the mezzanine galleries that ringed the Hall of Being. As I said, the universe was in the middle of the Hall, and it glinted and sparkles and shone. Went up quite a way, too…’
‘The universe you mention, it was, what, a diagram?’ I asked, interrupting for the first time.
‘Not really. Kind of. Sorta. […]’” (351)

Vengeance rarely lowers his register as a narrator, except for such comments as “went up quite a way, too.” The dialogue on the level of the frame narrative is a lot more colloquial, with unfinished sentences and contractions. As a consequence, the frame narrative feels like normal reality, while the embedded narrative feels like a story. This distances the story itself, but it also ground Vengeance in reality, again balancing the narrative on the fantastic.

4.2.2 “Closing Time”

Another story that includes an embedded narrative is the highly ambiguous “Closing Time.” The greatest mystery and horror is in the stories ending, but first I will consider how

the embedded narrative is constructed. Again the story is distanced to a period twenty years earlier in a London that still had clubs to avoid the licensing laws. The narrator was part of the Diogenes club, which only existed as a late night drinking venue. This setting again evokes the club narrative, although the club is not of the typical sort: “There were no fireplaces in the Diogenes Club, and no armchairs either, but still, stories are told” (118). Before the actual embedded narrative is told, the narrator and two acquaintances, Paul-the-actor and Martyn, are telling each other ghost stories. The two stories that are told are not very successful and are immediately questioned and dismissed as “most unsatisfactory” (120). Then an unnamed narrator, referred to as “one of us” (121) or “the storyteller” (131), takes the floor to tell his own “true story” (121) and a true club story is told, without any interruptions and questions as to the verity of the story at the end of it. The storyteller himself does not know if his story is a proper ghost story, but it certainly made an impression on the primary narrator, as the night is one of the few things he clearly remembers from that period. The unnamed storyteller and the narrator’s response to that night already foreshadow the mysterious events that are about to follow and since the reader empathizes with the narrator, he is also prepared to share this emotional response when the story is told.

The storyteller tells a story from his childhood in the late sixties and from the start the fact that he was still only a child and that the story is just how he remembers it, not how it factually was, are stressed. On his way home from school, the storyteller meets three older boys, Douglas, Jamie and Simon. They play together until they decide to go to the Swallows, a manor-house that once belonged to an earl, but that was closed by his son after his death. Here, at the moment they enter the grounds, the storyteller starts noticing strange things. The first thing he notices is that the gardens were still looked after, but this is quickly explained by Jamie that it is probably just a gardener that comes by every so often, because they have never seen anyone there. Scared as he is, the storyteller imagines the dog cages they encounter to be cages for little boys. The setting turns really magical once they wander through some bushes
and enter “a magical grotto” (124). This magical moment is again spoiled by the older boys when they urinate in the stream that runs through it, but the storyteller is shocked by this because he still feels that it is a magical place. These elements are all part of an escalation that leads up to the real intrusion of this story: a playhouse in the woods. On the door of the playhouse was a metal knocker “in the shape of some kind of imp, some kind of grinning pixie or demon” (127). Now the storyteller is really scared, but the other boys dare him to knock the door and when he does, he feels the imp twisting in his hand. At this point the storyteller explicitly states that his senses had overtaken his reason, saying, “I was not so old that I would deny my own senses” (128). This is also one of the basic tropes of the intrusion fantasy. But unlike the intrusion fantasy described by Mendlesohn which ends in the facing of the intrusion, the intrusion is never really encountered. The three boys go into the house and the storyteller never saw them again, but he does not know what happened. Perhaps it was just a “big-boy game” (129). Instead of dealing with the intrusion, the storyteller goes home: terrified, but unsure as to what happened. This story is in itself a nice example of a fantastic intrusion fantasy. Just as in “Murder Mysteries,” the intrusion is not negotiated with, but left behind, as far away from the narrator as possible. The intrusion is escaped; not resolved and thus the reader remains in the fantastic.

While the seemingly supernatural in the embedded story is the play house, in the frame narrative it is the story as a whole. The only reason for the reader to experience hesitation up to this point of the story is the importance that the narrator gives that night. The fantastic in the frame narrative only appears in the aftermath of the embedded story. As it was the final tale of the evening, all four men leave the club and talk about the story. Paul-the-actor asks the storyteller what happened next, but Marty says, “I for one do not believe a word of it” (131), emphasizing that it was only a story. But then the narrator draws attention to the old man that had said nothing for the entire story, but was only ominously described as “cadaverous, and grey-haired and painfully thin” (119). He turns out to be Simon, and that he
and his brothers were the children of the earl that owned the manor-house and that it was Douglas who had closed it down. He remembers the cages and how their father sometimes locked them in them and he also remembers the playhouse. In a quavering voice he adds that their father did not build it for them, but that “father had his own games” (132). Then the old man gets into a cab and drives away. Again, there is no chance to resolve the mystery.

The explanation by the old man completely turns “Closing Time” on its head. First of all, when the attention is brought to the old man, it is clear that he did not tell the story, but this leaves open the question of who the storyteller was. Both Paul and Martyn questioned him afterwards and it wasn’t the narrator either, leaving no one left to be the storyteller. Secondly, if Douglas closed down and left the house with his brothers after their father died, they could have never been the three boys the storyteller met. In retrospect and unknown to the storyteller himself, the real intrusion in the embedded story seems to be the three brothers. They certainly aren’t ghosts, because they were still alive, but then what is going on? Considering the implications towards child abuse, a more psychological reading could explain some elements of the story. Or perhaps the old man is simply trying to scare the other three even more, outside of the club context. Whichever interpretation the reader decides to gives this short story, the doubt that it causes can never be resolved, making both the frame and the embedded story both properly fantastic.

It is interesting that just as in “Murder Mysteries,” the seemingly supernatural event seems to be missing from the frame narratives. Unlike the older fantastic stories discussed in the previous chapter, there is no obvious supernatural element that is discussed throughout the story. There is no doubt about a sylph or a black monk that intrudes in the real world, instead Gaiman’s stories evoke the supernatural in more subtle ways. In “Murder Mysteries” the narrator never thinks he is seeing the Vengeance of the Lord before him; he sees a rather shabby looking man whose story implies that he might be and the only possible supernatural consequence of his meeting with this angel are the nightmares he has on his way back home.
that are most likely caused by the coincidence of his lack of sleep and a disturbing newspaper article. The apparently supernatural event in the frame narrative of “Closing Time” is located in the embedded narrative of the unknown and unaccounted for storyteller. The old man’s testimony verifies the story and resolves the fantastic element of the embedded narrative by revealing that the playhouse is not supernatural. But if the story is real than the three brothers should be as well, but they cannot be. This makes the appearance of the three brothers the fantastic element of the frame narrative.

4.2.3 “October in the Chair”45

“October in the Chair” is the last story I will discuss that uses an embedded narrative and it is the story that contains the purest manifestation of the club story. Unlike the former two stories, “October in the Chair” does not include a typical example of the fantastic, but it can be seen as a liminal fantasy. In the frame narrative the twelve months sit around a bonfire. Like a typical immersive fantasy, the story tells this first only later explains that they are gathered there to tell each other their stories. Each month, a different month takes over the chair to lead the meeting. The rules for this meeting are strict and this is demonstrated when September wants to begin his story but is stopped by February: “Nobody starts till October says who starts, and then nobody else talks” (64, my emphasis). This is clearly a gathering that precisely fits the definition of the club story. The embedded narrative is also clearly separated from the frame by the use of asterisks for and after the story, but also by giving not a single reference to the frame except one “October said” (68) in the first line of the story. I think this is important because it really shows how effective storytelling can be. Although the silence during the storytelling might be a rule of the monthly meeting, it is clear that when September eventually does get to start with his story, he is interrupted because he is not good enough at telling it, focusing more on himself, than on the story. Also June attempts to tell her story, but ends up summarizing it when she asks for the others’ approval. So while there are

rules, these are subjective to the story itself. This is confirmed when the embedded story is over, and the crowd remains silent for a while, still impressed.

The embedded story itself is about a boy called Donald, who is more commonly called the Runt by his brothers, parents, and teachers alike. Donald’s life is miserable as he is bullied by his peers and looked down on by his elders. His teachers say “that it is a pity that the youngest Covay boy didn’t have the pluck or the imagination or the life of his brothers” (69). Therefore, Donald runs away after some time of planning and it appears that he is indeed not the most imaginative kid. Although he had expected the world outside of his town to be more interesting and to see “springs of fresh water everywhere” (71), Donald does not seem too disappointed because “there was a river, though” (71), which he then decides to follow to the sea. Soon after, he leaves the river path in the hope to find a house to sleep in for the night.

From this point, the first hints at an approaching intrusion are given in the form of “a farmhouse, half tumbled down and unpleasant-looking” (72) and “an abandoned pasture” (72) in which he decides to sleep. Donald wakes up in the middle of the night and the intrusion is almost immediately introduced in the form of a young boy who starts talking to him. Here, the reader used to ghost stories knows that some kind of fear or amazement should follow, but Donald just talks back to the boy, seemingly oblivious to the strange nature of this encounter. The boy calls himself Dearly but “[he] used to have another name, but [he] can’t read it anymore” (73). The two boys walk on together and they end up at a cemetery, another trope conforming to the ghost story. But “it did not scare [Donald]” (74) and the boys keep on talking and decide to go play together in some abandoned houses. At this point, the reader will have recognized Dearly as a ghost, but Donald acts as though he is just another boy. Donald does not seem to identify the fantasy, creating a dissonance between his reaction and the reader’s. It is therefore a surprise when Donald plainly asks “which one of these [graves] is yours?” (74). To which Dearly replies by showing him his tombstone that reads “dearly departed/will never be forg” (74). Donald’s identification of the fantasy does not resolve the
dissonance between him and the reader, but rather relocates it. Instead of a dissonance in identification, it has now become one of handling of the intrusion. Donald’s matter-of-fact style of talking to the ghost and the fact that they are playing together are not the expected pattern of the story. In the terms of the intrusion fantasy this means that the phase of negotiation has been skipped. Also, Donald’s daydreaming about his glamorous return home and his acknowledgment of the reality that he will probably just be found soon, connect this story to real life and assure the reader that Donald is not just dreaming.

In the end, the story gets a darker twist when Donald decides he wants to stay with Dearly and enters the farmhouse that houses something that could turn him into a ghost as well. Again, the ending of the story is not a real end. The last line simply is: “Eventually, he went inside” (79). Just as the last stories, the ending leaves the audience wanting more. In this story, this is voiced by June, portrayed as a nervous young girl, who wants to know what happened next. In this story, however, there is also the more mature May who responds to her question that it is “better not to think about it” (79). While this is primarily aimed to comfort June about Donald’s implied suicide, I believe it also a general comment on the nature of storytelling. A story’s aim, as Walter Benjamin also said, is not to provide information. It is not supposed to provide a conclusive ending. Instead, the story should leave an effect on its audience that should not always be explainable.

4.2.4 “Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar”46

While “October in the Chair” relies on the general conventions of the intrusion fantasy, “Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar” draws directly from the work of H.P. Lovecraft to achieve its effect. Gaiman often uses Lovecraft’s mythology and does so very obviously in this story. This connection is mostly used to make the story funny, but it is also used to imply the appearance of the supernatural in the story. One of the ways the fantastic is constructed in this

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story is by contrasting an absurd but realistic use of Lovecraft to an apparently supernatural intrusion of his world into ours.

The story focusses on Benjamin Lassiter, an American tourist on a walking tour along the British coastline. It is told in the third person, but is uniquely focalized through Benjamin, using once again the outsider perspective. The humorous tone of the story is immediately set by Benjamin’s opinion on his “A Walking Tour of the British Coastline” (173), whose author “had never been on a walking tour of any kind, and would probably not recognize the British coastline if it were to dance through her bedroom at the head of a marching band, singing ‘I’m the British Coastline’ in a loud and cheerful voice while accompanying itself on the kazoo” (173). Benjamin has annotated his edition, replacing the positive adjectives like “scenic” by descriptions like “ugly but with a nice view if the rain ever lets up” (174). When he eventually arrives at the town of Innsmouth, this also seems a letdown. He ends up in a pub called “The Book of Dead Names” owned by A. Al-Hazred, an open reference to Lovecraft.

In the pub Ben gets into a conversation with two locals called Seth and Wilf. These are portrayed as somewhat dumb pub-crawlers. The conversation that follows is typical banter and takes humorous turns. It is the necessary lead up towards the eventual fantastic element. The men are drinking pints of Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar, a stout beer that also refers to a species of creatures form the Lovecraft universe. Ben, raised in a Texas town still upholding the prohibition, is also bought a pint of Shoggoth’s before he can protest. Before long, the conversation turns to “him whose name we don’t mention,” H.P. Lovecraft (178). Seth and Wilf clearly do not take a liking to Lovecraft, mocking the vocabulary he uses. The following fragment will illustrate the nature of their conversation.

“I mean, for starters, you look at them words he used. Eldritch. You know what eldritch mean?”

Ben shook his head. He seemed to be discussing literature with two strangers in an English pub while drinking beer. He wondered for a moment if he had become someone
else, while he wasn’t looking. The beer tasted less bad, the farther down the glass he went, and was beginning to erase the lingering aftertaste of the cherryade.


Ben shook his head again.

Gibbous means the moon was nearly full. And what about that one he was always calling us, he? Thing. Wossname. Starts with a b. Tip of me tongue…” (178-179, one to last emphasis mine)

Seth’s reference to themselves is the first clue that the world of Lovecraft might be real in this story. The word Seth was looking for was “batrachian” and it means “looked like frogs” (179). But the lead into Lovecraft’s world is immediately undone by a discussion on the word itself with Wilf saying, “I thought they was, like, a kind of camel” (179). This discussion turns comical and Nyarlathotep, another Lovecraft deity is introduced. The reliability of the two men is further brought down by Seth confiding to Ben that Wilf always gets a bit odd after a few pints of Shoggoth’s. When Ben asks them what their profession is, they reveal that they are acolytes of the Great Cthulhu, one of the old gods asleep beneath the sea, “well, not exactly asleep. More like, if you want to put a finger point on it, dead” (Seth, 181). When they explain to Ben what this involves, they mix up a formal, religious style with their normal colloquial language. In the meantime, Ben is finishing his second pint of Shoggoth’s and has a hard time distinguishing between the two men. They guide Ben around the town, showing him the video rental store, and “the Nameless temple of Unspeakable Gods” where “on Saturday there’s jumble sale in the crypt” (182). In the bay they show him the ruins of Sunken R’lyeh and “after that it all got a bit odd” (182).

Here, the story breaks and continues after the break with Ben waking up on a hillside. Considering the story up to this point, there is no reason to believe that any of the references to Lovecraft are true and the story has mainly been comical. Ben, our focalizer, was rather drunk and Seth and Wilf are not the most reliable types. They might think they are acolytes of the Great Cthulhu or maybe they are just playing a trick on Ben, the American tourist. Every
reference that indicates a real connection between the fictional world and Lovecraft’s is immediately undone by firstly the stories comedy, secondly a drunk focalizer and two unreliable locals, and thirdly the constant juxtaposition of the magical with the practical, as is done with the Nameless temple. Nonetheless, since this part ends with a drunken Ben falling asleep, the reader will expect to find more clues as to the nature of this fictional work.

When Ben wakes up, Innsmouth is nowhere to be seen and the people he meets also do not know of any town called that way in the region. He tries to explain to them about the pub, friends, “and a friend of theirs, called Strange Ian, who was fast asleep somewhere, if he wasn’t dead, under the sea” (183). This phrase shows that Ben’s memory of the previous night is distorted. Strange Ian is a reference to a phrase chanted by Wilf in the pub, “but in Strange Aeons even Death can Die” (181). It is only at this turn in the story that what seemed to be impossible in the first part of the story becomes an actual possibility. He also thinks he remembers to have seen something beneath the pier in Innsmouth, but he only alludes at it by saying that “there were things that lurked beneath grey raincoats that man was not meant to know” (184). In the end, Ben searches for answers of what happened that night, but he is so traumatized by what he saw that he is actually glad that he finds none, leaving the memory fading. The strategy used to keep the fantastic alive at the end of the story is again a flight from it. In one short paragraph, Ben returns back home to Texas and tries his entire life to stay as far away from the sea as possible. The fantastic is left in the distanced land, unsolved and disturbing.

Another interesting aspect of this work is its prosody. Considering the fragment of dialogue cited above, a natural speech pattern is imitated by the use of punctuation. In the direct speech there are plenty of full stops in the sentences. This mimics the tendency of real language users to search for the correct words to explain something, in this case Lovecraft’s vocabulary. Also the narrator uses more punctuation, in his case more commas. In the sentence “The beer tasted less bad, the farther down the glass he went, and was beginning to
erase the lingering aftertaste of the cherryade.” (179) they are completely unnecessary. Taking into account this punctuation, however, the sentence sounds a lot more like a real person telling the story. In some cases, as in real life, the comedy relies on rhythm and timing. It might be one of the main advantages of a short story that the reader has the time to read slowly, placing all the right emphases guided by the author. Listening to Gaiman tell this story\textsuperscript{47}, the additional meaning and pleasure derived from reading the short story as a story and not as a short novel is clear.

4.2.5 “How Do You Think It Feels?”\textsuperscript{48}

“How Do You Think It Feels” is the story of the affair between the married narrator and young woman called Becky, but is mainly about being emotionlessness. The story, told in the first person, starts in the present and then circles back to the exact same moment after the narrator has told the story of his last fifteen years. “How Do You Think It Feels?” is a hard story to like, mainly because the narrator has little to no empathy for anything in his life. It appears that he has always been a person void of morals or love, but he is never bad enough to be a narrator the reader can really hate. In the present time at the beginning of the story the narrator says, “I feel nothing at all” (307). For me, it is clear that the narrator’s story is so emotionless not because he always was that way, but that he has become that way.

The affair starts, somewhat typically, at a conference in America and continues when they return to England. It becomes apparent that the narrator is obsessed by his mistress. He starts neglecting his family and his job. His obsession also shines through in his language use, mentioning her name too frequently such as in the following sentence: “Instead I was in Becky’s Battersea flat with Becky” (308). The affair comes at an end when the narrator tells Becky that he is going to leave his wife. She no longer finds him “any fun” (310) and locks herself in her bedroom until he leaves.


This leaves the narrator shattered and he gets drunk in her apartment out of misery, but Becky does not come out of her bedroom. The narrator had already briefly mentioned that Becky’s a clay sculptor and he takes out her clay and start modelling a gargoyle. While the clay had already been introduced, this act arrives very abruptly in the story. The narrator’s creation of the clay gargoyle is described as a ritual.

“I made the gargoyle for myself in the small hours of the morning, out of grey modelling clay.
I remember doing it. I was naked. I had found a large lump of plasticine on the mantelpiece, and I thumped and kneaded it until it was soft and pliable, then, lost in a place of drunken, horny, angry madness, I masturbated into it, and kneaded my milky seed into the grey shapeless mess.
[...] I made it of my lust and self-pity and hatred, then I baptised it with the last drops of Johnny Walker Black Label and placed it over my heart, my own little gargoyle, to protect me from beautiful women with blue-green eyes and from ever feeling anything again.” 310-311

Then the story fast forwards and it seems that he is indeed protected from feeling every again; no matter who he meets, he “did not love anybody” (311). It even seems to be the gargoyle he made that is protecting him from the inside. Every time he thinks of Becky he feels an actual pain and he imagines that it is are the gargoyles fingers that are gripping around his heart to protect him from his emotions. Time flies past, the narrator’s company is successful, and he divorces his wife.

Eventually, he meets Becky again in a park and for some reason they get back together that night, as if nothing had happened between them. After they have sex, Becky says that she will not make the mistake of leaving him twice and they go to sleep and the story takes a turn for fantasy again. The narrator has a dream of something moving inside of him and when he opens his eyes and looks down, he sees a huge plasticine hand retreat back into a hole in his chest, with “dark hair caught between the stone fingers” (314). But as soon as he looks at it, it vanishes instantly. He goes back to sleep and when he wakes up again he is convinced that it was just a dream, but he also notices that he is alone in the bed. Becky was gone and left him
a purple orchid on the pillow and now the story is back where it began, with the narrator saying, “I feel absolutely fine. I feel nothing at all” (315).

This story could be considered an example of the fantastic, with the gargoyle functioning as the seemingly supernatural element. The narrator is obsessed, drunk or sleeping when the supernatural occurs, making him ideally positioned as a narrator for the fantastic. However, the fantastic does not seem to work in this text, despite fitting its formal pattern well. One side of this is the narrator’s non-response to the gargoyle which discourages the reader to doubt it as well. Another side to why the fantastic is not working in this text is utter impossibility of the events. A huge stone gargoyle living in someone’s chest would be hard to implement, even in high fantasy. These two problems could still rather easily be solved. Indeed, a shared reaction between the reader and the protagonist is not mandatory for the fantastic and the hand could have been an intrusive manifestation. The problem with the last interpretation is that there is a significant lack of intrusion fantasy rhetoric, which is why this reading does not feel right. The major problem for the fantastic here is the story’s metaphoric quality. Besides the actual gargoyle the narrator sculpts, everything strange that happens is too easily read as a metaphor, essentially reducing the mystery that is so typical of stories to a matter explanation.

4.2.6 “Chivalry” and “When We Went to See the End of the World”

The two stories that will be discussed in this paragraph are both examples of the liminal fantasy. Unlike the traditional fantastic intrusion fantasy, these fantasies make the world in which they are set strange by playing with genre conventions and reader expectations. They are also more often focused on a humorous instead of a disturbing effect. This genre is particularly suited for the short story for two reasons. Firstly, they often revolve around an inversion of the ground rules of fantasy and this novelty often runs out of potential

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for entertainment rather quick. If the same techniques would be applied to a full size novel, they would lead to either boredom and irritation or to new sort of otherworld that doesn’t have the same effects anymore. A second reason why the liminal fantasy works well with the short story is in its artificiality. As mentioned before, the tellers of stories tightly control their narratives and the game of the liminal fantasy both an exponent of that and a good way to revisit known material. The stories that will be discussed are “Chivalry,” about Mrs. Whitaker and the Holy Grail; and “When We Went to See the End of the World,” about a trip to the end of the world and unicorns with fleas, told by “Dawnie Morningside, age 11 ¼.”

The essence of “Chivalry” is illustrated best by its opening sentence, “Mrs. Whitaker found the Holy Grail; it was under a fur coat” (35). She found it on her weekly trip to the Oxfam Shop and bought it together with two Mills & Boon novels. The Grail is rather dusty, so Mrs. Whitaker cleans it and puts it on her mantelpiece, between a picture of her late husband and a china hound. Up to this point, the reader might still think Mrs. Whitaker is unaware that she has bought the Holy Grail, but when her friend Mrs. Greenberg comes over and asks what it is, she simply replies, “it’s the Holy Grail” (37). Then she formally describes the Grail as “the cup that Jesus drunk out of at the Last Supper. Later, at the Crucifixion, it caught His precious blood when the centurion’s spear pierced His side”” (37). But Mrs. Greenberg was Jewish and didn’t like unclean things and she just thinks that it looks very nice and mentions that her Myron “got one just like that when he won the swimming tournament” (37). The entire short story is based on this contrast between the magical and the response that the people in this perfectly normal fictional world don’t give it. The mimetic nature of the world is stressed throughout the story by the casual banter and the descriptions of Mrs. Whitaker’s daily activities.

Just after lunch, the doorbell rings and Galaad wants to enter the house to search for the Grail. But despite his shining armor, she demands his identifications, because “she knew it was unwise to let unidentified strangers into your home when you were elderly” (38). She
gives Galaad a cup of thee, but he can’t take the Holy Grail with him since it fits to nice on her mantelpiece. It also becomes clear that Mrs. Whitaker is not the only one that just accepts the fantasy. When Galaad goes back outside, he teaches the children how to feed lumps of sugar to his huge horse. Later, it appears that he has also been to the Oxfam Shop and there as well the girl after the counter does not comment on the fact that a knight had just walked, but on Galaad’s dreamy looks.

Galaad returns to Mrs. Whitaker to trade special items with her for the Holy Grail. The first time he comes, he first has to help her out in the garden. Only then does he get the chance to show her the sword Balmung, which “can slice a falling hair in twain. Nay, it could slice a sunbeam” (41), at which Mrs. Whitaker replies that he should probably better put it away. Again, Galaad is sent on his way, although her late husband would have quite liked it. The second time he comes, Mrs. Whitaker uses him to clean up her attic and “she kept him up there most of the afternoon” (43). When the cleaning is done he shows Mrs. Whitaker the Philosopher’s Stone, the Egg of the Phoenix and an apple of the Hesperides, which could grant her eternal life. Eventually she goes for the Philosopher’s Stone and the Egg, because “they do look very nice” (46) She then packs the Holy Grail in Christmas wrapping paper and sends Galaad on his way with a cake for on the road. In the end, Mrs. Whitaker goes back to the Oxfam Shop where she finds a lamp, which is implied to be magical. As a final note in this comical fantasy, Mrs. Whitaker does not take the lamp home with her, “after all […] it wasn’t as if she had anywhere to put it” (48)

While “Chivalry” relies on the contrast between the real and the unreal which is ignored by its characters, the world in “When We Went to See the End of the World” is an immersive fantasy world. The story is told by the 11 year old Dawnie Morningside. This perspective functions in the same way as the outsider perspective, because Dawnie also does not know the workings of her world yet. The dissonance in this liminal fantasy is situated in
the different reactions of Dawnie and the reader, who are exploring the world, and her father, who is already fully familiar with the world.

In the story, Dawnie and her family go to see the end of the world for her birthday. On their way there, a white deer crossed the road, chased by a couple of people. Dawnie’s mother exclaims “look!” (319) to draw Dawnie’s attention to the animal, but her dad tactlessly undermines their admiration by comparing the animals to “rats with antlers” (319) and telling a story how once a friend of his was killed in a road accident with a deer. A similar thing happens when they arrive at the end of the world and a unicorn is standing along the path. Dawnie wants to give it an apple, but her father tells her to stay away from it because it “probably has fleas” (320). The ordinary nature of the supernatural is first disillusionment for the reader.

There is also a difference in point of view between the reader and Dawnie. For her, the experience is comparable to going to the zoo and seeing exotic creatures and for the reader it is an encounter with supernatural creatures. Despite this difference, the reader and Dawnie share the same feeling of wonder at what they see in this world. Therefore, the comments made by her father are a disappointment for both. At first, the small dissonance between the reader and Dawnie and Dawnie’s style will cause some comical effect, but once the reader accepts her point of view in the world, the story takes a more pessimistic turn. It turns out that the relationship between Dawnie’s father and mother often erupts and argument and even physical aggression. Dawnie’s family situation is the core of this story. This does not mean that the fantasy elements are just a backdrop to this. Firstly, the evolution from a small dissonance in point of view between the reader and Dawnie to a big dissonance between Dawnie, and with her the reader, and her father creates an increasing sense that something is wrong in this family. I think it is important that the reader can first think that it is going to be a funny story, but that this illusion is shattered. This is the second disillusionment the reader undergoes. Secondly, Dawnie is hoping for a supernatural solution, in the form of wishes, to
her troubles at home. If this was a mimetic world, there would be no hope of this coming true. But because this world is magical, the reader hopes that wishing is as possible as unicorns or the end of the world. That wishes turn out to be as pointless there as they are in the real world is the third disillusionment for the reader in this story. The fantasy in this story is used to create a sense of disillusionment and increase the reader’s empathy with Dawnie, who is thoroughly unhappy.

4.3 Conclusions
The discussion of Neil Gaiman’s short stories has illustrated some of the strategies that were already discussed for the construction of the fantastic such as the casting of the protagonist as an outsider, the importance of the storytelling context, and the liminal fantasy. More importantly, however, Gaiman’s short fiction also provided this thesis with some additional insight to the construction of the fantastic and the connection between the short story and the fantastic.

As mentioned, fantastic stories often explain their seemingly supernatural events in the end, resulting in texts that are either uncanny or marvelous. Some of the stories discussed above, on the other hand, use a strategy that manages to keep the fantastic alive at the end of the story. This strategy is clearly illustrated at the end of “Closing Time,” when the old man rides away in a cab before he gives any explanation. The hesitation the reader experiences is kept alive by the removal of the fantastic element before it is resolved. In “Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar” the narrator flees back to America and stay away from the ocean, and in “Murder Mysteries” he leaves behind America and is glad to be gone. These stories are in effect intrusion fantasies that are not played out as they should according to Mendlesohn. The fantastic element is not negotiated with and is neither banished nor accepted. In the case of “October in the Chair,” there even is no particular reaction to it. The intrusion fantasy is held in its face of latency, neither actually there nor truly absent. The endings of these stories are
not really the end of the protagonist’s story and by telling a fully finished story, the protagonist and the fantastic are allowed to go beyond the story.

This is partly made possible through the short story form. It has already been mentioned that the story refuses to provide information, but rather gives interpretation. The reaction of the listener’s in the three stories that deal with embedded narratives shows this lack of information in their repeating question about what happened next. Also, because of its compression, the short story can hint at many things, allowing the reader to expand it, without having a factual base for his assumptions.

Further, “How Do You Think It Feels?” illustrated the need for the fantastic and fantasy in general to not be read in a metaphorical way. This does not mean that the other stories do not have a deeper meaning in their stories, but the actual supernatural events are not metaphors. The gargoyle in the story is too close to being a metaphor to be a fantastical element. This is perhaps because the story is too obvious about its supernatural event. In comparison to the older examples of fantastic fiction, the supernatural is constructed in a much more subtle way. The seemingly supernatural does not just enter the story, but creeps in from behind the scenes. This is probably because a contemporary audience would not experience the same hesitation when the fantastic element is so obviously introduced in the text.

Finally, the two liminal fantasies have also illustrated the different uses of this kind special kind of the fantastic. In “Chivalry,” I believe, it is used in its default setting of comedy. In “When We Went to See the End of the World,” on the other hand, the dissonances between the reader, Dawnie, and her father are used to create an atmosphere of sadness and disappointment. These stories also illustrate that the liminal as illustrated here could not exceed the length of a short story, because they would start lacking effect if they would have continued longer. These and also the other stories have a strong sense of being finished,
although, as mentioned, many of them do not really end. Looking back at Poe, this might be because they have achieved their effect and played out their single dramatic event.

5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the connection between the Todorovian fantastic and the short story and to illustrate this connection with a study of Neil Gaiman’s stories. It has done so by first focusing on both sides of this connection separately to get a thorough understanding of both and then looking for the elements that connected them. To find these elements, this thesis did not focus on finding similarities in the definitions of the short story and the fantastic. Instead, it began from understanding how each of them worked and how they are constructed to then find elements that function in similar ways, either working towards the other or strengthening each other’s effects. To this theoretical exploration of the fantastic and the short story, a section on the construction of the different types of fantasy was added. The meaning of this section was double. In the first place, its rhetorics were also useful to the creation of the fantastic, providing insight in how the same techniques can be used in several ways, but also serving as a reservoir of tools that are not always associated with the fantastic. In the second place, the discussion of fantasy was necessary to properly move from the theory towards Neil Gaiman, whose stories are all linked to the genre.

In the discussion of Gaiman’s fiction confirmation was found for the links that were identified between the fantastic and the short story. The story’s compressed form and its oral and mythical origins make it the ideal form for the fantastic. It has been shown that the short story is more than a form short enough to accommodate and sustain an information deficit that causes the reader to doubt the nature of his world. Instead, the short story actively works at making its world strange and mysterious, taking half the step towards the fantastic. Furthermore, the story’s preference for interpretation over information aligns the two perfectly. In Neil Gaiman’s stories, there often was a sense of a finished story, but of an open
ending, which ensured that the fantastic could continue. This seems to be a typical characteristic of the short story, which is said to expand in the reader’s mind exactly because of its compressed form. Unlike the novel, the short story does not want to portray an entire life, but rather focuses on a single extraordinary experience. This should not be interpreted in the disfavor of the short story, because in providing all that information, the novel closes itself off and gives the impression of a sealed unit. It is by telling less that the short story is able to suggest more, both in and beyond the story.

This thesis has focused solely on Neil Gaiman and the study of other short story authors from all sides of the literary field would be necessary to advance the study of the connection between the short story and fantastic. Especially the implications of the story form, its teller and their context could lead to interesting insights, as could a study of how the fantastic in short stories has evolved since its typical nineteenth ancestors. It is already clear that the introduction of the fantastic element is now less direct than in those older texts. Finally, the impact of the transition from the oral to written storytelling context and the influence of other prose forms on the nature of the short story should be explored further.

(26,111 words)
6. Works cited


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