

# Exploring Resilience in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*

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### Abstract

People are exposed to trauma at some point in their life. They tend to express several outcomes according to their personality, surroundings, and circumstances. The psychopathological conditions of trauma have been in the limelight so far. Cynosure of the psychological impairments of trauma normalizes that people only suffer in the aftermath of trauma. In recent decades the unidimensional psychopathological focus of trauma has shifted into multidimensional focus on the outcomes of trauma. Many people overcome the loss and adversities of life without being engulfed by grief and sorrow. They can move on and resume their life with some minor psychological disruptions. Being resilient to trauma is common and not found only in exceptionally healthy people. This paper aims to bring out the salutogenic concept of resilience in literature and analyses how the female protagonist called Door managed to preserve her physical and mental health even in the time of bereavement and the life-threatening situations of her life in Neil Gaiman's magical realism novel *Neverwhere*.

**Keywords:** Personality, Psychopathology, Trauma, Bereavement, Adversities, Resilience.

### Introduction

Resilience has become an increasingly important concept in psychology and mental health in recent decades. This research has expanded to encompass a strengths-based perspective centered on understanding healthy functioning and adaptation in the face of adversity. Exploring representations of resilience in literature can provide meaningful insights into how characters successfully cope with and overcome trauma and hardship. This paper examines resilience through an analysis of the character Door in Neil Gaiman's urban fantasy novel *Neverwhere*, demonstrating how she adapts and moves forward despite experiencing tremendous grief and danger.

Exploring the representation of resilience in literature provides an opportunity to illuminate and reflect on human experiences of adversity. As Southwick et al. (2014) note, narratives grant a window into how resilience interacts with culture, family, personality, and history in rich contextual examples. Literature captures the complexity of human encounters with trauma through its vivid portrayal of characters' inner worlds. Analyzing how literary characters cultivate resilience, overcome challenges, and grow in response to suffering can expand perspectives on the lived experience of resilience.

Neil Gaiman utilizes elements of urban fantasy in *Neverwhere* to create a symbolic world that the protagonist navigates alongside everyday London. The magical underside of the city externalizes inner processes and speaks to the universality of certain life experiences. Analyzing how Door adapts, survives, and transforms in this allegorical landscape provides unique insight into multidimensional resilience process. Fantasy's rich symbolic terrain elucidates how adversity shapes human experience and resilience facilitates adaptation and growth.

Resilience research in literature unveils the human dimensions of adversity often inaccessible through clinical data. Door's resilience in *Neverwhere* emerges through narrative events situated in cultural context and not as abstract variables, and mechanisms. Analyzing Door's responses using resilience research concepts reveals both the particularity and universality of resilience processes. This integrated approach highlights the value of literature to expand perspectives on the living reality of resilience.

Neil Gaiman's fantasy novel *Neverwhere* provides an excellent opportunity to examine resilience through its representation of the character Door. She has endured tremendous trauma with the brutal murder of her entire family, which forced her into homelessness in dangerous, unfamiliar environments. Yet despite this adversity, she demonstrates a remarkable capacity to persist, survive, and even thrive as she searches for meaning and connects with new allies.

*Large numbers of people manage to endure the temporary upheaval of loss or potentially traumatic events remarkably well, with no apparent disruption in their ability to function at work or in close relationships and seem to move on to new challenges with apparent ease. (Bonanno, 2004)*

Examining Door's resilient responses using examples from psychology research helps illustrate the multidimensional nature of resilience and its manifestations in narratives. This analysis aims to provide insight into the pathways, processes, and protective factors that can enable resilience amid suffering.

## Review of Literature

Bonanno et al., (2002) stated that Greater knowledge of psychology came from the people who sought treatment and expressed great distress after some potentially traumatic events. The assumption of resilience as either rare or pathological is modified after the evidence submitted by the theorists. Resilience reflects the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium. It is more than the simple absence of psychopathology. It represents a distinct trajectory from the process of recovery. (Bonanno, 2004)

Bolton et al., (2015) states that majority of individuals adapt well even when confronted extremely potentially traumatic events. One's capacity to meet the demands of life is associated with coping successfully with overwhelming stressful events. Small alteration during an adjustment has the potential to make a substantial difference in the lives of those who suffer.

## Resilience in Bereavement

Door is running for her life when the novel introduces her. She belonged to the royal family that have the peculiar power to create and open doors to places. Two murderers, Mr. Croup and Vandemar were scouring for her throughout the London Below to finish their job. She was exhausted and spent her last energy opening a door by thinking of some safe place. She entered London Above and destined to meet the protagonist, Richard Mayhew. He brought her to his flat, cleansed her wounds, and ran errands to get her help from the Marquis de Carabas.

Marquis brought Door to her home to find her father's journal to get some clues. She hesitated and did not want to enter her home again. Marquis, a man with no emotions forced her to choose

the option between entering the house or ending the business relationship with him. Her dwelling place has unique features. Her grandfather had constructed the house, and her father added some features to it. All the rooms are situated in a different location all through the London Below. The scattered rooms of the house are linked and easily navigated from the entrance hall which was covered with pictures. It does not have a door so no one can easily enter their place. So, Door is suspicious of how someone can enter and killed all the family members. *“She swallowed, then continued, talking to herself as much as to him, ‘We should have been safe here. Nobody should have been able to hurt us. Only my family could move around it’”* (Neverwhere, 82).

The entrance hall of the house welcomed them with the imprinted memory of the death of her brother. When Door entered the house, only silence and bewilderment of her family’s absence accompanied her until she found the dead body of her brother Arch in the swimming pool. It was fresh and even hurt the emotionless Marquis. He rubbed his forehead and twisted his head to soothe the sudden pain. Door explained to him that memories were imprinted on the walls of the house. She has been running and hiding to protect her life ever since she returned home to find her entire family killed. She doesn’t even have the time to mourn for her family. Now the memories have broken her heart and soul as the immediate response of her traumatic memory. Her pain and sorrow burst into uncontrollable tears. Now she has the company of Marquis and utilized her first chance to mourn for her family.

*I looked there. When I was cleaning up the body... And she began to cry, in low, raging sobs, that sounded like they were being tugged from inside her... she was hugging herself, and shuddering, and crying like a little girl* (Neverwhere, 82).

She excused some time from the impatient Marquis and cried so hard meanwhile he stood at the far end of the room and played Knucklebones. The unexpected and sudden loss of her entire family caused her psychological disruptions. She could not think more as her primary thought was to protect her life. She needed someone to rely on to guide her at that moment. The Marquis helped her to take the initial step in her quest. He suggested her to find her father’s journal as he raised the suspicion that there was a mastermind behind the murders, and they need to hire a bodyguard first. She is exhausted physically and mentally all through the loss and fight for survival. Yet she could pull herself together after ventilating all her pain through tears. She is not entirely engulfed by the sorrow “can you just give me sec? I’ll be fine.” (Neverwhere, 82). Amidst all her pain she could be resilient to resume the purpose of her visit and edge forward to their business of finding her father’s journal.

Door’s face was unreadable while watching her father’s video journal. Towards the last entry they could witness the last words of Lord Portico and Door was too stunned to be aware of her tears. Her father’s last line stated that she should go to Islington and trust the angel Islington followed by an arc of blood splashed across the wall. After wiping her tears along with her trauma, she shifted her thoughts regarding the angel Islington. They proceeded on their journey to the Floating market to hire a bodyguard.

The difference between the resilient individuals and the other participants, however, was that these experiences were transient rather than enduring and did not interfere with their ability to continue to function in other areas of their lives, including the capacity for positive affect. (Bonnano, 24)

### **Resilience in Life Threatening Situations**

As the oldest daughter of the Royal family, Door exhibited certain traits that nurtured her resilience throughout the adversities of her life. First her core belief of being safe is shattered. Whenever she thought or said that she was safe, there was an impending danger waiting to welcome

her. She thought her home was the safest place, but all her family members were cruelly murdered there. The immediate aftermath of her trauma is denial. She could not accept the shattering of her core belief. Then after four days of continuous running finally she found a stone burrow as a safe hide out. She could accept the fact that she is in danger now. "Portia, her mother, touched her cheek, and told her that she was in danger. In her dream, Door laughed, and said she knew." (*Neverwhere* 16) A man stood there with a knife aimed at her chest and ended up wounding her upper arm. On the journey to meet Islington, Door and her companions went to Down street. After crossing the wooden ledge and stating the word safe to Richard there is an impending betrayal and danger waiting for both. They both laughed at their situation when they heard the ironic statement of being safe. Door accepts the tragic circumstances as it facilitates her adaptation.

She fought bravely for her survival until the end. In a crucial moment she can overcome her fear of using her power on a man to kill him. She spent her last energy on that man who aimed a knife at her. Even though she was hungry and exhausted she kneed Mr. Croup hard in his groin and escaped from them by holding her wounded arm. Door is bleeding from her wound and has no energy left out. She is terribly in pain, hungry and has nowhere to hide yet she is not ready to give up. When she lost a lot of blood and the murderers approached, she pulled over all her strength to open a door to somewhere even though she was passing out. When she was aware of the footsteps of the assassins, the girl pulled whatever she could find deep inside her soul, from all the pain, and the hurt, and the fear. She was spent, burnt out, and utterly exhausted. She had nowhere to go, no power left, no time. 'If it's the last door I open,' she prayed, silently, to the Temple, to the Arch. Somewhere... anywhere... safe...' and she thought, wildly, 'Somebody.' (*Neverwhere* 23)

The recognition that resilience is not an innate trait but rather something that can be cultivated, which shifted the focus to the process of achieving resilience. Researchers proposed that resilience is ordinary rather than exceptional, emerging through basic human adaptive systems (Masten, 2001) Masten referred to resilience as ordinary magic (p. 227), emphasizing that the capacity to overcome adversity is common to all and develops through typical human adaptive process when biological, psychological, and environmental systems are functioning well.

She entered London Above, the protagonist Richard Mayhew found her and took her to his flat. When he cleansed the wound Door tried her best not to wince in the process like a warrior. After some exhausting days she had a safe place to sleep, eat and her wound became better. When her psychological, biological, and environmental systems were functioning well she could think now. The two assassins followed her to London Above. Door wanted to get some help and didn't dare to leave the house. She sent a message to the Marquis de Carabas through a pigeon. She calmly sits and read a book while waiting for him without anxiety.

Her life is constantly in danger. "I could wish you the best of luck in your future career, but I'm afraid I rather doubt you'll live long enough to have one." (*Neverwhere* 80). Initially she runs for her survival alone. She got help from the Marquis de Carabas at the price of owing him a favour. She hired a bodyguard named Hunter in the Floating market where she met Richard who was searching for her, as he vanished from London Above in the process of helping her. She did not stop to protect herself, rather decided to make a quest to find the veiled murderer who caused all the ravages. Along with her companions she started her dangerous journey to meet the angel Islington as directed by her father's journal.

When Door got the help and felt safe for a while, she prioritized her responsibility first. They went to Earl's court to get information regarding the angel Islington's dwelling place. In the court she exhibited her wit, authority, and temperament with the old Earl. She could control the Earl with her look, there was something more ancient and powerful in those huge opal-coloured eyes. Richard noticed that the room became silent to listen to her words whenever she started to utter

something. The companionship played a vital role in facilitating Door's resilience. From daring not to leave Richard's flat alone to confronting the murderers and asking them to leave exhibits her resilience to face the tribulations. "Leave us alone, said Door. Her voice was clear and steady. Richard squeezed her hand. If she could be brave, so could he." (Neverwhere 175). She could become an inspiration for Richard.

Each stage of her journey has obstacles, but nothing stops Door moving forward. After losing her family she connected with three people and formed a companionship. Along with Richard she was searching for the Angelus which was a door to meet the angel Islington, they confronted the murderers. They made a scary revelation of having a traitor among them, but Door ignored it and proceeded to meet Islington. Later they continued their journey to meet the Black friars where they must participate in an ordeal to get a key for Islington. An ordeal that could cost their life in the process. While returning to meet the angel, she confronted the betrayal of her bodyguard Hunter who plotted with the assassins. When she meets the angel in its citadel there comes the anagnorisis. The angel Islington is the one who caused all the ravages to escape from its prison and planned to usher the throne of heaven. Since Door is an opener and she only can use the key to open a door to heaven, it forced her by tormenting Richard. She could think and bring justice to the situation by creating and opening a door to Space instead of heaven. She sent Islington, Mr Croup and Vandemar to the Space and shut the door behind them. Door accepted and adapted all the twists and turns of her life during her journey and tried her best to find a path to reach her destination.

### **Conclusion**

She set a goal to move forward in her life and save herself from being engulfed by grief and sorrow. After losing the people she loved, she expressed her liking of Richard's company. Although he likes her, he returned to London Above. Whether it is bereavement or breakup Door dissolved her trauma in her tears and edged forward to perform her duty. Now she is ambitious to achieve her father's dream of uniting the London Below. Door's personality facilitates her to be resilient in bereavement and life-threatening situations. Acceptance, seeking help, adaptation, and goal setting are the main traits exhibited by Door to be resilient. At some point in their life both the protagonists were in danger and had nowhere to go but the single trait of resilience differentiates them. Richard decided not to fight and die in a distressed state when he heard the footsteps approaching, whereas Door gathered her last strength for her survival in the same situation. The portrayal of the character Door witnessed that a person could overcome all the adversities of life with minor psychological disruptions and can maintain mental and physical equilibrium.

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