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# Enjoy Your Trials: Emotions of Reader-response in Neil Gaiman's "Troll Bridge"

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The article describes a reader-response experiment in which qualitative data was gathered from a test group and analyzed according to the theory of Keith Oatley, which postulates the role of emotional responses as a feedback mechanism, i.e. emotions depend on evaluations of what has happened in relation to the person's goals and beliefs, and this remains true in a reader-response context. The test group was presented with the short story "Troll Bridge" by the contemporary fantasy writer Neil Gaiman and instructed to give an account of their emotional responses to the text, as well as to identify the most emotionally salient scenes. The analysis of the self-report accounts shows that the participants who enjoyed the piece were the ones whose emotional responses were more in line with the predominant phenomenological dynamics of the story, corresponding to that of tragedy. The analysis is further extended to illustrate a possible interpretations of the story with a postmodern twist regarding the protagonist's *hamartia*.

Keywords: cognitive literary studies, emotions, Neil Gaiman, literary universals, Keith Oatley, reader-response.

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*Human beings are hard-wired to appreciate simile and metaphor. . . . It is [this capacity] that allows us, I think, to understand and appreciate two contradictory things at the same time: that the story is a lie, and that the story is true.*

--Neil Gaiman (2015, at 54 min)

The sentiment expressed by Neil Gaiman in the above epigraph could be backed by a lifetime of experience: of an avid young reader growing up in Portsmouth--the birthplace of Dickens and the place of Kipling's early education--and the South England countryside; of a London journalist in the 1980s, enthusiastically interviewing all of his literary heroes, whose classic works of sci-fi and fantasy he had read as a boy; and, finally, of a celebrated author, whose tour de force *The Sandman* had launched him from the obscurity of British comics and non-fiction writing to establish him as an international star writer--scaring, delighting, and instructing millions of readers, listeners, and viewers who have encountered his prose works or one of their various adaptations.

Gaiman's quote tells us something important about the very nature of storytelling: even though the particular events of this and that tale may have never happened, and they inform us of the lives of people that never were, these tales could be, in a sense, more

genuine than the truth itself. Foregoing factuality, fiction can account for something much more fundamental--something that is constitutive of our common human heritage.

We, as readers of fiction, face the trials and tribulations of the protagonists; we empathize and feel certain emotions in response to the unraveling plot and search for a sense of closure. And, all this while, we are guided by something “that can't be just developed from language, or from experience” (Chomsky and McGilvray 2012, 27). If we assume the intuitions and motivations behind the 1960s cognitive twist in the sciences--indeed, the intuitions of the Enlightenment and rational scientific enquiry as such--to be correct, then the Chomskyan perspective informs us that there is a set of instructions, biological in nature, for the acquisition, processing and use of language (Hauser and Chomsky 2002); and, by extension, there must exist a set of rules governing the reception, comprehension and interpretation of narrative storytelling--in other words: universals of reader-response which are part of our biological endowment.

I argue that literary critics should heed the example of the academic fields that have been revolutionized by the cognitive turn, and that (following in the footsteps of luminaries such as Norman Holland, Keith Oatley, or Patrick Colm Hogan) more of us should begin a search for the “universal grammar of reader-response,” or the shared cognitive capacities which underline all of our interactions with literature, and then use the theories (not to say discoveries) thereof to inform our work. In this article, I utilize Keith Oatley's theory of *emotions as feedback from our evaluations of fictional challenges*. I demonstrate how the cognitive universals of happiness and sorrow (and universal narrative structures that are comprised of them) are operative in the minds of readers of one of Gaiman's stories, “Troll Bridge.”

That I would pick a story by Gaiman for such a study is no coincidence: his works are both prototypically narrative and accessible in their contemporary sensibilities. If we were to identify a unifying, over-arching identity-theme, or style, in Neil Gaiman's writing, it would be the obsession with "story-shape," with the importance of narrative, the story-ization of everyday life. In his public speeches, essays, in his online journal, and on social media, Gaiman explicitly states that which he conveys implicitly in his storytelling: his stories are, at the end of the day, stories about stories. This is apparent on a rather superficial level from his abundant use of references to other writers and works of literature ancient and contemporary, his metafictional embeddings and intertextuality. On a deeper level, his almost ubiquitous utilization of fantastic elements appears to, first and foremost, stress the fictionality--the quality "of being a story"--of his works; these elements make the fictionality of his short stories, novels, comics, and other creations overt, the ultimate message being: people (and Gaiman, the representative storyteller and story-reader, in particular) like things to be story-shaped. We process our experience narratively, and stories imbue our lives with meaning. Gaiman manages to covertly celebrate this principle in his subtle metafiction, creating stories which ultimately point to other stories: to the literary, the imaginative, and the fantastic, as a whole.

Where better, then, to start a search for cognitive literary universals than here?

### **Emotions of Reader-response: An Introduction**

*The astonishing variety of human responses makes irksome any too systematic scheme for arranging these extracts.*

--I. A. Richards (1929, 12)

It has been evident since the time of Aristotle's *Poetics* that the study of emotions can hardly be dissociated from any serious treatise on literature. With the onset of cognitive criticism, emotions and emotional response has become the center of interest for researchers in literary theory such as Norman Holland (neuropsychanalysis), Keith Oatley (emotions and cognition), Patrick Colm Hogan (narrative universals), or Lisa Zunshine (fiction and mind-reading), among many others.

One of the most persuasive contemporary accounts of emotional responses pertaining to artistic and literary experience has been given by Keith Oatley<sup>1</sup> in *Best Laid Schemes* and later reiterated in *Emotions: A Brief History*: "If we take four of the most basic emotions, we can see that in their reactive forms each is triggered by a particular kind of event in relation to a goal" (Oatley 2004, 79). In other words, Oatley sees emotions as feedback which helps us evaluate situations we find ourselves in, with regards to an overt or implicit goal we consciously, but more often subconsciously, set for ourselves. This view is not at all unique—as Patrick Colm Hogan asserts, it is a part of standard cognitive accounts, which "treat emotions as a form of 'appraisal'" (Hogan 2003, 140).

The basic emotions that Oatley and Johnson-Laird consider in their paper "A Cognitive Theory of Emotions" are happiness, sadness, fear,<sup>2</sup> anger, and disgust (Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987, 41). Happiness is understood as the indication of progress being made regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Oatley's work is based on his and Johnson-Laird's theory of emotions and cognition, as expounded in their original article "Towards a Cognitive Theory of Emotions" (1987).

<sup>2</sup> "Anxiety" in their original paper. "Fear" is the designation from Oatley 1992, and it is also the term used by Hogan.

a person's goal, while anger arises when the goal is being frustrated. Sadness is the reaction to a "loss of an active goal" or a "failure of a major plan." Fear indicates that a life-preserving goal is threatened, and disgust has to do with a "gustatory goal being violated."

Oatley is more specific about when emotions occur. When the evaluation of likelihood of a given development pertinent to a person's goal changes, this is indicated by an emotional response (Oatley 1992, 25). This is true for our emotional faculties as utilized in our daily life, but the same principles enter the process of reading fiction. Oatley explains:

In fiction, the first move is to put aside our own goals and plans, and to insert, instead, the goals, plans and actions of a character (as indicated by the author) into our own planning processor. In the second move, with the goals and plans we have taken on, we experience our own fresh emotions in the circumstances of the character's actions and their effects. (Oatley 2011, 116)

Oatley's account describes something every reader of fiction is intimate with: we "forget" for a while about our own goals and adopt, instead, the goals of the story's protagonist(s). This is possible thanks to the phenomenon Norman Holland identifies as "transportation" (Holland 2009), i.e. "losing oneself" in the literary text. We forget about our surroundings and challenges of our real lives to temporarily partake of the fictional reality.

As with many other cognitive re-formulations of reception and reader-response theories, these and similar claims appear both intuitively plausible and congruent with our own experience as readers, authors or teachers of literature—they seem generally correct. It is important to note at this point, however, that even naïve readers do not abandon their

personal goals as readers completely—and this is arguably more important to keep in mind when dealing with more informed readers.

We approach literature with as many of our personal goals in mind as there are literary tastes or branches of literary analysis. Hogan sums up the process thus: “Our emotional experience of a literary work is a function of junctural evaluation of narrative events in relation to our own goals—specifically our preferred final outcome, a goal that need not be the same as that of the protagonist” (Hogan 2003, 149).

### **Happiness and Sorrow in Neil Gaiman’s “Troll Bridge”**

*There comes a moment when the image of our lives  
parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little  
by little, begins to rule us.*

—Milan Kundera ([1986] 2005, 126–7)

In Neil Gaiman’s short story “Troll Bridge,” we follow the life of Jack, a little boy from South England countryside, and a series of his encounters with a magical creature from a parallel fairy-tale reality. The text is formally divided into three distinct parts corresponding to three stages of Jack’s life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. At each stage, Jack is faced with the same challenge—to survive the encounter with the troll—but this happens against the background of Jack’s changing life circumstances and his self-discovery as a moral actor.

The first part is composed of scenes of carefree summertime exploration, and it’s here that Jack encounters the troll under an abandoned bridge for the first time, and talks his way out of getting eaten by promising to come back to the troll later in life. Jack stumbles upon

the troll bridge a second time as a teenager on a date with his best friend and romantic interest Louise. He tries to save his life by sacrificing Louise to the troll. Finally, as an adult, after his marriage breaks down, having lived a life of failure and regret, Jack comes back to seek out the troll and fulfill his promise.

As for the style of the narration, the protagonist's detached, matter-of-factly voice and a lack of introspection convey little of his emotional turmoil. Instead, his states of mind are projected onto the environment, primarily the red-brick bridge, and reflected by the appearance and demeanor of the troll, who plays the role of psychopomp for the main character, reflecting his moral choices, remaining the sole persistent, if changeable, presence in Jack's life.

The initial description of the bridge is indicative of both the mood of the first part of the story, and Jack's mental world. Note the use of words such as "clean" and the impression of openness:

It was built of clean red brick, a huge curving arch over the path. At the side of the bridge were stone steps cut into the embankment, and, at the top of the steps, a little wooden gate. . . . The top of the bridge was paved with mud. On each side of it was a meadow. The meadow on my side was a wheatfield; the other field was just grass. (Gaiman 2005, 61)

The significance of the passage is better understood in the context of what precedes it, the point at which Jack describes his summertime exploration of the countryside: "I scrambled down a steep bank, and I found myself on a shady path that was new to me and overgrown with trees; the light that penetrated the leaves was stained green and gold, and I thought I

was in fairyland” (Gaiman 2005, 60). From this point of view, the bridge is much more than a physical structure. It is a gateway to adventure, wonder, and infinite opportunities that lie ahead of the boy, and not just in the immediate sense but also with regards to the outlook of his whole future life—provided he succeeds in retaining his adventurous, inquisitive and open mind, and stays true to the dreams of his childhood.

It is with this mindset that he manages to find the magical in the mundane, transfiguring myth and dream and fitting them in the everyday reality with an unquenchable desire to uncover the wonder of “what may be” behind the layer of “what is expected,” much in same way that readers and fans of Neil Gaiman have come to approach his stories.

When Jack discovers the troll waiting for him under the bridge, the stakes are high—he has all of his dreams and future to lose, after all—and this is reflected in the supernatural creature’s description:

He was huge: his head brushed the top of the brick arch. He was more or less translucent: I could see the bricks and trees behind him, dimmed but not lost. He was all my nightmares given flesh. He had huge strong teeth, and rending claws, and strong, hairy hands. His hair was long, like one of my sister’s little plastic gonks, and his eyes bulged. He was naked, and his penis hung from the bush of gonk hair between his legs. (Gaiman 2005, 62)

The boy needs to use all of his courage and wit to get out of what he sees as a potentially fatal situation. As in any adventure story, the reader is expected to be invested in the character’s wellbeing, fear for his life, and eventually rejoice in his triumph. At the same time, the text maintains its ambiguity and builds upon it in Jack’s future encounters with the

troll. In the best tradition of the genre of the fantastic, Gaiman lets the reader decide the nature of the creature for themselves—or, rather, leaves the reader with the pleasant uncertainty of intertwining, competing, or outright exclusive interpretations (see Čipkár 2016).

The interest and investment in the main protagonist is maintained by describing a variety of life events which most readers could identify with. The next time we encounter Jack, he is an adolescent dealing with his feelings towards the opposite sex. We learn that he is spending time with a friend, Louise, and we witness their budding romance against the backdrop of 1970s England. When the couple inadvertently wanders to the same place where Jack met the troll years ago, he is so preoccupied that the bridge gets only a passing mention. The sense of danger is retained, but the protagonist is no longer the same person as in the first encounter with the creature; now, he has responsibility for another human being and is faced with a more complex moral situation than just the minimal conundrum of saving one's own life.

In the third part of the story, Jack's failure to stay true to his potential and the downward spiral of his personal life eventually lead him to the final encounter with the troll. Just as the circumstances of his life have changed and his inner world has become a desolate place, so does change the description of the bridge:

There were graffiti painted on the side of the bridge: FUCK and BARRY LOVES SUSAN and the omnipresent NF of the National Front. I stood beneath the bridge in the red brick arch, stood among the ice-cream wrappers, and the crisp packets and the single, sad, used condom, and watched my breath steam in the cold afternoon air. (Gaiman 2005, 68)

His marriage a failure and his childhood dreams a long-lost fantasy, Jack finds himself facing a much different creature under the bridge this time. The ravages of real life, growing up, and of becoming disillusioned with oneself and one's place in the world take the bite out of the old childhood fears, and, indeed, undermine any instinct of self-preservation. The troll ceases to appear as a threat when there is no longer anything at stake, but starts mirroring the protagonist as a lost, pathetic, emasculated creature. No longer fearsome, he evokes pity as much as Jack evokes disdain at this point, and thus becomes the focus of the reader's sympathy:

"I didn't think you'd come back," said the troll. He was my height now, but otherwise unchanged. His long gonk hair was unkempt and had leaves in it, and his eyes were wide and lonely. . . . "I'm a troll," whispered the troll in a small, scared voice. "Fol rol de ol rol." He was trembling. (Gaiman 2005, 68)

The mood change, comparing the above excerpts, is evident. This change, as reflected by the change of the environment as well as the evolution of the portrayal of the troll, is the primary vehicle of the desired aesthetic effect; it gives the reader necessary cues for undergoing a dynamic emotional experience as the story unfolds. The rest—the suspense, the desire to know “what happens next”—would not be nearly as meaningful without the emotional investment and a structure that enables the reader to undergo this journey towards its cathartic outcome.

It is possible to think of the above-mentioned stylistic vehicle in terms of Eliot's objective correlative, as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the

formula of [a] *particular* emotion” (Eliot 1921, 92). However, the part of the term which the contemporary cognitive enquiries put into question is precisely the word “objective,” not in the structural sense, but rather in its gnoseological ramifications.

Let us consider the bridge as not only a representation of the act of transferring to the next stage of Jack’s life, but, in the manner suggested above, as a figurative crossroads where he is presented with a given ethical choice that will determine his future character. The bridge, on this view, is the “object” correlated to the notion of test or life-changing decision; this constitutes the bridge’s “meaning.” However, a plausible contending interpretation could designate the bridge as a pure expressionist element, where Jack’s character is not constructed *per se*, but only revealed, laid open for scrutiny, his failings magnified by the dramatic, existential, out-of-this-world scenario.

Moreover, the ambiguities of the literary text, amplified in the genres of magical realism and the fantastic, effectively prevent any “object” within it to convey a “particular” emotion, as Eliot would have it. While it is undoubtedly the emotional engagement which makes the story appealing, it certainly cannot be reduced to a process of given formulae operating over a set of signifiers, unlocking the appropriate emotional response according to either the authorial intent or a structural truth inherent, somehow, in the text itself.

Looking at “Troll Bridge” through the lens of Oatley’s model, Jack’s (and the reader’s) emotional journey should be organized around a number of “junctures,” points at which changes of evaluation of the likely outcome of plans occur (Oatley 1992, 52). Every such change is realized as an emotion. If the reader identifies with the character, they will adopt many of the character’s goals while retaining some of their own. Inevitable discrepancy between the character’s and the reader’s goals should lead to the emotions being elicited in the reader not mirroring the character’s portrayed emotions exactly, while the character’s

emotions should influence the reader's response, help them evaluate the situation, or even inform and shift their goals.

A close analysis of readers' emotional responses to the story should indicate some universal points of how our cognitive processes bear upon fictional narratives, and inform us about how an inter-subjective "meaning" appropriate to the story in question is formed. As the discoveries of generative grammar in the field of linguistics have demonstrated, one does not need an extensive corpus of texts in order to inquire into cognitive universals; and if intuitions of a single speaker about the grammaticality of a carefully selected set of syntactic structures can reveal anything of value, so could a single study of one carefully selected short story conducted with three dozen participants conceivably instruct us on some points regarding narrative universals.

### **Parameters and Results**

In order to test Oatley's proposed model and analyze its ramifications, I prepared a reader-response study. The participants, 24 female and 12 male, mostly undergraduate students of English, grad students, and college-educated professionals, were to read the short story and then answer a survey entailing seven open-ended questions (see appendix). They were asked to list the instances when they felt the following emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, contempt, and surprise.<sup>3</sup> They were also to list the points at which their

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond Johnson Laird's and Oatley's basic five, contempt and surprise, among others, are also considered as candidates for basic emotions by Paul Ekman (1992). However, the emotions were not defined in the readers' assignment for the present study, and the respondents relied on their common-sense understanding, often conflating contempt with disgust. For this reason, when analyzing the answers, I decided to use the terms as if they represented a single category.

mood had changed, instances where they identified with the characters or situations portrayed, and instances where they recollected a significant personal memory. They also answered whether they enjoyed the story or not.

The participants could read the text and complete the survey at their leisure; there was no set deadline for the task. The breakdown of responses is presented below. Only points where two or more respondents agreed are mentioned, discounting outliers and idiosyncrasies. Unless otherwise specified, the percentage is based on the total sample of readers.

Respondents who listed instances of happiness identified three main points which evoked the emotion. 55% of readers listed one or more scenes dealing with Jack's childhood exploration, such as the following:

I was exploring. I went past the manor, its windows boarded up and blind, across the grounds, and through some unfamiliar woods. I scrambled down a steep bank, and I found myself on a shady path that was new to me and overgrown with trees; the light that penetrated the leaves was stained green and gold, and I thought I was in fairyland. . . . I wandered down the path. It was perfectly straight, and overgrown with short grass. From time to time I would find these really terrific rocks: bubbly, melted things, brown and purple and black. If you held them up to the light you could see every color of the rainbow. I was convinced that they had to be extremely valuable, and stuffed my pockets with them. I walked and walked down the quiet golden-green corridor, and saw nobody. I wasn't hungry or thirsty. I just wondered where the path was going.

(Gaiman 2005, 60)

Almost a quarter of the participants (22%) listed scenes from the second part of Jack's life, his adolescence, where he is describing his friendship and budding romance with Louise:

We got to my house. Saw the lights inside, and stood in the driveway, and talked about the band I was starting. We didn't go in. Then it was decided that I'd walk *her* home. So we walked back to her house. She told me about the battles she was having with her younger sister, who was stealing her makeup and perfume. Louise suspected that her sister was having sex with boys. Louise was a virgin. We both were. We stood in the road outside her house, under the sodium-yellow streetlight, and we stared at each other's black lips and pale yellow faces. We grinned at each other. Then we just walked, picking quiet roads and empty paths. In one of the new housing estates, a path led us into the woodland, and we followed it. The path was straight and dark, but the lights of distant houses shone like stars on the ground, and the moon gave us enough light to see. Once we were scared, when something snuffled and snorted in front of us. We pressed close, saw it was a badger, laughed and hugged and kept on walking. We talked quiet nonsense about what we dreamed and wanted and thought. And all the time I wanted to kiss her and feel her breasts, and maybe put my hand between her legs. (Gaiman 2005, 65)

Both of the above excerpts seem relatable; both represent a specific stage in everyone's life, and are tied to some of the most magical and exciting moments a person experiences growing up. First is the freedom and adventurous expectancy of discovering the world

through child's eyes; second is the thrilling onset of one's life as a person who can form intimate relationships with others, and discover, with this intimacy, an exciting world of new opportunities. 11% of all participants listed both of them as instances of happiness. Here, I will let the reader's protocols speak for themselves.

One of the readers who indicated scenes of Jack's childhood exploration under happiness wrote: "The beginning of the story made me think about summers I spent at my grandparents' cottage in the mountains. I would spend the days by the river or in the nearby forest." Indeed, personal memories seemed very relevant in determining whether the opening scenes were to evoke the feeling of happiness, as evidenced in another reader's protocol: "When the protagonist walked up and saw all the tree tops and roofs during a beautiful sunny day I went, suddenly, back in time to my childhood when I always visited the village where my aunt lived, and I really enjoyed walking up the hills in summer and then looking down and seeing the roofs, huge fields and forests."

The relatability of the second most happiness-evoking passage, the scenes concerning Jack's budding romance, can be demonstrated by the readers' accounts such as this one: "[I identified] a little bit with the situation when the main character is talking about his best friend who he was in love with. . . . because I was in love with my boyfriend since we were children [and vice versa], but we were really good friends and neither of us had the courage to tell it to the other." Another one informs us, referring to the excerpt (Gaiman 2005, 65): "I thought of being in love with my best friend. 'And all the time I wanted to kiss her and feel her breasts, and maybe put my hand between her legs'; how many times I had this feeling!"

The passages that the readers above react to depict some of the happiest moments of Jack's life, and are indicative of his successful progress towards his personal goals; be it having some carefree fun as a child, or winning the heart of a girl he is attracted to as a

teenager. The reader wishes Jack to succeed just as they wish (or would have wished) themselves to succeed in the general endeavor of finding their expression for imaginative freedom to explore and to love.

The third most significant instance of reported feeling of happiness (reported by 11% of the respondents) has to do with the introduction of a supernatural element into the story, the appearance of the troll. This could indicate that certain genre expectations are met for readers who enjoy stories about the fantastic or the supernatural, as indicated by the readers' own responses under the rubric of "happiness":

-- I was a little hopeful and happy that this will be story with some fantasy [elements] in it.

-- When the troll appeared the first time. Expected trolls, wasn't disappointed.

The reason why I was happy is that there are some books whose title talks about elves and then they are barely mentioned in the book. (My own experience.)

-- "There was a troll waiting for me, under the bridge. 'I'm a troll,' he said. Then he paused, and added, more or less as an afterthought, 'Fol rol de ol rol.'" It is a rhyming troll.

Contempt and/or disgust were listed by more than half of the respondents (52%), referring to the scene of the second encounter with the troll, where Jack tries to offer Louise to the creature to save himself:

I grabbed Louise, a taut zombie, and pushed her forward. “Don’t take me. I don’t want to die. Take *her*. I bet she’s much tastier than me. And she’s two months older than I am. Why don’t you take her?” (Gaiman 2005, 65)

While the condemnation was not universal (the remaining 48% perhaps disagreed with Jack’s attempt at self-preservation while remaining more charitable towards his weakness), this is the scene where the attitude of the majority of respondents towards the main character changed. Instead of identifying and rooting for him, a significant portion of readers who assessed this scene disentangled their own goals from the character’s, becoming more negative. When asked when their mood changed, the most significant portion, 55% of readers, listed this scene, and 27% of respondents also listed feeling anger at this point in the story.

The second most “contemptible” passage, according to 36% of respondents, was Jack’s mention of cheating on his wife in the third part of the story, reflecting his blasé attitude towards infidelity, and a number of bad life decisions:

I was working in London, doing A&R for one of the major record companies. . . . I had to keep a small flat in London; it’s hard to commute when the bands you’re checking out don’t even stagger onto the stage until midnight. It also meant that it was fairly easy to get laid, if I wanted to, which I did. (Gaiman 2005, 67)

The infidelities and the absence from his family is what eventually leads Jack’s spouse to leave him one night, putting a symbolic coda on his life of pretense and lack of emotional fulfilment.

Finally, sadness was listed by 44% of the respondents, especially referring to a scene between the second and third part of the text, where Jack meets Louise again, on a train, after many years:

“I really liked you, that night, Jack . . . I thought you were going to ask me out. I would have said yes. . . . You didn’t.” Her hair was cut very short. It didn’t suit her. I never saw her again. The trim woman with the taut smile was not the girl I had loved, and talking to her made me feel uncomfortable. (Gaiman 2005, 66)

The encounter makes apparent that the relationship is irrevocably over; not only was the promise of their date many years ago never fulfilled, this last encounter replaces the original memory in Jack’s recollection. With the preceding scene still in their mind, the reader realizes the goal of finding romantic love with the high-school sweetheart and experiencing something special is completely lost.

Another sadness-evoking point in the story, for 13% of the respondents, is the scene where Jack finds out that his wife had seen through his double life:

I got back from a two-week jaunt to New York one winter’s day, and when I arrived at the house it was empty and cold. (Gaiman 2005, 67)

Following this discovery, Jack wanders off into the night, trudging through the countryside of his childhood, drawn to the inevitable third encounter with the troll. But the creature is changed:

“I didn’t think you’d come back,” said the troll. He was my height now, but otherwise unchanged. His long gonk hair was unkempt and had leaves in it, and his eyes were wide and lonely. (Gaiman 2005, 68)

At this point, the reader’s sympathies have shifted and the troll becomes a figure of pity, a shift which is exacerbated in the context of Jack’s failings. The contrast with the original, fearsome appearance of the troll made 22% of readers report the feeling of sorrow, the only emotion noted at this point by those who identified this scene as salient. None in this subgroup were the ones who identified troll as a source of fear at the very end, when Jack agrees to be eaten (8%).

Lastly, only 13% have noted the feeling of melancholy present in the opening passages of the second and third parts of the story, where Jack describes the landscape of his childhood changing:

The fields started to go, as I grew older. One by one, row by row, houses sprang up with roads named after wildflowers and respectable authors. Our home—an aging, tattered Victorian house—was sold, and torn down; new houses covered the garden. . . . I moved to London, and then, some years later, I moved back again, but the town I returned to was not the town I remembered: there were no fields, no farms, no little flint lanes; and I moved away as soon as I could, to a tiny village ten miles down the road. (Gaiman 2005, 63 and 66)

As for the question of enjoyment, 77% of participants reportedly liked the story. Everybody in this group, as opposed to those who did not enjoy the story, also shared three common points:

Firstly, they all listed instances of sadness concerning the fortunes of the main character and his magical counterpart, the troll. On the other hand, the wider theme of passage of time and its impact on both the outside world and a person's maturing process—a theme that runs throughout the story as a strong undercurrent—was something that the readers who did not enjoy the story also responded to.

The feeling of sadness in readers who did not reportedly enjoy the story also seemed to be evoked by minor details which triggered a sad personal recollection, or inspired them to go on a philosophical tangent. Alternatively, they did not feel any sorrow at all, or, which is more puzzling, they felt sad throughout the entire reading session.

Secondly, the group which enjoyed the story listed changing attitudes towards the main character, as reflected in their answers about mood change and the feelings of sadness, contempt and anger. This would indicate they were invested in the character's goals and constructed goals of their own which were related to the character's fortunes and behavior.

Thirdly, at some point in the text before listing the feeling of sorrow, the readers who enjoyed the story also identified a passage which evoked happiness and often recollected their own happy memories which bore a similarity to either the incidents of Jack's childhood or his adolescent attempt at dating. The pattern of happiness-followed-by-sorrow was exclusive to the majority of the 77% who enjoyed the story, as opposed to those who did not enjoy the story and had either little or no emotional response, or the feeling of sadness permeated their whole experience.

### **Jack's *Hamartia*: Discussion of the Findings**

It seems that a certain basic dynamic is at work in "Troll Bridge," a process of changing emotions according to a predictable formula. Not only the reader has to be invested in the challenges the main character faces, but they should also evaluate the outcomes of these challenges in a certain way to be able to enjoy the narrative. The results of the survey suggest that in order for the story of "Troll Bridge" to function and impress itself emotionally upon the mind of the reader, two critical evaluations must take place in a specific order:

First, an impression of movement towards a successful fulfillment of a goal within an implicit plan must be formed, and it must concern the main incidents of the plot. This could be either the idea of enjoying Jack's carefree childhood and maintaining a mind of adventurous expectancy towards the world, or experiencing the vicarious romantic thrills of his promising date. We could see the attitudes of goal-fulfillment with regards to both of these scenarios in the excerpts from readers' protocols in the previous section.

Next, the protagonist's plans, which are the same as those formulated previously, or are logical extensions of those past plans, must be foiled along with the plans that the reader has established around the protagonist in the process of empathic identification. At this point, the reader may formulate new plans, which would assist them in making sense and enjoying the conclusion of the story—in other words, undergoing catharsis. These new plans may encompass the feeling of pity for the troll during his and Jack's ultimate encounter (as was surely the case in 22% of readers who identified and decided to list the scene under sadness), or the idea that Jack has been rightfully punished/redeemed by exchanging lives with the troll in the very end, the story of his life coming full circle. The

ominous significance of the final scene was registered by one of the readers, who quotes the final scene, under the question of “situations you identified with,” in its entirety:

I watch from the shadows as the people pass: walking their dogs, or talking, or doing the things that people do. Sometimes people pause beneath my bridge, to stand, or piss, or make love. And I watch them, but say nothing; and they never see me.

*Fol rol de ol rol.*

I’m just going to stay here, in the darkness under the arch. I can hear you all out there, trip-trapping, trip-trapping over my bridge. Oh yes, I can hear you.

But I’m not coming out. (Gaiman 2005, 69)

The above-mentioned two evaluations fit into Aristotle’s classic formula of tragedy: “It is therefore necessary for the story that is in beautiful shape to be single . . . changing not into good fortune from bad but the opposite way, from good fortune to bad” (Sachs 2006, 37).

The cause of the shift of fortune is *hamartia*, or “missing the mark” by the protagonist.

“There is no tragedy, according to Aristotle, unless a characteristically good central figure is aiming at something exceptionally high. For there to be a *hamartia*, there must first be a mark to be missed” (Sachs 2006, 8).

While the fictional reality of the shift in fortunes is evident both from the text itself and the readers’ evaluation of it, Aristotle’s requirement of a “characteristically good central figure” warrants a moment of scrutiny. The story of Jack evidently is not that of a morally flawless person who is met with bad luck, as most readers find his actions objectionable.

Aristotle warns that “decent men ought not to be shown changing from good to bad fortune

(since this is neither frightening nor pitiable but repellent)” (Sachs 2006, 36). While the “Troll Bridge’s” hero does not qualify as a moral paragon—for his actions provoke anger and contempt—he should not, conversely, be perceived as an “extremely bad character,” becoming undeserving of the feeling of pity in the eyes of the reader.

While the link between experiencing happiness or sadness at various points in the story and the evaluation of the main protagonist’s character is not entirely clear, it seems uncontroversial to assume that these emotions are either stemming from a more positive than negative attitude to the protagonist, or serve to ameliorate negative attitude. If Jack is reduced to nothing but a selfish, cheating sociopath, the tragedy remains unrealized, which is reflected in the reports of readers who did not enjoy the short story.

However, what is the “exceptionally high mark” which is missed by the hero, so as to satisfy the requirement of *hamartia*? Again, the implicit understanding of this by the reader is crucial for the tragic arc of the story to function. The most obvious culprit is the scene where Jack offers Louise to the troll to save himself—it is the point at which most readers’ mood changes and the point where “good” fortune starts to be replaced by “bad.” Jack’s *hamartia* would then lie in the inability to do the chivalrous thing and put the other’s safety—indeed, the wellbeing of the girl he professes to love—before his own.

The obvious problem here is that the scene is mostly met with feelings of contempt/disgust (52%) and anger (27%), *not* sadness, so this moral failing on the part of Jack does not seem to be the cause of the story’s dynamic, evoking the shift from happiness to sadness. The critical point here is not Jack’s objective ethical failure, but the effects of his failure on the perception of himself, Louise, and their relationship.

This change of perception (noted by 64% of readers under question three of the survey, the breaking point mostly accompanied by contempt/disgust or anger, as noted

previously) spelled the end to their romance and set the tone for Jack's future life, which, the way it is portrayed, is simply "going through the motions," without any genuine enjoyment. Jack's career, his family life, even his infidelities are hand-waived:

I moved with my family—I was married by now, with a toddler—into an old house that had once, many years before, been a railway station. . . . I was getting older. One day I found a gray hair; on another, I heard a recording of myself talking, and I realized I sounded just like my father. . . . I thought that Eleanora—that was my wife's name; I should have mentioned that before, I suppose—didn't know about the other women. (Gaiman 2005, 66 and 67)

The way Jack describes his life in the third part of the story leaves the impression that anything of importance that could have happened to him took place up until his second encounter with the troll. In this light, his moral failure with Louise appears less like the initial reason of his downfall, and more as a contingency retroactively constructed as a precondition for his future life situation. "When a thing occurs as a result of a series of contingent conditions, it produces the retroactive impression that it was *teleologically* necessary, as if its development had been preordained from the very beginning" (Žižek 2014, 30). In other words, even though the second encounter with the troll was reflective of what Jack was to become, it can be perceived as the cause only in retrospect, once the full context has been established.

However, if the second encounter is not the *hamartia* itself, but only its symptom, where does Jack really "miss the mark?" Even if we reject a strictly allegorical interpretation, Jack's repeated bargaining with the troll appears to stand for the kind of decisions he will

make in his “real” life, and it is representative of the attitudes he will hold. These attitudes remain in the background, and the magical encounters with the troll are the primary means for their observation. But it is precisely the context of Jack’s life and the trials he must undergo which resonate with the reader—whether these are trials imposed by society or the individual himself.

Thus, Jack’s *hamartia* is not the betrayal of his girlfriend (or, later, his wife); it is the betrayal of his dreams, and the dreams of the readers. “Troll Bridge” might be considered a contemporary story for a contemporary readership, which is, in the case of the present study, composed exclusively of the millennial demographic.<sup>4</sup> While Jack’s cowardice in face of danger still readily evokes moral outrage, the true tragedy is perceived in compromising one’s happiness—happiness not in the vulgar hedonistic sense of pleasure-seeking, but in a broad sense of living a fulfilling, enjoyable and ethically sound life.

Here are some relevant excerpts of reader’s feedback from the survey, which could support this theory:

-- Each segment [of the story] is a different mood piece. Each reconnects to different set of unreliable personal memories. First is warm, safe and full of light, second awkwardly personal, emotionally vulnerable, strangely exposed. Third empty and unfulfilled.

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<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, the attitudes of the readers might reflect something timeless and unconstrained by any particular cultural influence--but further, more rigorous studies would have to be conducted to test such a hypothesis.

-- [I felt sad] realizing he didn't love Louise [anymore] after the second troll encounter--emptiness, love was all an illusion. His wife leaving him--his life was a failure.

-- Disagreeable: Probably the overall apathy of the main character and his self-centeredness including inability to live up to the positive qualities of the human spirit.

-- It makes me sad that he never asked [Louise] out, and that people can change and grow apart over time.

-- The attitude of the main character to his life--it seems that he has no interest in his life.

-- I was expecting him to act upon his love and not throw it away like this.

-- [The story caught my attention] at the point where he met Louise on the train after many years. I hoped for some action, but I was quite disappointed, he didn't even like her hair. . . . The story made me think about how many people live the kind of life that Jack was living, full of selfishness and loneliness, which will eventually eat them alive.

-- [Jack is unable] to give and/or receive genuine emotion and to acknowledge Louise as the object of his affection; he thinks of her as a different person in order to free himself from the dark past (maybe caused to some extent by suppressed guilt from the incident with Louise and the troll).

-- I was a bit angry that Jack did not put more effort in his life. . . . I did not agree with Jack giving up on life so easily.

-- I was a bit disappointed when he found out that his wife had left him.

-- At the end of the story I felt a bit bad for Jack. . . . now he has to keep surviving under the bridge arch.

-- The main character just gave up at the end of the story, he didn't fight, he didn't want to change himself or at least try to do so.

-- I felt a bit angry when he met Louise and she told him she had liked him and that she would have gone out with him, but he didn't do anything that night.

-- [The scene where Jack meets Louise after many years] made me feel quite sad and angry because they both missed the opportunity to be together.

-- I enjoyed the story. It's the reflection of real life but in different way. Short, interesting, funny, creepy and scary at the same time and it forced me to realize that life is short and we should enjoy every single moment.

-- Every time I thought he'd be happy he somehow screwed things up.

-- I felt sadness when the main character met the girl Louise after many years and she remembered that night when he had wanted to kiss her but didn't. She wanted that as well so maybe if he did kiss her, things would be different and more cheerful.

Jack's trials speak directly to the current generational cohort, and, more than before, are relevant "today . . . when we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the superego injunction 'Enjoy!,' from direct enjoyment of sexual performance to enjoyment of professional achievement or spiritual awakening" (Žižek 2006, 304). The readers' responses reflect this perfectly: portrayals of enjoyment in scenes of Jack's childhood exploration and adolescent dating are met with the feeling of happiness, while his inability to enjoy his

career, family life, or even his affairs evoke sorrow. In short, Jack's *hamartia* is his inability to enjoy.

This is confirmed at the very end, where the superego injunction becomes stronger than the instinct of self-preservation, and Jack gives up his life willingly to the troll. Aware of his failure to find happiness and owning up to it, he is redeemed in the eyes of the reader (the reader to whom, in a fashion, the role of superego is delegated)—through sympathy and sorrow, he becomes a cautionary tale, re-asserting us in our conviction to live our lives to the fullest.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The juxtaposition of the mundane or the commonplace with the magical, the sensational, and the fantastic—i.e. the technique constitutive of most of Neil Gaiman's writing, including the short story "Troll Bridge"—foregrounds the capacity of narrative thinking and human imagination to change our everyday experience into something extraordinary. In a circular yet uncannily powerful fashion, human experience is redeemed as it becomes a part of a story, while stories acquire a redemptive power because they pertain to human experience.

The question at the heart of the present work is an enquiry into possible avenues in a search for the universals of literary creation, reception and understanding: is there a timeless set of principles, the identification of which can not only shed light on the role imaginative creators like Gaiman play in shaping contemporary culture, but also establish foundations for the broader literary research in the 21st century?

In this practical reader-response study, I have enquired about emotionally salient points in the story "Troll Bridge" and systematized readers' reports about their emotional

experience. I found a high degree of agreement not only in the identification of the salient scenes, but also in the particular emotions and their developments. My conclusion is that the story of “Troll Bridge” (along with, presumably, other works by Gaiman), as (overtly or covertly) manifested in the mind of the reader, needs to follow the structure of a tragedy for it to engage the reader’s emotional capacities successfully and thus become an enjoyable and meaningful experience. My claim is that we can better understand how fiction (whether the fiction of Gaiman’s oeuvre, similar genre writing, or fiction in general) is operative in reader’s minds by extrapolating from empirical studies such as the one presented here.

I have delineated a possible avenue of inquiry into literary universals, understood as intrinsically tied to our biological endowment, utilizing Keith Oatley’s theory of emotions as feedback from our evaluations of fictional challenges. I demonstrated how the cognitive universals of happiness and sorrow (and universal narrative structures constituted thereof) are operative in the minds of readers of one of Gaiman’s stories, following with an example of an interpretation, which, while still rooted in the interpreter’s (i.e. mine) particular concerns, reflects the data gathered from an engagement of real readers and their actual readings of the story, providing an example of how reader-response can be utilized as grounds for a discussion of topics which traditionally belong to the center of interest of literary studies—topics such as theme, or style.

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### **Appendix: The Survey Form to "Troll Bridge"**

1. Was there any point or passage (or multiple points) in the text where you felt one of the following emotions (however weak)? If yes, identify the point(s) / passage(s) with a short quote or other reference. Identify strong emotion with an asterisk (\*). One emotion can have more entries, and some emotions can be left blank, of course.  
  
Explain why you felt the particular emotion if you can, briefly.

HAPPINESS

SADNESS

FEAR

ANGER

DISGUST

CONTEMPT

SURPRISE

2. At what point(s) did the story catch your interest (if at all)? Why did it interest you?
3. At which points in the story did your mood change (if there were such points). How did it change and why?
4. Did you enjoy the story? Why (not)?
5. Was there any aspect of a character or situation in the story that you identified with or really related to, real or imagined? Write it down.
6. Write something from the story that you disagree with, or something that did not agree with you.
7. Was there any significant personal memory that you thought of while reading a certain passage? What was the passage and the memory?