REPRESENTATIONS OF LONDON IN NEIL GAIMAN’S NEVERWHERE

Keywords: environmental image; chronotope; fantasy fiction; intertextuality

Abstract: In his novel Neverwhere Gaiman depicts the modern city of London - London Above, and his inverted fantastic counterpart - London Below. London Below is the reflection of London Above in a heterotopic mirror: a fantastic version of the city, represented by its mythical identity. While London Above is “filled with colour”, and is “a city in which the very old and the awkwardly new jostled each other, not uncomfortably, but without respect”, London Below is “built of lost fragments of London Above: alleys and roads and corridors and sewers that had fallen through the cracks over the millennia, and entered the world of the lost and the forgotten”, and it is “inhabited by the people who fell through the cracks in the world”. This article aims to analyse the representation of London in terms of Lynch’s environmental image, Bakhtin’s study on chronotope and Foucault’s essay on heterotopias and heterochronies, and to examine Gaiman’s version of London in terms of myths and legends that forge the identity of the city.

Since according to Bridge and Watson: “more than half of humanity now live in cities, in globally complex urban patterns” (1), the city is central to human experience today; and as a result, it finds its way into literary representations, as well. Today mainstream literature genres contain urban subgenres, as: Urban Crime Fiction, Urban Fantasy, Urban Gothic, etc. The city fascinates writers by the possibilities it offers in fiction. On the one hand, according to Lynch (5) “the city is in itself the powerful symbol of a complex society”, and thus it can be seen as an intricate canvas for painting a complex image of society and its issues. On the other hand, the topography of the city can be also seen as “a palimpsest of its history” (Gomel “Narrative Space and Time” 173), allowing an examination of its roots, forgotten history, haunting memories and traumas. In addition, according to Bridge and Watson the “sheer complexity of urban processes, the internal structures and cultures of cities and their interrelations across the globe mean that different ways of understanding cities have never been more relevant” (1). Considering these, it is only natural that the representations of the city in literature should be elaborate and diverse. In this regard, fantasy fiction is no exception, since, as stated by Jenkins, “like the Gothic novel, fantasy fiction draws on architecture as a major part of its symbolic economy” (28).

In his seminal work The Image of the City, Lynch analyses the environmental image from the urban planning point of view. There, he states that any environmental image consists of three components: identity, structure, and meaning, which always appear together (8). Its first component, identity, implies the “identification of the object”, its “distinction from other things”, its “individuality”
(8). The structure refers to “the spatial or pattern relation of the object to the observer and to other objects” (8), and the meaning involves the practical or emotional meaning for the observer (8). In addition, Lynch states that an environmental image has two qualities: legibility (3) and imageability (9). Legibility, according to Lynch, is “the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern, […] if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols” (2-3). He further states that “a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern” (3). And imageability, as defined by Lynch, is the “quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer” (8). He also states that “a highly imageable (apparent, legible, or visible) city in this peculiar sense would seem well formed, distinct, remarkable” (Lynch 8). In the context of a literary text, the image of the city can be claimed to be constituted similarly to identity, structure and meaning, which should be both legible and imageable. The aim of this article is to apply, in an interdisciplinary approach to literary text, the above readings of the environmental image to the representations of London in Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, along with the literary concepts of intertextuality, Bakhtin’s chronotope, and Foucault’s heterotopia.

*Neverwhere* is an urban fantasy novel, set in London in the nineties. Its main character Richard Mayhew, a Scot, who relocates to London for work, gradually discovers the city and its multiple layers, going on a journey to the London’s underground, the home of poor and destitute, “who fell through the cracks of the world” (Gaiman 79). The image of London, depicted in the novel, is a multi-layered, intricate structure. It consists of numerous elements that combine to reveal a modern metropolis, anchored in myth and history, while being affected by complex social issues. London is gradually built up through the eyes of the novel’s main character. At first, Richard finds it: “huge, odd, fundamentally incomprehensible” (Gaiman 2), but then he progressively gets used to it, and his perspective changes:

*It was a city in which the very old and the awkwardly new jostled each other, not uncomfortably, but without respect; a city of shops and offices and restaurants and homes, of parks and churches, of ignored monuments and remarkably unpalatial palaces; a city of hundreds of districts with strange names—Crouch End, Chalk Farm, Earl’s Court, Marble Arch—and oddly distinct identities; a noisy, dirty, cheerful, troubled city, which fed on tourists, needed them as it despised them [...] a city inhabited by and teeming with people of every color and manner and kind (Gaiman 4).

In the fragment above a seemingly heterogeneous image that could belong to almost any old city is personalised by referencing actual place names, a fact that narrows the possible readings of the city’s identity and narrows its meaning interpretation by referencing specific elements.

Identity is the first constituent of the environmental image, according to Lynch (8), and it is constituted of a set of characteristics that make a place unique, distinct from others, and simultaneously recognisable among others. In *Neverwhere*, apart from being actually named, London is recognisable due to a number of cultural
references, also known as “cultural codes” (Barthes, “S/Z” 184). These, according to Barthes, pertain to the category of myth, and serve the ideological function of “naturalisation” (“Mythologies” 127-130). These cultural codes rely on shared collective knowledge, “an oddly joined miniature version of encyclopaedic knowledge” (Barthes, “S/Z”185). In the text, these can be classified into: onomastic allusions, topographical allusions, historical allusions, and allusions to myth and legend. Other such cultural references that do not belong to any of the above categories can be distinguished in the following lines: “It was a city of red brick and white stone, red buses and large black taxis, bright red mailboxes and green grassy parks and cemeteries”, where “red brick”, “white stone”, “red buses” and “black taxis”, “bright red mailboxes” etc. Were they taken separately, they would not point to any particular place, but combining these references makes them function as widely recognised symbols of London. As it was stated above. their recognition depends on the reader’s familiarity with London’s representation on postcards, posters, or other media. So, the seemingly common traits become unique by being bind together. Another instance of such allusions is in the title Neverwhere, which is simultaneously ambiguous and open to interpretation. It points to an alternative reality of never and nowhere, which combined with the novel’s two epigraphs: a quotation from The Napoleon of Notting Hill and The Lyke-Wake Dirge, are used as pointers towards interpretation, which simultaneously create both identity and meaning. Chesterton’s The Napoleon of Notting Hill is set in an alternate reality London, which is shaped by its place names, and presents a social critique of the multicultural London’s society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Whereas, The Lyke-Wake Dirge is a traditional song sang during the vigil held over a dead person, in which the soul’s travel from earth to purgatory is described, along with the dangers it faces on the way (Quiller-Couch 381). The first epigraph ties the image and meaning to the city of London, implying a social critique, while the second suggests the end of main character’s old life in London Above, his “death”, and his journey and “rebirth” in London Below, as the Warrior, after slaying the Great Beast of London.

Regarding onomastic allusions, these play an important role in establishing the identity of the city in the novel. The main character’s name Richard Mayhew functions as a double allusion. On the one hand, Mayhew is the name of the Victorian urban sociologist Henry Mayhew, who was the first to explore London’s underground of poor and homeless in his study London Labour and the London Poor. On the other hand, Richard or Dick, as Richard introduces himself, functions as an allusion to Sir Richard - Dick Whittington, four times Lord Mayor of London. Dick Whittington is also the hero of the folktale Dick Whittington and His Cat, allowing thus an interesting dialogue between the novel and the folktale, and foreshadowing Richard’s journey and ascension in London Below. Therefore, the name is used to introduce the main character, as well as the identity of the city and its aspects that are explored further in the novel. The name of one of the characters – Old Bailey, is a reference to Criminal Court of England and Wales, or one of the buildings housing the Crown Court, also commonly known as the Old Bailey. Old Bailey in the novel is as old as London itself; his name is an allusion to his knowledge, as he sells information: “You wants it, we knows it” (Gaiman 71). As
there is only one Old Bailey and it is located in London, the name serves as an allusion allowing both identity and meaning formation in the novel.

The topographical allusions category is extensively represented in the novel. These have an undeniable role in identity creation, supplying a series of place names specific to London, thus “anchoring” (Barthes, “Image-Music-Text” 38-41) the reader’s interpretation of the city. These allusions simultaneously participate in the city’s identity, structure and meaning creation. From the very beginning of the novel, we are introduced to a map of London’s Underground on an umbrella that Richard receives as a gift, introducing: “Earl's Court, Marble Arch, Blackfriars, White City, Victoria, Angel, Oxford Circus” (Gaiman 2), and which serves both as an introduction to the setting and as a first layer to the city’s identity and structure. The numerous place names are London specific, and as a result have an undeniable role in identity creation. Such famous landmarks, as: the Tower of London, Big Ben, British Museum, BBC, St. Paul’s Cathedral, National Gallery, etc.; and such London Underground stations, like: Earl's Court, Marble Arch, Blackfriars, Victoria, Angel, Oxford Circus, Islington, etc. are ingrained in shared collective knowledge, also function as symbols, making them both legible and recognisable to the reader, as London specific. The place names are used systematically to create a virtual map of London, a structure designed to make London recognisable in the novel. Ironically, the main character realises “that the Tube map” is “a handy fiction” that makes “life easier”, but bears “no resemblance to the reality of the shape of the city above” (Gaiman 4). Other topographical references, like: Thames, Greenwich, Battersea, Albert Bridge, Chelsea, Marble Arch, etc. are used to fix this complex structure on the map, making the London depicted in the novel both legible and recognisable. However, the city structure represented in the novel is not only anchored in space, but also in time, as there are multiple historical allusions in the novel.

The historical allusions in Neverwhere are also used to “anchor” the interpretation of the city to London, and have an important role in identity and meaning creation. On the one hand, the references to such historical events, as: the “Great Fire”, the “Great stink”, the “Bonfire Night”, or the “pea-soupers” are London specific, painting another layer in the image of London, anchoring the city in the past, and giving it its historical roots and complexity. Also, such references to historical figures, as: “Guy Fawkes” or “King Lud”, along with references to the “London Wall”, “Fleet Marsh”, “Fleet Ditch”, or “Blackfriars”, the former priory in the City of London, reinforce the aforementioned roots and enhance the city’s structure in the novel. On the other hand, as this structure spans both in space and time, it becomes a three-dimensional construction. The analysis of time and space in literature, as a single concept, was first introduced by Bakhtin in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”. Chronotope, according to Bakhtin, is “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). In his essay, Bakhtin discusses three basic types of ancient novels and their corresponding chronotopes. This concept was further discussed and expanded on by numerous modern scholars. Gomel in her study Narrative Space and Time discusses postmodern chronotopes, and Nikolajeva in Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern discusses chronotopes.
specific to fantasy fiction. In *Neverwhere* chronotopes play an important role in recognition of the city’s identity, structure, and meaning.

London in the novel is represented as a “simultaneous city”, a place “where two or more spaces coexist” (Gomel, “Narrative Space and Time” 181). Its structure in the novel is a layered one: London Above is placed on top of London Below. London Above representing the actual, modern-day city of London, while London Below is represented as a repository of city’s history, memory and trauma, and a place where the poor and destitute live. London Above is a “layered” city, similar to Freud’s Rome, where past and present coexist (Gomel, “Narrative Space and Time” 179). London Below is a “figurative space”, an inverted counterpart to London Above, separated by the Tube, which functions as a connection point, a border between the two cities. This division introduces the first type of chronotope encountered in the novel is represented by the chronotope of multidimensionality or transition between the chronotope of reality (London Above), and the chronotope of alternative realm (London Below). Time and space function differently in London Below, compared with the recognizable reality chronotope. London Below is organized in a feudal structure. Time and space are warped and distorted in London Below, which introduces the second type of chronotope that can be distinguished in the novel, the chronotope of time displacement. The spatiality and temporality are altered between dimensions, as the characters in the novel travel between London Above and London Below. The connections between the two spaces either exist organically and certain characters know about their existence and use them, or they are made by opening portals (Door). The regular inhabitants of London Above cannot see these connections, as the metaphor of invisibility of the poor and homeless is taken a step further in the novel, and becomes a literal effect of the exposure to London Below and its inhabitants. Richard becomes invisible to his work colleagues, to his fiancée and even to taxi drivers, after he helps Door. His fiancée, Jessica breaks their engagement, because he chooses to help Door. Her attitude is representative for the society’s attitude towards poverty and homelessness, during the nineties, which unfortunately is still actual today: “If you pay them any attention, Richard, they'll walk all over you. They all have homes, really. Once she's slept it off, I'm sure she'll be fine” (Gaiman 14). On the opposite end, we are shown Jessica’s fascination with wealth, influence and power: “And they weren't just people. They were People. Some of them were even Personalities” (Gaiman 114).

*Neverwhere* contains numerous allusions that are used as pointers towards text interpretation, and as means to anchor it. These are important in meaning formation, as they help build the city’s image, by contributing to its identity and structure. For instance, there are numerous menu options for the rich and famous at Stockton’s exhibition: “the canapés, vol-au-vents, sundry nibbles, and free champagne” (Gaiman 113); and: “... chicken legs, melon slices, mushroom vol-au-vent, caviar puffs, and small venison sausages ... with a Brie and fennel sandwich and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice” (Gaiman 113). These numerous menu options are opposed to the poverty of the inhabitants of London Below. For example, when Richard is upset that Anaesthesia ate all of his fruits, she asks him if he likes cat. Richard’s confirmation is followed by: “‘Thigh?’ ... ‘Or breast?’"
Needless to say, Richard declined “the prime cut of tomcat” (Gaiman 70). The extreme poverty of some of the inhabitants of London Below is represented by Sewer Folk, who scour the sewers for all sorts of junk to sell, including dead bodies, as it was seen in the case of Marquis de Carabas. They were inspired by the mudlarks and the pure-finders described in Mayhew’s *London Labour and London Poor*. These oppositions between London Above and London Below contrast the two planes, accentuating the city’s vertical structure.

A third type of chronotope encountered in the novel is the chronotope of heterotopia or of a multitude of discordant universes (Nikolajeva 141-145). It can be exemplified by the black hole chronotope (Gomel, “Narrative Space and Time” 172), which enables present and past spatiality and temporality to coexist. As stated in the novel: “There are little pockets of old time in London, where things and places stay the same, like bubbles in amber” (Gaiman 142). This chronotope is enabled through the strategy of collapsing, where the two different spaces coexist, and are squeezed in the same diegetic space (Gomel, “Narrative Space and Time” 173). In this case the two coexisting spaces are the two representations of London. These two representations are based on binary oppositions: the London Above is opposed to the London Below; the rich are opposed to the poor; the homeowners to the homeless; the old is opposed to the new; the Harrods is opposed to the Floating Market; etc. The financial district “a cold and cheerless place of offices” (Gaiman 102) is opposed to “loud, and brash, and insane, . . . in many ways, quite wonderful” (Gaiman 230) crowd at the Floating Market; people at Stockton’s exhibition in Armani suits opposed to “sewer folks” selling garbage and lost property; etc. While London Above is situated in real-world (or rather its representation), and London Below is situated in London Above’s underground. The Tube is the border between the two cities, between reality and illusion. The London Below is the heterotopic mirrored image of the London Above, a repository of all London history (from its Celtic and Roman roots through Black plague, to the nineties London), people and myths. All the things forgotten and lost can be found in London Below, everything that once existed in London Above is stowed away in London Below, including memories that continue to exist in London Below. In the novel, a Roman Legion coexists organically with an abandoned Victorian Hospital and with the Tube. London Below is not necessary only a repository of past events, but a kaleidoscope of changing perspectives, a heterotopia and a heterochronia, as well (Foucault 6). An example of such shifting time and space is the following fragment: “They walked through daylight and night, through gaslit streets, and sodium-lit streets, and streets lit with burning rushes and links. It was an ever-changing place: and each path divided and circled and doubled back on itself” (Gaiman 190).

In this vertical structure London Below is the inverted image of London Above. The actual, old London is described, as stripped of its personality, by the financial district that rose in the place of former palaces and cathedrals: “The actual City of London itself was no bigger than a square mile . . . a tiny municipality, now home to London’s financial institutions, and that that was where it had all begun” (Gaiman 4). However, the original London “grew into something huge and contradictory” (Gaiman 4), and so, present-day London Above is described as a sterile, cold, uninhabited place, a simulacrum (Baudrillard 166) of good life, wealth,
prestige, and a symbol of money. In the following lines Old Bailey remembers the time when London meant so much more than glass and steel buildings:

Old Bailey remembered when people had actually lived here in the City, not just worked; when they had lived and lusted and laughed, built ramshackle houses one leaning against the next, each house filled with noisy people. Why, the noise and the mess and the stinks and the songs from the alley across the way (then known, at least colloquially, as Shitten Alley) had been legendary in their time, but no one lived in the City now. It was a cold and cheerless place of offices, of people who worked in the day and went home to somewhere else at night. It was not a place for living anymore (Gaiman 103).

In the above fragment such allusions like: noise, stinks, mess paint the image of a different London. It is not a nostalgic image of a perfect city, but rather the image of a real, lively, noisy and dirty place, contrasting the cheerless and cold financial centre. The sterility of the financial district is inverted in the “carnivalesque”, loud and smelly London Below. For instance, the above described sterility of the financial district in the novel is opposed to the liveness of the Floating Market:

It was pure madness—of that there was no doubt at all. It was loud, and brash, and insane, and it was, in many ways, quite wonderful. People argued, haggled, shouted, sang. They hawked and touted their wares, and loudly declaimed the superiority of their merchandise. Music was playing—a dozen different kinds of music, being played a dozen different ways on a score of different instruments, most of them improvised, improved, improbable (Gaiman 88).

Every district in London Above has an inverted counterpart in London Below: Knightsbridge, one of the most attractive areas of central London, becomes Night’s Bridge, one of the most dangerous places of London Below, inhabited by nightmares. Angel Underground station and Islington district become in London Below an actual angel, named Islington, who incidentally is the novel’s villain. Although, the entire London Below is a heterotopia, there are other heterotopic places: Floating Market, Night’s Bridge, Shepherd’s Bush, Labyrinth, etc. London Above also contains heterotopias that are simultaneously heterochronies: National Gallery, Tate Gallery, Big Ben, Tower of London, etc. Alongside the impossible Fantasy fiction chronotopes one can also identify the alternative history chronotope - “corresponding to the two forms of temporality that Lyotard called ‘myth’ and ‘contingency’” (qtd. in Gomel, “Shapes of the Past and the Future: Darwin and the Narratology of Time Travel” 336); and the chronotope of trauma (Gomel, “Narrative Space and Time” 173) evoking the traumatic historic events, since the city is “haunted by the memory of the cataclysm and the premonition of its return” (173). Such traumatic historic events as: “the Great Fire”, “the great stink”, “the peashoupers”, etc. are all London specific.

The last category of allusions that help the formation of identity, structure and meaning in the novel are the allusions to myth and legend. These allow a dialogue between folklore, myths, legends, and novel’s themes, characters and
setting, painting vivid images, and adding layers of meaning. For example: “The street ended in a vast Cyclopean gateway . . . Giants built that gate . . . tales of long-dead kings of mythical London churning in his head, tales of King Bran and of the giants Gog and Magog” (Gaiman 188). These allusions give a mythic dimension to London, by planting its roots past history into the myth. Another such example is the allusion to labyrinth, allowing the introduction of the Beast of London. It references the urban legend (modern folklore) of “alligators in sewers” (Brunvand 90), exemplified in the following lines: “I thought it was just a legend,” he said. “Like the alligators in the sewers of New York City” (Gaiman 103); as well as: “I fought in the sewers beneath New York with the great blind white alligator-king . . . I fought the bear that stalked the city beneath Berlin . . . There was a black tiger in the undercity of Calcutta” (Gaiman 141). The urban legend of beasts in sewers seems to be spread worldwide, thus Gaiman’s allusions towards the variants of this legend are not surprising. The Beast of London was inspired out of one of these legends, that of the “Black Swine of Hampstead”, which was widely popular during nineteen century (Boyle 1989), and which is specific to London and anchors the identity and meaning interpretation.

To conclude, the image of the city, with its components identity, structure and meaning, is a complex, intricate structure. In Neverwhere, it is a multi-layered structure that consists of numerous elements that combine to reveal a modern metropolis, anchored in space, time, myth and history, affected by complex social issues, nevertheless unique and recognisable. As a result, the image of London in Neverwhere is both legible and imageable, evoking strong images in the reader’s mind, as the author taps into collective knowledge to make it easy to identify, distinct from other cities, to build and reinforce its structure in the novel, and to endow it with meaning, by creating complex chronotopes, using symbols and numerous onomastic, topographic, historic and mythic allusions.

Works Cited


