

“The best in this kind are but shadows”: Pathos of Aesthetic Alienation in *New Grub Street* and *The Sandman*

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Abstract

Aesthesia or the art of perception involves an awareness of human tendencies and the Greek origin of the word, *aisthesis* stands for “one who perceives.” As much as an author might or might not find it significant to observe their surroundings and then fictionalize them to be able to emulate a lived reality, seen and heard all too well – one cannot disagree that once the vision they try to communicate achieves a heightened focus and is given a shape of words – the writer finds themselves in a mode of paradoxical nonexistence, in other words, aesthetic alienation. This paper aims to identify the very process through which a writerly vision comes true as an author decidedly chooses creative sincerity over domestic comfort as seen in George Gissing’s 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*, and Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*, a DC Vertigo comic series (1993). Closely examining the dramatis personae and their intimate imitation of the respective authors’ aesthetic beliefs, the article makes use of both primary and secondary data and discovers that the domain of creative genesis is always separated from the finished literary products, autonomous and distant.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Alienation, Literary Practice, Dream, Reality

In order to understand how aesthetic interests are pursued in the world of creative writing, one can suggest a certain scene (Act 4, Scene 6) from *King Lear* where Shakespeare dramatizes Lear and Gloucester’s self-affliction and a consequential change of heart in the middle of a storm. When Lear, a now maddened beggar, appreciates Gloucester, a man who could feel life with depth despite his apparent blindness, the latter does not take time to calmly affirm, “I see it feelingly” (4.7.205). Likewise, in the previous scene, as two actors respectively pretending to be a vagabond (in actuality, the noble youth, Edgar) and an elderly nobleman (his “authentic” homeless father, the Earl of Gloucester) walk up a hill together, the audience also “feelingly” sees a “horrible steep” (Shakespeare 4.7.198) above the English channel in place of the flat stage. The language of Shakespeare itself plays a more active role in creating the illusion than sound effects or however many props a director uses. Nevertheless, just after a while, we feel pulled out of the theatrical performance and thrown into real life almost in the same breath when Edgar becomes a mediator between the imaginary “irreality” of Shakespeare’s play and the terrestrial awareness of the audience. The scene reverses as yet again he stands aside and admits to “trifle



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thus ... to cure” (Shakespeare 4.7.198) his father’s suicidal thoughts and pretends to be another man from the beach below helping the old man attain a “miraculous” survival from a potential fall off the cliff. However self-reflexive and many-layered a stagecraft it is, the audience, ready to be entertained like Gloucester, is not necessarily after an apologia for the decisions Shakespeare might make to prove anything geographically, historically, or contextually accurate, for it is more drawn to the value of “speaking what we feel, not what we ought to say” (Shakespeare 5.3.324).

This Coleridgean “suspension of disbelief” readers or observers assume to momentarily isolate themselves and fully indulge in theatrical illusions while at the same time surveying the stage like a haunting third is a paradoxical situation that can be applied to a fictionist who is presently invested in the processes of creating a narrative. In order to attain a heightened state of imagination till the plot takes its own course and characters become *real* in an author’s imagination, he/she is to consider themselves to be an outsider watching the stories slowly unfold before them. The Eliotesque desire of “doing the police in different voices” (Bedient 104) perhaps, pervades all possible creative ventures when an artist, trying to “animate many different voices with equal conviction” (Bate 31), finds it somewhat imperative to dissolve “the very identity of the body that writes” (Barthes 142). Oscar Wilde also claimed the same in “The Soul of Man under Socialism”: an author “stands outside his subject, and through its medium produces incomparable artistic effects” (307). In light of this aesthetic alienation – a prerequisite for any visionary effort – both George Gissing and Neil Gaiman, despite a century-long gap in terms of the very idiosyncratic nature of writing, address how a writer “instead of participating in life, watch(es) themselves standing apart, making it the raw material for art” (Bate 12). For Gaiman, this attempt involves showing a renewed interest in William Shakespeare as a sub-character playing an important role (much akin to how Shakespeare treated “less significant” peasants in his work) in issues 13, 19, and 75 of his critically acclaimed and publicly admired comic series, *The Sandman* (1990). The character of Shakespeare here deals with the inevitable isolation of a historical existence he achieved by producing timeless narratives (Puschak 06:30-06:39). As for Gissing, in his novel, *New Grub Street* (1891), it is Edwin Reardon, an ambitious talented young writer of commercially unsuccessful novels from Victorian London who, in his pursuit of the “golden” era of literature “unsullied by mechanical production” (Knox 105), fails to appeal to the salability of authorship and finds himself isolated from the community of self-proclaimed “populist” editors, publishers, and writers. They also captured the power of individual aesthetic visions that shape the authors’ respective interpretations of the world, heavily emphasizing the notion of literature as “dream-material” (Katsiadis 71); and the extreme price an author has to pay giving life to his/her imagination while not being able to live one of their own.

Initially supposed to be a revival of a 1970s DC superhero with the same name as a monthly horror comic in 1988 (later printed in *Vertigo* collections), Neil Gaiman replaced the common idea of a muscle-bound crime hunter with a pale slender-figured

divinity named Morpheus, Oneiros (after the Greek God), Lord Shaper, Prince of Stories, Dream Lord, but mostly as Dream who rules over the realm of Dreaming. Traditionally considered a “low art” (primarily appealing to teenagers) exhibiting colorful illustrations of overtly masculine men/feminine women or mainstream slangs and speech balloons, the very definition of comics, however, has gone through significant changes over the recent years as a form of alternative rhetoric ranging from the sorts of pragmatic (*Kick-ass*, 2008) to those of non-sequential surrealistic (more or less all Japanese *manga* series). An ever-flexible genre-bending continued series, it allows a writer to accessorize an imaginary environment much similar to what the thirteenth-century French writers did in a Vulgate Cycle – a huge network of interlocking tales featuring hundreds of quasi-historical, mythical, legendary or actual characters from different universes of literature, politics, mythologies, and religions in a parallel montage – which together would contribute to the making of the mother plot. Gaiman takes advantage of this particular form of popular expression as well as the incredible lack of concrete information regarding Shakespeare, the man and the writer to fictionalize his works (specifically, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*) into a parallel metafiction that “comments both on Shakespeare’s life and on the nature of literary creation and storytelling” itself (Round 97). Much against the pedagogical tendency of dissecting Shakespeare in terms of quotation marks, reference lists, and academic formats, Gaiman explores the “obligation to imagination” (2013) a storyteller has to fulfill: “of telling, of being told to, of being told about” (Blank 299). Just the way Shakespeare single-handedly revisited, adapted, and popularized hundreds of otherwise little-known original narratives, giving them a new identity and form from what they used to be – Shakespeare himself has been reconstructed in Gaiman’s world as a dream emissary catering to both the Renaissance and modern subjectivity – an author in search of a *vatic* truth that requires his deliberate disavowal of the little propensities which ultimately make him a human. Though carefully preserved in the pages of history, the alienation of a genius rising above an awe-struck audience only to find themselves desolate in a kingdom made of their own imagination is an inevitable end which seems to strike the three-fold mirror image of Dream the protagonist, Shakespeare the character, and Gaiman the author all at once in the “plethora ... of art, beauty, and other worldliness” (Lancaster 71) that is the fantasyland of *The Sandman*.

In *The Sandman*, the bard appears three separate times, the first being “Men of Good Fortune” (No. 13) in which Gaiman introduces Shakespeare as a novice writer full of ambitions ready to leave his mark on the world, while the other two are “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (No. 19, winner of the World Fantasy Award, 1991, and the only comic to win in the category of Prose Fiction) and “The Tempest” (logically enough, the last issue of the series, No. 75) all of which have bits and pieces from the original plays intermingled with Gaiman’s personalized narrative. Each of these issues plays with our usual suspicions about the bardic magic of creativity Shakespeare possessed; the authenticity of his work; the universal appeal he was

able to create; his decided biographical presence or reticence; and all in all, how he became a master of storytelling in his lifetime followed by a possible empathetic understanding of what cost him to do just that. The protagonist, however, by no means, is Shakespeare but Dream, one of the pantheon of the Endless which other than himself, consists of his six siblings – Destiny, Death, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium – personified entities of universally applicable attributes. It should be of interest to notice here that of all the equally dynamic anthropomorphized forces that Gaiman illustrated in a controlled yet chaotic vortex of intertextual mythologies and polyphonic storylines, it was Dream he chose to be the protagonist, perhaps, because as Kurt Lancaster says, this character captures one of the core issues Gaiman wanted to explore in *The Sandman*: “humanity’s desire for dreams and the cost of attaining that desire” (71) – also reinforced by Dream Lord himself: “He [Shakespeare] did not understand the price. Mortals never do. They only see the prize, their heart’s desire, their dream” (Gaiman 20). In other words, Dream is addressing the unforeseen perils of a lifelong dedication towards the endeavor of dreaming which Gaiman thinks is but equivalent to storytelling and requires an ultimate compromise of living a life as one knows it so that stories about different modes of lives can be observed and then publicly communicated. And for Gaiman, no one but Shakespeare is a perfect vessel of some of the most powerful stories ever told for his “propagation of dreams via stories, humanization of the cosmos and cross-cultural coherence,” the leading dreamer of his time and even that of Gaiman’s (Lancaster 72).

In an issue (No. 13) primarily concerned with questions of men and mortality, Shakespeare greets the readers of Gaiman for the first time as a certain “Will Shaxberd,” a supporting character that Dream meets by chance when he goes to a Renaissance pub to see someone called Hob Gadling, a man whose desire to be immortal was granted by Dream during one of his investigations of the mortal world and its dreams. Shaxberd, desperate to win fortune’s favor and about to stage his first play, finds it exceptionally difficult to compete with his contemporaries like Christopher Marlowe, whose “gifts” of composing plays like *Dr. Faustus* according to Shaxberd are the signs of a sublime aspiration, “or more than [that], to give men dreams, that would live on long after I am dead” (Gaiman, No. 13, 13). The concept of defeating death, therefore, in a dialectic connection draws itself back towards the question of immortality posed by Gadling. Later, it is revealed that ironically it is Shaxberd who is about to do it, and not Gadling, for a more aesthetically meaningful proposal is being offered to no one but the writer, a man soon to dream up the narratives which will gain him eternity. In a private bargaining scene, the ambitious playwright readily accepts the gift of creativity from Dream Lord almost in a Faustian fashion in exchange for writing two plays to celebrate Dream and his immense power over humans (revealed later in No. 19). Thus, in Gaiman’s imagination, the *bildungsroman* journey of Will Shaxberd, an average writer on his way to becoming William Shakespeare, one of the world’s pioneering literary figures, starts.

It can be argued that an inherent characteristic of a dream is its malleability containing “multiple projections of imaginative activity” (Katsiadis 63) at the same time, giving us enough scope to entertain our interpretational interests (Vorwerk 7). For Shakespeare’s second appearance in the comic, Gaiman skillfully develops a storyline (No. 19) which not only holds the same title as Shakespeare’s original play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1596) but also incorporates its actual plot and some of the major characters including Titania, Oberon, Theseus, Hippolyta, Puck, the rude mechanicals, and so on. Gaiman remains true to the Shakespearean motifs and chooses a theatrical piece with one of the most brilliant dreamscapes imagined – full of fine fantasies, lucid dreams, parallel realities, bizarre transformations, carnivalesque transgressions of ontological boundaries, reversal of magic spells and lovers, communion of royalty and groundlings, humans having the “most rare visions” (Shakespeare, *Midsummer* 138) of fairies, and the list goes on. However, what stands out about this play is how it appraises the power of human imagination; the way “dreamers” or people involved in any field of liberal arts are perceived in their time; and the tragic eventualities that might yield before or after a dreamer (in this case, a writer) decides to dream (write) and supplant the reality with their aesthetic ideals. Perhaps, this is what motivated Gaiman to make use of the “parted eyes” in *AMND* and envisage how Shakespeare, the dreamer in debt to d/Dream for his creative inspiration might pen his dilemmas, underscoring a crucial issue closely tied to *The Sandman*’s heart: aesthetic alienation or simply put, an artist’s commitment to his/her art in relation to the everyday life they live (Shakespeare, *Midsummer* 176).

An astounding miscellanea of Ovid, Chaucer, Marlowe, Spenser, North’s *Plutarch*, English folk-tales, and idyllic sceneries of Sussex Downs, *AMND* has been adapted previously by well-known writers like Rudyard Kipling (*Puck of Pook’s Hill*, 1906) or Terry Pratchett (*Lords and Ladies*, 1992), but *The Sandman* surpasses the common expectations of all regular, irregular, and even rare readers of comics. Unlike others, it involves Gaiman imagining the way Shakespeare, an ideal Romantic dreamer would have confronted the sine qua nons of the outer world, where “dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down” (Woolf 51); and mostly, a son will demand his father’s attention. In “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (No. 19), Gaiman opens the scene with a troupe of actors including Shakespeare and his eight-year-old son Hamnet, making their way to an English countryside on June 23, 1593 to stage the first show of *AMND* which historically is also very close to the year of the original play’s composition. As the illustrations progress, we begin to notice Shakespeare’s constant denial to spend time with his son since the playwright is too occupied directing the actors, meeting Dream who will bring a mysterious audience for the play’s premiere, and finally, mediating between the land of Dream (since the fantastical creatures in the audience are none other than the real-life counterparts of his characters in the play) and the land of men (real-life mechanicals). And when the bard moves on to attend a far more important call

of duty which is to please Dream and his audience with the first of the two plays he promised in his contract, we see the grey shadow of a dejected Hamnet falling behind in the background (2), “a telling image that connects the reader to Hamnet’s plight” (Lancaster 71).

Furthermore, when an ecstatic Hamnet approaches Shakespeare to share a conversation he just had with a fairy creature (Titania), the playwright cannot help expressing his vexation at the “foolish fancies” (Gaiman 25) of the child. This ironic situation raises questions about the authorial honesty of the very man who is keen to “give men dreams” (Gaiman, No. 13, 13) and offer “to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name” (Shakespeare, *Midsommer* 17), yet undermines the power of dreaming and considers the actual encounter between his son and a fairy just another product of a “seething brain” (Shakespeare, *Midsommer* 4). A dreamer pressured to live up to his visions that will define humankind’s future modes of storytelling, Shakespeare in one fraction of a moment seems to forget the way dreams work, that there is no “big dream” (high aesthetic taste of the royalty or critics) or “small dream” (malapropisms of the rude mechanicals or Hamnet’s childhood fantasies) since all of them are born of imagination’s “great constancy,” equally “strange and admirable” (Shakespeare, *Midsommer* 25) in their own rights. It takes till the end of the comic for the bard to finally believe in his own words verbalized through the epiphanic realization of Theseus in *AMND*, “the best in this kind are but shadows” (Shakespeare 25-26). It implies that the best (or even the worst) of creative labors are but illusions, a part of the shadow-realm a writer visits only in their dreams and creates visions so powerful that have “the disconcerting ability to take the place of real-life” (Castaldo 105), for the writer inhabits the story and the story, in turn, inhabits the readers’ world.

At the latter part of the installment, Shakespeare’s distance from his son brings about even more cathartic twists when Hamnet’s fear of his own death becoming one of his father’s stories does turn out to be true as the playwright’s figment of imagination, Titania, the fairy queen from *AMND* reveals herself as an existing entity among the onlookers. Intrigued by Hamnet’s performance as the play’s Indian boy, she takes an interest in the lonesome child following the exact fashion of the “fake” Titania on stage (who was responsible for the changeling’s disappearance from the human realm) and gives him the attention he deserved but did not quite receive from his father. Some critics claim Hamnet is the real-life source of the epitome of Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Hamlet*, but what is significant here is how Gaiman has drawn a parallel alignment between the reality Shakespeare imagines and the reality that does actually happen, mirroring the way he imagined it. In an attempt to defamiliarize the known and pursue the sublime remote, Gaiman’s Shakespeare becomes a spectator to his own life: “I watched my life as if it were happening to someone else. My son died. And I was hurt. But I watched my hurt, and even relished it, a little, for now, I could write a real death, a true loss” (Gaiman, No. 75, 27). The final page of the issue throwing a casual remark on Hamnet Shakespeare’s

premature death in 1596, “aged eleven” (Gissing 26), reiterates an acute awareness of loss permeating the world of Shakespeare’s creation, majestic yet very lonely. Similar to Shakespeare, Dream’s assistance in the death of his son, Orpheus, signals a climactic hour in “Brief Lives” (Nos. 41-49 of the series) since a part of Dream is freed of his son’s responsibility. A series of unfortunate events thus triggers an already felt isolation or imprisonment within self-made walls which is a recurrent motif in the comic and reflected at the very beginning of it when Dream Lord finds himself captured at the hand of some corrupt mortals who wanted to kidnap his sister, Death, but took him instead. Alienation also finds its way of blatant revelation when the groundling Hob Gadling finally understands why the mighty lord of Dreams visits a mortal like him after every one-hundred years – precisely because he does not have any friends, is “lonely” (Gaiman, No. 13, 23) and always has been since he bears the burden of ruling over the land of Dreaming – a burden solely his to carry.

A dream-narrative within a narrative about a protagonist named Dream, No. 19 of *The Sandman* is a stand-alone story about storytelling which stresses the self-decided alienation of a playwright/actor/dreamer safeguarding themselves from possible distractions so that the more imminent task of carrying on with the show is properly met, thus becoming “a man who gives up all true connections to everyday life for eternal glory,” only to regret it later (Castaldo 101). Not very long after the play begins, we see Shakespeare mortified at the news of his friend Marlowe’s death and yet ready for the stage against his better judgment, such is his isolation enforced by untold responsibilities since it is he whose dreams and “shadow truths will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot” (Gaiman, No. 19, 21). Here, in a symbolic way Gaiman implies how Shakespeare’s undeniable emergence as the Bard of the Elizabethan “singing nest” both literally and metaphorically obliterated the existence of the other writers of his time and even some of the next (Puschak 04:30-05:39). Gaiman makes a similar approach in the last issue of *The Sandman*, “The Tempest” (No. 75). There, Ben Jonson appears in a good number of pages to let us know that Shakespeare, indeed, did borrow many of his plots and characters from secondary sources like those by Montaigne, Plutarch, and Raphael Holinshed. However, they are simply forgotten over time since Shakespeare immortalized the versions he customized and made completely his own, so much so that the less informed audience like Hob Gadling thought the possibility of *King Lear* having a happy ending is a work of “idiots” (Gaiman, No. 19, 19). But the truth is Shakespeare reversed it in his play because this is what he had envisioned in one of his dreams.

Shakespeare makes his appearance for the final time in *The Sandman* in its last issue, “The Tempest,” (No. 75) which incidentally was also his swan song with the same title. As the bard struggles to finish the final play he promised to write for Dream, his wife interrupts and complains, “You dream too much nonsense” (Gaiman, No. 75, 21) which she believes is leading their only daughter, Juditha, astray. The concept of dreaming associated with “daydreaming” or similar pejorative suggestions seems

to continue when Shakespeare comes across a puritanist comment in an inn and is called a “plague-crow,” a bringer of the black plague in the country because sins bring plagues and his plays bring sins (Gaiman, No. 75, 7). At this point, Gaiman reveals a realization he has come to after years of practicing as a professional writer as well as his historical knowledge of Shakespeare: the reception of a dreamer in their time. In all probability, a man of “small Latin, and less Greek” (Jonson 31) background, Shakespeare was considered an “upstart-crow” with his thick provincial accent (Bate 12) at some points of his life upon entering the London Theatre. Also, condemned multiple times by historiographers for showing more interest in monetary investments, political alliances, “bricks and mortar” (Gaiman, No. 75, 39), and making an exit as soon as enough money for an easy life after retirement was managed, Shakespeare might not have received the same recognition when he was alive as we might think, at least not by some sections of the native/non-native communities of readers, viewers, publishers, actors, or patrons – simply because logically it would be impossible to please all at a time. Being a poet, he was also a “lunatic,” a “lover,” and a “madman” who “sees more devils than vast hell can hold,” (Gaiman, No. 75, 10), as would like to believe some of the anti-theatre conservatives of the contemporary canonical tradition.

Therefore, Gaiman believes to be able to harbor the creative impulse and not compromise innate aesthetic values while at the same time make a living out of it or produce plays for public consumption against the “constraining conventions of theatre and in some cases, financial well-being of his family” (Pendergast 190), Shakespeare the author had to experience estrangement unlike any other man of his time. As much as Gaiman explores the *imago* of the bard as a distant star inspired by exquisite dreams and mythic materials, he does not forget to remind us that Lord Strange’s Men are laborers who “also need to pay [their] way through the countryside” (Gaiman, No. 19, 15). However, the readers of *The Sandman* are not given a proper chance to be disappointed at the thought of pure organic dreams being utilized as a mere commodity by the professional playwright, for Gaiman makes sure that Dream meets Shakespeare, the source of poetic visions unites with the artist, and the Romantic pursuit of aesthetic values finds its way back home for one last time in the final issue of the series.

“The Tempest” (No. 75), thus, functions as a valedictory narrative of the quadruple orientations of Prospero, a dream-vision of Shakespeare; Shakespeare, the anamorphic human vehicle remembered for his stories; Dream, the archetypical prince of dreams (stories) without whose assistance there would be no Shakespeare; and finally, Neil Gaiman, the master writer who brought all the previous three to his pages, invisible but unmistakably present only “a paper’s thickness away” (Brown 165). They all simultaneously plead for our indulgence to “set them free” from “the burden of words” (Gaiman, No. 75, 41), for all of them are one embodiment of the same self-portrait: a storyteller celebrated for his imaginative plenitude. The greatest legacy of Shakespeare in his ability to maintain a delicate yet effective

verisimilitude of concepts like reality, truths, and dreams to their full complexity is what Gaiman finds to be the ultimate definition of writerly achievement. In his mind, Shakespeare lives all his dreams (beautifully illustrated in No. 75 with Shakespeare sitting at his desk by the candlelight and dreaming his visions in shades more vivid and real against the monochromic setting of his room) and gives shapes to “things unknown” (Shakespeare, *Tempest* 5.1.15). As Mazzotta comments on the epilogue of *The Tempest*, “If we are chameleons who become all we touch, then, we may really be nothing of our own” (Pendergast 196). Shakespeare does confirm to lose himself among the many lives he created, no less eventful than the “real ones” of Ben Jonson (Gaiman, No. 75, 37) and despite all the resentments of continuing to do so against the approval of his kinsmen or even the church (as shown in the final pages of the series), he is finally released of his aesthetic responsibilities and continues to live, though alone, through the creations born of his dreams. Hence, for Shakespeare, the shadow line between illusion and reality can be found oscillating in a third space behind the g/Globe and its curtain which is where d/Dream, the quintessential origin of creativity abides (Gaiman, No. 75, 40).

On the other hand, at once comparable and not with Gaiman’s Shakespeare, George Gissing introduces a 19th century emerging young writer named Edwin Reardon in his novel, *New Grub Street* (1891), a perpetual dreamer determined to regain the Arcadian glory of the British literary history at the cost of not living his present reality in a new London, a very “new” Grub Street, *The Nether World* (1889), or *The Whirlpool* (1897). A labor-market of writers of histories and dictionaries, it was a promiscuous city that changed the very definition of literature with self-proclaimed “progressive” journalism and championed its mass consumption through plagiarized articles, replicas of reviews, periodicals, manuals, readers’ digests, fancy magazines with velvety covers, inflated political proceedings, and ornate official supplements. Reardon and his friend, who also happens to be an aspiring self-dependent writer, Harold Biffen, together portray a Janus-faced struggle of pursuing the aesthetic impulse to create and at the same time a remarkably ambivalent late-Victorian temper to the business of “realist” literature. The very opening scene of the novel with an unperturbed Jasper Milvain casually enjoying his breakfast and throwing a remark rather “with cheerfulness” (Gissing 7) on a man being hanged in London creates the onset of a fiction prepared to present the reality as it is, thriving with “penny-a-liners” (Lewes 300), desensitized space-fillers of voluminous journalistic/literary production (i.e., a three-volume system or a three-decker novel) recycled to the point where they lose their substance. As claims the Yule brother, Alfred, “The evil of the time is the multiplication of ephemerides. Hence a demand for essays, descriptive articles, fragments of criticism, out of all proportion to the supply of even tolerable work” (Gissing 69). Similarly, his daughter Marian is found in the British Museum contemplating on the lack of originality among the writers of the time while “exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day’s market” (Gissing 200).

Uncompromising times like these do not leave too many options to explore in terms of creative writing, driving young old souls like Reardon towards their self-decided isolation, “never seeing those of his acquaintances who were outside the literary world” (Gissing 297), the world he created in his imagination free of all procedural formalities, journalistic attacks, political upheavals, and critical retorts of his contemporaries, namely Milvain and John Yule.

“The economic realities of the profession continued to demand a flexibility of both talent and attitude from those who would chance it for a living” (Asch 27) and Reardon, one of the many writers in the novel, appears to find it increasingly difficult to become a tradesman and consider writing merely as an economic activity, a profession of industrial utility and not a vocation of choice. Trapped between the educated middle-class readers’ demand for quick journalistic materials (like those in *The Current*, *The Study*, *The West End*, and so on) and the sophisticated Scriblerian tradition of exploring the power of language to a satiric end, Reardon almost becomes a real-life model of Gissing himself, making the novel a “*roman a clef*” (Poole 141). The entire scenario here evokes the same struggles that Gissing experienced in his life as a writer conditioned to “speak an alien language and live in a Leyden jar” (Gosse 279), underrated and at times rebuked for being unfaithful to the much popular genre of romantic realism “written to please people” (Gissing 86). In that way, we can draw a parallel connection between *The Sandman* and *New Grub Street*, both of which investigate the nature of creative endeavors in an autobiographical connection to the writers themselves. Whereas Gaiman manages to frame the despair of authorial sincerity in an allegorical comic and appeals to his readers’ pleasure, Gissing demands a direct yet “far studious ... mode of readerly engagement” (Hone 180) challenging the late-Victorian liquidation of literature to the state of “table garnishing” (Gissing 170). With an Arnoldian confidence in classics as “touchstones” and a tireless pursuit of authorial intents, Reardon turns into “a Jasper of the facile pen,” a miserable man of letters who feels as “unfortunate” as a street woman selling away his honor, his intellectual propriety (Gissing 455).

As Gissing explores the complex idea of serious literature supplanted by casual journalism, “objective art’s inevitable, degrading concession to subjective economic experiences” (Asch 28), Reardon fails and his counterpart, Milvain thrives. “An alarmingly modern young man” (Gissing 4), Milvain seeks opportunities and seizes one by marrying Reardon’s widowed wife Amy, a proud inheritor of £10,000 from her uncle, right after Reardon dies following a lifetime of depression, poverty, broken health, frequent attacks of writer’s block, and the ultimate death of his son. The symbolic body swap of Reardon by Milvain shows “the intellectual temper [which] was that of the student, the scholar,” of Homer, Virgil, or Dr. Grantly and his reverie of the English countryside is of no value to “the market [that] conditions the act of thinking itself” (Asch 30), the observations that might or might not be organic but disposable only before the taste of London and its self-contained meritocracy. Altogether, the disappearance of Reardon from Grub Street

only implies the impossibility of separating the aesthetic merit of any given work from the commercial value it has a chance to attain in the market. If a day's work of translation or review of an already reviewed product is worth "ten to twelve guineas," it does not matter whether the work concerned has the imaginative value "of a mouldy nut" (Gissing 181).

Since the subjective essence of writing/reading is plagued by press machines and the capitalist nature of journalism is rewarded by the laws of supply and consumption, some regular practices of a literary enthusiast in Gissing's world would include: reading at least four newspapers and two magazines, composing Saturday columns, sketching out papers, and recording potential material on a daily basis (Gissing 181). Milvain's triumph over an overworked Reardon who fails to anticipate the ubiquity of telegraphic communication (after Edison) and appease a people "who can't distinguish between stones and paste" only indicates what is deemed as success in the New Street of writers, readers, and publishing houses (Gissing 181). Gissing complains that here hundreds and thousands of paper sheets are merchandized and maltreated in the name of academic, journalistic, and thespian enterprises only to meet egocentric ends and parade a commercial sentiment of offending and defending contemporary literature just so a profitable business can be established. In Reardon's case, despite nurturing a passing fancy to let go of his "uncompromising artistic pedantry," he ultimately fails to do so due to an intrinsic fear that perhaps every writer feels of being forgotten or worse, remembered for their authorial insincerity (Gissing 64). Whereas Shakespeare, the character in *Gaiman* and the laureate of Renaissance England, was able to please many and please for long by presenting the general truth of humanity, Gissing found that same nature of truth, be it one of literature or life, drastically changed as press politics and pragmatic journalism corrupted the ways life itself was perceived in the late-eighteenth century Grub Street: prosaic, redundant, and mechanized.

Coming back to fiction, since the middle-class readership developed a taste for what Gissing found to be a "Zolaesque style of novel writing" with agreeable stories, cheerful notes, "systematically flattered" naturalism and tantalizing romance stories for a plot, the triplets of Reardon, Biffen, and their creator all felt that the Victorian fascination with literature as a breeding ground for faltering materials was only a communal loss of interest in the classics (998). Critiqued many a time for this "nostalgic retrogression" and haughty classicism which Garrett Stewart argued, expose Gissing's "devotion to the dead past as a repudiation of the future" (337), rendering an obsolete contempt against the mass readers (for him, consumers) of his time – it cannot be denied that Gissing's preoccupation with a selected few bygone days in the history of British literature and rigorous stylists like Landor, Quincey, and Ruskin rather barred him from seeing the beauty that the popular work of Austen, Dickens, or George Eliot possessed – accessible, yet no less sincere than what Reardon so desperately sought in his work. The ideal image of a reader for Gissing, is one of a traveler he met in his childhood who knew Latin and always carried a copy

of Horace “battered, thumbed and penciled” (330) for regularly tossing and turning and memorizing the pages by heart, implying how important Gissing found it to cultivate a genuine reception of aesthetic voices not by mass-mediated markets at that moment, but years later by the scholars, critics, and enthusiasts, a new progeny of studious readers hopefully more modern and mature than the previous.

An example can be found in the novel itself where Reardon and his friend Biffen read excerpts from Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and find themselves lost in a technical conversation trying to determine the correct acoustic patterns one should adopt to separate the narrative voice of the chorus from those of the singular characters (Gissing 134). Here, the high expectations that Reardon, and in turn, Gissing nurtures regarding an absolute profitless circulation of first-rate fiction produced and appreciated by writers, readers, and publishers of similar intellectual aptitude more interested in curtailing the vernacular for the sake of a coded literacy seems to be an attempt too ambitious ever to make a reality. The aesthetic responsibility that Reardon takes on his shoulder to train the mass reading ear “to a restrained, if not reticent” (Matz 213) symbolic register of a text signaling an ideal literary engagement irrespective of common human concerns (at times, financial and even biological), is bound to fail precisely because such concentrations are remarkably “self-contained” (Asch 34), making Reardon an isolated artist looking for inspiration in the loopholes of a dead past, not ready to consider his own time and spirit as potential source material for aesthetic investment. This is where we can see another point of departure between Gaiman’s Shakespeare and Gissing’s Reardon – one willing to turn his life into art and the other, art into life – though both experience the same desolation of a writer’s persona determined to live their dream at any cost.

Against Reardon’s unfeasible vision of a perfect world of craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities, we see the constant triumph of eloquent automatons like Milvain with their “cyborg-like capacity” to regurgitate stories already told for the umpteenth time and a pathetic picture of sincere writers like Reardon and Biffen typing away banal advertisements choosing clerkship over creativity (Hone 206). A more harrowing picture ensues towards the middle of the novel when Biffen jumps into a blazing fire risking his life to save a manuscript he has just completed after much toil only to realize a few days later that perhaps the critics and readers would have been stirred to actually give his book a try with him dead than alive. And over the next few chapters, we can see a completely heartbroken Reardon aimlessly roaming about the city streets dreaming over his once successful attempt at writing while spontaneously reciting in public some lines from *Antony and Cleopatra*, which had “superfluous kings for messengers” to the commons (Gissing 206). Almost instantly, he receives a “loud mocking laugh” of the onlookers of a modern London (Matz 212), reflecting a culture that has rejected its noble past and “does not listen, but only hears” the many great voices it once sheltered like that of Shakespeare (Hone 217). Inevitably, Reardon’s demise after a while in the following chapter reinforces Gissing’s personal confrontation with the contemporary world of fiction where the

audibility of literary voices has to flirt with the madness of modern London, easy to avoid but difficult to live in. All in all, despite epitomizing the manifold dimensions of a vain aesthetic vision, Reardon does invoke a cathartic air permeating the entire novel and the city that produced it and he accepts the isolation of an author readily lost in a “valley of the shadow of books” and finds comfort therein (Knox 93).

Throughout the ages, as imaginative perceptions change in a self-questioning survival game of artists, writers, or other practitioners of liberal arts, ancient binaries of “observing” and “being observed” rather seem to gesture at even more interrelational complexities between those who write and the oeuvres that in turn write them – be it in the Victorian London of George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* or the chimerical territory of Dream in Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*. In both texts, we see how writers and their commitment towards a creative construction lend them an alienation which is highly intuitive and inevitable since the focused immersion that is required for the telling of a story and the way it is observed or intended to be told ultimately depend on the observational integrity of the authors themselves. Also, as Barthes notes, the active participation of an audience willing enough to be born with the writer ready to die is a significant factor for one to read or write more freely without any added inhibitions. Still, somewhere in the middle of a story the storyteller disappears – making us question how they see a story coming alive living a story themselves, how they narrate us a dream while bringing us out of it, and mostly, how the shadowy realm we see once we close our eyes builds the world that we see with eyes wide open.

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