Neil Gaiman: Master of Stories

Fairy Tales are no longer just for children. One might suspect that Neil Gaiman has dedicated his life to frustrating librarians, having written dozens of stories that refuse to be pigeonholed into an existing category. Compounding elements of Fantasy, Science-Fiction, Comedy, and even Horror, Gaiman’s hybrid creations never fail to invoke a sense of mysticism and wonder within the reader. **With a unique talent for warping the line that typically divides Children’s and Adult literature, Neil Gaiman has graced the world with short stories, novels, and comics that attracts those of all ages.**

Gaiman’s aptitude for reading and writing was revealed extremely early in his life. Born in the small town of West Sussex in 1960, he attended a Church of England school where he would devour entire textbooks at the age of four. Moving on to the school library Gaiman discovered The Lord of the Rings, (although they only had the first two books of the trilogy) which would serve as one of his first inspirations for creating stories of his own. By the age of ten Gaiman had added H.P. Lovecraft, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and countless other to his list of role models. Norse, Greek, and Egyptian Mythology, in addition to contemporary literature, would also play a huge role in shaping Gaiman’s realm of literary awareness, stirring up a hunger that would lead him to “read the entire children’s section of the local library, and a good bit of the adult section” (Whedon, 21.) Though it was Fantasy that incited his initial interest, the works of Ray Bradbury and Douglas Adams nestled their way into the mind of a teenage Gaiman, leading him to experiment with the genre of Science Fiction. Comic books, specifically Batman related ones, were another one of the influences that soaked into Gaiman’s brain, forming a fascination with the medium of comic books which would later serve as the drive to create his critically acclaimed Sandman series. This myriad of styles, genres, and stories would swirl about in Gaiman’s head, incubating, while he pursued a career in journalism. Gaiman relentlessly wrote reviews and held interviews, hoping to form connections that would later allow his own work to be published. A healthy combination of persistence and luck allowed Gaiman his eventual success; short stories were published in magazines, books were written, and eventually, films were made. Today his works have been read worldwide, translated into several different languages and hailed for their universal appeal. Those who have read or viewed Gaiman’s works commend his originality and his knack for “finding magic in the damnedest places” (Roberts, 2), while others have never heard of him at all.

Gaiman’s ability to write in a variety of styles is one of the man’s most glaring talents. Fantasy is without a doubt Gaiman’s forte; his capacity to twist familiar shapes into hauntingly similar oddities distinctly defines his style, and makes his mark on the genre. Stardust details a young man’s journey to retrieve a fallen star, and imbues several darker themes within that of a Victorian Era fairy tale, leading to the novel being praised by adults in addition to younger readers. American Gods, arguably his most famous work, centers itself on the concept that Gods do indeed exist, but are directly strengthened or weakened by the number of believers that follow them. The novel subtly coerces the reader into analyzing their own “Gods” while allowing a respectful tip-of-the-hat to the once mighty and powerful beings that embodied the values of various civilizations. The characters in Anansi Boys seem more like old acquaintances rather than a series of descriptions encrypted on paper. Each minor flaw or nuisance that the characters present rings a familiar bell, resonating with the reader as it lets them know that they are not alone in their annoyance. Anansi Boys also features many more of Gaiman’s comedic elements, carefully placed throughout the novel to incite laughter during times of distress or suspense. Gaiman’s capability to “transform a mundane world into a place of terrible wonders” (Gee, 12) causes the reader to fantasize about little magic of their own.

Though a few of Gaiman’s novels may have made the New York Times Bestseller list for several consecutive weeks, no individual work of his will ever be free of comparison to his masterpiece: The Sandman. Following his seventy year long imprisonment at the hands of cultists seeking immortality, Morpheus the Sandman, one of several “Endless” (anthropomorphic representations of phenomenon experienced for eternity by mankind) sets about righting the wrongs he has made in the past, his outlook having been changed by his imprisonment. Originally written as a monthly thirty-two page comic book, Sandman grew in popularity at an exponential rate. The Sandman's main character is Dream, the Lord of Dreams (also known, to various characters throughout the series, as Morpheus, Oneiros, the Shaper, the Shaper of Form, Lord of the Dreaming, the Dream King, Dream-Sneak, Dream Cat, Murphy, Kai'ckul, and Lord L'Zoril), who is essentially the anthropomorphic personification of dreams. At the start of the series, Morpheus is captured by an occult ritual and held prisoner for 70 years. Morpheus escapes in the modern day and, after avenging himself upon his captors, sets about rebuilding his kingdom, which has fallen into disrepair in his absence. Gaiman himself has summarized the plot of the series (in the foreword to Endless Nights) as "The Lord of Dreams learns that one must change or die, and makes his decision." The character's initial haughty and often cruel manner begins to soften after his years of imprisonment at the start of the series, but the challenge of undoing past sins and changing old ways is an enormous one for a being who has been set in his ways for billions of years. In its beginnings, the series is a very dark horror comic. Later, the series evolves into an elaborate fantasy series, incorporating elements of classical and contemporary mythology, ultimately placing its protagonist in the role of a tragic hero.

The storylines primarily take place in the Dreaming, Morpheus's realm, and the waking world, with occasional visits to other domains, such as Hell, Faerie, Asgard, and the domains of the other Endless. Many use the contemporary United States of America and the United Kingdom as a backdrop. The DC Universe was the official setting of the series, but well-known DC characters and places were rarely featured after 1990. A notable exception is Lyta Hall, formerly Fury of the 1980s super-team Infinity, Inc., who figures prominently in the "Kindly Ones" story arc, and her superhuman abilities are not ignored. Most of the storylines take place in modern times, but many short stories are set in the past, taking advantage of the immortal nature of many of the characters, and deal with historical individuals and events such as in the short story "Men of Good Fortune."

A faithful subject of his imagination and supreme storyteller, Neil Gaiman is not only capable of weaving entire realms for his audience to experience, but excels at doing so. His careful implementation of fantasy, myth, and humor amongst horribly surreal backdrops draws readers deep into the abyss of his stories, leaving them unsure of what may actually be obscured when they return to familiar reality.

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