Reworking the postmodern understanding of reality through fantasy in M. Night Shyamalan's Lady in the Water *(2006) and Neil Jordan's* Ondine *(2009)*

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Abstract: In the two feature films *Lady in the Water* (2006) and *Ondine* (2009), M. Night Shyamalan and Neil Jordan, respectively, present us with two grounded-in-reality fairy tales whose two male protagonists come in close contact with two mythical water creatures – encounters that positively reshape their perspective on reality through the use of fantasy. Shyamalan relates the story of an emotionally wrecked middle-aged man who rescues a 'narf' (a water nymph in an unoriginated ancient bedtime story) from the pool of the dreary building he is superintending, while Jordan follows the ordeal of a struggling Irish fisherman who accidentally fishes a 'selkie' (a Celtic seal-like water creature that has the power to assume full human form on land by shedding its seal skin). The two films negotiate the problematic connection between the fantastic and the real, and question the postmodern concept of representations masking an absence of solid reality as proposed by Jean Baudrillard. The paper focuses on tracing the ontological and linguistic role of fantasy in relation to reality and delineates how acts of storytelling and representation can refashion the human psyche's perception of reality in a postmodern world by analysing the narrative and psychological means by which this relation is constructed in Shyamalan's and Jordan's films. The main argument of the paper is to explore how employing metafictional narrative techniques and reworking the psyche's ties to fantasy can offer the postmodern individual a more enabling understanding of themselves and their reality.

Keywords: Postmodern psyche, Reality, Fantasy, Storytelling, Meaning-making, Metafiction, Unconscious

> *"[A] deeper import / Lurks in the legend told my infant years / Than lies upon that truth we live to learn."*

(Schiller 3.4)

The word *fantasy* commonly connotes falsehood and is widely regarded as an antithesis to reality. Many writers and philosophers have argued against fantasy because it distances people from the real. Plato, for example, contends that fantasy breeds deceit and harbors untruth in the soul (1991: 59-60). Nevertheless, and counter to popular belief, most human beings have the urge to engage in fantasy not because it serves as a distraction from reality; rather, fantasy draws our attention to the gaps between knowledge and experience and attempts to fill them in a constant process of meaning-making. For instance, the frame narrative of *One Thousand and One Nights* introduces us to King Shahryar who deems all women inherently unfaithful due to his wife's recent infidelity. After he kills the queen, he decides to marry a virgin every night only to have her beheaded the following day until there are no more virgins left in the kingdom. In spite of her father's reluctance, the *wazier*'s daughter, Scheherazade, offers to spend one night with Shahryar. The witty Scheherazade manages to force the king to spare her life for so many days by telling him a tale every night – these tales constitute the body of the fables and folktales in *One Thousand and One Nights*. And every night she stops halfway so Shahryar will be eager to know the rest of the story the following night. By the 1001st night, Scheherazade and her enchanting tales succeed in winning the king's heart and he makes her his queen. Not only does Scheherazade use her tales to spare her own life, but the fantasy that she puts together works as an incentive to recast Shahryar's reality.

Aside from its technical components which usually involve magic, adventure and basic binaries, fantasy as a long-standing storytelling genre harbours a more essential quality at its core: the ability to create a world different from, yet parallel to, the real world based on the consensual construction of belief between the author and the audience (Mendlesohn, 2008: xv). This consensual construction of belief is what makes Scheherazade's fantastical worlds derive from and flow into Shahryar's reality and, hence, give him the liberty to explore the alternative versions which the real world can offer. In other words, fantasy cannot be entirely divorced from reality, otherwise it would be incomprehensible and unrelatable; fantasy has to follow an underlying framework similar to that of reality in order to generate the needed make-believe effect. The concocted worlds that Shahryar was captivated by for 1001 nights give him the opportunity to move beyond the inevitability of his self-structured reality and make room for negotiable alternatives and probabilities, which in time culminates in the restructuring of the aforementioned reality. Accordingly, fantasy should not be contested against reality in terms of 'truth' because fantasy's truth – unlike reality's, which depends on verisimilitude – stems from an involvement in its conditions of creation/narration; fantasy's truth becomes a reversal of expectations (Spitz, 2015), and provides the tools needed for navigating the real.

In that sense, fantasy seems to approach the concept of truth from a postmodernist perspective. Whilst modernists' main preoccupation was to search for the Truth, postmodernists do not believe in the existence of one universal Truth but a myriad of variable truths which the individual can actively participate in creating instead of being bound by them. This, to a great extent, describes the core notion of fantasy, but the analogy is only skin-deep; although both postmodernism and fantasy focus on representations in order to reject the definitiveness of reality and share in the meaning-

making process, the role of fantasy in creating concocted representations of the real is complicated by the postmodernist nihilist outlook towards reality/truth.

According to postmodernism, representation is an ongoing deconstructive process that ends up in denying the very thing it represents. Now we live in a world that gives us the chance to experience reality through a plethora of representations, yet the problem with these extended representations is that they have to feed on each other for survival — each takes its predecessor as a point of reference then eliminates it — and the end result is usually divorced from the real; it is a hyperreal, or what Jean Baudrillard calls a 'simulacrum'. Simulation is then "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality", and simulacrum "is never what hides the truth — it is truth that hides the fact that there is none" (Baudrillard, 1994: 1). In other words, Baudrillard concludes that creating multiple representations or versions of reality eventually denies its existence altogether — something that renders the representation process rather essentially grim and existentially disheartening. To think of folk and fairy tales and other subgenres of fantasy as simulacra of reality is to trap fantasy inside a self-reflective system of referentiality and, as a consequence, terminally limit its capabilities. Fantasy does not point out countless versions of reality to prove the existence of none — or obliterate Reality altogether; instead, it restores faith in our ability to continuously reshape reality and fill in its gaps.

To further explain this gap-filling process, Kieran Egan offers another closely-related interesting approach and draws a rather convenient linguistic analogy. A child gains a linguistic grasp over the world and its objects through experiencing it and creating ties between the signified (referent) and the signifier (reference). For instance, in order to learn the word 'cat' the child has to see a cat to link the word with the creature. However, with concepts that are less obvious, the child resorts to gap-filling in a continuum of opposites. The child can never fully understand the word 'warm' without first experiencing the two ends of the spectrum 'hot' and 'cold' then placing 'warm' in between:

> This way of learning to grasp the world in language and concepts is clearly very common. Young children first learn opposites based on their bodies; "hot" is hotter than the body, "cold" is colder; "big" is bigger than their body, "little" is smaller; "hard" is harder than the body, "soft" is softer; and so on. Young children learn a great deal about the world using this procedure; wet/dry, rough/smooth, fast/slow, and so on. Children's perceptions of their own bodies provide their first yardstick for making sense of the world around them, and gaining a conceptual grasp over it by means of language. Once they have formed an opposition, they can learn other terms along the continuum between such opposites. (Egan)

But when reality fails to express this in-betweenness, the child or the adult adopts fantasy to fill in the gaps. Between 'alive' and 'dead' fantasy gives us 'ghost'; between 'human' and 'fish' fantasy gives us 'mermaid'. Fantasy is thus perceived as a means of describing the world — an innate activity of the human mind that recognises reality and its elements but refuses to reel under its restraining realism. Therefore, the human mind's tendency

towards the fantastical does not necessarily destroy the rational/real; rather, it frees the mind from the possessive grip of undermining familiarity.

This creative involvement in the meaning-making process is what makes fantasy specifically appealing to children and adults alike. Marina Warner draws an example from the theatrical performance of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* where audiences were asked to clap their hands if they wanted Tinkerbell to live after she was poisoned. Children impetuously clapped but adults were reluctant to take part in the fantasy because it promised them the agency that reality usually denies them and the imaginative power they have buried under innumerable layers of rigid reason (Warner, 2018: 11); it gave them the pleasure of being creators themselves. Fantasy gives people agency and brings them back to a stage where they feel the excitement of experiencing and contributing to things for the first time. At the end of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, the grandmother reads the following verse from the Bible to Kai and Gerda: "Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Andersen, 2013: 184). Fantasy requires nothing but a true sense of wonder that children naturally possess and adults need to rediscover.

This distinct feature of fantasy is what sustains its survival and reproduction. *Lady in the Water* (2006) and *Ondine* (2009) are two cinematic visions that do not introduce fantasy as such, but as part of a system that steadily renegotiates fantasy's role in shaping reality. M. Night Shyamalan and Neil Jordan present us with two protagonists who epitomise the true spirit of postmodernism; both have lost faith in reality's ability to provide meaning as an outcome of personal traumas. One is a middle-aged man named Cleveland Heep who forsakes his profession as a physician and works as the superintendent of an apartment complex after his entire family is murdered, and the other is a formerly alcoholic fisherman named Syracuse whose only daughter suffers from kidney failure which leaves her in need of a wheel-chair. Interestingly, the two unfortunate lead characters come in close contact with two female water creatures that change the course of their lives for good.

After he encounters some bizarre incidents and hears frequent water splashing at night in the building's pool, Cleveland finds a young woman whom he later discovers to be a *narf* named Story. A narf is a water nymph in an unattributed bedtime story created by Shyamalan himself and whose premise is laid out to the audiences in the beginning of the film through animated chalkboard narration accentuating the fairy-like tone of the story:

> Once, man and those in the water were linked. They inspired us. They spoke of the future. Man listened and it became real. But man does not listen very well. Man's need to own everything led him deeper into land. The magic world of the ones that live in the ocean and the world of men … separated. Through the centuries, their world, and all the inhabitants of it stopped trying. The world of man became more violent. War upon war played out, as there were no guides to listen to. Now those in the water are trying again — trying to reach us. A handful of their precious young ones have been sent into the world of man. They are brought in the dead of night to where man lives. They need only be glimpsed and the awakening of man will happen. But their enemies roam the land. There are laws that are meant to keep the young ones

safe but they are sent at great risk to their lives. Many do not return. Yet still they try … try to help man. But man may have forgotten how to listen. (Shyamalan, 00:00:24–00:02:15)

For all its simplicity, the film's prologue establishes the basic fantasy-reality tension lying at the heart of Shyamalan's story. Human beings were once close to the fantastical realm of the narfs; they exchanged knowledge and wisdom until people's pride led them to conjecture that they are capable of possessing everything and they drifted away from the water (a symbol of fantasy) and more towards land (a symbol of reality/reason). The story also delineates human beings' dilemma of growing up — how, in the process of relinquishing childhood and embracing adulthood, they gradually learn to abandon their sense of wonder and assume a firmer grip on the real.

As Cleveland spends more time with Story and the tenants of the apartment complex, he finds out the purpose of the young narf's visit: Story is sent to the world of man in order to inspire and bring about the awakening of a human vessel, an author whose writings will positively impact future generations and change the world for the better, unless her mission is interrupted by a malicious dog-like monster called the *Scrunt*. As Story searches for the human vessel, Cleveland unwraps the mystery around Story and with the help of the rest of the tenants tries to protect her from the Scrunt's attacks so that she can complete her mission and safely return to her world.

In a slightly more realistic setting, a down-on-his-luck Irish fisherman named Syracuse catches in his nets a mysterious young lady who claims to not remember anything about her past even though she calls herself Ondine. The name is a variation of *undine* which means 'a water nymph' in traditional European folklore; it is also derived from the Latin word *unda* which means 'wave' ("Undine"). Annie, Syracuse's free-spirited daughter, suspects that Ondine is a *selkie*. There are widely different accounts of what a selkie is but in most Scottish, Irish and Icelandic folktales, selkies are believed to be seal-like water creatures capable of shedding their seal skin and shapeshifting into human form upon reaching land. What those legends have in common is that if selkies lose their seal skin, they are bound to stay on land until the skin is found. Female selkies have a special kind of allure since they metamorphose into extremely beautiful women and, hence, become the object of desire for fishermen who hide their skins and keep them as wives. Ondine, being an exotically attractive woman whose songs seem to attract more fish to Syracuse's nets, sparks Annie's imagination – Annie identifies Ondine with the protagonist of the legend that she has read and decides to reenact in reality.

Following the lines of a typical fantasy, Syracuse falls in love with Ondine, regardless of her insistence on staying in hiding and keeping her identity a secret. As viewers, we slowly become entangled in Annie's story just like the skeptical Syracuse does and we are drawn to a belief system that transforms the obviously gruesome reality into a narrative we can control; Ondine turns out to be a Romanian drug mule who has lost her drug package in the sea and is, thus, followed by the dangerous man she works for. These details, albeit sordid, fit perfectly in Annie's reinterpretation of reality as her imagination works them out to produce another fantastical version to realise her happily-ever-after story. Ondine, with her foreign accent and outlandish beauty, becomes the selkie that Annie has been reading about, her pursuer becomes the selkie husband that leaves his sea

home in search of his wife, and the lost drug package that Ondine accidentally finds one day becomes the seal skin that she has to hide in order to stay on land. Annie's proactive involvement in the narration expounds the aforementioned gap-filling role of fantasy as she manages to find a more convenient middle ground between her father's abject reality and her unlimited childless imagination. Her metafictional role both as narrator and character helps ease the audience into accepting the two extreme contradictions – Ondine being a selkie versus Ondine being a drug mule – as parts of one bigger narrative which is her happiness and her father's salvation.

Cleveland and Syracuse are examples of the postmodern individual; both of them have lost faith in reality's ability to provide meaning to their personal tragedies which have engulfed their entire existence. It is not until they are introduced to their respective water nymphs that they start to reshape their understating of reality. Story and Ondine are not just mythical figures; they are elements of the fantastical — as opposed to the rational — that the two protagonists have to face and integrate as part of their healing journey. The fantasy that Cleveland and Syracuse are forced into fills in the gaps in their failing systems of belief and motivates them to retell their own stories through ongoing, evolving negotiations with reality — a process that can be explored on two closely related levels: the narrative and the psychological.

The narrative relation between fantasy and reality is interminably negotiated and renegotiated in the two films by means of metafictional storytelling. Cleveland and Syracuse employ fantasy to create narrative frameworks which are not only contained within, but are also ceaselessly overlapping and shifting roles with reality. Traditionally, reality is viewed as the master narrative within which fantasy is extended and played out; this narrative paradigm is deconstructed by postmodern techniques of storytelling in which metafiction breaks reality's confining limits and undermines its position as a master narrative. It is true that a loss of a master narrative means that meaning has lost its fixed point of relevance and reference, which results in a desperate sense of anxiety as experience by Cleveland and Syracuse, but this equally enables fantasy to exchange positions with reality as the two no longer control each other yet succeed in filling each other's gaps. This dialectical narrative relationship impels Cleveland and Syracuse to realise that their perception of reality is shaped by fantasy as much as fantasy is maintained by the existence of reality.

M. Night Shyamalan lays out the narrative structure of *Lady in the Water* as a metafictional commentary on the process of storytelling. Story (the narf) is a story (the fantasy as experienced by Cleveland and the rest of the tenants) within a story (the realistic borders of the narrative) even though the last two frames are conjoined coequally not hierarchically. Despite the fact that all of the tenants play a significant role in Cleveland's newfound fantasy, there are two characters in particular who conspicuously embody the fluctuating tension between fantasy and reality: Mrs Choi and Mr Farber. In order to understand Story's sudden appearance, Cleveland seeks the help of an old Chinese woman, named Mrs Choi who, relying on an old Chinese bedtime story, fills him in with Story's purpose, and a disgruntled film critic (Mr Farber), who analyses everything and everyone from a strictly rational point of view. Mrs Choi does not speak English and so Cleveland uses her granddaughter Young-Soon as a translator, indicating that fantasy is not totally self-sufficient and still needs reality as a medium to operate. As

mentioned earlier, J.R.R. Tolkien points out that fantasy does not exist in a vacuum and that the very words and objects we use in our everyday life are the elements upon which fantasy can thrive (Tolkein, 1966: 48). Moreover, the old woman only relates the bedtime story to Cleveland if he allows her to treat him like a child. As eccentric as it may sound, the old woman's demand reminds us of Marina Warner's remarks referred to above that children are more receptive of fantasy than adults. Mrs. Choi realises, being a force of fantasy herself, that Cleveland has to abandon his skepticism and receive her story with a true sense of wonder. On the other hand, while Mr Farber provides Cleveland with the rational insight he needs to understand the tenants' characters so as to assign them roles in Story's fantasy and help her escape the Scrunt and return home, Farber's unbending reason and incessant clinging to reality's restrictive rules renders him incapable of believing in Story's purpose. Mr Farber does serve as an equilibrating force so that Cleveland does not lose himself in the fantasy, yet being suspicious of Story and critical of the circumstances around her enigmatic appearance prevents him from understanding Story's purpose in Cleveland's life; his high-handed sense of realism endangers Story's existence the same way adults banish fantasy as an irrational undertaking. Not only do Mrs Choi and Mr Farber embody the extravagant metafictional element in the film, they also represent the convoluted relationship between fantasy and reality in the narrative structure of the story. While Mrs Choi plays the role of the author as she continuously feeds Cleveland with new information about Story and her world, which determines Cleveland's actions and makes us, as audiences, witness of how the narrative is created and woven into existence, Mr Farber reflects the sentiments of the adult viewer who overanalyses the story's farfetched fantastical element with a dismissively condensing attitude. The critic is eventually killed by the Scrunt while ironically commenting on this 'expected' narrative turn of events:

> This is like a moment from a horror movie. It is precisely the moment where the mutation or beast will attempt to kill an unlikable side character. But in stories where there has been no prior cursing, nudity killing or death, such as in a family film, the unlikable character will narrowly escape his encounter and be referenced again later in the story having learned valuable lessons. He may even be given a humorous moment to allow the audience to feel good about him. This is where I turn to run. You will leap for me. I will shut the door. And you will land a fraction of a second too late. (Shyamalan, 01:26:51-01:27:44)

Mr Farber's words reveal that he is involved in the metafictional process of storytelling as much Cleveland is; the only difference is that the former refuses to allow fantasy to reform his system of previous experiences, which strips him of the rational controlling agency he claims to be in possession of, whereas the latter permits his gradually blossoming sense of wonder to alter his perception of the world and give him the control he previously lacked. Farber's death could signify the triumph of reality or it could indicate that reality is devoured by the very thing it creates, referring to Baudrillard's postmodern notion of the simulacrum which Mr Farber also embodies in his refusal to assign relatable significance to Story and the story in which she is contained (Shyamalan's film itself). Mrs Choi and Mr Farber are the two forces that Cleveland has to balance in order to engage with his Story; grounding fantasy in reality while employing reality to serve fantasy is what Cleveland has to do to construct his own meaning.

In *Ondine* Neil Jordan also plays with metafictional techniques to highlight the relationship between fantasy and reality. The film is extremely self-reflective as it perpetually draws attention to its fantastical element; besides Annie's recurrent allusion to *Alice in Wonderland*, the film refers to the conventional fairytale tropes it uses as Annie tries to challenge her father's bleak reality with her reinterpretive imagination. Annie assumes the role of the storyteller and uses mermaid story tropes, such as the fisherman and the beautiful female water creature and her interconnectedness to nature, to construct a story that she keeps on changing and discussing with her father as events unfold. Annie creates this fantasy to make her father's life more joyous while he decides to entertain the fantasy to help distract his daughter from her critical medical condition. They both negotiate the boundaries between fantasy and reality in their attempts to make each other happy — a process of storytelling in which we (as the audience) become emotionally involved because we want to save Annie and Syracuse the same way the *Peter Pan* audiences clapped their hands to save Tinker Bell. To express this marriage between the fantastical and the real, throughout the entire film Jordan uses solid, atmospheric colours and angles; it is only in the scenes after Syracuse knows the truth about Ondine and violence ensues (01:31:22-01:35:12) that Jordan uses washed-out, grained camera lenses to give those scenes an incredibly unrealistic/dreamy effect, so the only oppressively real events are purposefully represented as fantastical. This technical code-switching in cinematography further complicates the relationship between reality and fantasy and renders Annie's version of reality on equal footing with the viewer's.

The two films also investigate fantasy's healing abilities from a psychological standpoint through engaging with their main characters' unconscious. Psychoanalysis does acknowledge the role of the imaginary in composing our notion of the world; both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung recognise fantasy as an instinctual undertaking prompted by the unconscious, making it part and parcel of the human psyche. For Jung, fantasy is "a result of spontaneous eruptions from the unconscious, perhaps archetypes which become the subject for active imaginative shaping" (quoted in Egan). Put differently, he proposes that fantasy is reflective of the unconscious and representative of the different facets of the individual's psyche. The water nymph in the two films is the mirror in which the protagonist discovers more about himself, and the irrational elements of the fantasy she brings along help the protagonist scrutinise and acknowledge the significant parts of his psyche that were previously unknown to him.

That is why the actual struggle in both narratives is essentially dictated by the human/realistic versus the mythical/fantastical — even the other characters in the films become part of this psychologically manifested dichotomy. Cleveland is first introduced to us as a decent man who likes to keep to himself most of the time; he does know every tenant in his building but he does not know much about any of them. It is only when Story's story unfolds that he starts to get acquainted with them in order to figure out their function in the fantasy and, in time, help Story return home. The act of reconnecting with the other tenants is what Cleveland needs to understand himself if these characters are seen as the various aspects that comprise his psyche: Mr Farber, the cynical critic; Mrs Choi, the superstitious lady; Reggie, the physical strength fanatic; Mr Leeds, the wise veteran; Mr Dury, the interpreter; and many others — including Shyamalan himself who plays the writer — could all be regarded as the different forces within Cleveland's

unconscious, and these parts need to come together to save the narf, i.e. to help the fantastical survive. In a similar manner, people in Syracuse's small circle of friends and family correspond to integral parts of his personality: Annie, his daughter, is the child, the creative force; Maura, the drunken ex-wife who tries to lure Syracuse back into alcoholism, is self-destructive desire; and the friendly priest is optimistic faith. Directly or otherwise, all of them assist Syracuse out of his personal tragedy by helping him save Ondine and secure a future for her. The role that Story and Ondine play in Cleveland's and Syracuse's lives is far more important than restoring their belief in the supernatural; what they miraculously manage to achieve is prompting the two men to reconnect with themselves, to truly understand and reconcile with every part of their psyche.

In addition to the introspective insight that Story and Ondine gift their human saviours, the otherworldly beings turn the conflict between the human/realistic and the mythical/fantastical into a subversive quest towards redemption. Just as the metafictional quality of both narratives destabilises the long-established relation between reality and fantasy, the films psychologically renegotiate traditional masculine-feminine politics of representation. *Lady in the Water* and *Ondine* overhaul the mythological image of the destructively alluring female water creature and, instead, create two figures whose existence provides the male protagonists with reassurance and equilibrium. Story and Ondine may seem like two vulnerable beings in need of help, but it is the very act of enabling Cleveland and Syracuse to save them that asserts their redemptive power because, in the process, the two men realise it is themselves that they ultimately redeem. Alternatively, Story and Ondine could be representative of the female image in the two male protagonists' unconscious, and confronting this image is what leads to total reconciliation with the Self. According to Jung, the female image of any man — the anima — constitutes a considerable part of the masculine unconscious, and how one deals with the emotions and desires it generates directly affects the formulation of the Self archetype. It is interesting how Jung attributes metaphysical and mythical qualities to the anima archetype, which gives rise to magically complex relationships that extend beyond the realm of the real (1968: 27–30). After their personal tragedies, the two men have subdued their feelings of grief and tried to emulate the image of the emotionally disconnected male figure society usually dictates; however, their encounter with the two female mythical creatures leave room for their emotional vulnerabilities to resurface and, hence, they come to understand the depth of their grief. It is no coincidence that Mrs Choi and Annie are both women because they function as the external creative energy which fuels and facilitates the two men's confrontation with their anima. Cleveland and Syracuse finally come to accept their anima not only as a disposition towards emotional balance but also as a creative force necessary for survival the same way lands make room for streams of water to flow through them. It is no wonder then that Story and Ondine are water creatures; their connection to water symbolises the inventive and redemptive force the two protagonists needed to allow into their lives. This symbolic fertility corresponds with fantasy's ability to simultaneously affirm and regenerate reality not as simulacra but as extended versions of itself.

If postmodernism deconstructs our long-established notion of reality by destroying all fixed points of reference, then fantasy reconstructs our fractured ties to the real world by narratively and psychologically engaging us in the very act of storytelling. Stories tap into the potential of human imagination and teach the despondent postmodern individual that

fantasy can save them from the loss of meaning. Through their tragedy-stricken protagonists, M Night Shyamalan and Neil Jordan affirm that fantasy neither negates reality or reason nor partakes in the lugubriously relentless process of deconstructing meaning, and that availing ourselves of the fantastical can reorient our understanding of reality and provide fresh outlooks on ourselves and the world around us. Cleveland and Syracuse are fictional examples of how the happily-ever-after in our personal stories can be as simple, yet as glorious, as restoring ingenuous faith to our imagination and coming to terms with who we really are. Story and Ondine challenge the two men to take part in creating their fantasy and by doing so they come to understand the narrative agency they possess and the kind of control they can practise over their own reality. Moreover, engaging in the act of storytelling offers them a therapeutic insight into their psyches and ways to deal with their seemingly circumstantial, yet essentially existential, grief. In short, both *Lady in the Water* and *Ondine* succeed in incorporating two fantastical female figures in relatively bleak realities, and by exploiting metafictional narrative techniques and destabilising masculine-feminine representations and their psychological effects on characters, they question the quasi- reality-fantasy hierarchy and assert fantasy's redemptive quality.

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