What is Dirt?

An Ecocritical Analysis of Dirt in Neil Gaiman’s Neverwhere

Rasmus Ekström Kuchler

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Handledare: Cecilia Björkén Nyberg
Examiner: Anna Fåhraeus
Foreword
I would like to thank my tutor, Cecilia Björkén Nyberg, for guiding me through this essay and helping me realize this project as a whole. I would also like to thank all the scholars that have made this essay a reality in regards to applying the aspect of “dirt theory” to eco-criticism. Special thanks also goes out to Neil Gaiman for his colorful portrayal of London Below and his work that makes him one of my favorite fantasy authors.
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Introduction

What is dirt? That is a question I asked myself whilst cleaning the house the other day. Dust (it appears) is seemingly everywhere, from under the bed to behind the television. Grime and filth cling to the old dishes and the dirt from my shoes can clearly be spotted if one were to follow my entrance from when I took out the trash, and forgot to take off my shoes again. Yes, dirt is everywhere, and no matter how hard we scrub, vacuum, dust or soak in water; it will always be there because dirt is a part of nature. Today, modern society has a vast array of rituals regarding cleanliness and some individuals go to extreme lengths to make themselves and their homes clean. But even though this distancing from filth is more evident today than it was merely a hundreded years ago, dirt is still with us and still part of our history.

In this essay, Neil Gaiman’s novel Neverwhere (1996) will be studied through an ecocritical perspective, more specifically Dirt Theory. As Heather I. Sullivan claims in Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism, this theory takes into account that many ecocritics fail to see dirt in all its dimensions, and are thus engaged in “dirt rejection” (2). Today most ecocritics seem to be focused on the more glamorous aspects of a clean and separated nature that stands apart from modern society and as such, dirt is an often ignored subject as it refers to an often duller part of the environment on this planet. Sullivan mentions that “Dirt Theory is an antidote to the nostalgic views” (1) and with that in mind it is clear that Dirt Theory simply wants to establish the fact that there is no ultimate boundary between us as humans and nature itself. To erase these boundaries the theory focuses on the movement of the smallest aspects of dirt, such as dust and sand, which are very mobile and follow humans and objects from location to location. At its core, however, Dirt Theory is mainly created to give “dirt its due” (3) as Sullivan states and it is with this in mind that this essay has been written.

The importance of dirt has not gone unnoticed though, and a few ecocritics and scholars have studied the subject, the most notable being Mary Douglas with her study on
pollution and taboo in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. While Heather I. Sullivan and Douglas are the two main sources for this essay, other scholars’ research will also be utilized. Victoria Kelley with her study on dirt and the working classes in *Cleanliness, Dirt & the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* as well as William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson with their research on dirt in a more contemporary setting in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* will influence this essay. Moreover, Mark Llewellyn with his article on *Neo-Victorianism: On the Ethics and Aesthetics of Appropriation* will also be supporting this essay with its knowledge of modern Victorianism.

Neil Gaiman is a very popular fantasy author and previous works on his novel *Neverwhere* include such articles as: *Paradisical Hells: Subversions of the Mythical Canon in Neil Gaiman’s Neverwhere* (2005) by Andrés Romero Jódar which focuses on the narrative structure of the novel as well as Maria Błaszkiewicz’s *Allegorizing the Fantastic: A Spenserian Reading of Neil Gaiman’s Neverwhere* (2014), in which she chooses to focus on the allegorical approach to the characters. The narrative is also crucial here as Błaszkiewicz interprets it with the quest archetype. Though most of the work on Gaiman’s novel seems to be on the characters and the narrative structure, others focus on different areas perhaps even more relevant to this study. In *Tunnel Visions and Underground Geography and Fantasy* (2006) Alice Jenkins researches the treatment of urban landscapes and tunnels in the fantasy novel.

With these sources, this essay will try to answer the question: Is dirt treated as a character in *Neverwhere*? Hopefully, we will know this by the end of this essay and perhaps it will add more color to our understanding of Neil Gaiman’s vibrant world.
Cleanliness versus Uncleanliness

If one were to consider the social and cultural aspects of dirt and filth, it would be hard not to mention the binary opposites of cleanliness and filth. The world of *Neverwhere* is a world of stark contrast, for not only does it resemble our world but it is also a world which mirrors itself. To discuss the topic of cleanliness in *Neverwhere* one must first view the context in which the novel was written. London Above is just ordinary London where people come, go, work, and live their lives. However, London Above is something more as well; it is a society built on the lessons its’ people over the years have accumulated. It is a place of social norms and regulations that in turn help London Below stay invisible. As Victoria Kelley mentions in her introduction to *Soap and Water*, cleanliness was related to class in the Victorian era in the sense that it established boundaries between the classes themselves (1). Since Gaiman echoes the Victorian era, it is also here that an analysis must be made in regard to the historical context of the novel.

London Above is a society that at first seems familiar to the reader but as the story progresses, the perspective on the city and its people becomes distant and distorted. With the Victorian era in mind, it is almost as if the dirt in *Neverwhere* is more of a struggle of class than a means to disappear in a modern society. As Richard first wakes up after Door’s departure, he walks out into a city that seems to have forgotten him. Society seems too refined to even be bothered by his mere presence. London Above is a pillar of light, a centre far away from the dirt and filth that Richard now embodies. As Phillis Browne argues, “where dirt reigns, disease, misery and crime stand erect around his throne; liberty, progress and enlightenment hide their heads in shame” (Kelley 36). What is essential in this statement in regards to *Neverwhere* and Richard is that the Victorian ideals still echo in the minds of all who live in London Above. It is possible that London Above refuses both London Below and Richard’s right to exist for London above is a cultivated and modern society that cannot house
any members of ill-repute. The magic is in this instance stripped away only to be replaced by social blindness conditioned by years of social history.

What is interesting here is that even before Richard’s descent into London Below he was already feeling like an outcast, a man who did not belong in his society. It is as if dirt had chosen this fate for Richard, and had prepared him for him meeting Door. A perfect example of this social seclusion is Richard’s relation to his girlfriend, Jessica:

They had reached a person on the sidewalk. Jessica stepped over the crumpled form. Richard hesitated. “Jessica?” “You’re right. He might think I’m bored,” she mused. “I know,” she said brightly, “if he makes a joke, I’ll rub my earlobe.” “Jessica?” He could not believe that she was simply ignoring the figure at their feet. “What?” She was not pleased to be jerked out of her reverie. (Gaiman 23-24)

Jessica is described by Richard as a woman who is too beautiful for him. Moreover, she has an upper-class job and, most importantly, she is clean. Symbolically, Jessica steps over Door and continues to go about her daily business. Door lies on the ground and Jessica ignores her, which can be read as meaning that she ignores dirt. Mary Douglas states that “as we know it, dirt is essentially disorder” (11), and as a modern society strives towards some form of perfection, it and the majority of its citizens will fear a descent into disorder and chaos. Jessica is an example of this social phobia, for dirt is for London Above a shunned and scary concept. So perhaps Jessica’s ignorance of Door, and Richard a little later, comes from Jessica’s subconsciously inherited morals regarding dirt. However, if we are to consider this thought, we might touch upon the supernatural element of dirt, not in relation to Neverwhere but to society itself. And perhaps this is the pillar from which dirt’s invisibility morphs into a magical element in the novel. Still, London Above stands as a shining hill of light, order and above all cleanliness, but its light appears to be blinding rather than illuminating.
On the other side of the mirror there is London Below. This society, which is completely buried in the London Underground, stands on its own. Still, it functions as an unwanted neighbour of the citizens of London Above. A society draped in Victorian costume and invisible to all from the above world, it is constructed out of its own rules and manners but, most importantly, it is a community of filth. Mary Douglas writes that “the right basis for comparison is to insist on the unity of human experience and at the same time to insist on its variety, on the differences which make comparison worthwhile” and that “the only way to do this is to recognize the nature of historical progress and the nature of primitive and modern society” (78). What Douglas points out here is crucial to the setting of *Neverwhere*. London Above denies London Below the right to exist and, conversely, London Below is suspicious of all the above-world dwellers. Gaiman writes about the meeting of these two cultures as a modern culture meeting a primitive one. It is as if the Empire meets the savages. The Rat-people who live in the filthiest part of London Below and behave like giant rodents demonstrate this better than anyone:

A man scuttled towards them. He had long hair, a patchy brown beard, and his ragged clothes were trimmed with fur-orange-and-white-and-black fur, like the coat of a calico cat. He would have been taller than Richard, but he walked with a pronounced stoop, his hands held up at his chest, fingers pressed together.

(Gaiman 68)

Gaiman takes the reader into the society of the rat-people which is a rather drastic introduction to London Below. The language of Rat-speak is here described to the reader for the first time: “Lord Rat-speaker bowed so low that his long hair brushed the ground, and he chittered back at the rat wrinkling his nose, showing his teeth, squeaking and hissing, for all
the world like an enormous rat himself” (Gaiman 76). Like Richard, the reader becomes an explorer coming from contemporary society, an explorer from the Victorian perspective of the British Empire encountering the primitive culture of London Below for the first time, and as such he enters a completely alien world which he automatically views with some disdain. Gaiman does this deliberately; he consciously mirrors the Victorian way of thinking about subservient cultures and, as such, creates an effective Other, not only with the Rat-people but the entire world of London Below. However, there is more to London Below and its filth and dirt than just this. As mentioned earlier, Gaiman’s world has many faces, and the segregation part is only one of them.

Another, more crucial aspect of the uncleanliness in Neverwhere is its ability to protect. It does this in the form of invisibility, but also in the form of adapting the “moving bodies” as Heather I. Sullivan points out, with dirt itself serving as a shield from disease and death, and perhaps adding to the magical element of immortality (2). Mr Croup and Mr Vandemar illustrate this as they have travelled, rather brutally, through time as only immortals can. Even an angel still lives within anybody’s reach in the dirt although Gaiman does not describe whether or not they are within reach of the people of London Above. The citizens of London Below live out their lives in a daily setting of filth and muck, but instead of killing them it has perhaps only made them stronger. To add to this fact, Hunter recalls visits to other cities, all of which have been the “below” version of these: the “undercity of Bangkok” (Gaiman 215), the “city beneath Berlin” (227) and the “sewers beneath New York” (226). To suggest the existence of so many of these Underworld cultures hints at the notion of dirt not only existing, but in a way contributing to and protecting an living eco-system.
The Manifestation of Dirt

Victorianism in the London Underground

The Victorian era influences Gaiman’s writing in this novel, both from the point of view of the environment of the fictional London Below and its description, but also from that of topography as the actual London Underground itself contains both a heritage and a philosophical link to the past. The Underground in London has its roots in the Victorian period and as such the world of London Below can be viewed as a united empire governed by barons, as expressed to Richard by Old Bailey: “I don’t recognize ye. What barony do you give fealty to?” (Gaiman 51). Not only does this give the author a more direct path to link the setting to a specific time period, but it also sets the stage for a diverse and descriptive array of characters more historical and jarring than “fantasy-like” in description:

They wore black suits, which were slightly greasy, slightly frayed, and even Richard, who counted himself among the sartorially dyslexic, felt there was something odd about the cut of their coats. They were the kind of suits that might have been made by a tailor two hundred years ago who had had a modern suit described to him but had never actually seen one. The lines were wrong, and so were the grace notes. (Gaiman 32)

The introduction to Mr. Croup and Mr Vandemar seems to be an encounter with a pair of very odd gentlemen; they appear to come from another time and place. At first Richard has trouble with instinctively placing the two individuals and refers to them both in the following terms: “It was-what? Mormons? Jehovah’s witnesses? The police?” (32). It is interesting that Richard first subconsciously denotes their appearance based on religions that uphold old beliefs and also the police, an organization with considerable power in our society. Another
aspect to Richards’s thoughts goes to the formal and florid language in which Mr Croup speaks: “A career in law and order, although indubitably exciting, was not inscribed on the cards Dame Fortuna dealt my brother and me” (33). Gaiman writes in a way that upholds the old prose and strict beliefs of the Victorian era, much like Llewellyn describes in his article on the rules of Neo Victorian writing (27,28)

Richards’s first encounter with the world of London Below is a fairly distant one. However, before long he is thrust into a world of sights, smells and sounds both familiar and all too unfamiliar. Richards’s trip to the floating market is filled with impressions that mimic what one would expect to find in a bazar in a late-nineteenth-century British colony. The style in which Gaiman chooses to describe the colours and the setting is akin to the nineteenth-century element of retaining beauty within dirt, a very Victorian feature as Cohen and Johnson mention in their take on the Bourgeois and how Victorian art elements tried to show the “romantic” beauty in a dirty world (133).

Dirt itself is written into the story with great care and detail: It is natural, it is ever-present and highly symbiotic with both the environment (it almost consumes the environment) and it’s inhabitants:

The central courtyard of Mr.Croup and Mr.Vandemar’s hospital was a dank and cheerless place. Ragged grass grew up through the abandoned desks, rubber tires and bits of office furniture. The overall impression given by the area was that a decade before (perhaps out of boredom, perhaps out of frustration, perhaps even as a statement, or as performance art) a number of people had thrown the content of their offices out of their windows, high above, and had left them there on the ground to rot (Gaiman 143).
Gaiman continues to describe the living element of a naturally dirty eco-system by including a thriving insect life, perhaps in order to denounce that dirt equals death: “Slugs sprawled indolently under the springs of the burnt mattresses; snails left slime trails across the broken glass; large black beetles scuttled industriously over smashed grey plastic telephones and mysteriously mutilated Barbie dolls” (Gaiman 144). Many of the things described here seem to be done not only to give reality to the scene but also to uphold the reader in the mindset of “positive” dirt or life not being destroyed simply because the environment is polluted. Gaiman portrays a living world to prove that life is truly sustainable even in this element. As Douglas argues, “the only way in which pollution ideas makes sense is in a reference to a total structure of thought” (42). In other words for a location to make sense it has to have a realistic structure and even though our western society’s collective minds think of pollution as destructive, it is here depicted as a normal natural environment with a living aspect to prove its true ability to exist.

This is not all, however, as dirt appears to be host to many things, not all of which are positive:

And then it erupted over the side of the platform. It was diaphanous, dreamlike, a ghost-thing, the colour of black smoke, and it welled up like silk under water, and, moving astonishingly fast while still seeming to drift almost in slow motion, it wrapped itself tightly around Richards’s ankle. It stung, even through the fabric of his Levi’s. (Gaiman 141)

Here the animal that attacks the hero is part of the same ecosystem that the insects were before but instead of being depicted as a normal animal of that ecosystem, it is twisted into something different. As this creature of the muck emerges from the depths, Richard is instantly over-powered and thrown back when once more he has to fight for his survival. Later, as Hunter saves Richard and the giant tentacle of smoke disappears down into the
abyss, Richard looks down at his leg to find purple welts on the skin of his ankle. The colour of life is also seemingly sucked out of his clothes. Gaiman changes his writing and gives dirt a new face that reminds the readers of the danger lurking in this world. What is special here is that the features of dirt as a bringer of death and disease are envisioned as a “monster” that is ugly, dangerous and something that must be held at bay. Kelley mentions this negative beast like quality when she discusses “battling” dirt in the Victorian working-class environment: “The spectre of “invisible monsters,” germs that could lurk anywhere unseen, gave a new impetus to the battle against dirt” (22). Gaiman proves that dirt can be overwhelming, dangerous and natural and this helps to cement the realistic elements of his dirty eco-system, with the feature of “the beast of dirt” almost being a direct mirror of the Victorian way of thinking. It is also here that the thought of dirt as a character slowly starts to form as the reader experiences a multi-layered element with different characteristics both positive and negative.

There is one aspect of dirt that is unique to London Below however, and that is the ability to disappear and be hidden. Mary Douglas claims that “primitive means undifferentiated; modern means differentiated” (78). Accordingly dirty individuals are not seen by today’s society. In other words; dirty equals unseen and clean equals seen. Dirt takes the form of inherent primitiveness and, as such, dirty individuals and worlds are not differentiated and are not worthy of our own society’s attention. But this can, in Gaiman’s world, actually be a good thing as the Individuals in the dirt and filth can view the world from a different perspective than others; they see through the cracks with an almost supernatural perception. But even though the residents of London Below can perceive the world in far greater contrast, they are completely invisible to the outside world. They are dirty and therefore unseen by the above world. The commuters from London Above, on the other hand,
only pass through the area because they have to. These people from London Above do not linger, and they do not see the underground as the people of London Below do.

To further visualise this fact, Gaiman chooses to write about Richards’s first encounter with the Marquis de Carabas set in an alleyway riddled with garbage: “What Richard had taken for a pile of rags unfolded, expanded, stood up in one fluid motion” (45). Richard, here being in the early stages of his introduction to the world below, cannot see de Carabas and mistakes him for something dirty and unwanted. This kind of invisibility is symptomatic of our society. Simply ignoring a homeless person begging for money or food seems to be the most common way to deal with these individuals. In such situations the first thought is often that if someone were to hand them money, they would only waste it on alcohol or drugs. It truly is a dark line of thought, and darkness and dirt often go hand in hand.

_Dirt and Darkness_

As Cohen and Johnson point out in their study on filth’s contribution to culture, “the underworld follows neither the standard rules of time - it endures eternally and mingle every epoch in its depths - nor those of space - it is dark, supernatural, and labyrinthine in its construction” (53). They refer to the mythical aspect of the Victorian underground. Here a maze of tunnels sprawl outwards in the dark like the legs of a giant black spider, and it is here that darkness can truly take on a living quality. Darkness, it seems, has an almost equally important role as dirt in the novel, and as such it is alive and vibrant in both natural and unnatural ways.

As I will discuss later, the aesthetics Gaiman uses to describe the darkness often correspond with the *movement* of dirt. The people of the underground live, breathe and travel in the dark, and the element of darkness itself only seems to contribute to the “invisible” society of London Below. Dirt and darkness help; they hide and assist the natural environment in many different ways. But there is one aspect left, one that is very familiar to our own
“above world” standards; darkness is danger, fear and uncertainty. Gaiman uses this state of things to his advantage in the section where he writes about Knightsbridge and Richard and Anaesthesia’s encounter with the violent form of Darkness:

And Richard began to understand darkness: darkness as something solid and real, so much more than a simple absence of light. He felt it touch his skin, questing, moving, exploring: gliding through his mind. It slipped into his lungs, behind his eyes, into his mouth… With each step they took the light of the candle became dimmer. (Gaiman 102-103)

What is important to note is that in this passage, darkness becomes a solid thing; it morphs and twists and comes across as concrete rather than abstract. It manifests as dirt, a reality to which you can touch and physically relate: “Yet because every element of it was once part of the world above, it maintains the power of that connection, with its former meanings recombined in unforeseen ways” (53). However, in this instance, one might consider the “embodiment” of darkness to be what a majority of readers might expect: the dark is frightening. However, this diabolical darkness retains its’ naturalistic element on the sheer basis of its own existence. Much like dirt, it exists without being necessarily evil. In fact, Gaiman seems to play with the idea of presupposed thoughts and especially with the introduction of light in the shape of Islington: “It was not much taller than Richard, but it made him feel like a little child. It was not a man; it was not a woman. It was very beautiful. Its voice was quiet” (Gaiman 197). This Angel is radiant, wise, and beautiful in a way not easy to describe and also, at first, calming and safe but as the story unfolds one can clearly see the nature of Islington’s plan. The assumed pillar of truth and goodness becomes a twisted, wicked and distorted figure draped in a bright light.

Gaiman uses the reader’s pre-existing ideals to cement the idea of darkness and filth as a natural element not inherently evil but perhaps misunderstood. The light becomes
deceiving, a thing of danger, and much as the citizens of London Above flee from the
darkness and filth almost by instinct, so do the citizens of London Below flee form the
concept of light. It is important to remember here, however, that the people of London Below
seem not exactly to flee form the physical manifestation of light, but rather from the concept
of it.

**The Movement of Dirt**

*The Living Underground*

Earlier in this essay the concept of *movement* was briefly mentioned with the promise of being
discussed later. This part fulfils that promise by trying to analyse the concept of dirt in
movement, especially in relation to the character of the London Underground. As Sullivan
mentions in regard to Duve’s 2008 novel *Taxi*, the “transporting bodies appears to be a fluid
and rather aimless process” (5). This statement is highly relevant for my discussion of
*Neverwhere* as it mirrors the concept of the London Underground and the subway system.

This is where the theory of a moving, breathing and virtually expanding Underground comes
into existence. A more straightforward example of this is to be found in the passage
describing Richard entering Earl’s Court:

> There was straw scattered on the floor, over layers of rushes. There was an open
> log fire, sputtering and blazing in a large fireplace. There were a few chickens,
> strutting and pecking on the floor. There were seats with hand-embroidered
> cushions on them, and there were tapestries covering the windows and the doors.
> (Gaiman 150)

This place, which is reminiscent of a medieval castle, contains the life of several living things;
dirt and filth exist here and thrives to a substantial degree. This is not all though, as Earl’s
court is also in motion by being located within a subway train, an example of dirt literally
moving from place to place with the help of a machine. But what happens when you take away the machine and replace it with living things? A good example of what happens is the floating market which, as its’ name suggests, is moving. People come and go and traders, bodyguards and slave-owners, all contribute to the relocation of filth: “Rubbish!” screamed a fat, elderly woman, in Richard’s ear, as he passed her malodorous stall. “Junk!” she continued. Garbage! Trash! Offal! Debris!” (Gaiman 110). Here we find a case of overstatement of the subject since not only are the moving bodies contributing to the spread of filth, but they also sell it as goods.

When Richard first encounters Door, he sees her as a small and filthy girl in need of help. Then, having assisted Door, he begins to fall through the cracks. Throughout his life, Richard has been in contact with filth but never to such dramatic extremes. Only moments into the story, he is covered in filth. At one point he is knee deep in sewage from following the Marquis in his search for Old Bailey. At another he encounters the rat-people during his first trip alone into London Below. Sullivan claims that dirt theory is based on “material environmental immersion” (4), and this statement can point to what happens with Richard here. He becomes infused with dirt in motion. Dirt and filth, smear and dust cling to Richards’s body in ways he does not even notice. For him the dirt is, at first, uncomfortable and miserable, but moments into the story, it has become secondary in nature. Richard moves along with the rest of London Below and the dirt moves along with him.

Gaiman’s manner of approaching the movement aspect of the entire novel is special in the way he gives dirt recognition. Dirt moves the masses of individuals in the underground and as such they move in a wavelike and fluid pattern. However, dirt can also bend, shape and twist the fabric of reality to its uses and influence the characters themselves: “He was filthy, covered in a black, encrusted dirt which filled his pores and lived under his fingernails; his eyes were red and bleary, his hair was matted and snarled” (Gaiman 244).
What is interesting here is that this is a vision Richard has of himself as a homeless person and it is part of the ordeal of obtaining the key which is a crucial element in Richard and Door’s quest. Without this event Richard would not have the strength to help Door and as such it seems as if dirt is preparing Richard for what is to come. Could it be dirt that has been guiding Richard through the underground, choosing for him, helping him? Could it be that it was dirt that sent Richard on his adventure? If we take into consideration that dirt is constant and living, much like the forest or sea, and that it contains a supernatural element, it is possible that the dirt, and by extension London Below, governs Richards’s destiny. So perhaps dirt does not only move in natural and supernatural ways but also moves the living things that dwell within its’ sphere.

Dirt and Doorways

If we are to talk about a living and breathing dirt form as a character, we must address the subject of the supernatural aspect that dirt possesses in the novel. This last section will focus on the features of magically expanding dirt, not only because magic is such a predominant factor in the novel, but because the dirt in Neverwhere expands with the help of the characters’ main intentions. As Sullivan points out; “Dirt Theory acknowledges on-going processes through time and across space” (2) and this is essential to the magic dirt of Neverwhere. Richard’s first experience with London Below comes, from him stumbling across a bleeding, dirty and disoriented girl, lying on the pavement. As Richard decides to help Door, he subconsciously promotes the concept of dirt transmission by taking Door in his arms, that is, by becoming filthy.

This is not all, however; the Lady Door has, through the use of her powers, exited the Underworld through a doorway, and not just any doorway but through a portal. Richard does not notice this for he encounters the girl later when she is simply lying in the street, but through Richards’s course of action here, he has unintentionally, or intentionally if we
consider the magic dirt, contributed to the supernatural expansion of dirt. If someone from London Below were given the task to describe Lady Door’s abilities, then she would most likely be described as an “opener.” But of what exactly? Door’s inherent ability to open objects is magic, and as such not only can she open the concrete version of a locked door but also its’ abstract counterpart, a portal. This means that Door can create huge gaps in space and time from which she can travel:

And 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 this is the last door I open,” she prayed, silently, to the Temple, to the Arch. “Somewhere…anywhere…safe…” and then she thought, wildly, “somebody.” And as she began to pass out, she tried to open a door… (Gaiman 22)

As Door travels through this portal, she finds herself dropped onto the streets of London and the reader gets an example of dirt spreading through the world using Door herself:

The girls face was crusted with dirt, and her clothes were wet with blood…

Suddenly the girl´s eyes opened, white and wide in a face that was little more than a smudge of dust and blood. (Gaiman 24)

By opening the portal, Door manipulates the element of space itself, and this makes it possible for filth to travel along with her into new areas. Therefore it is quite logical to agree that every time Door uses her ability to some extent, in situations like this, she contributes to the almost spiderweb-like spread of dirt throughout both London Above and Below. With the focus here being on the supernatural element, the reader can view dirt as almost tactical in nature, as if on a conquest.

If dirt governs the characters in the story, it would only be reasonable for it to govern itself. Sullivan talks about “dirt´s ability to travel” (2), and even though what she
means is its’ natural way of transporting itself, one may link this phenomenon to the supernatural element of anthropomorphism. In other words, dirt acquires a conscious ability and decides where to go on its own. Gaiman, however, portrays this spread as mostly a natural expansion rather than a diabolic one: “He felt a breeze against his face. Something in the quality of the darkness beyond his closed eyelids changed. “‘So what’s your point?’ asked Door. The acoustics had altered as well: they were in a bigger room” (Gaiman 174). As Door and Richard enter the British Museum, they do so covered in filth. Dirt accompanies them around extremely valuable pieces of art and historical monuments that are usually routinely scrubbed and cleaned. However, this does not destroy the Museum. It does not kill the security guards. It does not consume the building. It only co-exists. Why? Because dirt is again a naturally neutral element; it supernaturally spreads only with the essence of its’ inherent nature to exist.

Douglas discusses the inherited belief about dirt as often contributing to evil in religious themes and as such it has given our society a warped view on the concept of dirt (51). It seems as if Gaiman toys with this aspect of our inherited beliefs since it is not dirt expanding that is evil but the people who dwell in between the dirt that are the true source of this malevolence. An example of this is Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar, the two ancient cutthroats. These men have for centuries acted as assassins. As far back as the destruction of “the city of Troy” (Gaiman 145), they have killed, burned, crushed and gutted thousands of individuals. They are magically geared towards immortality and as a result they have contributed to the magically expanding dirt for hundreds of years. One may only imagine to what extent dirt has spread with the aid of these rather unsavoury gentlemen. But even here, dirt is not evil, it is possibly self-knowing and self-aware, but it does not choose to be malevolent in any way. The evil characters commit wicked deeds whilst dirt expands around them. Another use of this is the opening of the final, and by western standards most sacred,
doorway: “The door had opened, only a crack, but it was open. Light flooded through the crack in the door. The angel took a step forward” (Gaiman 328). As Islington commands the opening of the doorway to heaven, Door again uses her ability and even though Islington’s plans are foiled, one might wonder whether this was part of the evil angel’s plan to conquer heaven, or an attempt of dirt to naturally enter heaven. If so, then here is proof of a living character with its own agenda, hidden form the rest of the underground.
Conclusion
In this essay I have studied how the element of dirt is represented in Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, and whether dirt is treated as a character in *Neverwhere*. I would argue that it most certainly is, as not only is it portrayed as living and coexisting, just like any other natural element, it is also fullfills a magical role in the story itself. This gives the reader an opportunity to enjoy the element as much as any of the other more accepted natural elements such as the forest or the sea.

At first glance one may choose to focus on the mere surface of *Neverwhere* and only see the type of filth that is dangerous, disease-riddled and shunned. The type of dirt that only exists in order to bear the burden of all of London Above’s resentment. Dirt is, from this perspective, merely weak and an undesirable environment for Richard and Door to travel through. Dirt in this instance becomes a sort of material embodiment of the Other. But if the reader scratches but an inch deeper, he or she will find that Gaiman, whilst treating dirt as a character, writes about dirt with colours, faces and fused with nature itself. These elements become the subject of a story of misunderstanding, and as I myself realized this, a whole new world opened up. The environment became so much more alive, much like the living forest, or living sea.

This feeling of living dirt comes in the form of its portrayal within Gaiman’s novel itself, for as much as it can do wicked things, it can do good things, and what is interesting with this is that the often wicked acts that are attributed to dirt throughout the novel are actually caused by human characters. This strengthens the argument that dirt is part of an existing eco-system and that it cannot do “evil” things by nature, only humans can do that. I have mentioned above dirt’s ability to move, and with this a suggested intelligence allowing it to control itself and others. It would be interesting to explore further how the entire plot is suffused by the aspect of dirt controlling the setting and the characters. It is dirt that
helps Door to escape, that chooses Richard’s fate and brings him into the world of London Below. If it did such a thing, it must have affected Richard in a way when he was in the world above and therefore dirt, of course, exists there too, and this only supports my point that it is portrayed by Gaiman as a natural and living element.

The major characters in the story also seem to be geared towards Gaiman’s use of introducing a misunderstood environment as a character. The clearest example of this is Islington who, despite being an angel, is wicked and evil. Islington is draped in light, warmth and a beauty that is unheard of, but this does not prevent him from being the main protagonist of the story. I believe this only goes to show how Gaiman uses the light of Islington to be blinding, instead of enlightening. Dirt is known, by our society’s standards, to be a bad thing, but the author seemingly toys with this fact as if he describes our modern and strict views on the subject with irony. Because of the environment these details can become refreshing as they depict beauty within the dirt. The reader finds perhaps more easily nuances and subjects for analysis than they would in older works. It all boils down to the view of dirt retaining its living existence with the help of Gaiman himself, as he proves that dirt can have as much character as any other fantasy environment.

As for further research, this essay has only touched on the surface of a deep but still unexplored ocean and this leaves a great deal of diving and exploring ahead. One could focus solely on the deeper aspects of moving or expanding dirt, and from there work towards deeper conclusions. There is also the approach of social taboos and dirt if one were to focus on the clean versus unclean part of the essay. The mythical aspect of filth and the dark could be researched in regard to comparison of perhaps other tales and how they describe dirt along with Neverwhere. Social class and dirt in the novel would be a very interesting topic if one where to compare dirt and the proletariat but this essay concludes by stating the simple and inescapable fact that dirt is part of nature.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


My name is Rasmus Ekström Kuchler. I am a native of Halmstad and a huge nerd. Fantasy and Science Fiction are two of my biggest interests.