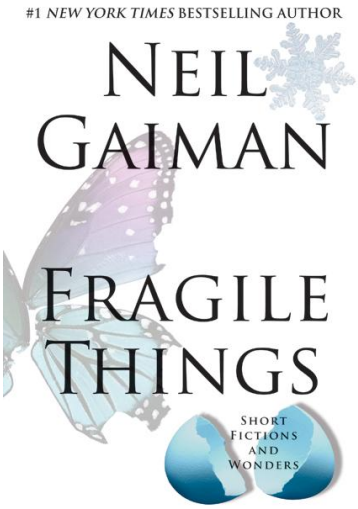
Krzysztof Rybak, "Entry on: How to Talk to Girls at Parties by Neil Gaiman ", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/588. Entry version as of November 19, 2026.

Neil Gaiman

How to Talk to Girls at Parties

USA (2006)

TAGS: Sirens



Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers.

General information	
Title of the work	How to Talk to Girls at Parties
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2006
First Edition Details	Neil Gaiman, *How to Talk to Girls at Parties*. [In] *Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders*, New York: William Morrow, 2006, 400 pp.
ISBN	9780060515225
Available Onllne	Full text of the short story is available on the official Neil Gaiman's page: How To Talk To Girls At Parties.
Awards	Locus Award for Best Short Story; Nominated for the 2007 Hugo Awards for Best Short Story.
Genre	Science fiction, Short stories
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Krzysztof Rybak, University of Warsaw, rybak.km@gmail.com

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Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elżbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Creators

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Neil Gaiman , b. 1960
(Author)

Neil Gaiman was born in Hampshire, England, the son of leading members of the Church of Scientology and now lives near Minneapolis in the United States. His parents were of Polish-Jewish and East-European Jewish origin. He was raised in Sussex, and educated in Church of England schools. He loved books from an early age, enjoying in particular the works of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Edgar Allan Poe, Ursula K. Le Guin and G. K. Chesterton. He has described himself as a "feral child who was raised in libraries," (see here, accessed: July 3, 2018) and credits this experience for his life-long love of reading. Raised in both the Jewish tradition and the Church of Scientology, Gaiman's religious upbringing attuned him to intersections in culture and belief and while he was heavily influenced by these belief systems, he ascribes to none as an adult. He began a career as a journalist and interviewer, and wrote for the British Fantasy Society.

His writing career began in journalism and his first published book was a biography of the musical group *Duran Duran* (1984). He wrote *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion* (1988), and collaborated with Terry Pratchett on *Good Omens* (1990). Notable in his career is his friendship with other major writers of fantasy such as Pratchett, and Alan Moore. He began writing comic books, and developed *The Sandman*, a series of highly popular graphic novels (1989–1996) about Morpheus, the personification of sleep/dream, in collaboration with artist Mike Dringenberg. Gaiman's literary output is voluminous, including works for adult readers, young adults, and children, including *Neverwhere* (1996), *American Gods* (2001), *Coraline* (2002), *The Wolves in the Walls* (2003), *Anansi Boys* (2005), *The Graveyard Book* (2008), *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013). A hallmark of his approach is a cross-cultural interest in mythology, fairytale and folk tale, which he interweaves in his storytelling. In 2017, he published *Norse Mythology*, a retelling of the Norse myths.

Gaiman is credited with reviving and re-creating comics as well as

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succeeding in the cross-genre writing for multiple audiences and ages with his works of prose, comics, song lyrics, drama, screenwriting and journalism. Gaiman was one of the first writers to establish a blog and a Twitter account and has over one million followers on each. Gaiman's work has received numerous awards internationally, including the Carnegie Medal and the Newbery Medal and his work has been on the bestseller lists across the world numerous times. *The Graveyard Book* is his most awarded book with sixteen awards. To date he has published forty books, thirty-nine graphic works, and had six television episodes, five screenplays and two theatre works produced.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Profile at the literature.britishcouncil.org (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Profile at the www.fantasybookreview.co.uk (accessed: July 3, 2018).

Bio prepared by Lynnette Lounsbury, Avondale College of Higher Education, lynnette.lounsbury@avondale.edu.au and Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Adaptations	A film adaptation directed by John Cameron Mitchell was released in 2017.
Translation	*Fragile Things* was translated into many languages.

Summary

How to Talk to Girls at Parties presents the memories of Enn, who recalls events from school times when, as a fifteen-year-old boy, he and his friend Vic went to a party organised by one of their friends. Vic forgot the girl's address at the time, but the boys reached the place following the sounds of music. When they arrived it turned out that the party was organised by people whom Enn and Vic did not know; perhaps they ended up in a completely different apartment, but they did not mind.

Vic was having a great time trying to seduce one of the girls (he succeeded). Meanwhile, Enn for whom contact with opposite sex was problematic, tried to talk to girls. Women at the party were extremely beautiful and mysterious: they stuck to each other, Enn felt that they were somehow different than him and their words seemed to make no sense (although they spoke English, the boy did not understand them). "[A]ll the girls at that party, in the twilight, were lovely; they all had perfect faces but, more important than that, they had whatever strangeness of proportion, of oddness or humanity it is that makes a beauty something more than a shop window dummy" (all quotes from on-line version available at neilgaiman.com.

Similar descriptions return throughout the story in different variants: there is twilight in every part of the apartment, so Enn doesn't see the girls clearly and all of them seem beautiful to him. During the party Enn talks to several of them, although each of the conversations is mysterious and confusing. After some time Vic runs nervously from the room where he locked himself with one of the girls. The boy wants to leave the party as soon as possible, although neither Enn nor the reader knows what actually happened in the locked room. The boys rapidly run away from the party; after leaving the apartment, Enn confesses that he had a closer encounter with one of the girls and

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vomits in the street, but neither Vic nor the reader really know what had happened in the room in which Enn and the girls spend some time together.

Even though in the short story only few classical elements are mentioned (the labyrinth, *Antigone* of Sophocles, and "Homer's Greek") Gaiman's works are known for many intertextual relations to popular culture, literature classics, and myths, including Nordic or Graeco-Roman ones. The very interesting description of female characters (physical dissimilarity of the heroines from other characters) in *How to Talk to Girls at Parties* and Gaiman's characteristic writing style may hint at how to interpret the characters in the context of mythical sirens. Attention is drawn to the characteristic physical otherness of Wain's Wain, the returning description of music and the monstrous nature of Stella, with whom Enn was locked in a private room – all elements are strongly connected with the sirens.

Analysis

In Gaiman's short story I see three main elements referring to mythical sirens. I was inspired by direct references to antiquity and classical mythology present in the text (motif of the labyrinth, *Antigone* of Sophocles, and "Homer's Greek").

First of all, the girls are – as notes Gaiman – "strange", which suggests their difference and otherness. In antiquity, mermaids were depicted as human-animal hybrids (a combination of woman and bird or fish), whose beautiful singing seduced sailors and led them to the rocks they inhabited which eventually led to the men's death. In Homer's *Odyssey*, sirens tempt Odysseus and his crew returning from Troy to Ithaca. It is worth noting that in Homer's work one cannot find a description of the creatures' appearance. In another ancient text – *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes – there is a description of the sirens' appearance, they are presented as female-bird hybrids (A. R. 4.899). Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* presents them in a similar way (Ov. *Met.* 5.551). In Gaiman's text attention is drawn to physical dissimilarity of the heroines from other characters, the characteristic physical feature of one of them, Wain's Wain, is strongly emphasised: a split finger on her hand that made her "imperfect", although her description of the carnival in Rio de Janeiro seems more intriguing. There, Wain's Wain saw dancers dressed in colourful costumes with wings, who "tried to look" like "them": Wain's Wain and Hola Colt

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(mysterious characters, we don't know more about them). Also the characteristics attributed to sirens are revealed: physical attractiveness (breasts, eyes) of women and the winged costumes of the Rio carnival resembling human-bird hybrids, one of the ancient images of these creatures.

Another element referring to mythological images of sirens is a returning description of music strongly connected with these creatures. According to Homer, it was the seductive singing that lured sailors who swam to the rocky shores and drowned (Hom. *Od*. 12.39–46). Gaiman who often refers in his work to various elements of popular culture, in this short story evokes stars of the music scene (including The Adverts, The Stranglers, Sex Pistols, and David Bowie). Enn, although familiar with current musical trends, does not recognise the sounds coming from one of the rooms and calls them "strange sounds". These mysterious melodies, peculiar sounds coming out of nowhere – the girls themselves may be their source – resemble sirens' singing.

Sirens' singing, usually associated with threat, has another meaning in Homer's work. Those mythological creatures were also considered to be carriers of truth and knowledge of old times, which they transmitted with their songs. That makes them similar to Muses preserving the memory of the past and inspiring poets. In Homer, sirens sing to Odysseus a story of deeds of heroes from Troy, which awakens his desire and excites him into a frenzy while he is effectively restrained by ropes his companions used to tie him to the mast. Gaiman also introduces a storyteller, carrier of knowledge. Triolet, the last of Enn's interlocutors, explains her exotic name, mistakenly associated with the hippie movement, as follows: "It's a verse form," she said, proudly. "Like me". Like Homeric sirens, so is Gaiman's Triolet a carrier of knowledge and memory about the past of her own culture. The words spoken by the woman are very significant, as they focus on the extraordinary power of the poem, completely overwhelming the recipient – a poem that conquers the listener and makes him powerless. The sirens had a similar power, deeply permeating the soul of the listener, who in the end died among the waves and was devoured by monstrous temptresses. A moment after saying the words mentioned above, Triolet leans towards Enn and begins to whisper a mysterious poem. On one hand, the poem whispered in the ear was indeed beautiful (though incomprehensible!), on the other – it clearly seduced the teenager who experienced almost narcotic visions of diamond buildings, strong

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	colours, and the sound of waves. Enn was awakened from Triolet's whisper by his friend, Vic: "In my head I began to come back from a thousand miles away. [...] For the first time that evening I recognized one of the songs being played in the front room". Vic ran rapidly from the room where earlier he locked himself with Stella. The boy wanted to leave the party as soon as possible, although neither Enn nor the reader knew what actually happened in the locked room. Leaving the apartment, Enn notices Stella standing at the top of the stairs. In the eyes of Enn, from the most beautiful girl at the party she became a furious figure in crumpled clothes and smudged make-up. It was only after making a closer contact that she became dangerous and terrifying – it might be that provoked by Vic her real nature came out in this way.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Sirens
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Appearances Boys Coming of age Communication Emotions Femininity Future Gender Girls Masculinity Pop culture references Sexuality Socialisation Supernatural creatures (non-classical) Violence
Further Reading	Rybak, Krzysztof, "Osobliwe dźwięki. Recepcja mitycznych syren w *Jak rozmawiać z dziewczynami na prywatkach* Neila Gaimana" ["Strange Sounds: Reception of the Mythical Sirens in How to Talk to Girls at Parties by Neil Gaiman"], in Weronika Kostecka, Anna Mik & Maciej Skowera, eds., Łapacz snów. Studia o twórczości Neila Gaimana [The Dream Catcher: Studies on the Works of Neil Gaiman], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP, 2018, 257–271.

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