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The Other Side of Wall: Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* as a Portal Quest



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1 Introduction

Stardust is a fantasy novel published in 1999 by the author Neil Gaiman, originally published in 1992 as a picture book. The novel follows the adventures of Tristran Thorn as he attempts to capture a fallen star in order to woo the girl considered the most beautiful in the mundane English town of Wall. Tristan leaves his familiar home and ventures out into the land of Faerie, where instead of a piece of fallen rock, Tristan finds the star in the form of a girl named Yvaine, who has a broken leg. There are obstacles preventing Tristan from returning home with Yvaine from within Faerie, however—also with their eyes on the star are an aged witch-queen and her sisters looking to restore their youth and beauty, a similarly frazzled witch, and the sons of a king searching for their right to inherit the throne. With their successful return to Wall, Tristran decides to leave his formerly beloved in her happy state, and he and Yvaine return to Faerie to travel and eventually inherit the throne to Stormhold, as Tristran is revealed to be the last surviving male heir. Typical fantasy tropes are played with within *Stardust*, allowing for a degree of self-awareness—the narrator occasionally addresses the reader directly as a sort of conspiratorial “wink-wink nudge-nudge”—yet most of the novel follows in the footsteps of traditional fantasy stories and fairy tales.

2 Mendlesohn and Portal Quests

Major common features of such fantasy stories are described in the science fiction academic Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetoric’s of Fantasy*, where she sorts fantasy into four main categories depending on “the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world”. These are portal quest, immersive, intrusive, and liminal fantasy respectively (xiv). The defining feature of portal quests is that the protagonist—and by association the reader—passes through a portal, leaving “familiar surroundings” and entering “an unfamiliar place” (Mendlesohn 1). A common structure of portal quest fantasies entails that the “naïve” protagonist, to whom the fantastic is distant or unreachable, comes into “direct contact with the fantastic” until he or she is able to influence the secondary world with their newfound knowledge directly. Mendlesohn labels these stages as “entry, transition, and negotiation” (2). *Stardust* is a portal quest fantasy with its use of borders, portals, and linguistic features to show the protagonist’s entry from the primary world into the secondary world and to emphasise the contrast between the two, while also showing the transition and negotiation periods as the main character adapts to the secondary world.

3 *Stardust* and the Two Worlds

Stardust’s main structure follows Mendlesohn’s definition of portal quests, complete with the protagonist’s entry to a secondary world via a portal, a transition period where the secondary world is familiarised, resulting in a negotiation period where the characters have influence over the secondary world (2). Throughout this process, the secondary world is contrasted with the primary world, and *Stardust* does this by emphasising the borders/portals, using linguistic contrasts, and using

different description for the primary and secondary world to show the protagonist's transition and to relate and distance the secondary world to the reader.

3.1 Borders and Portals

In *Stardust*, there are both physical and fluid borders between the primary world of Wall and the secondary world of Faerie and portals between the two. The actual wall surrounding the town of Wall (and by extension the town itself) acts as a border between the two worlds, with 19th Century England developing on one side and the land of Faerie on the other. Dunstan Thorn, Tristran's father, dreams of "leaving the village of Wall and all its unpredictable charm, and going to London, or Edinburgh, or Dublin, or some great town where nothing was dependent on which way the wind was blowing" (*Stardust* ch. 1). The irony presented here, of course, is that in its "unpredictable charm", Wall is predictable—yet to escape it, Dunstan can only choose one direction: that of the "real" world. The people of Wall try their best to put the other side of the wall "out of their minds" (*Stardust* ch. 1). Faerie is forbidden, and the wall is guarded all year round.

Though Wall is a threshold against magic of sorts and crossings of the wall are rare, there are exceptions where Wall, the contact point between the two worlds, is crossed and becomes a portal instead of a border. The fair that visits the meadow outside Wall every nine years is an opportunity for the fantastic and the mundane to mingle, and it is during one of these "mingling" phases that Tristran is conceived. Tristran is later allowed to pass through the wall due to his heritage. The townspeople he leaves behind are "framed in the gap" from his perspective, while as soon as Tristan passes through, he notes the abnormal moon and the fragrant scents immediately, signalling a new, unfamiliar environment. He hesitates, before finally passing "beyond the fields we know...and into Faerie" (*Stardust* ch. 1). Tristan may have roots in the fantasy world, but at this point in his journey he sees himself as completely human. With these contrasts of both ends of the portal, the distinction between Wall and Faerie is made clear.

The duality of this border/portal highlighted when Tristran and Yvaine return to Wall together. Mendlesohn writes of portal quests: "Crucially, the fantastic is on the other side and does not 'leak.' Although individuals may cross both ways, the magic does not" (xix). Tristran can return through the portal regardless of where he feels more at home. Yvaine, however, cannot cross the threshold without transforming "into what [she] would be in that world: a cold, dead thing, sky-fallen" (*Stardust* ch. 10). Yvaine, as a fallen star, would lose all but her most literal form if she were to cross the border; magic and the fantastic cannot "leak back" into the primary universe.

In addition to the physical, brick-layered border/portal of the wall, there is a fluid portal in *Stardust* in the form of the Babylon candle. A fantastical literalisation of the nursery rhyme "How Many Miles to Babylon?", the candle is a shortcut to Tristran's desired destinations, but it also serves as a portal to new, unfamiliar parts of Faerie. During his first use of the candle, he sees many different

scenes in Faerie; during the second usage, Tristan and Yvaine are transported to the clouds, which starts another phase of their adventure. Therefore, passageways between the two worlds are not just fixed, but fluid and subjective to control from the protagonist.

3.2 Linguistic Contrasts

Linguistic features serve to contrast between characters from Wall and Faerie, as does the narration. Dialogue from characters from Faerie are frequently marked to show their idiolects, or are otherwise shown to be accented. The mysterious hairy man that Tristran encounters in the forest is an example of this. He uses non-standard speech patterns and his pronunciation is marked in spelling (eye dialect): “Beg your puddin’...Bein’ on me own so much, I gets used to settin’ me own pace” (*Stardust* ch. 4). As Tristran grows more comfortable in Faerie, he shows linguistic accommodation to that of his companion when he uses “fraid not” as a reply (*Stardust* ch. 4). Mistress Semele, a witch, uses her idiolect to her advantage to create the image of a harmless old lady—she frequently uses non-standard conjugation (“I sells glass flowers”) and contractions (“What d’ye say?”) (*Stardust* ch. 8). The captain of the lightning-hunting ship talks in an idiolect that matches that of a typical pirate’s, using words such as “aye”, “right-ho”, and calling Tristran “young feller-me-lad” (ch. 8). The tree that Tristran talks to does not use non-standard speech patterns, but it is marked as “oddly accented” (*Stardust* ch. 6). This use of non-standard spelling and speech patterns indicates the difference between the figures of Wall and those from beyond.

As well as idiolects, word choices, especially the use of swear words, works as a both a subversion of standard fantasy and distinguishes the individuals in the story. On a surface level, this linguistic choice keeps in line with Gaiman’s desire to write an “fairy tale, for adult readers” (Gaiman, “Importance of Fairytales”). Yet these swear words are not just for shock value. While the inhabitants from Wall are well-spoken, characters “beyond the wall” will use profanity when emotional that directly contrasts with their regular “dignified” speech. After being murdered, the ghost of Primus, the eldest prince of Stormhold, says to his brother: “May you choke on [the rune stones] if you do not take revenge on the bitch who slit my gullet” (*Stardust* ch. 8). Similarly, Yvaine, a being from beyond Wall and Faerie, slips between formal speech and swearing. Her personality is epitomised by her first appearance in the book, which reads: “And there was a voice, a high, clear, female voice, which said, ‘Ow,’ and then, very quietly, it said ‘Fuck,’ and then it said ‘Ow,’ once more.” This candid speech style is contrasted with the formal; at times biblical speech styles are used, seen in when Yvaine saying “Wither thou goest, there I must go”, a variation of Ruth’s plead to Naomi in Ruth 1:16 (*Stardust* ch. 8). Further similar subversions are made by Yvaine, for example when she follows a cold and lofty speech of how she shall “give [Tristran] no aid of any kind” with a heart-felt insult of “idiot” (*Stardust* ch. 1).

Wall and Faerie also differ in their use of metaphors. The characters of Wall are less prone to using metaphors: early in the story, a creature from Faerie is searching for a word to compare the rain to: “It was wet as...” he says, struggling for a word, and Dunstan Thorn suggests, “[w]ater?” (*Stardust* ch.1). Metaphors are even directly discouraged in Wall; Tristran’s saying that “the tiny clouds...were sheep” is met with taunting and teasing from his sister (*Stardust* ch.1). His efforts to back pedal from a direct metaphor to an implied metaphor (“he had meant simply that they reminded him of sheep”, *Stardust* ch.1) do nothing to help his situation. After Tristran passes into Faerie, the narration describes food as “smell[ing] like heaven” when using Tristran as a focaliser, showing his freedom to use metaphors once out of Wall (*Stardust* ch. 4). By chapter 8, the narration describes how the clouds in the sky of Faerie “reminded Tristran of a fantastical city or unearthly town”, showing Tristran’s acceptance of metaphors and his adjustment to Faerie.

While metaphors fail in Wall, what are merely sayings and proverbs in the primary world are literalised in Faerie. In the text, the nursery rhyme “How Many Miles to Babylon?” becomes a candle that can be used to transport the user to their choice of destination. At first the little man Tristran meets asks the question rhetorically; after Tristran comments that the story is “only a nursery rhyme,” the little man replies, “there’s some on this side of the wall that would give seven years hard toil for that little cantrip...back where you come from you mutter ‘em to babes alongside ‘Rock-a-Bye-Baby’ or a ‘Rub-a-Dub-Dub,’ without a second thought” (*Stardust* ch. 4). The nursery rhyme “The Lion and the Unicorn” is the basis for the action in chapter 5 of *Stardust*; a lion and a unicorn are literally fighting over a crown, and Tristran and Yvaine save the unicorn that will help them on their journey. Similarly, when Tristran recites well-known literature such as Coleridge and Shakespeare in a town in Faerie, he gathers “great renown”, and the townsfolk want him to become the “next bard of town” (*Stardust* ch. 8). What is fiction in the primary world is real or valuable in the secondary world, emphasising the whimsical quality of Faerie in contrast.

In *Stardust*, magic is frequently dependent on language, and for magic to “come true” requires only one meaning of an utterance to be fulfilled. Mistress Semele uses ambiguous truth conditions to her advantage: upon making a deal with her, Tristran tries to rule out loopholes. Mistress Semele promises not to harm him or Yvaine, and he asks her to promise that he and Yvaine will “arrive in Wall in the same manner and condition and state that [they] are in now,” with “board and lodging upon the way” (*Stardust* ch. 8). Mistress Semele works around this by turning Tristran into a dormouse; she feeds him and puts him in a cage, and turns him back to his original form before they arrive in Wall, keeping her word “to the letter” (*Stardust* ch. 8). The requirements for Lady Una’s freedom are seemingly impossible: “on the day the moon loses her daughter, if that occurs in a week when two Mondays come together” (*Stardust* ch. 1), but these conditions are fulfilled; Yvaine, the falling star, is the moon’s daughter, and Victoria marrying Robert Monday counts as “two Mondays coming together” (*Stardust* Ch. 10). Spoken magic in *Stardust* consists of reality changing and

fulfilling the truth conditions of an utterance, but this is also used in reverse by the witch-queen; while she is under the influence of a potion that allows her to only speak the truth, she is able to cast a powerful curse on Mistress Semele, as her words are a “true-speaking” (*Stardust* ch 5). As her words are “true”, so must reality fit her words.

Aside from linguistic features in the dialogue, the narration in *Stardust* also serves to emphasise the otherness of Faerie in contrast to the primary world. The narration uses the word “strange” and its synonyms to directly signal a divergence from the norm in the primary world. The word “strange” and its variations appear 18 times in the narration; “odd” appears 8 times, and other words such as “unusual”, “curious”, “peculiar”, “queer”, and “unfamiliar” are also used. Tristran Thorn’s daydreams are “strange, guilty fantasies, muddled and odd” and filled with fairytales (*Stardust* ch. 2); the “harbour-tree” is “inhabited by people and dwarfs...and other, even queerer folk” (*Stardust* ch. 8). That Faerie is strange and unfamiliar is at times stated outright in the narrative, while at other times, the narration withholds information to achieve a similar effect. When the witch-queen casts a spell to reanimate the dead unicorn, the narrative reports on the fact that she said something, but not the words she said: “She grunted several syllables that shall not be recorded here” (*Stardust* ch. 8). Whether it is the character’s idiolect and word choice, the different usages of metaphors and magic’s use of truth conditions, or overstatements and omissions in the narration, they all serve to heighten the otherness of Faerie in contrast to Wall.

3.3 Transition and Familiarisation/Defamiliarisation

According to Mendlesohn, most fantasy does not work, as one might think, “by making the unfamiliar strange”; portal quest fantasies work, rather, through familiarisation: “creating a world through the layering of detail, making that detail comprehensible” (9). When Tristran first arrives in Faerie, ample description is given to the unfamiliar; as the secondary world becomes more and more familiar to Tristran, Wall is distanced to the point where he feels more at home in Faerie.

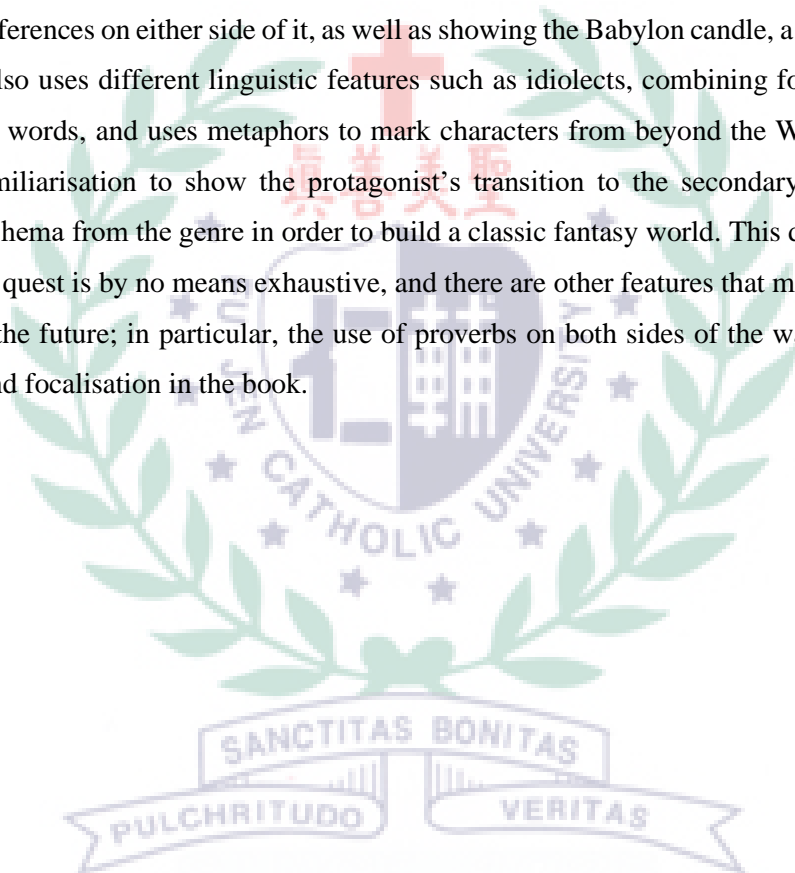
A key component of fantasy and portal quest fantasy is the “alienation” effect described by Mendlesohn, where “intense moments of description” are employed to emphasise the new and unfamiliar (54-5). From the start of the novel, Tristran’s affinity with Faerie is made clear, from his family’s reluctance to let him go to the market as a boy and his own curiosity for that beyond the wall. Once Tristran passes through the portal to Faerie, his surroundings are that of intrigue to him, and they are described in wondrous detail—the stars are “glittering and gleaming”, and the moon is a “harvest moon” that “[shines] golden yellow, the colour of ripe corn” (*Stardust* ch. 4). The stars are then defamiliarised as “dancers, stately and graceful, performing a dance almost infinite in its complexity” (*Stardust* ch. 4). The elaborate description given to the flowers of Faerie, the new food Tristran eats, and the dangers of the murderous trees, down to the stinging of the leaves as they cut at the character’s skin, create the impression of both awe and unfamiliarity.

Despite aspects of Faerie being new and unfamiliar to Tristran, he is not a fish out of water; Tristran moves through a transition period to a final negotiation period where he is king of Stormhold in Faerie. Tristran is able to navigate his way through Faerie without having been there before. This ability not only saves Tristran and his companion from his first ordeal, it also hints at his closer ties to Faerie: he is not familiar with the primary world beyond Wall, whereas he can direct himself to places he has never even heard of in Faerie. As the story progresses, Tristran grows more comfortable: his new clothes give him confidence, and his new shoes “fit him better than the old ones ever had” (*Stardust* ch. 4). By the time Tristran returns to Wall, he feels closer to Faerie than he does to the people of Wall, “for he felt that he had more in common with them than with the pallid folk of Wall in their worsted jackets and their hobnailed boots” (*Stardust* ch. 10). When Tristran and Yvaine are ready to leave Wall for good, Wall and Faerie are juxtapositioned, with the lights of “lanterns and candles and witch-lights and fairy glitter, like a dream of the night sky brought down to earth” of Faerie contrasting with the fainter candles and gas lamps of Wall. Tristran’s detachment from the primary world is made clear, as the lights from Wall “[seem] as distant and unknowable as the world of the Arabian Nights” to him (*Stardust* ch. 10).

While the portrayal of Faerie in-story is juxtaposed and contrasted with Wall to distinguish between the two, the portrayal of Faerie to the reader does not necessarily aim for the effect of creating something entirely new; rather, well-known fantasy traditions are invoked to create a world that is familiar to readers of fantasy, yet is still distinctive in comparison to the reader’s world. To quote Mendlesohn, fantasy is “heavily dependent on the dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder, that it is a fiction of consensual construction of belief” (xiii). In *Stardust*, relations are made to the readers’ world; Faerie is both described in comparison to “our” world and as being as beyond it: “Faerie is bigger than England, as it is bigger than the world...so it is now, by the time we come to write of it, a most huge place indeed, containing every manner of landscape and terrain” (*Stardust* ch. 3). The narrator is positioned as coming from “our” world, and includes the reader when using “we”, instead of a more formal “one”. Another example of the narrator positioning with the reader is when Tristran looks up at the stars he wonders if “they could not help being amused every time another little human believed itself the center of its world, as each of us does” (*Stardust* ch. 4). The narrator invokes the unknown in Faerie with the phrase “*Here, truly, there be dragons*”, following up with a listing of mythical beasts—but not failing to also mention the “more familiar animals” such as cats, dogs, wolves, and bears (*Stardust* ch. 3). The “Lion and the Unicorn” segment, the nymph who turns into a tree to escape an unwanted suitor, and the “little folk” are well-trodden paths in fantasy; these episodes work as shorthand in the worldbuilding of Faerie alongside with subversions of the genre, such as the aforementioned combined use of formal language and curse words, Yvaine’s sarcasm, and the continuation of the narration past the traditional “happy ending”.

4 Conclusion

Stardust, as an early work of Gaiman, with its combination of a more traditional fantasy structure and fantasy references, is a unique entry to his oeuvre, though he would later go on to write more “fairy tales for adults” such as *The Sleeper and the Spindle* as well as other portal quests such as *Neverwhere* and *Coraline*. The result is that *Stardust* is a portal quest fantasy where the fantasy is both familiar and unfamiliar, to both the protagonist and the reader; a distinction is made, however, between the primary world of Wall and the secondary world of Faerie, so that they contrast and play off each other. This is achieved in the story by emphasising the border and portal of the wall and the differences on either side of it, as well as showing the Babylon candle, a manipulatable portal. *Stardust* also uses different linguistic features such as idiolects, combining formal speech patterns with curse words, and uses metaphors to mark characters from beyond the Wall. Finally, *Stardust* uses defamiliarisation to show the protagonist’s transition to the secondary world, and invokes readers’ schema from the genre in order to build a classic fantasy world. This discussion of *Stardust* as a portal quest is by no means exhaustive, and there are other features that may be examined more deeply in the future; in particular, the use of proverbs on both sides of the wall and the use of the narrator and focalisation in the book.



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