

The Construction of @neilhimsel: Empathy and the Art of Neil Gaiman's Empty Protagonist

Standard narratological investigation of the work of Neil Gaiman doesn't immediately show anything too out of the ordinary by way of his writing, and certainly nothing too remarkable overall by way of the construction of his protagonists. As opposed to so many other YACL writers, if anything, Gaiman's protagonists, for my purposes, his young male protagonists, seem peculiarly underwritten and more as opportunities for the facilitation of a story. Whether we are looking at the unnamed protagonists of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* or *Fortunately, the Milk* to the more liminal construction of Nobody Owens as a boy growing into his own humanity in *The Graveyard Book*, Gaiman's young male protagonists seem to operate more as subject positions for the reader to occupy the otherwise empty slots. Or perhaps not.

My argument in this paper considers that this seemingly underdeveloped protagonist is actually quite meticulously crafted to be filled by the reader's conception of the author's voice and biography in what amount to as a sort of game of "Know Neil to Know How to Feel." Known to his audience through his endless interaction with them via social media, Gaiman's readership leans upon its own perceived familiarity with him to flesh out and, in their mind, decode, the characterization of sparsely designed protagonists not unlike how Gaiman uses illustrators to flesh out his more sparse writings in his comics.

Authorial misprision or not, this action denatures normative empathic bonding where a reader shares feelings and bonds through those experiences similarly held with the protagonist into a weird coterminous co-authorship where the reader appears to craft the protagonist through the interlocution and addition of "Neil," gleaned from @neilhimsel, into the text. In effect, to his audience, Gaiman's underwritten, ambiguously crafted young male protagonists are analogous to the character slots of a role playing game, whereas Gaiman supplies and controls the narrative as might a good dungeon master, but, not unlike a game, the audience fulfills their role as a collaborator creating emotional moments not out of shared empathy but from deliberately scripted responses supplied by the biography and tenor of its author, Neil Gaiman.

In the end, Gaiman's readership not only effectively and gleefully dismisses the idea of Barthes' dead author, the readership inserts @neilhimsel into what they perceive to be autobiographically-constructed scripts that demand they play by the author's "rules," his life and motivations to writing. As such, the act of reading certain Gaiman texts becomes an exercise of decoding, not imagining of feeling. Interestingly enough, the empathy constructed in these works is not shared by the reader with the protagonist but with what the audience thinks they know about the author, @neilhimsel, as, in their minds, they have helped craft the protagonist.