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*Journal of Artistic  
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**Volume 4 Issue 1 (July 2016) Article 8**

**Eva Rodríguez Cárdenas**

**"A Cognitive Approach to Postmodern Children's Production: New Reflections on an Adult Readership"**

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Rodríguez Cárdenas, Eva. "A Cognitive Approach to Postmodern Children's Production: New Reflections on an Adult Readership" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 4.1 (2016): 78-88

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This text has been blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

Volume 4 (2016) coordinated by Ana González-Rivas Fernández. Issue 1 edited by Juan González Echeverría, Rosario López Gregoris and Ana Abril. I Selgyc Postgraduate And Early Career Researchers Conference (Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada).

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**Abstract:** The critical approach to children's literature has delved into manifold aspects concerning the level of sophistication of these texts and the interpretative possibilities that they can offer to adult readers. Innovation and experiment are no longer treated as "abnormal" elements in texts for children, but rather considered as proofs that the literary praxis has evolved into more sophisticated levels of accomplishment. Cognitive poetics has a relevant role in this study and, more concretely, the notion of "conceptual metaphors". The main goal of this study is to construct a cognitive reading of the JOURNEY metaphor, which seems to underlie the majority of children's texts and folktales, by exploring two poems by British author Neil Gaiman — "Locks" and "Inventing Aladdin", both extracted from the compilation *Fragile Things*. For this purpose, I will take into consideration some interesting concepts by Wójcik-Leese referring to the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, but applied to the specific writing of a text. In so doing, this analysis will undertake diverse modes in which current literature deconstructs and reverses the traditional models for folktales and children's literature.

**Palabras clave:** Postmodernism, children's literature, conceptual metaphor, cognitive poetics, fairy tales

**Eva RODRÍGUEZ CÁRDENAS**

## **A Cognitive Approach to Postmodern Children's Production: New Reflections on an Adult Readership**

### **0. Introduction**

The production labelled as "children's literature" constitutes an enticing and complex field of study that has been largely beneath the notice of the academic circles (Hunt, Nières, Fernández). Although children's books are overtly recognised as important educationally and commercially by both public and critics, they have also been traditionally considered to be out of the high literary canon. Instead, the study of this kind of texts has been generally limited to their instrumentality as tools for pedagogical purposes. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, several critics (e.g. Shavit, Klingberg, Nikolajeva) have approached children's texts as legitimate works of art, recognising their artistic value and their literary complexity. This paper develops a theoretical and practical approach to children's literature through the analysis of some specific examples of short narrative by British writer Neil Gaiman. The theoretical perspectives which have been chosen in order to carry out such a study are children's literature criticism and cognitive poetics.

This paper's goal is to construct a cognitive reading of the JOURNEY metaphor, which seems to underlie the majority of children's texts and folktales (Herrero). The works explored are two poems by Gaiman —concretely, "Locks" and "Inventing Aladdin". For this purpose, some interesting concepts by Wójcik-Leese referring to the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY will be taken into consideration, but applied to the specific writing of a text.

By applying some relevant aspects from these different specific methodologies to the literary discourse, this paper aims to prove their functionality as tools for its analysis and to build up a cognitive reading of the JOURNEY metaphor within Gaiman's poetic production.

### **1. Critical approaches to children's literature**

Children's literature has been traditionally considered to be out of the high literary canon and thus automatically labelled as an inferior genre field. In this connection, Hunt (*An Introduction* 2) suggests that "in the critical hierarchy, children's books are so trivial that to study them is not a legitimate activity", and there are other authors such as Nières (49) and Fernández (35), who also deal with this issue.

Hunt (*An Introduction* 6) also states that, in the academic field, the very subject-matter of children's literature seems to disqualify it from serious adult consideration, since it is designed for an immature audience and, for those within the traditional literary establishment, the term "children's literature" incurs in terminological contradiction.

The main reason why children's literature has been traditionally relegated from the leading critical quest is that it has been mostly related to the pedagogical domain in the diachrony. It was only from the end of the 1980s onwards that some critics such as Shavit, Klingberg or Nikolajeva began to approach children's literature in its own right —as texts worth reading and worth discussing by adults. After a century treating children's books as didactic tools, there is still a group of scholars and authors who is reticent about labelling them as "literature". According to them, a writer should have the right to be innovative regarding the theme of a text, its characters, language, etc. However, children were still considered by them to be readers with a limited phenomenological and experiential knowledge of the world and, therefore, some argued that the works aimed at them should also be limited in accordance with their capacities (Hunt, Kneen).

The former idea has been generally refuted by an important bulk of contemporary critics who defend that these texts should be further appreciated in themselves by reason of

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their artistic value and their literary complexity. Thus, whereas the earlier books for children back in the nineteenth century were based on traditional materials and were rather simple and mainly didactic, the modern literary production for children and teenagers has grown more "literary" and artistically elaborate.

This paper pursues to delve into some intriguing and novel cores concerning the level of sophistication of the so-called "children's texts" nowadays and the interpretative possibilities they can offer to adult readers, who can experiment the texts in a completely different way and under more encompassing reading levels than younger readers.

## 2. A cognitive approach to postmodern children's production

In her book *Cognitive Poetic Readings in Elizabeth Bishop*, Wójcik-Leese offers detailed analyses of Elizabeth Bishop's poems and their drafts by turning to cognitive linguistics in interpreting the poet's alternate construals. For the purpose of this study, I find some of the concepts that she uses to be applicable to Gaiman's work.

One issue cognitive poetics delves into is the application of cognitive linguistics to the study of literature: "the object of investigation of this science is not the artifice of the literary text alone, or the reader alone, but the more natural process of reading when one is engaged with the other" (Stockwell 2). Cognitive poetics uses analytical tools from cognitive linguistics in order to better understand the literary phenomenon in relation to the human mind and our embodied experience. It also demonstrates the continuities between creative literary language and creative language in everyday use.

Within the field of cognitive poetics, there is a notion of great relevance for the present study —namely, the notion of "conceptual metaphor". A definition of metaphor involves an understanding of two or more conceptual domains (Stockwell 106). In cognitive linguistics these elements are seen as source and target cognitive models altogether, for example teeth (target) are pearls (source). So, cognitive linguistics models the process of metaphor as a mapping of properties between the two spaces or domains which is very important in human reasoning and language because it is dominant in the human cognitive process. This theory is also relevant because it appears that many ordinary expressions and ways of representing the world rely on metaphorical mappings, even though speakers are not aware of it. Stockwell (109) states that "these metaphorical patterns are so strong and widespread that we can even understand our philosophical view of life itself as being founded not on an objective world but on a set of metaphorical representations". This statement accords the affirmation by Lakoff and Johnson:

Conceptual metaphor is pervasive in both thought and language. It is hard to think of a common subjective experience that is not conventionally conceptualized in terms of metaphor . . . Everyday metaphors are built out of primary metaphors plus forms of commonplace knowledge: cultural models, folk theories, or simply knowledge or beliefs that are widely accepted in a culture. (45)

The source domain of these metaphors relating to everyday experience is used to talk about the target, related to any degree of abstraction. They can be found in everyday expressions and also in the way people see and structure the world around them. The conceptual metaphor which will be further studied and developed in this paper is LIFE IS A JOURNEY, since it seems to underlie most of children's text and folktales as Herrero comments in his article.

## 3. Looking metaphor: the poet as an observing traveller

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For Elizabeth Bishop, the creativity process resembles close examination rather than sightseeing: the poet or the writer does not need to write about abstract and complex ideas, but the journeying mind can find an excitement at yet another extraordinary facet of the familiar, stressing the exploration aspect in the journey conceptual schema (Wójcik-Leese 58).

Through the LOOKING metaphor, the reader senses that the author is not observing an object for the first time, but rather returning to it again and again to capture its "otherness", giving the impression that the poet's mind was revolving around the same object, convinced that a different perspective might help to reveal the object's inherent extraordinariness.

In order to carry out the "looking" process, the author has to abandon the traditional straight path, which intends to reach a new destination in the shortest time possible, and follow a circular pattern in order to thoroughly scan the visual field thus delineated, and examine the object located within its own boundaries. This circular movement around the object conditions a cyclical manner of movement, which can account for systematic observation (Wójcik-Leese 59). To put it another way, the poem is not a path that the mind follows in order to reach a destination, but it describes circles around what people calls ordinary things, aiming to discover a new and exciting aspect about them from different perspectives: there is a conceptual shift from movement to observation.

This cognitive model is summarized in a few lines by Wójcik-Leese:

Within this cognitive model the TRAVELLER is the MIND, conceptualized as a body, which focuses its explorative efforts into A KEEN OBSERVATION OF DETAIL. [...] By complementing the linearity of the PATH schema with the schema of the CYCLE, the traveller-mind can shift, at any point along the VERTICAL vector, into the HORIZONTAL plane: circling around a chosen object, watching it more closely and from various angles. (63)

In the following practical case study, this cognitive model and the looking metaphor will be applied to one of the poems written by Gaiman. The goal of this analysis is to prove that the specific study carried out by Wójcik-Leese and the conceptual metaphors that she built from her analysis of Bishop's poetic production can be extracted and applied to the work of other authors and, specifically, to Gaiman's poem "Locks".

### 3.1. "Locks" and the three perspectives

Gaiman's collection *Fragile Things* does not only include short stories, but also some examples of poetry which turn out to be as piercing, bright, and breathless as his other stories (Wagner, Golden, and Bissette 403). The poem titled "Locks" is a retelling of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", told through the heart of a father and a daughter, in which the author expertly uses repeated word cycles and a turn at the end that is often a distinguishing point in poetry. This poem is very personal because the author wrote it for her daughter, Maddy, when she was two, so we could say most certainly that the characters in this poem are actually Gaiman and his daughter.

The tale of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" has its origins in the story written by the British poet Robert Southey, included in his book *The Doctor* (1837) and called simply "The Three Bears". This is not the first known version of the tale, but it certainly is the one which has prevailed till our days along with "Goldilocks". In Southey's tale, the main character is not a little girl, but an old woman with very ill manners; however, in 1850 Joseph Cundall published *A Treasure of Pleasure Books* and included a different version in which he substituted the character of the old woman for a little blond girl. Whereas the character of the old woman gave the tale a burlesque tone, the introduction of the little girl turned the story into a warning which taught children not to walk around on their own and to be careful

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when meeting strangers. As was the case with other tales, the content was revised and transformed, resulting in a cleaned up story with added little morals.

In Gaiman's poem we find yet another retelling of the classic tale from his personal perspective and based on his experience of the storytelling, both as a child audience and as an adult storyteller.

Of course, fairy tales are transmissible. You can catch them, or be infected by them. They are the currency that we share with those who walked the world before ever we were here. (Telling stories to my children that I was, in my turn, told by my parents and grandparents makes me feel part of something special and odd, part of the continuous stream of life itself). (Gaiman 15)

Turning again towards the cognitive model proposed by Wójcik-Leese's study on Elizabeth Bishop and the *LOOKING* metaphor, this study contends that Gaiman's poem can be a clear example of its use and proposes it as an adequate case study for the purpose of explaining the pattern and complexity of Gaiman's work.

The path of "Locks" is not straight, but circular: the poem does not intend to reach a certain destination, it moves around a fixed object in order to thoroughly scan and examine it from different perspectives, because each different perspective might help to reveal the object's inherent extraordinariness. The object that is being observed here is not other than the classic fairy tale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", around which the characters revolve. Whereas a bedtime tale can be considered by many as an ordinary thing, for the author it proves to be something of great relevance, "part of the continuous stream of life itself", which he has observed closely throughout all his life.

The father is telling his little daughter the story of Goldilocks "for the hundredth time" and, while doing so, he remembers how he felt and what he thought when he was told the tale as a child:

When I was a small child and heard the tale,  
 if I was anyone I was Baby Bear,  
 my porridge eaten, and my chair destroyed,  
 my bed inhabited by some strange girl. (Gaiman 234)

Meanwhile, the little girl, although she already knows the story by heart, "reinvents" it during the storytelling session:

*"There was a little girl, called Goldilocks,  
 for her hair was long and golden,  
 and she was walking in the Wood and she saw —"*

*"—cows." You say it with certainty,  
 remembering the strayed heifers we saw in the woods,  
 behind the house, last month. (Gaiman 233)*

The girl is (re)writing the story by using the same technique than the one suggested by Wójcik-Leese in Bishop's work: she evokes her personal experience and the events that her eye and mind have been recording as a source of inspiration, and this leads her to share with her father the experience that she had lived the previous month and to include it within the story. Including these changes in an object which has been observed repeatedly causes an excitement at another facet of something primarily familiar.

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At the end of the poem, the father considers again the roles of the characters within the tale and realizes that the perspective he looks at them from his now grown-up self has changed with respect to his younger years:

These days my sympathy's with Father Bear.  
 Before I leave my house I lock the door,  
 and check each bed and chair on my return. (Gaiman 236)

Now that he is an adult with a greater experience and that he has a little daughter under his charge, he no longer looks at the tale from the perspective of an innocent being. He is not the Baby Bear anymore, but Father Bear, and the idea of someone breaking into the security of his family's home, as Goldilocks did, is dreadful:

*"Someone's been sleeping in my bed."*  
 And here I hesitate, echoes of old jokes,  
 soft-core cartoons, crude headlines, in my head. (Gaiman 235)

An innocent line from the tale, so many times heard when he was a child and his parents told it to him, has become a sexual reference from the perspective of an adult and also a reminder of the fact that innocence is lost sooner or later, as it will eventually happen to his daughter:

One day your mouth will curl at that line.  
 A loss of interest, later, innocence. (Gaiman 235)

"Locks" is a poem that displays great clarity and simplicity in the language it uses, making it less obscure and difficult to understand than other classic works of poetry. However, this does not imply that the present poem lacks complexity in its structure and interpretations. According to Wójcik-Leese in Bishop's work, this clarity and simplicity would be the result of a disciplined eye and mind, which have been observing attentively in order to, eventually, share them through a text.

All in all, and from the point of view of cognitive poetics, this poem portrays a mind thinking and is a suitable example of Bishop's construal and the looking metaphor, according to which the ability to see stands for the ability to live. The changes of perspective carried out by the author throughout his life—from which he has taken a closer and detailed look at the tale of "Goldilocks"—have made mental revisions possible. Only through these mental revisions and their different interpretations can the ordinary object become extraordinary.

#### **4. Exploration metaphor: the poet as a surveying explorer**

This section intends to further investigate into Wójcik-Leese's idealized cognitive model of EXPLORATION, a model extracted from Bishop's work that underlies the dominant pattern of her conceptual universe: MENTAL LIFE/POETIC CREATIVITY IS AN EXPLORATION IN A SPACE (Wójcik-Leese 64). For this purpose, a different poem by Gaiman will be analysed, "Inventing Aladdin".

Defining one's own poetic position by means of the EXPLORATION metaphor supposes a rewriting of the Romantic JOURNEY metaphor: Wordsworth's walk poem or the quest could be treated as discursive conventions which structure conceptual metaphors employed by the speaker (Eubanks 422). By means of a dominant use of the metaphors POET-AS-TRAVELLER and POET-AS-SEER, Wójcik-Leese elaborates her own conceptualization based on the work by Bishop: THE POET IS AN EXPLORER AND KEEN OBSERVER OF DETAIL, which is specified metonymically to THE MIND (OF THE POET) IS AN EXPLORER AND KEEN OBSERVER OF DETAIL (Wójcik-Leese 65).

The kernel of the EXPLORATION metaphor could be summed up simply as: "the explorer equals the exploring mind". The author is not an idealized figure or a superior character who

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observes the world from a privileged perspective, and what the poet sees is not hidden from the people on the streets. The main difference between the poet and the ordinary people is that the former has imaginative needs to satisfy, and that is the reason why the mind of the poet pays especial attention to detail. These details are recorded by the poet's eye and mind in order to provide him or her with "inspiration" for future work, being the LOOKING metaphor complementary of the EXPLORATION metaphor. For the purpose of putting into practice these theoretical notions, the next section will pose special focus on another poem by Gaiman — namely, "Inventing Aladdin".

#### 4.1 "Inventing Aladdin" or the birth of fairy tales

In his poem "Inventing Aladdin", Gaiman imagines how Scheherazade, the main female character from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (or *The Arabian Nights*, in short), created the different stories that form the book, and more specifically is centred on how she invented the tale of "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" as well as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves". Gaiman's goal is to make the reader think about the origin of fairy tales, because some people have grown so used to them that they may believe that they have always existed or that they are a natural part of our lives. On this respect, Zipes comments:

When we think of the fairy tale today, we primarily think of the classical fairy tale. We think of those fairy tales that are the most popular in the western world: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *Puss in Boots*, *The Frog King*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Tom Thumb*, *The Little Mermaid*. It is *natural* to think mainly of these fairy tales as if they had always been with us, as if they were part of our nature. (5)

In the introduction to his poem, Gaiman explains how he feels when he comes across academic publications which affirm the lack of authorship of classic fairy tales:

One thing that puzzles me (and I use "puzzle" here in the technical sense of "really, really irritates me") is reading, as from time to time I have, learned academic books on folk tales and fairy stories that explain why nobody wrote them and which go on to point out that looking for authorship of folk tales is in itself a fallacy; the kind of books or articles that give the impression that all stories were stumbled upon or, at best, reshaped, and I think, yes, but they all started *somewhere*, in someone's head. Because stories start in minds —they aren't artifacts or natural phenomena. (Gaiman 22)

Returning to Zipes, he also discusses the mythical nature of classic fairy tales in his book *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*:

Over the centuries we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives. Consciously and unconsciously we weave the narratives of myth and folk tale into our daily existence . . . These myths and fairy tales are historically and culturally coded, and their ideological impact is great. Somehow they have become codified, authoritative, and canonical. We talk of classical myths and classical fairy tales. They seem to have been with us or centuries, for eternity, but we neglect the manner in which we created gods and magic to hold our experiences and lives intact. (4)

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In "Inventing Aladdin", Gaiman portrays Scheherazade as the actual author of the tales included in the book, although he is perfectly aware of both the fact that Scheherazade is a fictional character and that the stories of Aladdin and Ali Baba were not included in the original version of *The Arabian Nights* —they were later added in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by one of its first translators, the Frenchman Antoine Galland.

Scheherazade as a narrator was a fiction, as was her sister and the murderous king they needed nightly to placate. *The Arabian Nights* are a fictional construct, assembled from a variety of places, and the story of Aladdin is itself a late tale, folded into the *Nights* by the French only a few hundred years ago. Which is another way of saying that when it began, it certainly didn't begin as I describe. And yet. And still. (Gaiman 22)

The aim of this poem is to make the readers realize that stories are made up by people who make them up; that they do not come from dreams but have narrative logic and, if they work, they get retold. Resuming the EXPLORATION metaphor, I am going to comment on Scheherazade's role in the poem as a metonymical representation of the mind of the poet and the fulfilling of the idealized cognitive model MENTAL LIFE/POETIC CREATIVITY IS AN EXPLORATION IN A SPACE.

Scheherazade's daily life is portrayed as a cyclical routine that she repeats with slight variations. At night, she continues with the unfinished story from the previous night and, once she is done, her sister, Dunyazade, asks her for another story which will be left unfinished too, so that the king will spare her life one more day. On the other hand, her daytime is devoted to different tasks as a housewife: feeding the kids, going to the market, etc.

In the poem, Scheherazade did not know the tales that she is telling to her king in advance, but she is portrayed as their original author. She is a fictional representation of the poet writer who, in this case, has to look constantly for inspiration if she wants to survive. What could be suggested is that Gaiman is making use of the metaphor of POET-AS-SEER, from which he can elaborate the conceptualization THE MIND (OF THE POET) IS AN EXPLORER AND KEEN OBSERVER OF DETAIL. Let us take a look at the following fragments from "Inventing Aladdin":

Aladdin locked beneath the earth,  
 she stops, her husband hooked for one more night.

Next day  
 she cooks  
 she feeds her kids  
 she dreams...  
 Knowing Aladdin's trapped,  
 and that her tale  
 has bought her just one day.  
 What happens now?  
 She wishes that she knew.

. . .  
 Her sister and her husband fall asleep.  
 She lies awake and stares up in the dark  
 Playing the variations in her mind:  
 the ways to give Aladdin back his world,  
 his palace, his princess, his everything.  
 And then she sleeps. The tale will need an end,



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but now it melts to dreams inside her head. (Gaiman 366)

Similar to Bishop's patterns extracted by Wójcik-Leese, in this poem the inspiration that Scheherazade is constantly looking for does not emerge in epiphanic moments, but it tends to be gradual and contingent. Her eye and mind are constantly looking and recording everything that surrounds her, both consciously and unconsciously:

She wakes,  
 She feeds the kids  
 She combs her hair  
 She goes down to the market  
 Buys some oil  
 The oil-seller pours it out for her,  
 decanting it  
 from an enormous jar.  
 She thinks,  
*What if you hid a man in there?*  
 She buys some sesame as well, that day.  
 . . .  
 But once the story's done, the teller's dead,  
 her only hope's to start another tale.  
 Scheherazade inspects her store of words,  
 half-built, half-baked ideas and dreams combine  
 with jars big enough to hid a man,  
 and she thinks, *Open Sesame*, and smiles,  
 "Now, Ali Baba was a righteous man, . . ." (Gaiman 367)

The portrayal of Scheherazade is a good example of the aforementioned interpretation made by Costello regarding Bishop's poetry: in "Inventing Aladdin" the experience of beholding is shown to be available to an ordinary person, a young girl who must keep a constant creative process in order to survive. The poetic ability is no longer reserved just for the visionary, transcending poet. In this poem, a wife running for an errand or going to the market is presented as a looking and exploring mind that is granted insight through careful attention to the world (Costello 150). Scheherazade is an explorer and a keen observer of details who extracts data from her daily life and makes use of them in the right moment, during the improvised creative process that takes place every night ("Scheherazade inspects her store of words . . ."). Since she has bought oil and sesame earlier, these elements come to her as an inspiration for the tale of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves", elements that resulted from her exploration of the immediate space that surrounds her.

## 5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this essay was to present children's literature as an enticing and complex field of study, which has been approached from different theoretical standpoints in the foregoing analysis. In order to do so, this paper has applied relevant aspects from different specific methodologies to the literary discourse, proving their functionality as tools for its analysis. There is a very recent production of postmodern children's fiction that is yet being expounded by current criticism and offers intriguing gaps of exploration. Neil Gaiman's short narrative constitutes a remarkable case within that production. Being an author of wide recognition and fame, his short stories and poems have been largely eclipsed by his works within the novel and the comic genre.

With regard to cognitive poetics and the notion of "conceptual metaphor", this paper has conducted a cognitive reading of the JOURNEY metaphor that underlies part of Neil

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Gaiman's production. The approach presented here intends to introduce some innovation to the analysis of Gaiman's production (within the broader context of contemporary literature for children) by applying this special notion of cognitive studies to the literary field.

From a cognitivist perspective, and based on Wójcik-Leese's terminology, all of Gaiman's poems under analysis —"Locks" and "Inventing Aladdin"— have proved to slant motley portrayals of a thinking mind, which turn all out to be metaphorical representations of the mind of the poet or writer. The underlying patterns in both texts can be identified with Bishop's construal and the LOOKING and EXPLORATION metaphors proposed by Wójcik-Leese (2010). By representing the poet's mind as a seer and as keen observer of detail, Gaiman is able to render the ordinary elements from daily life as extraordinary. This undermines the traditional conception of the poet and writer as a superior being with a transcending ability. His work is composed by common people and simple elements; however, its outcome propels his short fictional universe out of the ordinary and into the significantly complex.

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**Bioprofile of the author:**

Born in Logroño (Spain), Eva graduated in English Studies in 2012 from the University of La Rioja. She continued her studies through the Master's degree in Translation and Intercultural Mediation from the University of Salamanca and the Master's degree in Linguistic and Literary Perspectives on the Text from the University of La Rioja. Currently, she is working as a PhD student and conducting a research focused on children's literature and the work of British author Neil Gaiman.

**Contact:** <[eva.rodricar@gmail.com](mailto:eva.rodricar@gmail.com)>