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The Mirage of Appearance in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*

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Abstract

Neil Gaiman's acclaimed narrative *Neverwhere* investigates the intricate relationship between perception and reality. Set in the surreal landscape of London Below, the story serves as a rich tapestry of illusions, where characters and settings often mask deeper truths. This analysis examines how Gaiman employs the fallacy of appearance to reveal the complexities of identity, belonging, and societal expectations. Through a close reading of pivotal scenes and character transformations, the article illustrates how Gaiman crafts a world where the superficial often obscures the genuine, prompting readers to question their assumptions about truth. The study further explores the thematic implications of these illusions, demonstrating how they reflect broader societal issues such as class disparity and the nature of reality in urban life. By engaging with concepts from philosophy and literary theory, the article argues that Gaiman's work transcends mere fantasy, offering a poignant critique of contemporary society's tendency to prioritize appearances over authenticity. Ultimately, this exploration of *Neverwhere* underscores the importance of discerning the unseen truths that lie beneath the surface, inviting readers to navigate the complexities of perceptions.

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Introduction

Appearance determines half of personality, and attitude determines the rest. There is always an inevitable exception in which everyone at a certain point may stumble. Even the instincts will freeze to realize reality at that moment. That exception possesses the power to take any form in this universe. In the novel *Neverwhere*, that exception takes the form of a celestial being named Islington. Angels are considered as the one among the stock characters because the word "angel" swiftly creates an image of a winged creature that is pure and holy. Angels are generally considered as the servants who perform the duties as per the command of the God. They renounce sin and wait in the presence of God to serve Him. The word "angel" often relates personalities with pure, good nature and beauty. The spontaneous and unexpected help from someone in a crucial moment always correlates with the angel's assistance. "*The angels I have in mind are all wings, haloes, trumpets, peace-on-earth-goodwill-unto-men (Neverwhere 137).*"

The canonical and non-canonical books had featured information regarding the earthly beings and celestial beings; earthly things were created in the earthly manner as humans had created through the soil and must return to soil. Similarly, God created celestial beings magnificently. God creates his angels using winds and flames of fire. "*What are the angels then? They are spirits who serve God and are sent by him to help those who are to receive salvation (Hebrews 1:14).*" According to Paul the Apostle, there is a difference between heavenly bodies and earthly bodies with their motives and their beauty. Dionysius was a theologian and was converted to Christianity by Paul, the Apostle. *He wrote the book De Coelesti Hierarchia (On the Celestial Hierarchy) around the fifth to sixth century AD.* This work deliberately featured the angelic choirs and their hierarchies. This book is one of the major influential works in the progress of Eastern Orthodox Church theology. There are three spheres and nine orders in the angelic hierarchy. The first sphere consists of Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. The second sphere consists of Dominions, Virtues, and Powers. The third sphere consists of principalities, archangels, and angels. Each choir of angels has been entrusted with a particular kind of work to perform. Seraphim reside in the supreme position of the angelic hierarchy. They are the burning ones with the majestic six wings and are characterized by their burning love for God.

Archangels can often be seen in the Scriptures. They are the powerful angels who stand in the presence of God to fight against the evil. The term "archangel" appears only in the singular when referring to the name of the angel Michael in the Canonical Bible. Milton depicted the power of the archangel Michael by featuring the thunderstroke of Michael, which frightened the fallen angels even in their nostalgia. "*They dreaded worse than Hell; so much the fear of thunder and the sword of Michael (Paradise Lost Book 2, 40).*" The deuterocanonical *Book of Tobit* provides the details about the archangels with special reference to the Archangel Raphael. "*I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand in the glorious*

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presence of the Lord, ready to serve him (Tobit 12:15).” Angels are in the bottom line of the celestial hierarchy. They are the most recognized choirs of angels. They are associated with the concern of human affairs. They are intermediaries between God and men. They act as a messenger and a guardian. The word “*another angel*” is reiterated in the *Revelation chapter* to emphasize that each angel is assigned to do a particular activity.

God had bestowed on his angels the power to control the fire, water, wind, and earth. Islington may belong to this hierarchy of angels called Power, as it possessed the power to control the elements. “*The candles were unlit, but as the tall form walked past, they flickered into flame. No hand touched them; no fires touched their wicks*” (*Neverwhere* 132). Angels are assigned to guard places and people upon God’s word. God keeps His Cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden after the fall of Adam and Eve. The vision of the holy city of Jerusalem in John’s revelation had a magnificent feature of a great wall with twelve gates and twelve angels to guard it. It is a belief that the archangel Michael is the guardian of a village called Michaelpatti, which is situated in Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu. The Archangel Michael is also considered the protector of Israelites. Likewise, the angel Islington was also the former guardian of Atlantis, and then it guarded London. Below in this novel.

Though the angels have power and authority over everything under heaven, they cannot judge and punish human beings. Only God can judge mankind. They are the watchers and guardians. They must report everything to God and wait for His judgment. “Tobit, when you and Sarah prayed to the Lord, I was the one who brought your prayers into his glorious presence. I did the same thing each time you buried the dead” (Tobit 12:12). According to Neil Gaiman and John Milton, even celestial beings have insomnia when their minds are adulterated. In *Paradise Lost Book V*, the archangel Lucifer could not sleep in the heavenly twilight as he was envious of the Son of God and proud of his power. In the novel *Neverwhere*, Islington could not sleep as it was haunted by its horrific deeds in dreams.

Huge waves were rising and crashing over the city; ... Islington heard each and every one of their voices, clearly and distinctly, as one by one they screamed, and choked, and burned, and drowned, and died. The waves swallowed the city, and, at length, the storm subsided. (*Neverwhere*, 257)

When the angels disobeyed God and distorted their virtues and committed sin, they lost their wings by means of losing divinity and the protection of God. In the movie *Constantine*, the angel Gabriel, who has committed sin, has lost its divine power and protection when confronting Lucifer. Consequently, it had lost its wings too. The mighty angel Gabriel is defeated by Lucifer and asks the protagonist *Constantine*, who is a human, to kill it if he desires. Losing wings is perhaps a symbol for plummeting from immortal to mortal. In the movie *Legion*, the archangel Michael went against the command of God by helping mankind in the end of days. He lost his wings and the position of the archangel who leads the heavenly army, the mighty power that frightens the fallen angels to fight again. Michael becomes mortal by losing all the divine powers and dies in the hands of the angel Gabriel.

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God gives free will to his creations, but they have to face the consequences according to their choices. These tenets of angels may seem to be slavish, but indeed angels have free will. These creatures are an epitome of obedience and submission to God. They have chosen the path of loving God over everything. It is Lucifer's choice to rebel against God. It is the choice of angels whom they want to follow between Lucifer and God before their fall from heaven. Their free will is tangible in the choice of angel Abdiel to return to God from Lucifer's army even after Lucifer's provocative speech in *Paradise Lost*. In the movie *Legion*, it is the Archangel Michael's choice to give what God wants instead of what God utters.

The splendor of the angels represents the Creator, and their presence illuminates the surroundings. *"And this I saw another angel coming down out of heaven. He had great authority, and his splendor brightened the whole earth (Revelation 18:1).* Angels' magnificent appearance mirrors their purity and the glory of the God. In *Neverwhere*, Gaiman portrayed Islington's attire as a simple one with the absence of all colors, which was perhaps driven by the concept of clothing the cloud in *Revelation 10:1*. *"Its robes were not white, as Richard had initially thought: they seem to have been woven from the light (Neverwhere, 197)."* Everything that is pertaining to Islington is illuminated with emphasis on its holistic appearance. The references regarding its robe and eyes and even the wine it offered emphasized Islington's holistic outward nature. As light resembles divinity and purity, they believed in the existence of angels, though they had no wings.

The angel Islington expressed all the inherent characteristics of an angel, such as tolerance, patience, humility, and so on. Its robe is illuminated as bright as light. It was so humble while welcoming Door and Richard. It was tolerant and patiently answered all the questions raised by Richard and Door. It was beautiful, and everything about Islington was magnificent. Regarding its appearance, it had golden hair and a pale face and was so beautiful. It had grey and luminescent eyes that were as old as the universe. *"The angel Islington, standing beside her, turned and smiled at Richard as he entered. That was the most chilling thing of all: the gentle compassion, the sweetness of that smile"* (*Neverwhere*, 321). It was gentle and did everything lovingly. kindly smiled at Richard even though he was dubious about Islington's words. It expressed its condolences for Door's father and comforted her. It asked them what they wanted, as it would like to bestow a boon on them. It made them trust it and asked them to bring a key, which would solve all their problems.

Kindling one's desire and trapping them was the prime trait of Satan. Islington had not ordered them to bring the key, but it kindled their desire to obtain a solution to their problems and made them bring the Key through a dangerous journey. It used Richard's desire for a solution and Door's determination to find the truth to achieve the core act of bringing the key. It prohibited the assassins from killing the protagonists as well as the Marquis de Carabas when it found they were useful to it. Once Richard and Door found the key, Islington only cared for Door and allowed the assassins to kill as they pleased. Islington made the bodyguard Hunter a traitor to Door by using her desire to obtain a spear to perform the heroic deed of killing the

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Great Beast of London. Just like Judas Iscariot, Hunter exchanged the door to the assassins for a spear.

As appearance helps predict one's personality, it is easy for Door and Richard to trust Islington. Richard, who is initially dubious about Angel's existence, also believes in Islington. When it asked Richard about his dubious state, he hesitated to accept it to Islington by seeing its luminescent eyes. Here Richard and Door resembled Adam and Eve. Door believed the words of Islington as Eve believed the words of the Serpent. Richard did not trust Islington entirely but trusted Door and followed her as Adam had trusted Eve and eaten the forbidden apple.

Richard walked over to the Angelus. He ran a finger down its painted robe. 'Do you think it can really do it? Get me my life back?' I've never heard of such a thing. But I don't think it would have lied to us. It is an angel. (Neverwhere 203)

Islington talked to the assassins named Mr. Croup and Vandemar through the medium of water. It used the water to connect them with the telephone, which indicates its power to control the water according to its desire. It also symbolized its nature. It mirrored an evil witch in the Disney movies who ordered its servants through the medium of water. *The* movie *Enchanted*, which was released in 2007, was written by Bill Kelly and directed by Kevin Lima. Narissa is the queen and evil witch in the kingdom of Andalasia who wanted to protect her power and throne. She spoiled the marriage between her stepson and his beloved Giselle by sending her to the real world from the animated one. The witch was giving commands to her servant Nathaniel through the medium of water to kill Giselle. The writer Neil Gaiman symbolically portrayed the similar qualities of Islington and Narissa through their same intentions and communication method.

It stopped when it reached the rock pool, kneeling down and letting its finger touch the cold water. There was a ripple in the water, which began with its fingertips and echoed out to the edges... The angel concentrated for a moment; it could hear a telephone ring somewhere in the distance. (Neverwhere 258)

Islington had a prevalent role under the pseudonym of the Employer. It is the one who is behind all the ravaging of the rest of the characters in the novel. By dwelling in its citadel, it makes everyone a pawn in its plan. It assigned the assassins to kill Door's family and planned everything deliberately for its own benefit. It spared Door's life as it needed her power to open the door for it. It spared her and scared her and arranged a traitor around her and made her trust it. It gives every instruction to the assassins to execute its plan. Islington contradicted itself from other angles by its egocentric personality. It never cared for others' well-being. It used Mr. Croup and Vandemar to assassinate Door's family and the rest of the crimes, as they were pleased to do those things. Instead of indulging directly, Islington used these people for eliminating the people who were useless in its plan. *"I didn't kill him," Islington corrected her, gently. I had him killed"* (Neverwhere 327).

When Hunter unveils the truth behind all the haphazard and disastrous events in the protagonists' lives, Richard freezes to accept the fact. He stumbles on the paradox between

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appearance and reality. Richard's questions revealed the influence of appearance on the determination of a personality. The holistic appearance easily makes everyone deduce the pure and good-natured personality of that person. Richard's reaction to this fact is the perfect example of the fallacy of appearance. He could not accept the real nature of Islington from the moment of anagnorisis to the denouement of their adversity.

Richard shook his head, as if he were trying to brush away a fly. 'It can't be,' he said. 'I mean, I've met Islington. It's an angel... 'I still don't understand,' said Richard. 'Islington. I actually met him. It. Him. He's an angel. I mean, a real angel' (Neverwhere 304–306).

Angels are polite and never use abusive words. When Satan and the Archangel Michael argued about the body of Moses, Michael never used any harsh and abusive words. *"Not even the chief angel Michael did this. In his quarrel with the Devil, when they argued about who would have the body of Moses, Michael did not dare to condemn the Devil with insulting words but said, 'The Lord rebuke you' (Jude 1:9). The mightiest angel, Michael, neither cursed nor fought back with Satan, though he had already won him in the battle. Islington was yet playing hard to veil its true face. It chained the door and welcomed Richard humbly to its citadel and introduced the assassins to him. Islington was discussing with the assassins regarding torturing Door to open the door before Richard's arrival. Angels never use the abusive terms; hence, Islington consciously maintains its modesty to cover its dark nature. It is just beating around the bush to command torturing Richard when Door refused to open the door for Islington. 'No time,' it said to Richard, 'no time.' However, she does strike me as someone who would indeed act to end the pain and suffering of a friend, a fellow mortal, such as yourself, Richard..." (Neverwhere 322).*

Islington had been the guardian of Atlantis. It punished the people of Atlantis by sinking the whole continent under the waves of the ocean without God's command. As an angel who can control fire and water, it must have attempted to protect the island; instead, it was hovering far above and listening to the people's screams. It just hovered and watched the people dying through fire and water. As a consequence, it was imprisoned in a citadel deep beneath the London Below. As Islington said, *"They told me it was my punishment for Atlantis." I told them there was nothing more I could have done* (Neverwhere 324). Angels generally let everything into God's hand, but Islington wanted to do everything on its own as it pleased. It caused the massacre of the Atlantis people and imprisoned them in a citadel to repent for its sin. The prison has a door without a keyhole, and the Black Friars were the custodians of the key. It can enter heaven when it earns forgiveness from God, who would send an opener to release Islington. When Marquis and Door advocated for the Atlantis people, Islington said they deserved it, which denotes that after thousands of years, it never repented for its sin. Islington didn't have the patience to wait and wanted to sneak into heaven. It neither repented nor waited for its time to return.

Lord Portico, who is the father of Lady Door, wanted to unite the Underworld. He has so many plans; hence, the Earl sends him to Islington. Islington tried to use his desire for its

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plan, but he refused and laughed at Islington. It was deeply offended by his laughing and killed Lord Portico. Islington planned everything and used the emotions of people for its own sake. It spared Door and modified her father's video journal to earn her trust. It makes them believe that the key will solve their problems, and they take a dangerous journey to obtain the key. Islington wanted to rebel against God. It said Lucifer was an idiot, which denotes the crest of its pride. It overestimated itself by calling Lucifer, who is the source of all evils, an idiot for achieving nothing at all.

Islington not only spared Door but also her sister, as they belonged to the very special family of the openers who can open and even create doors to all places. It spared Door's sister as a backup option for its plan. It planned flawlessly to escape from its prison. When Door refused to open the door, Islington tortured Richard to force her. It just turned back, as if it was not pleased to see these tortures. These kind gestures and serenity are not from its soul but from its practice for thousands of years. Islington never got along with anyone in these thousands of years. It used the people for its benefit and threw them away later. *"When I am gone," said the angel, very quietly to Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar, with charm, and with kindness, and with compassion, "kill them all, howsoever you wish"* (Neverwhere 329). It never loves or respects any human being. Angels recurrently used the phrase "Have no fear" when confronting mankind to strengthen their faith in God. Here Islington used this phrase to strengthen their faith in themselves. This phrase has been told to the righteous people to whom God has sent his angels to convey the message. Here this phrase is said to the sinners. *"Have no fear," it said. "For when the vastness of creation is mine, and they gather about my throne to sing hosannas to my name, I shall reward the worthy and cast down those who are hateful in my sight"* (Neverwhere 331).

When Door deliberately opened the wrong door, Islington's factual nature was disclosed. Its splendor and serenity vanished and expressed a sort of blended emotion. Its happiness and pride are replaced by disappointment, anger, and entreaty. Door opened the door of cosmic, which started to suck everything in that hall. The protagonists and Marquis were chained, which protected them from sucking. The accustomed serenity, charm, and glory of Islington vanished completely. It could veil its demonic nature no longer. It has been maintaining its charm and compassionate gestures yet. It threatened Door directly without searching for polite words. *"There was no longer any trace of kindness or compassion on the angel's face; only hatred, pure and honest and cold. 'I will kill you,' it told her"* (Neverwhere 332). Upon realizing the futility of its threats, the angel immediately began pleading with her. As a helpless angel facing death, it yearned to preserve its life. It tried to incite Door by mentioning her sister's existence. It used Door's love for her family as a last weapon to tempt her to close the door. However, it ended up expelling into the vastness of the space.

Gaiman wanted to emphasize the contradiction between words and deeds. Islington was polite, but it has a dark nature. When Door and Richard returned from Islington's citadel, they became unconscious due to the potent wine. Hunter took them to Serpentine's nest. Richard, for the first time, could see Door trembling out of fear after realizing that they were in

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Serpentine's crest. Serpentine was rude and couldn't comfort Door when she said her father was dead. She pointed out that her father was wrong and asked himself, "Why trouble while planning to unite the underworld?" She was neither polite while speaking nor mean to harm. She was modest to refuse honorifics. "*Just Serpentine, child. I have no time for silly honorifics and imaginary titles.*" (Neverwhere, 221) She is the first one to call Richard a hero ever since he tumbled into London Below. Though he used to be a successful man in the London Above, people in the magical world treated him as stupid, ignorant, and immature. Serpentine looked at his eyes and understood his inherent potential. She even advised Door, "You learn to recognize the type. Something in the eyes, perhaps." (Neverwhere, 220) while Islington gave them wine that inflicted pain, Serpentine offered medicinal food that relieved Richard's pain.

Conclusion

In the novel *Neverwhere*, the author used the stock characters of Angel Islington and Serpentine to emphasize the fallacy of appearance. The people in London Below feared Serpentine; when they wanted to make their children behave themselves, they told them, "Behave, or Serpentine will take you." (Neverwhere, 220) Serpentine, the leader of the snake clan, indirectly indicated Satan. In the Scriptures, Satan disguised itself as a snake to deceive Eve. Her appearance frightened Door, but she called her child. She wore a shredded, stained white dress, and her eyes were sharp. Though her mouth was a cruel slash in an imperious face, she "*gently stroked Hunter's brown cheek with it, a gesture of affection and possession.*" (Neverwhere, 219) Gaiman deduced that the serene and polite appearance may be ignorant of love, and the imperious face with a frightened appearance may genuinely care.

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