

The Trickster as Liminal Agent: Gaps, Disruption, and Narrative Dynamics in Neil Gaiman's Corpus

This paper proposes a narratological framework for analyzing the trickster figure as a liminal agent in fiction. Drawing on Turner's liminality, Iser's *Leerstellen*, Mendlesohn's liminal fantasy, Eco's open work, and Greimas's semiotic square, it develops a triple semiotic square model that maps the trickster's ethical positioning, action categories, and narrative dynamics. The framework is applied to Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989–1996), *American Gods* (2001), and *Anansi Boys* (2005), demonstrating how trickster figures such as Loki and Anansi operate through narrative gaps – omissions, disruptions, and deliberate withholdings that force both characters and readers to reconstruct meaning. The analysis reveals the trickster as a structural engine of narrative progression, uniquely positioned at the threshold between creation and destruction, order and change, functioning both as the generator of narrative indeterminacy and as the catalyst of its resolution.

1. Introduction: The Universal *Speculum Mentis**

The trickster archetype stands as one of the most persistent and globally distributed constructs in human storytelling. As Paul Radin (1956, ix–xi) emphasizes, few myths are as pervasive as that of the trickster, which is recognizable in the oral traditions of indigenous tribes as well as in the literary heritage of advanced civilizations. Radin characterizes this character as a *speculum mentis* – a mythic-poetic mirror of the mind that embodies the core of human transformation. For Radin, the trickster is a paradoxical entity:

The Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously [...] He knows neither good nor evil, yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social [...] yet through his actions, all values come into being and are articulated. (Radin 1956, ix)

This paradox is not merely a character trait; it is a structural function – and it is this structural function that the present paper seeks to formalize. The trickster is not born with the right to shape the world as a primordial deity does. Instead, as Szakolczai and Thomassen (2018, 136) observe, the trickster “transforms what is already created or finds new uses and connections,” operating at the edges of established systems. If the trickster's paradox is structural, then the narrative gaps it produces are the primary mechanism through which trickster agency operates.

Despite this foundational role in mythology, narratology has struggled to integrate the trickster, often treating the figure as a static motif rather than a dynamic operator. Hynes and Doty (1997) systematized existing research, but their predominantly anthropological framework provides insufficient tools for analyzing how trickster figures function within fictional narrative structures. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing the trickster not merely as a character type, but as a

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liminal agent – a fundamental engine of narrative progression operating within the thresholds of story-building.

The central argument is as follows: in the fiction of Neil Gaiman – specifically *The Sandman* (1989–1996), *American Gods* (2001), and *Anansi Boys* (2005) – trickster figures function as structural operators whose primary activity is the generation and manipulation of narrative gaps. By inhabiting the neutral moral axis of the narrative’s ethical universe, these figures possess a unique freedom of movement denied to both heroes and villains. This freedom enables them to engineer events, steer plots, and create or use narrative gaps that drive the story forward, preventing the narrative from collapsing into stagnation or repetitive order. The trickster, in short, is the liminal agent that keeps the fictional world alive.

Following Lewis Hyde (2017, 7), the trickster is defined here as a “boundary crosser” who exists at the “gates of the city and the gates of life,” trafficking in disruption, ambiguity, and transformation. In narratological terms, the trickster operates through what this paper calls gap-making: the strategic production of narrative omissions, disruptions, and indeterminacies – what Iser (1978) theorizes as *Leerstellen* (‘Blanks,’ ‘Negations,’ and ‘Vacancies’). These gaps are the trickster’s primary tools, creating the conditions for what Turner (1969) calls liminality.

The analysis proceeds through three case studies – *The Sandman*, *American Gods*, and *Anansi Boys* – before synthesizing recurring patterns across the corpus. To trace these operations analytically, this paper proposes an original triple semiotic square framework, adapted from Greimas’s (1987) semiotic square but designed specifically for the analysis of trickster agency. The theoretical apparatus established below provides the scholarly grounding for this instrument, but the framework itself is the paper’s own methodological contribution – a replicable tool for mapping the trickster’s ethical positioning, action categories, and narrative dynamics.

2. Theoretical Framework: Liminality, Gaps, and the Triple Semiotic Square

2.1 Liminality as Narrative Threshold

Victor Turner’s concept of liminality, derived from Arnold van Gennep’s (2018) model of rites of passage, provides the foundational anthropological framework for this analysis, but it gains its full analytical power only when read alongside the narratological insights of Hyde (2017) and Vizenor (1990). Turner identifies three phases in rites of passage: separation, margin (limen), and reaggregation. The liminal phase is characterized by radical ambiguity: “the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these people elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 1969, 95). Liminal entities are stripped of status markers, possessions, and social distinctions – reduced, in Turner’s phrase, to a *tabula rasa* on which new knowledge and identity can be inscribed (Turner 1969, 103). This model provides the first pillar of the present paper’s hypothesis: if the trickster is a liminal figure *par excellence*, then its narrative function must be understood not as a fixed character trait but as a structural operation – the generation of gaps through which transformation becomes possible.

The crucial insight for narrative analysis is that liminality is not a passive state but an active, productive force. Hyde (2017, 15) captures this dynamism when he describes the trickster as a “boundary crosser” who exists at the “gates of the city and the gates of life” – the character who ensures that thresholds remain open and transformative rather than merely separative. The liminal phase involves the temporary suspension of normal social rules, which creates the conditions for transformation. Turner (1969, 110) notes that folk literature abounds with liminal figures – “holy beggars,” “third sons,” “little tailors,” and “simpletons” – who “strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and reduce them to the level of common humanity.” The court jester, operating at the highest point of the political unit with license to gibe at king and courtiers, is the institutionalized form of this figure (Turner 1969, 110). The trickster is its narrative equivalent.

Contemporary scholarship has revised Turner’s model in ways that are particularly productive for literary analysis. Rather than a single bounded ritual transition, contemporary liminality involves “multiple, overlapping liminal phases, places, and states as individuals move between various cultures, contexts, and roles throughout their lives” (Thomassen 2014, 89). This revised understanding is additive rather than exclusive: liminal states coexist with ordinary life rather than suspending it entirely. Vizenor (1990, 277) extends this understanding into discourse, arguing that the trickster’s language itself is liminal – a “comic holotrope” that resists the closure of dominant narratives and sustains the interpretive openness that Turner’s model predicts. Fludernik’s (1996, 12) concept of “experientiality” – the cognitive effort through which readers naturalize unfamiliar narrative situations – applies here with particular force: the anomalous behavior introduced by trickster characters demands precisely the heightened interpretive effort that, in Fludernik’s framework, gives narrative its urgency. In Gaiman’s fiction, this revised liminality is structurally embodied. Characters like Shadow Moon in *American Gods* and Fat Charlie Nancy in *Anansi Boys* do not pass through a single bounded threshold; they inhabit multiple, simultaneous liminal states – between the mortal and divine, between the mundane and mythic, between ignorance and knowledge – that layer and interact throughout the narrative.

The trickster is the agent who inhabits and exploits these liminal zones. As Szakolczai and Thomassen (2018, 136) observe, the trickster is not a creator or a primordial being; it transforms what already exists, finding new uses and connections at the margins of established systems. If Turner provides the anthropological ground and Hyde the mythological articulation, the question remains: how does this liminal dynamic manifest specifically within the genre of fantasy fiction? This marginal position – ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner 1969, 95) the fixed categories of the narrative’s moral and ontological universe – is precisely what enables the trickster to generate the gaps that drive the story forward.

Farah Mendlesohn’s (2008) taxonomy of fantasy provides the genre-specific lens through which this anthropological framework is applied to narrative analysis. Mendlesohn (2004, 228–239) identifies “liminal fantasy” as a mode in which the boundary between the mundane and the fantastic remains equivocal – the magic is never fully explained, and the reader is denied the certainty that either a portal-quest or an immersive fantasy would provide. In liminal fantasy, the reader must fill in the blanks, constructing the rules of the fictional world from incomplete evidence. This is the genre-level articulation of Turner’s anthropological insight: the narrative itself occupies a threshold state, and the reader is placed in the position of the liminal subject, stripped of familiar classificatory tools. Gaiman’s fiction operates persistently in this mode. As Klapcsik (2009, 193) observes, Gaiman’s fantasies are “ironic due to their doubled narrative perspectives, the

multiplication and estrangement of voice,” producing a sustained condition of interpretive uncertainty that mirrors the trickster’s own ontological ambiguity.

2.2 Gaps as the Mechanism of Trickster Agency

If liminality provides the site of disruption, the narrative gap is its mechanism. Wolfgang Iser’s concept of *Leerstellen* describes the structural features within literary texts that indicate where different segments and patterns are to be connected, even when the text itself does not explicitly state those connections. Gaps are, in Iser’s (1978, 182) formulation, “the unseen joints of the text” that mark off schemata and textual perspectives, prompting readers to engage in acts of ideation. They are not deficiencies or failures of narrative; they are the productive asymmetries around which the entire text-reader relationship revolves (Iser 1980, 106). Eco’s (1979) concept of the “open work” provides the structural complement: the text sustains itself through strategic incompleteness, engineered so that it remains alive to multiple interpretations. Together, Iser and Eco establish that gaps are not incidental to narrative but constitutive of it.

Iser distinguishes three types of gaps, each serving distinct narrative functions. “Blanks” (suspended connectability) leave open the connection between textual perspectives, spurring readers to coordinate these perspectives into projections of reciprocal influence (Iser 1980, 107). Once the schemata are linked, the blank disappears – but only until the trickster engineers a new one. “Negations” invoke familiar and determinate elements only to cancel them out; what is canceled remains visible, modifying the reader’s attitude toward the familiar and guiding them toward a specific interpretive position (Iser 1980, 107). “Vacancies” are non-thematic segments within the referential field of the “wandering viewpoint” – the reader’s dynamic, shifting perspective as it travels between narrator, characters, plot, and fictive reader (Iser 1980, 109f.). Crucially, “the shifting blank itself maps out the path along which the wandering viewpoint is to travel” (Iser 1980, 111): the gap does not merely invite interpretation but actively choreographs it. The trickster is the character whose gap-making most closely mirrors the author’s own structural strategy.

The cognitive process of filling these gaps involves what Iser (1978, 169) calls “ideational activity” – the reader is induced to make textual segments act upon and transform each other, producing the aesthetic object through their own participation. This process operates through anticipation and retrospection: the reader forms provisional gestalt patterns that are constantly modified as new information emerges, in a “kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections” (Iser 1978, 278). The text is, in this sense, inexhaustible: “a single text is capable of multiple realizations, and no single reading can exhaust its full potential” (Iser 1978, 280).

Combined with Umberto Eco’s (1979) notion of the “open work,” this framework illuminates the trickster’s structural function with particular precision. For Eco, the open work is a dynamic machine that sustains itself through strategic incompleteness; the author engineers indeterminacy so that the text remains alive to interpretation. The trickster, in Gaiman’s fiction, is the diegetic agent who performs this function from within the story-world. The trickster is the character whose scheming most closely mirrors the author’s own structural strategy – engineering gaps, withholding information, acting through proxies, and ensuring that the narrative machine never stops.

In Gaiman's work, trickster characters do not merely act; they omit. By withholding information, lying, operating through disguise, or manipulating other characters as proxies, they force both the diegetic characters and the actual reader to reconstruct the un-narrated. This liminal gap-making is what Vizenor (1990, 277) means by the trickster's "narrative wisps" – the fragments of story that resist closure and invite imaginative completion. The trickster ensures that the narrative remains an open work by constantly re-negotiating the rules of engagement from within.

The theoretical synthesis can now be stated precisely. Turner establishes that liminality is a productive threshold state in which normal classifications dissolve and transformation becomes possible. Mendlesohn's taxonomy, while not addressing Gaiman specifically, provides the conceptual framework through which Gaiman's fiction can be understood as liminal fantasy – placing the reader in precisely this threshold condition. Iser and Eco provide the mechanism: the narrative gap (*Leerstelle*) is the textual device through which liminality is produced and sustained, and the open work is the structural principle that keeps the text alive to interpretation. What remains is an analytical instrument capable of tracing how trickster figures operationalize these dynamics within specific texts – how they generate gaps, exploit liminal thresholds, and drive narratives from stagnation through transformation.

2.3 Methodology: The Triple Semiotic Square

This analysis employs a triple semiotic square framework, adapted from Greimas (1987), to provide a replicable analytical instrument for tracing trickster agency across Gaiman's corpus. The Greimasian semiotic square maps the logical relations between semantic oppositions – contraries (S1 vs. S2), sub-contraries ($\sim$ S1 vs. $\sim$ S2), contradictories (S1 vs. $\sim$ S1; S2 vs. $\sim$ S2), and the complex and neutral axes – revealing how meaning is generated through the interplay of these positions rather than through any single term alone (Greimas 1987, 49; Corso 2014, 69). Three distinct squares are applied, each targeting a different dimension of trickster agency.

2.3.1 Square A: Ethical Positioning and Narrative Role

The first square maps the character's position within the narrative's moral universe. Three agent positions emerge: the Hero (S1, good), the Villain (S2, evil), and the Trickster (neutral axis, $\sim$ S1 + $\sim$ S2). The Greimasian model also generates a complex axis (S1 + S2) that simultaneously embodies both good and evil. However, this position functions as a structural limit rather than a fourth agent type: no character can sustainably occupy both poles at once. In narrative practice, figures who approach the complex axis – who momentarily embody both heroism and villainy – are unstable and transient, passing through it on their way to one of the three occupiable positions. The complex axis thus marks the boundary of the model, not an additional role within it.

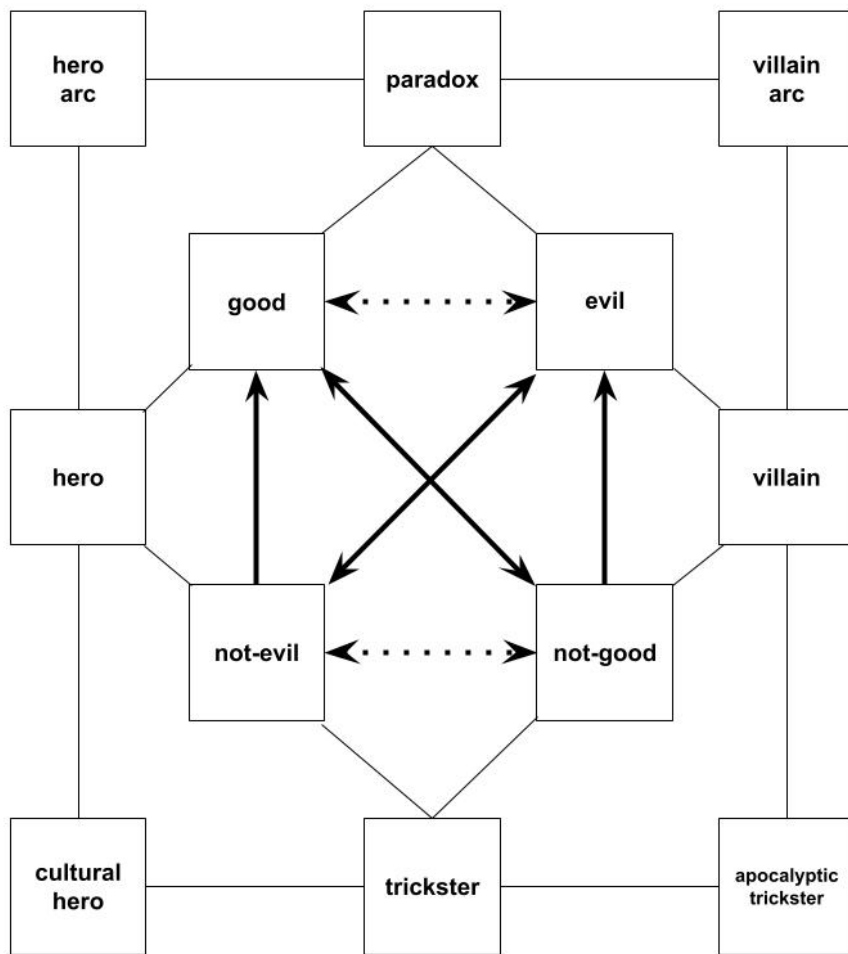


Fig. 1: Square A: Ethical Positioning and Narrative Role

The square distinguishes three agent positions. S1 (Good/Hero) marks ethical commitment to the established order: the Hero stabilizes the world by working toward the restoration or preservation of what is right – as Morpheus does throughout *The Sandman* when he reclaims his stolen tools and rebuilds the Dreaming, or as Shadow Moon does when he refuses to let the gods die for Wednesday’s scheme. S2 (Evil/Villain) marks antagonistic disruption: the Villain challenges the order through force, deception, or malice directed toward destructive ends – as the Corinthian does when he roams the waking world as a serial killer during Morpheus’s imprisonment, or as Grahame Coats does in *Anansi Boys* when he embezzles and murders to preserve his own power. The Neutral Axis ($\sim S1 + \sim S2$ /Trickster) is the position the Trickster inhabits – simultaneously Not-Good and Not-Evil, unbound by the binary obligations of either Hero or Villain. This is the position Radin (1956, ix) describes as the paradox of the trickster who “knows neither good nor evil, yet is responsible for both,” and what Vizenor (1990, 285) characterizes as narrative “nothingness” – an encounter that centers the imagination without fixing it to any ideological pole. Wednesday in *American Gods* exemplifies this axis: he claims to defend the Old Gods (superficially S1) while orchestrating their mutual slaughter for his own resurrection – neither heroic nor villainous, but structurally trickster. The fourth vertex, the complex axis ($S1 + S2$), represents the theoretical limit where heroism and villainy merge – a position occupied by tragic figures rather than tricksters.

The critical narratological implication of this positioning is that the trickster’s moral freedom is also structural. The Hero cannot engineer certain kinds of gaps without betraying their ethical commitments; the Villain cannot create certain possibilities without triggering their own defeat. The Trickster, unbound by either set of constraints, can move where neither can – creating gaps that evade classification and forcing the narrative to move when both Hero and Villain are paralyzed by their own ideological rigidities. This is the source of the trickster’s unique agency: not power, but positional freedom.

This positional freedom is the narrative equivalent of what Turner (1969, 95f.) describes in the liminal phase of ritual: the stripping away of status markers, the dissolution of fixed categories, the reduction to a state in which transformation becomes possible. The trickster’s occupation of the neutral axis is not merely a moral position; it is a liminal condition. And because Gaiman’s fiction operates as liminal fantasy in Mendlesohn’s sense, the reader shares in this condition – denied the certainty that a fixed hero or villain would provide, forced to navigate the same interpretive ambiguity that the trickster inhabits.

Crucially, the trickster’s position on the neutral axis is not permanent. Hynes and Doty (1997) emphasize the trickster’s “polyvalence” – their capacity to shift positions depending on circumstance. When a trickster fully assumes the role of Hero or Villain, they cease to function as a Trickster, and another character fills the structural gap.

2.3.2 Square B: *The Mechanics of Action*

The second square maps the trickster’s own action categories – the modes through which the trickster intervenes in the narrative and drives it forward.

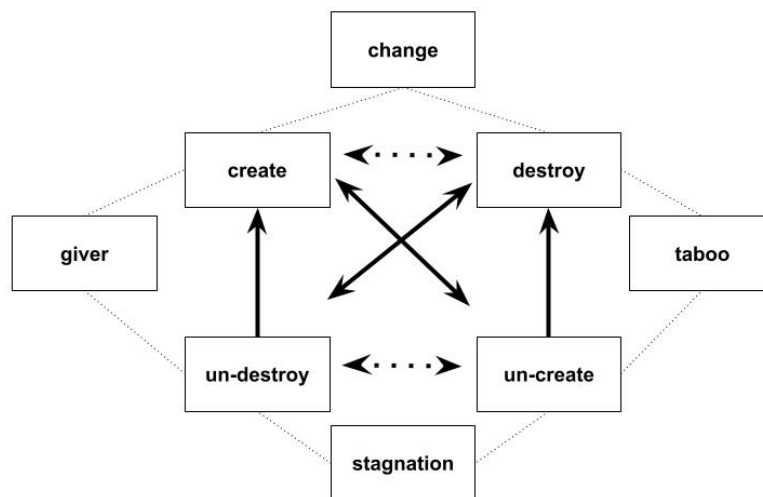


Fig. 2: Square B: The Mechanics of Trickster Action (overview)

The square distinguishes four action modes. Create (S1) denotes active making – the trickster brings new structures, relationships, or possibilities into being, as when Anansi wins all the stories from Tiger and establishes the narrative order of the world (Gaiman 2005, 31–34). Destroy (S2) denotes active unmaking – the trickster dismantles what exists, as when Wednesday engineers the mutual

slaughter of Old and New Gods to harvest their belief-energy. Un-create ($\sim S1$) is the withholding of creation – a period of strategic inaction in which the trickster refrains from making, allowing existing structures to decay or reveal their insufficiency, as when Loki in *The Sandman* fulfills the boon on his own terms, allowing the consequences to unfold rather than acting directly. Un-destroy ($\sim S2$) is the withholding of destruction – the trickster refrains from annihilation, preserving what could be destroyed so that transformation remains possible, as when Spider in *Anansi Boys* disrupts Fat Charlie’s life but does not destroy it, leaving room for reintegration.

The trickster’s essential power lies not in any single position but in the combinations along the square’s edges. The trickster acts as what Hynes and Doty (1997) call a “sacred bricoleur” – a figure who destroys to create ($S2 \rightarrow S1$) or un-creates to expose what was hidden ($\sim S1 \rightarrow S2$). Wednesday in *American Gods* destroys old mythic structures ($S2$) to create new belief-energy ($S1$). Anansi in *Anansi Boys* un-creates Fat Charlie’s settled identity ($\sim S1$) so that a more authentic self can emerge. Loki in *The Sandman* un-destroys the Dreaming ($\sim S2$), engineering conditions for transformation rather than outright annihilation.

Each edge-combination maps onto a specific type of Iser’s *Leerstellen*. The Destroy-to-Create edge ($S2 \rightarrow S1$) produces Negations: familiar structures are canceled and must be reinterpreted. The Un-create edge ($\sim S1 \rightarrow S2$) produces Blanks: possibilities are withheld, forcing the reader to construct connections. The Un-destroy edge ($\sim S2 \rightarrow S1$) produces Vacancies: the reader’s viewpoint is redirected as elements shift around preserved anchors.

2.3.3 Square C: Narrative Dynamics and the Liminal Transition

The third square tracks the progression of the story-world and maps the trickster’s function within it.

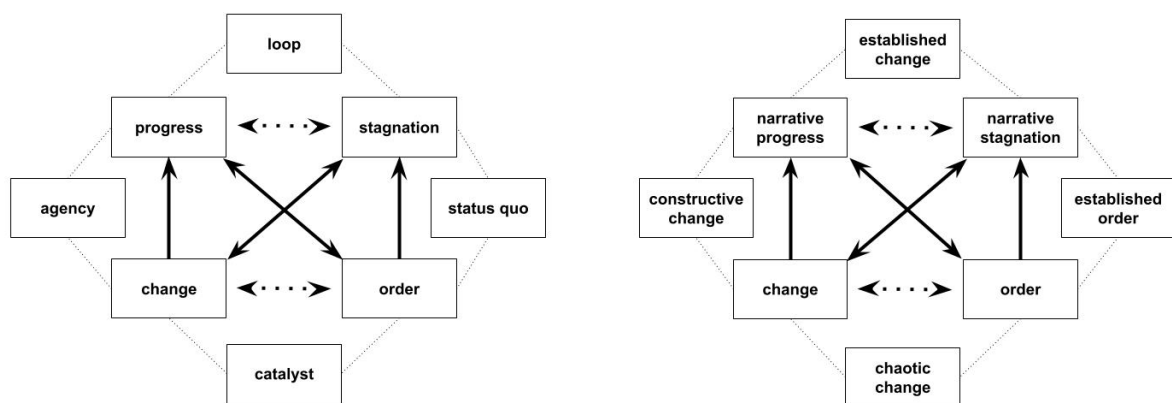


Fig. 4: Square C: Narrative Dynamics and Liminal Transition

The square distinguishes four narrative states. Progress ($S1$) denotes forward movement: characters develop, and new equilibria emerge. Stagnation ($S2$) is arrested development: the narrative locked

in repetition. Order (~S1) is a stable, closed system – Eco’s (1979) “closed work.” Change (~S2) is Turner’s liminal threshold: the “betwixt and between” (Turner 1969, 95) state in which norms are suspended.

The trickster’s primary function in Square C is to break Stagnation (S2) by introducing a gap that forces Change (~S2) – the liminal phase in which established norms are suspended, and new possibilities emerge. This Change is not yet Progress; it is the unstable threshold state that is the necessary precondition for transformation. The trickster does not guarantee Progress (S1); it guarantees movement, preventing narrative collapse into repetition.

This movement corresponds to Turner’s three-phase model: Stagnation (S2) is the pre-liminal state; Change (~S2) is the liminal phase in which “the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply” (Turner 1969, 97); and Progress (S1) is reaggregation. The trickster is the ritual specialist who initiates separation and sustains the liminal phase long enough for transformation to occur – or, in Mendlesohn’s terms, the agent who keeps the fantasy liminal.

The three squares are not independent instruments but an integrated analytical apparatus. Square A establishes who the trickster is and why it can act where others cannot. Square B maps what it does and how its actions exploit the logical edges between creation and destruction. Square C tracks what happens as a result – the narrative movement from Stagnation through Change to Progress. Together, they provide a comprehensive account of trickster agency that is both theoretically grounded and analytically replicable.

3. Case Study I: *The Sandman* – The Gutter as Liminal Void

3.1 Stagnation and the Imprisoned Dream King

Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* (1989–1996) provides a uniquely layered field for trickster analysis because it operates simultaneously in two registers of gap-making: the formal gaps of the comics medium itself, and the thematic gaps generated by trickster interventions within the story-world. The comic book “gutter” – the space between panels where “closure” happens and where the reader’s mind connects two discrete images to construct a continuous narrative (McCloud 1993, 66) – is the literal instantiation of Iser’s *Leerstellen*. Gaiman exploits this formal property with deliberate sophistication, ensuring that pivotal narrative turns hinge precisely on what remains unsaid or visually implicit in the gutter space.

The series opens with a state of profound Stagnation (S2) on Square C. Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams, has been imprisoned since 1916 by the occultist Roderick Burgess (Gaiman 1989, issue 1), who attempted to capture Death but ensnared Dream instead. Burgess holds Morpheus in a glass sphere in his Sussex mansion – not in Hell, as is sometimes misidentified – stripped of his tools of office: his helm, his pouch of sand, his ruby. For seventy years, the Dreaming decays. Nightmares walk free, sleepers cannot wake, the fabric of the dream-world unravels. This is Stagnation in its most literal narrative form: the engine of the story-world has been arrested, and nothing can move until it is released.

The escape of Morpheus in 1988, when his guard falls asleep under the watch of Alex Burgess (Roderick’s son, who inherited the captive after his father’s death decades earlier), initiates the first

major Change (~S2) transition. But the more structurally significant trickster interventions come later, in the arcs that reshape the Dreaming's fundamental nature.

In Iser's terms, the seventy-year imprisonment constitutes a massive Vacancy: the referential field of the Dreaming is present but non-thematic, a latent narrative space whose potential remains unrealized. The reader of "Preludes and Nocturnes" (Gaiman 1989, issues 1–8) encounters the consequences of this Vacancy – the sleep sickness, the escaped nightmares, the decay of the dream-realm – as Blanks that demand ideational activity. The text withholds the full picture of what the Dreaming was, inviting the reader to construct its former coherence from fragments. This is liminal fantasy in Mendlesohn's precise sense: the rules of this fictional world are never fully given, and the reader must navigate the threshold between knowing and not-knowing that Turner identifies as the defining condition of the liminal subject. Crucially, even during this Stagnation, trickster figures are at work. The Corinthian, a nightmare who escapes the decaying Dreaming, roams the waking world as a serial killer (Gaiman 1989–1990, issues 10–14), exploiting the Vacancy of Dream's absence to pursue his own agenda. More significantly, Desire – Dream's sibling and persistent antagonist – engineers the creation of a dream vortex, hoping to maneuver Morpheus into spilling family blood and thus triggering the Furies' retribution (Gaiman 1990, issue 16; 1994–1995, issues 57–69). These trickster operations within the Stagnation phase demonstrate that the gap left by the absent protagonist does not remain empty; it is immediately colonized by figures who exploit its liminal potential.

3.2 Loki and the Ethics of the Void: Square A and Square B Applied

Loki's role in "The Kindly Ones" arc (Gaiman 1994–1995, issues 57–69) exemplifies the neutral axis of Square A with particular clarity. Loki does not seek Evil (S2) in the conventional sense of total destruction; his goal is not the annihilation of the Dreaming but the unraveling of the old Order (~S1) that Morpheus represents. Loki's involvement is itself a trickster arrangement: he owes Dream a boon for not being returned to his mythological punishment – the cave with the serpent dripping venom. Dream calls in this debt, asking Loki to take Daniel Hall at a later age. But Loki, being a trickster, fulfills the boon on his own terms – he orchestrates the kidnapping while Daniel is still a baby (Gaiman 1994–1995, issues 57–63), an act that inflames Lyta Hall's maternal rage and sets in motion the chain of events that ultimately destroys Dream himself. Loki operates at ~S1 + ~S2 – he is Not-Good (he orchestrates the kidnapping of Daniel Hall, an innocent child, through deception) and Not-Evil (he does not seek the Dreaming's destruction for its own sake; he seeks the conditions for transformation). This positioning on the neutral axis is precisely what grants him the structural freedom to act where neither the hero-characters of the narrative nor its villains can.

On Square B, Loki's action is a complex edge-combination. He Un-creates (~S1) the protection around Daniel Hall – together with Puck, Loki kidnaps the child, exploiting Hippolyta Hall's grief and redirecting it toward Morpheus. Crucially, the Furies can only be summoned against one who has spilled family blood, and Morpheus had already fulfilled this condition by mercy-killing his own son, Orpheus. Loki's manipulation thus does not create the Furies' legal basis but engineers the emotional catalyst – Lyta's rage – that activates it (Gaiman 1994–1995, issues 57–69). This Un-

creation (the removal of Daniel from the Dreaming’s protection) creates the conditions for a Destroy (S2) operation – the Furies’ assault on Morpheus – which in turn enables a Create (S1) operation: the emergence of Daniel as the new Dream. The trickster does not perform the destruction directly; he engineers the gap that makes destruction possible, then steps back while other forces do the work. This is the “sacred bricoleur” in action: destroying to create, un-creating to reveal.

The narrative consequence, mapped on Square C, is a movement from the Order (~S1) of Morpheus’s ancient, rigid stewardship of the Dreaming – a state of stability without progress – through the Change (~S2) of the Furies’ assault and Morpheus’s death, toward a new Progress (S1): the Dreaming reborn under Daniel, more flexible, more merciful, more capable of growth. The trickster’s gap-making is the necessary catalyst for this transition. Without Loki’s liminal gap-making, the narrative would remain trapped in the Order of Morpheus’s unchanging stewardship.

On Square A: Across all three works, tricksters occupy the neutral axis (~S1 + ~S2) but demonstrate the “polyvalence” that Hynes and Doty (1997) emphasize. Loki shifts from collaborator to villain; Wednesday maintains moral ambiguity; Anansi occupies neutrality from beyond the grave. No trickster remains permanently in one position, confirming the role is structural, not fixed.

3.3 Puck and the Gutter as Liminal Void

Robin Goodfellow (Puck) in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Gaiman 1990, issue 19) offers a more compressed but equally illuminating example of trickster gap-making. Puck’s role in the performance for Titania and Oberon is to ensure that the play’s magic exceeds its theatrical frame – that the gap between performance and reality collapses. His delight in chaos, his refusal to respect the boundary between the diegetic audience and the fictional world within the play, generates a cascade of *Leerstellen* that Gaiman deliberately leaves unresolved: What did the faeries truly experience? What did Shakespeare understand about what he had done? What happened to the changeling boy? These blanks are not oversights but strategic gap-making – trickster gaps that keep the reader’s wandering viewpoint in motion long after the issue ends.

The gutter between the panels where Puck acts, and the panels where consequences emerge, is the formal correlate of the trickster’s structural position: the liminal void between cause and effect, between action and meaning, where the reader’s ideational activity must supply the connection. Gaiman’s mastery of the comics medium lies precisely in his understanding that the gutter is not empty space but productive space – the site where the trickster’s gap-making and the reader’s gap-filling converge.

4. Case Study II: *American Gods* – The Con as Gap-Making Mechanism

4.1 The Architecture of the Con

American Gods (2001) deploys the trickster figure through a narrative architecture in which the “con” functions as the primary gap-making mechanism. The novel’s central revelation – that the apparent war between Old Gods and New Gods is itself a con orchestrated jointly by Wednesday (Odin) and Mr. World (Loki in disguise) to harvest belief-energy (worship) from the deaths of gods on both sides (Gaiman 2001, 400–450) – reframes the entire narrative retrospectively as a trickster operation. This meta-con is not merely a plot twist; it is a structural enactment of the trickster’s gap-making function, forcing the reader to retrospectively reinterpret every prior event through the lens of the trickster’s gap-making.

Wednesday is Odin, the All-Father of Norse mythology, operating as the novel’s primary trickster-operator. Mr. World, the leader of the New Gods, is revealed to be Loki in disguise (Gaiman 2001, 420–445), Wednesday’s co-conspirator and the con’s second architect. Their collaboration is the novel’s central gap: the truth systematically withheld from Shadow Moon, the other gods, and the reader throughout the novel’s first two-thirds. This withheld truth is the blank around which the wandering viewpoint is choreographed. Every scene in which Wednesday recruits gods for his war, every scene in which Mr. World threatens and maneuvers, is a Negation in Iser’s sense: familiar narrative elements (the war narrative, the recruitment narrative, the hero’s journey) are invoked only to be canceled by the revelation that the entire structure is a fabrication.

The con, as a narrative structure, is fundamentally a gap-making machine. It operates by creating false appearances and withholding true motives, forcing Shadow Moon (whose story we follow), the other gods, and, retrospectively, the reader to inhabit a state of permanent ontological unease. This is precisely what Margolin (1990, 843) describes as “ontological instability”: a condition in which the reader is forced to question the fundamental rules and boundaries of the fictional world. Wednesday and Mr. World weaponize this instability, transforming it from a condition of readerly discomfort into a mechanism for harvesting belief energy.

Wednesday does not confront the New Gods directly; he finds the gaps in the American cultural system – the interstices between old belief and new, between immigrant memory and assimilated identity – and weaponizes them. This is Hyde’s (2017, 15) “boundary crosser” at work: Wednesday moves through the liminal spaces of American culture, exploiting the pores between established orders rather than attacking them head-on.

4.2 Shadow Moon and Overlapping Liminality

Shadow Moon is the novel’s structural embodiment of the revised liminality framework. His journey enacts Turner’s three-phase model: he begins in a pre-liminal state of stagnation (imprisoned, bereaved), enters the liminal threshold through Wednesday’s intervention, and ultimately achieves reaggregation through his vigil on the World Tree. Shadow occupies the Blank – what Iser (1978, 182) describes as the “unseen joints of the text” – registering the effects of Wednesday’s scheming without comprehending the mechanism behind it. His ignorance makes him

the reader's perceptual proxy: he does not know who Wednesday really is, what the con entails, or why events unfold as they do. This gap between Shadow's limited knowledge and the reader's growing suspicion generates the interpretive tension that Eco (1979) identifies as the condition of the open work.

Shadow's journey maps precisely onto Square C. He begins in Stagnation (S2): the novel opens with him in prison, passive, waiting, his life arrested by his wife's death and the collapse of his plans (Gaiman 2001, 3–50). Wednesday's recruitment initiates Change (~S2): Shadow is drawn into the liminal road journey that constitutes the novel's middle section, a perpetual state of "betwixt and between" (Turner 1969, 95) in which the boundary between fact and fiction, between myth and reality, is systematically erased. The revelation of the meta-con and Shadow's subsequent choice to end the battle – to refuse to let the gods die for Wednesday's scheme – initiates the transition toward Progress (S1): a new, unstable equilibrium in which the Old Gods disperse back into the American landscape, Shadow discovers his true nature, and the cycle of belief is recalibrated.

4.3 The Semiotic Squares Applied

Square A positions Wednesday at the neutral axis (~S1 + ~S2) with particular complexity. He claims to represent Order and Tradition (the Old Gods, the old ways, the preservation of ancient belief) – a position that superficially resembles Good (S1). But his methods are pure trickster: deception, manipulation, the weaponization of other characters' loyalties. He is Not-Good because his apparent commitment to the Old Gods is revealed as self-serving; he is Not-Evil because his goal is not destruction for its own sake but the generation of belief-energy for his own survival and resurrection. This is the neutral axis at its most sophisticated: an ethical position that mimics both Good and Evil while remaining committed to neither.

Mr. World (Loki) similarly occupies the neutral axis, though from the opposite direction. He claims to represent Progress and Innovation – the New Gods' rhetoric – but operates through ancient trickster strategies of deception and boundary-crossing. The revelation that Mr. World is Loki in disguise collapses the apparent opposition between Old and New, revealing that the conflict itself is a trickster operation. This collapse generates a massive Blank in Iser's sense: the reader must retrospectively reinterpret all of Mr. World's actions, filling the gap between appearance and reality through ideational activity.

Square B maps the meta-con as an edge-combination. Wednesday Destroys (S2) the old order of mythic belief by orchestrating a war while simultaneously Creating (S1) a mechanism for harvesting belief-energy. Loki, as Mr. World, Un-creates (~S1) the New Gods' confidence while Un-destroying (~S2) the Old Gods' residual force. The "sacred bricoleur" function (Hynes / Doty 1997) distinguishes the trickster from straightforward Creator or Destroyer: the trickster works the edges, combining action modes to generate *Leerstellen*.

Square C maps the House on the Rock scene (Gaiman 2001, 90–120) as the novel's pivotal liminal site – a real tourist attraction in Wisconsin that Gaiman transforms into an architectural threshold where mythic and mundane realities overlap. Here, Shadow and the reader experience Iser's "wandering viewpoint," the interpretive position continually revised as new perspectives

emerge. The scene enacts Change (~S2), breaking mundane Stagnation and initiating the liminal crisis that drives the novel's second half.

The novel's structure enacts Turner's three-phase model at every level. Shadow's personal journey, the con's unfolding, and the mythic war between Old and New Gods all trace the same arc: from pre-liminal stagnation through liminal crisis to reaggregation. This layered parallelism confirms that the trickster's gap-making operates simultaneously at the levels of story (the con), character (Shadow's transformation), and discourse (the reader's experience of the narrative as an open, indeterminate text in Mendlesohn's precise sense).

5. Case Study III: *Anansi Boys* – Storytelling as Gap Technology

5.1 Anansi as the Supreme Gap-Maker

Anansi Boys (2005) represents the fullest and most self-reflexive deployment of the trickster figure in Gaiman's corpus, because here the trickster's gap-making function becomes inseparable from the act of storytelling itself. Anansi – the West African and Caribbean spider-god of stories – is introduced through a single, structurally decisive claim: he owns all the stories. This is not a metaphor. In the novel's ontology, Anansi's ownership of the stories means that all narratives are, in some sense, trickster operations – structured by the same logic of strategic gap-making, strategic withholding, and diegetically manufactured gaps that characterizes the trickster's agency in the other works of the corpus.

Anansi's opening move in the novel is his death. He dies at a karaoke night in Florida (Gaiman 2005, 23–48), collapsing mid-performance in a moment that deliberately blurs the boundary between performance and reality, between life and death, between tragedy and comedy. This ambiguity is the novel's first Blank: Is Anansi truly dead, or is his death another trickster performance? The text refuses to resolve this question definitively, and the reader's wandering viewpoint is set in motion from the novel's first pages. Anansi's death is itself a gap-making act, the supreme trickster maneuver of disappearing to engineer the conditions for transformation.

Vizenor's (1990, 277) concept of the trickster as a "comic holotrope" – a semiotic sign that deconstructs even the subtlest narrative traces within a culture – finds its most literal instantiation in *Anansi*. The novel's narrator frequently interrupts the narrative to comment on storytelling conventions, offer alternative versions of events, or acknowledge the narrative's constructed nature – as when the opening pages declare that "[i]t begins, as most things begin, with a song" (Gaiman 2005, 1), folding the reader into a storytelling frame that foregrounds the act of narration itself. This metafictional dimension is not ornamental; it is the formal enactment of Anansi's trickster function. By laying bare the process of storytelling, the novel ensures that its own gaps are visible – that the reader is aware of them as deliberate authorial constructions – and is therefore drawn into a more conscious and active form of ideational participation.

5.2 Fat Charlie's Ignorance as Structural Gap

Fat Charlie Nancy, Anansi's son, is the novel's structural embodiment of the Gap. The ignorance of his own identity – that his father is a god (Gaiman 2005, 1–48), that he has a divine other half, that he can manipulate reality through storytelling – is not merely a character trait but a narrative mechanism. Fat Charlie's ignorance is the Stagnation (S2) of Square C: his life is arrested, his identity fixed, his possibilities foreclosed. He is, at the novel's opening, a figure of pure Order (~S1): stable, predictable, incapable of Progress.

The arrival of Spider – whom Fat Charlie initially takes to be a long-lost brother (Gaiman 2005, 69–118), but who is in fact the other half of a single self, split in childhood by Anansi's magic (Gaiman 2005, 301–322) so that the trickster inheritance would be contained – is the trickster intervention that breaks the Stagnation. The reader discovers only gradually that Spider and Fat Charlie are not siblings but two aspects of one person: the mundane and the divine, the fearful and the fearless, separated and set against each other. Spider occupies the neutral axis of Square A (~S1 + ~S2) with characteristic ease: he is charming, generous, and genuinely helpful to Fat Charlie in some respects, but he is also deceptive, manipulative, and utterly indifferent to the consequences of his actions for others. He is Not-Good and Not-Evil; he is a trickster in the purest structural sense. His arrival in Fat Charlie's life initiates Change (~S2): the liminal state of instability and transformation in which Fat Charlie's settled identity is dismantled, and a new one must be constructed.

On Square B, Spider's action is an Un-create (~S1): he does not destroy Fat Charlie's life directly, but he negates its settled structures – takes his fiancée, takes his job, takes his identity – creating the conditions for a more authentic self to emerge. This Un-creation is painful and disorienting, but it is the necessary precondition for Fat Charlie's eventual Create (S1): the claiming of his storytelling heritage, the integration of his trickster identity, the emergence of a self that is neither the passive object of others' stories nor the reckless agent of Spider's trickster operations, but something new.

5.3 Storytelling as Technology of Reality Manipulation

The novel's central ontological claim – that stories do not represent reality but constitute it – is the theoretical heart of the trickster's gap-making function. Anansi's stories are not fictions in the conventional sense; they are operations on the real, interventions that reshape what is possible. This aligns with Vizenor's (1990, 281) understanding of trickster discourse as a form of imaginative liberation that resists the closure imposed by dominant narratives. When Anansi owns all the stories, he controls the *Leerstellen* of the cultural universe – the gaps through which new possibilities can emerge and through which old certainties can be dismantled.

The novel's treatment of storytelling also connects to Fludernik's (1996, 12) concept of "experientiality" – the cognitive effort required to naturalize anomalous narrative experience. Fat Charlie's journey is precisely a process of naturalization: learning to integrate the anomalous reality of his divine heritage into a coherent self-narrative. The trickster's gap-making forces this naturalization, demanding the cognitive effort that gives the narrative its urgency and depth. Anansi

does not give Fat Charlie his identity; he creates the gaps that force Fat Charlie to construct it himself.

The Moral Square (Square A) positions Anansi at the neutral axis with characteristic ambiguity. He disrupts hierarchies, the dominion of Tiger, who in Anansi mythology owned all the stories before Anansi won them through cunning (Gaiman 2005, 31–34) and the settled order of the mythic world, but creates new patterns through storytelling. He is Not-Good (his methods are manipulative, his concern for his sons is filtered through trickster indirection) and Not-Evil (his disruptions are ultimately generative, enabling Fat Charlie's transformation and the revitalization of the story-world). Anansi thus enacts the structural paradox at the core of Radin's (1956, ix) formulation: not merely a character who happens to do both good and evil, but one whose interventions generate the very categories of value by which the narrative world operates. His ownership of the stories is the material basis for this paradox – because he controls narrative itself, every moral distinction the novel produces is, in some sense, a trickster artifact.

The Dynamic Square (Square C) tracks Fat Charlie's arc with precision: Stagnation (S2) (passive, controlled by narrative of others) → Change (~S2) (Spider's arrival, the Caribbean journey, the confrontation with Tiger) → Progress (S1) (Fat Charlie's claiming of his storytelling heritage, the integration of his identity, the emergence of a new equilibrium). This progression is not linear but recursive: each stage generates new gaps that must be filled, new blanks that the wandering viewpoint must traverse. The novel ends not with closure but with the promise of a continued story – the trickster's guarantee that the narrative machine will never stop.

The theoretical integration is most complete in this final case study. Turner's liminality operates at the level of character (Fat Charlie as liminal subject, stripped of identity, undergoing transformation), at the level of the fictional world (the boundary between mundane London and mythic Caribbean is equivocal in precisely Mendlesohn's sense), and at the level of narrative discourse (the metafictional narrator enacts Iser's *Vacancies*, shifting the reader's wandering viewpoint between registers). Eco's open work finds its most literal embodiment: Anansi's ownership of all stories means that the text is, ontologically, an open work – always susceptible to retelling, reinterpretation, and the trickster's renegotiation of its terms.

6. Synthesis: The Trickster as Structural Principle

6.1 Recurring Patterns Across the Corpus

The application of the triple semiotic square framework across *The Sandman*, *American Gods*, and *Anansi Boys* reveals a set of recurring structural patterns that define the trickster's function in Gaiman's fiction. These patterns are not incidental to the individual works but constitute the deep logic of trickster agency as a narrative principle.

On Square A, trickster figures consistently occupy the neutral axis (~S1 + ~S2), refusing alignment with either the ethical commitments of the Hero or the destructive imperatives of the Villain. Loki in *The Sandman*, Wednesday and Mr. World (Loki) in *American Gods*, and Anansi in *Anansi Boys* all operate from this position of moral freedom. This is not a character flaw but a structural necessity: the trickster's positional freedom is the source of its unique agency. The

trickster role is a structural position, not a fixed identity – when a trickster assumes the role of Hero or Villain, another character fills the trickster gap. In *The Sandman*, this dynamic is visible in Morpheus’s gradual movement toward the Good (S1) axis: as he exhibits more hero-like traits, moving the character to heroic arc, his trickster role is distributed among other characters (Loki, Puck, Desire) who maintain the neutral axis and continue to generate the gaps that drive the narrative.

On Square B: Trickster interventions consistently exploit the edges rather than occupying single positions. The pattern is edge-combination: Destroy to Create (S2→S1). Loki destroys the Dreaming’s protections to create conditions for Daniel; Wednesday destroys old beliefs to create new power; Anansi’s stories destroy Tiger’s monopoly to create new narrative possibilities.

On Square C: Trickster interventions drive the narrative from Stagnation (S2) through Change (~S2) toward Progress (S1). The liminal transition is always genuine: characters and readers pass through a threshold of uncertainty before reaching a new equilibrium. This confirms the trickster as the structural agent of Turner’s rite of passage within the narrative.

6.2 The Trickster as Liminal Agent of Narrative Gaps

The synthesis across all three works reveals a deeper structural insight: the trickster in Gaiman’s fiction functions as a liminal agent of narrative gaps. This is the precise point at which the narratological and anthropological frameworks converge. Turner’s liminal subject, Iser’s gap-generating text, Mendlesohn’s liminal fantasy, and Eco’s open work are unified in the figure of the trickster, who operates simultaneously as a character within the story-world and as a structural principle that governs how the narrative generates meaning through the continuous production and manipulation of gaps.

This dual function is what Vizenor (1990, 277) captures in his concept of the trickster as a “comic holotrope” – a figure that operates at the level of the sign itself, deconstructing the narrative traces through which culture is reproduced. The trickster does not merely disrupt the story-world; it disrupts the reader’s relationship to the story-world, forcing the active, creative engagement that Iser describes as ideational activity. In Gaiman’s fiction, this disruption is always productive: the gaps the trickster engineers are not voids but invitations, not failures of narrative but its most vital moments.

7. Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that trickster characters in Neil Gaiman’s corpus function as liminal agents whose primary structural activity is the generation and manipulation of narrative gaps. By occupying the neutral axis of the moral semiotic square (Square A), tricksters possess a unique positional freedom that enables them to act where heroes and villains cannot. By exploiting the edges of the action square (Square B), they operate as sacred bricoleurs who destroy to create, un-create to reveal, and un-destroy to transform. By breaking the axis of Stagnation on the dynamic

square (Square C), they initiate the liminal transitions through which narratives evolve, preventing the story-world from collapsing into repetition or paralysis.

The triple semiotic square framework provides a replicable analytical instrument for tracing these dynamics across different texts and media. Its application to *The Sandman*, *American Gods*, and *Anansi Boys* reveals consistent structural patterns: the trickster's moral freedom as the source of its narrative agency; the edge-combinations of Square B as the mechanism of its interventions; and the Stagnation-to-Change-to-Progress movement of Square C as the narrative consequence of its gap-making. These patterns are not specific to Gaiman's fiction but constitute a deep logic of trickster agency that the framework makes visible and analytically tractable.

The broader theoretical contribution of this analysis is the synthesis of Turner's anthropology of liminality with Iser's reader-response theory of gaps into a unified account of trickster agency. The trickster is simultaneously a liminal agent in Turner's sense – a threshold character who inhabits the zones of ambiguity and potential that enable transformation – and a gap-engineer in Iser's sense – a structural operator who creates the *Leerstellen* through which readers actively construct meaning. These two functions are not independent; they are two aspects of the same structural principle. The trickster keeps the narrative alive by leaving it incomplete – that there are always gaps to fill, always thresholds to cross, always the possibility of Change.

In Gaiman's hands, the trickster emerges as the narrative principle *par excellence*: the character who ensures that stories, like life itself, remain in motion, resisting stagnation through perpetual transformation. The story unfolds in liminal phases, and this process is driven by characters who assume the trickster role.

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