

Trickster as a Source of Liminality in Narratology

This dissertation defines the trickster role characters take on to serve as a driving force in story progression, focusing particularly on their role in liminal phases that cause narrative instability.¹ Tricksters are a mythological figure that appear independently in every culture and play an essential role in the study of liminality in narrative, in the theory of transitional rituals, and in cultural anthropology. Their stories are meant to educate, entertain, or warn us, and this archetype has moved from oral culture to written literary works and remains present in modern genres. The trickster operates outside the conventional moral dichotomy, which sets it apart from heroes, who stabilise the narrative through ethically sanctioned goals, and villains, who disrupt order through antagonistic force. By refusing to adhere to established rules and testing the limits of narrative structure, the trickster exerts an influence on story movement that neither heroism nor villainy can achieve.

Drawing on Victor Turner's (2018) anthropology of liminality, Mark Turner's (1996) theory of cognitive blending, and the latest developments in cognitive narratology (Sinding et al. 2025), this dissertation proposes that stories move through liminal phases, in which the trickster's actions and strategic or imposed inactions open narrative gaps that advance the story. By provoking conflict, ambiguity, and ontological instability, the trickster prevents narrative stagnation and forces the story toward change and, ultimately, progress. While anthropology has examined the trickster in depth, narratology lacks a coherent framework for understanding how this figure operates within the story-building and narrative progression. To address this gap, the project develops a semiotic model of narrative states (order, change, stagnation, and progress). This model conceptualises the trickster as the agent who navigates and manipulates the tensions between these states. The trickster's role isn't either inherently chaotic or purely creative; rather, it serves as the engine of alternation, continually unsettling and reconfiguring the story's internal logic to sustain narrative movement.

This project applies the proposed semiotic model in the corpus of texts, primarily Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, *The Anansi Boys*, and *The Sandman*, to determine whether characters like Loki, Mr Nancy, Dream, and the Corinthian act as catalysts of narrative and story progress. The hypothesis posits that these trickster figures operate within thresholds, storylines, or ontological layers, and use disruption as a communicative act that forces both characters and readers to renegotiate meaning. By examining how trickster-driven liminality opens new narrative possibilities, the dissertation argues that the trickster is not merely a character type but a fundamental narrative function: a force that keeps stories from collapsing into repetition, guiding them instead toward transformation.

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