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# **HANDING THE REINS TO THE TRICKSTER:**

A Narratological Analysis of the Construction of Reliability in  
Joanne M. Harris' *The Gospel of Loki*

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**Title:** Handing the Reins to the Trickster: A Narratological Analysis of the Construction of Reliability in Joanne M. Harris' *The Gospel of Loki*

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**Abstract:** How can a reader believe anything the narrator says when the narrator is an infamous trickster? *The Gospel of Loki* (2014) tells the Edda-stories from the Norse Trickster God Loki's viewpoint, providing a unique perspective on the Norse myths. For the presented plot to be valid the narrator has to be trusted to tell the truth; he has to be a reliable narrator. The prevailing understanding of reliability in narratives is that it is equal to the absence of signs of unreliability. Only recently has this theory become opposed, with the suggestion that reliability has signs too. This essay continues the discussion of reliability as something that can be understood on its own basis. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that a narrator who is initially unreliable can become reliable through the implementation of signs of reliability in the construction of the narrative. It is demonstrated through the application of existing narratological models of reliability, augmented with concepts from the fields of rhetorical studies, meta-narratives, to Loki. In the essay it is shown that reliability can be ascertained through focusing on a few criteria derived from the different approaches.

**Keywords:** The Gospel of Loki, Joanne M. Harris, Loki, Narratology, Reliability, Unreliability, Intertextual unreliability

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Joanne M. Harris, Norse Mythology and Loki

Joanne M. Harris is a contemporary English author with a French heritage. In accordance with her heritage, Harris is probably most well known for her novels about people in the French countryside during the first half of the twentieth century. One of these novels, *Chocolat*, was made into the 2000 Oscar-nominated film of the same name (“About” *online*). However, Harris has not only written about the lives of people in the French countryside. She has also delved into the territory of fantasy and mythology. *The Gospel of Loki* (2014) is the third novel she has written in her *Runemarks* series, functioning as a prequel to the children’s novels *Runemarks* (2007) and *Runelights* (2011).

Harris was introduced to Norse mythology as a child. She was captivated by the tales, and reflected in hindsight that because the myths contained fractured story pieces they allowed her the necessary imaginative space to create a new continuity, to create her own narrative. When she explored the myths, she was intrigued by one character in particular: Loki, the Trickster God. “Why Loki? All the books I’d read showed him in a negative light. And yet he seemed to me to be the catalyst for all the best tales; a wild and mercurial character whose shift from cheery practical-joker to murderer and sociopath reflects the rise and fall of the gods” (Harris, “The Gospel of Loki – Background” *online*). Even as a child, she felt that Loki was the Norse legends’ true protagonist and instigator, and that he had been cast aside. She decided that she would write her own version, a version in which Loki would get to assume his rightful place at the forefront, providing him a chance to tell his own story (*ibid*).

Loki is a complex character, one that has gained a partially undeserved negative reputation. This is something Harris has tried to alter by showing that, while there is truth to the established view, there is another side to him. She has given him a voice of his own and a chance to convince people that his voice too can provide a legitimate account of the events of Norse mythology, granting Loki the opportunity to prove that he is more than an unreliable trickster. Harris has taken an intertextually unreliable narrator and, through the novel’s construction, made him more reliable.

The story Harris wrote is *The Gospel of Loki*. The novel is a modern retelling of the Norse myths: it starts with a critical review of the “quirky creation myth” (Jones *online*),

which involves a giant called Ymir and an equally giant cow named Audhumla who, by licking the salty primordial ice, frees the first human. From the genesis of the world, the story continues by showing the conflicts that evolve under the World Tree Yggdrasil's branches. In the Nine Worlds held within the World Tree there live several different clans, all of them descendants of beings belonging to either Chaos or Order. From Chaos came the Vanir and from Order came the Aesir, two clans that "settle down together, after squabbling over possession of the 16 Runes, conveyors of magical power" (ibid). Loki, however, is not one of them; in *The Gospel of Loki* he is a being of pure Chaos, his true form being Wildfire (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki"). Many strange adventures with a diverse cast from the Norse pantheon are featured in the novel. The characters presented include Odin, the All-Father or, "the Old Man" (ibid) as Loki regularly calls him; his son Thor, who wields the famous hammer Mjolnir; Balder the Fair; Freyja, the Goddess of Desire; Hel, the Guardian of the Dead; and Fenris, the monstrous wolf that is destined to kill Odin when the world comes to an end. The end of the world is part of the novel too: Ragnarok, "the doom-laden 'Last Battle' of the Gods that has fascinated so many later myth-makers, from Richard Wagner to JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis and Alan Garner" (Jones *online*). There is also a lot of dry humour, informal dialogue and direct addresses to the reader which combine to make the story feel direct and contemporary.

A review of *The Gospel of Loki* in *The Guardian* claims that the only liberty taken by Harris is the rearranging of the myths to conform to a straight timeline in her reimagination of the Norse myths (ibid). While this is an exaggeration, the author herself says that about seventy-five percent of the novel corresponds with the original material, while the rest is a creation of her own imagination (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki – Background" *online*). The original material referred to includes three main texts: *The Poetic Edda*, *The Prose Edda* and *The Völuspá*. The stories are old, having existed in oral form for a long time before they were written down. The myths have persisted to modern day in fragments; the oldest preserved manuscripts being *Codex Regius*, *Codex Wormianus* and *Codex Upsaliensis*. These have all been dated to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, though they are copies of an earlier manuscript that itself was a copy of the text written by Snorri Sturlason (Collinder 22).

In *The Edda* by Snorri Sturlason, the tales of the Norse Gods are told in an order that has more to do with the styles of the poems than with chronology. The reason for the order being concerned with poetic style is probably to do with part of the text being devoted to how to construct a poem following the rules of verse that prevailed at the time of its writing. *The*

*Edda* is told from the perspective of an outsider who tells tales of times long since passed, and the telling is in the mode of historical narrative rather than literary fiction. The characters are portrayed as people who actually lived, once upon a time, which is not strange seeing as several of the figures are based on real people who lived during the fifth and sixth century A.D. (Lindgren *online*). As such, a large number of words are devoted to lining up the many people involved, naming them and saying something short about who they were. In this line-up, Loki is not said to be a good man, but one who some call the slanderer of the Aesir, the instigator of all betrayal and a hindrance to all gods and humans (Sturlason 54).

It is not without reason Harris claims that Loki is portrayed as a villain in all texts she has read; much of what I read as I researched this paper states explicitly or implicitly that Loki is evil. His villainous nature is often declared without any deep reflection; Loki's deplorable personality is seen as evident because of the legacy he has: that of the villain. These comments are, however, made by people who have not studied the source material in depth; they refer to texts that are rewrites of or only inspired by the original source material. A cursory glance at the old texts would also cast Loki as the antagonist. He is indeed the villain of the story, inasmuch as there is a villain. In *The Völuspá*, a prophecy about the end of the world from *Codex Regius*, Loki is prophesied to steer a ship on which the enemies of the gods sail as they travel to bring destruction to the world, and two of his sons are prophesied to play important parts in the demise of the gods, one killing Thor and the other killing Odin (Williams *online*).

A vessel journeys from the East, Muspell's troops will come,  
over the waters, while Loki steers.  
All the monstrous offspring accompany the ravenous one,  
The brother of Býleist is with them on the trip  
("The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore" 12).

The sentiment of Loki's nature being evil can also be found in a review of Harris' novel: "Certain characters in history and mythology gain a bad reputation over time, fairly or unfairly. Some are cast as meddlers, troublemakers, and villains. Loki, the Norse trickster god is one such figure" (Bedford *online*). The world knows Loki as the villain; despite having to work against the grain Harris is changing this black and white interpretation of the character, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of who he is.

## 1.2 Previous Research and Aim

What *The Gospel of Loki* has is a main character of questionable nature, written by a woman who wishes to make his hidden greatness apparent. As we saw above, Harris' motive for writing the novel is clear; her objective is to show Loki's complex spectrum, both his bad and good qualities. The novel is written with the intention of simultaneously providing redress for the main character and entertainment for the reader. This is accomplished by transforming a mythological character whose thoughts were unknown into a more realistic, novelistic character who articulates his thoughts and feelings, giving reasons for his actions and stripping them of their villainous nature.

Loki's infamous reputation provides a special opportunity for understanding the construction of reliability in fictional narratives. Rimmon-Kenan states that signs of reliability are difficult to specify and are most easily understood as the absence of the signs that indicate unreliability (100). In line with Rimmon-Kenan's statement, most research on the subject concentrates on understanding unreliable narrators. A narrator normally starts in a position of authority and thus has the reader's trust from the beginning, only to lose it as the story progresses (Hogan 155). Regarding Loki, the initial condition is different: he is unreliable from the outset and the narrative strives to negate the effects of his infamy. Because of this condition, researching reliability within the novel will provide a new perspective on how narratives work to construct a bond of trust with the reader.

The thesis of this essay contradicts the current views of reliability in narratives and states that a narrator cannot only move towards unreliability, but can move from the unreliable end of the scale towards reliability. This essay aims to examine what makes Loki in *The Gospel of Loki* intertextually unreliable and to determine the tools used to transform him into a more reliable narrator.

Since Harris' novel is very recently published, there are few sources that discuss the primary text. While there are a fair number of reviews and interviews on the topic of the novel, there are no sources that meet the academic requirements of peer-review and scientific method. Another reason for the lack of previous research may be that the novel outwardly belongs to a genre that still does not enjoy a high status among literary scholars; it is firmly lodged within the sphere of popular culture, classified as fantasy or "mythpunk" (Bedford *online*). Mythpunk is a part of the literary subgenre of speculative fiction which has its base in myth and folklore, adding postmodern fantastic techniques that also can be seen in urban

fantasy, academic fantasy and confessional poetry. It is a genre that spins common fairy tales in unique ways (“Introduction to Mythpunk” *online*). Though there is change occurring in the direction of inclusiveness in literary canon, this novel has not yet benefited from this. Because of the lack of academic material about *The Gospel of Loki*, there is a certain restriction regarding how the primary source can be approached. There are, however, as mentioned before, texts written about the novel itself that do not fall within the academic sphere: reviews of the novel and comments by the author. These sources have been of use to fill the void academic criticism normally would have filled. Direct comments about the text by other authors give credibility to the arguments presented in the essay and provide valuable insight.

With *The Gospel of Loki* and *The Eddas* being so closely connected, another category of sources has been valuable for this essay. There is abundant material to select from when the topic is broadened to Norse mythology and *The Eddas*; for the purpose of this essay the selection has been limited to texts that focus on the character Loki.

In addition to sources connected to the novel and Norse mythology, sources that provide insight into how reliability is constructed are needed to further the discussion. Literary theory is required for this, and I have chosen to specifically focus on narratology. Narratology rather than structuralism or other literary theories is used as reliability is a feature of narrative and falls under the specifics with which narratology is concerned. Models that base the understanding of reliability on the absence of signs of unreliability are prevalent, yet are augmented by recent theories that are contradictory and based on signs of reliability.

The concept of intertextuality is also used in this essay because it is needed to explain the special initial conditions of the novel which are paramount to understanding why reliability is constructed the way it is in the novel. The reason is found outside of the text as the author responds to the preconceived notions of the audience. Intertextuality sees texts as a part of one bigger text, and as part of a cultural phenomenon, rather than separate and independent constructs: “Individual text and the cultural text are made from the same textual material and cannot be separated from each other” (Allen 35). Intertextuality is also of importance as I argue that it is used as tools to construct trust between narrator and narratee.

Furthermore, other sources are used to explore the different approaches that work together to construct reliability: rhetorical studies, the concepts of meta-narratives, and archetypes.



### **1.3 Disposition**

This essay has four main chapters: first, the introduction; second, a chapter that explains some of the relevant literary theory; third, a chapter that holds the analysis and discussion of the primary text; and finally a concluding chapter which holds a summary, a declaration of results and a conclusion. The first three chapters have different subsections.

The second chapter, the theory chapter, is divided into three sections. The first is about narratology, explaining some of the most important concepts. There are also sections on intertextuality and then specifically on a concept of narratology: unreliability.

The third chapter of the essay is dedicated to an analysis of the primary text and has four sections. Before the first part there is a brief introduction; here, the essay's thesis and aims are reintroduced. The sections then bring up different modes of discovering tools that are used to create reliability

Chapter four is the conclusion in which answers to the research questions are clearly stated.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Several different theoretical perspectives are useful when exploring reliability in *The Gospel of Loki*. The novel is a text that contains a rich history because it has adapted old stories, but at the same time it provides a new perspective on these stories by being aware of its place in history and being different than its inspiration to suit a modern audience; the old and the new are combined into one piece of literary art. This section presents the essay's important theoretical concepts.

### 2.1 Concepts of Narratology

Most of what is discussed here will be woven into the analysis because the essay is about reliability in *The Gospel of Loki* and not a general guide to how reliability works, but it is important to define some concepts before starting the analysis. The reason for this is that while there is agreement on what the different parts that compose a narrative are, the various narratologists do not agree on the terminology. In this essay the terminology used has its basis in the definitions presented by Rimmon-Kenan in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), with additions from *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2009) by Mieke Bal.

In *Narrative Fiction*, Rimmon-Kenan divides the narrative apparatus into three levels (4). First, there is the *text*: the text that can be read, with all its words, punctuations and formatting. The text is the physical object that can be held as a book or seen on a monitor. It is the only level of a novel the reader can directly come into contact with (ibid 4). There are two underlying levels. The first of these two is the *story*, which encompasses the factual events within the text. The story includes everything that happens in the text. These events can be put in a chronological order. The story is the world that is presented within the text. It is not directly illustrated and can only be understood by the reader reorganizing and discovering the clues presented in the text. The second underlying level is *narrative*, the presentation of the story within the text. The narrative is the telling of the story. Narrative is always progressing and describes the unfolding of events. It is not within the static descriptions of a text that narrative is found; it needs actions, and on a linguistic level, it needs verbs. The narrative contains the point of view and focalization; the narrative is the part of the text that colours the story.

Narrative is, however, not to be confused with plot, though they are closely related. Plot, much like narrative and story, is the unfolding of events, but plot adds a new aspect: that of causality. To demonstrate, here is an example first used by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*: “The king died. The queen died,” is a story, “The king died, then the queen died,” is a narrative, while plot in comparison would be, “the king died, and then the queen died of grief” (ibid 17). Causality provides a reason for events and connects them, making them more than separate points on a timeline. Neither a narrative nor a plot need be concerned with the preserving of the linearity of the timeline that “[o]ur civilization tends to think of [...] as an uni-directional and irreversible flow” (Rimmon-Kenan 44). To use the example again, a perfectly good narrative with plot could be: *The queen died of grief because the king had died before her.*

Continuing with the layering of a narrative text, there is a hierarchy to consider regarding different stages between sender and receiver. At one end there is the author, the person who sat down and wrote the text. The next level is the implied author which Wayne C. Booth introduced as a concept that would allow a discussion of morality in narrative without having to “refer directly to a biographical author” (Bal 17). The implied author is the sense of the author that the reader can detect from the literary text, the personality and the morals that the author can be understood to possess if no other sources than the text are accounted for. Once inside the text, there is the narrator. The narrator is the one doing the telling within the narrative. It is clear who the narrator is in first-person narratives. In third-person narratives and second-person narratives it is more difficult to see; however, Bal asserts that the narrator is always an “I”: there is always someone telling the story, someone who is not the author (ibid 20). On the other half of the spectrum, the end closer to the reader, there is first the narratee. The narratee is not always apparent. Unless there is a “you” or a name which is given in text the narratee is easily missed. Yet as with Bal’s hidden “I” in the narrator, all narratives are constructed with a receiver. The next level corresponds to the implied author: the implied reader. The implied reader is the target audience that can be discovered in the narrative; it is the values, knowledge and morals that the reader is expected to possess. On the final level there is the actual reader, the person holding the book, reading it and reacting.

All of these concepts create the foundation upon which the discussion of reliability is built and provides a foundation for my analysis. I will continue to provide theoretical background on reliability and these concepts in the next section.

## 2.2 Unreliability

While this essay is concerned with the construction of reliability, previous research on the topic has mainly explored how unreliability works, because, as Rimmon-Kenan states, “signs of unreliability are perhaps easier to specify, and reliability can then be negatively defined by their absence” (100). Reliability is not something that normally has to be constructed, the structure of “narratives place[s] narrators in a position of structural authority. Thus, in all likelihood, readers begin with a presumption of narrator reliability and lose trust in a narrator only once they have reason to do so” (Hogan 155). Per. K. Hansen defines four types of unreliable narrators. First, intranarrational unreliability: in this category signs of unreliability are discursive markers: hedging, uncertainty in relaying of events and self-contradictions. Second, he defines internarrational unreliability as when the narrator’s version of events is contradicted by one or several other narrators’ versions. The third type is intertextual unreliability. A narrator is intertextually unreliable for one of the following reasons: he is an archetypal character known for being unreliable; the novel is written in a genre that typically has unreliable narrator; or something in the paratext such as the title hints at the narrator’s questionable reliability. The last category, extratextual unreliability, is the most ambiguous because it depends “on the reader’s direct implementation of [their] own values or knowledge in the textual world” and works from Booth’s model of unreliability stemming from discrepancy between the implied author’s morals, the morals of the narrator and the morals of the reader (Hansen 241-244). Terence P. Murphy, however, criticises the work of previous theorists who have been formulating theories of reliability with unreliability as their foundation. “In sharp contrast, I suggest that the key to resolving this debate is the formulation of a secure definition of narrative reliability” and from there the unreliable narrator can be understood (Murphy 68). Murphy has formulated five signs of a reliable narrator:

a secure speaking-location back home; the use of the classical middle style of standard English; an observer-narrator status; ethical maturity, which is secured before the novel commences, and a plot structure which involves the retrospective reevaluation or Aristotelian anagnorisis of a character other than the narrator. The marked status of an unreliable narrator involves a variety of marked departures from this norm. (ibid 84-85)

The theory behind how unreliability and reliability function with narrators is directly applicable to understanding and discussing the tools used by Harris to make Loki's account of Norse mythology legitimate. My analysis builds on the results that previous discussions on the topic have yielded.

### **2.3 Intertextuality**

Intertextuality is the study of how all texts are interconnected. It claims that no text exists in a vacuum; every story must be understood in a context. Graham Allen expresses it like this:

“[a]ll utterances depend on or call to other utterances; no utterance itself is singular; all utterances are shot through with other, competing and conflicting voices” (26). Intertextuality as a theory declares that meaning is not something the reader gains directly from interpreting the text; it is not a transfer of meaning from one written mind to an organic one.

Intertextuality asserts that the meaning instead is found in the intertext, the spaces between texts (ibid 1). All texts a reader has encountered combine to form meaning: a word means nothing in itself as a sign for something signified, but has meaning because of repetition and collective agreement. Larger fragments of text work the same way as words; full sentences and whole textual genres gain meaning from being part of a collective whole. As it is with the reader who creates meaning through connections drawn when they read, authors “do not create their texts from their own original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts” (ibid 35); they create collages. An author who is aware of how intertextuality works can use it: “The communication between author and reader is always partnered by a communication or intertextual relation between poetic words and their prior existence in past poetic texts. Authors communicate the existence of past texts within them” (ibid 38).

Intertextuality can, as discussed in the section about unreliability, be a sign of unreliability. Previous knowledge of typecast, paratextual signs such as title and genre alert the reader to the fact that the narrator potentially is unreliable. This is applicable to *The Gospel of Loki* thus making intertextuality relevant.

### **3 Literary Analysis – The Construction of Reliability**

The thesis of this essay is that contrary to current understanding, which only discussed progression towards unreliability, a narrator can change through the narrative from being unreliable to becoming reliable. This essay aims to identify the tools that transform the intertextually unreliable Loki in Joanne M. Harris' *The Gospel of Loki* into a more reliable narrator. This is first done by discussing how Loki is intertextually unreliable because of previous incarnations beginning with *The Eddas* and continuing through literary history and popular culture and then through considering tools that construct reliability.

#### **3.1 Intertextuality**

##### ***3.1.1 Intertextual Unreliability***

Intertextuality is important to the understanding of *The Gospel of Loki* as it stems back to the reason Harris wrote the novel: "I have tried to reconcile some of history's conflicting views of this controversial character [Loki], whilst creating a story of my own that runs alongside the original myths" (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki – Background" *online*).

The novel is in many respects an adaptation which means that for *The Gospel of Loki*, it is truer than with many other texts that the meaning can be found in the intertext, in its relation with other texts. The element of reliability is affected by this. While narrators usually begin by being considered reliable and lose the reader's trust over time as they act in ways that do not facilitate the keeping of dependability (Hogan 155), this situation is handled differently in Harris' novel. Loki is a character that the implied reader knows of from previous reading experience; it is assumed that the reader is familiar with Loki, which is not a strange assumption to make. Norse mythology is widely spread and there are many ways to come in contact with it and Loki. Loki also has archetypal status, being a trickster. The knowledge the reader arrives with can vary from a deep understanding of the mythology, to a passing familiarity with the characters gained from watching adaptations of the myths in the form of the films in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2008-) or the TV series *Supernatural* (2005-) in which interpretations of the characters appear. Regardless of the source, if the reader knows of Loki, the reader will also know that it is unwise to trust him.

One of the first things one learns about Loki is that he is not to be trusted. Loki is evil, the instigator of the end of the world. Even in retellings where he is not directly responsible for Ragnarok, he is a trickster who gets up to mischief and is as likely to cause problems as to

solve them. The problems that he does solve are often the ones that he caused to begin with and he is usually punished accordingly. One example of this is the tale where Loki steals Idun's golden apples which provide the gods with immortality. The consequence is that the gods grow old, but Loki returns the apples and all is well (Hyde 100-101). Despite the gods retaining their youth and immortality in the end, Loki is not quickly forgiven. The act of stealing and endangering the Aesir's existence is not an act that inspires trust in him as a character.

The connection between intertextuality and unreliability has been noted before: Hansen gives intertextuality as one of his four categories of unreliable narrators (241). Even in cases where the narrator is not adapted from a previous literary or mythological character they can, through the story's presentation, be connected to archetypal characters or genres that inform the reader of how the narrator can be expected to behave.

Because Loki is an intertextually unreliable character in any story he appears in, Harris had to write the novel in a certain way to convince the reader that Loki's account of events should be taken seriously; what he says has to be believable. To achieve reliability, the voice doing the telling has to be trustworthy and there are a number of ways this can be accomplished.

### ***3.1.2 Intertextuality and Reliability***

As established in the previous section, intertextuality affects how the reader responds to characters in a story based on genre expectations and archetypes, which make Loki in his role as a trickster unreliable. However, intertextuality cannot only decrease reliability; it can be used as a tool to construct trust. Loki as the narrator knows that the narratee will think ill of him from the first word; he is expecting the reader's distrust. There is no point in hiding his nature, and he does not; rather he revels in it, using the knowledge of who he is thought to be to his advantage. Hogan asserts that concerning unreliable narrators, readers "have a general preference for information that is contrary to the self-interest of the speaker" (166), leading to such information being considered more trustworthy despite the narrator's questionable character. On the front page of the physical book it says "THE EPIC STORY OF THE TRICKSTER GOD" (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki"), revealing to all what type of character the protagonist is, should familiarity with him be lacking. The subheading on the book's cover cannot be said to be the words of Loki himself, but as soon as the author has put a period to her acknowledgements the novel commences and Loki steps in as the narrator. Here at the

very beginning of the novel, before the pages are numbered, Loki himself ensures that the reader understands the history of his world by listing the characters that will appear in the narrative into different categories and he lists himself under the heading: “**Others** (including: demons, monsters, warlords, freaks and other undesirables)” (ibid). The headings and characters listed are accompanied by short descriptions that in tone are dry and summarise both Loki’s opinions on them and what the general consensus regarding them is within the diegesis. Loki at once shows that he is not part of “the Popular Crowd” (ibid), that he does not hold high opinions of the people who are favoured and that the sentiment is mutual. He is not well-liked and by admitting to it he places himself in the position of an underdog, something that is likely to win him sympathy.

Hogan does not bring up that there is a balance to consider regarding how speaking against self-interest affects reliability. If misery is flaunted it can invite suspicion as much as bragging can, and make the reader question the narrator’s sincerity. Because Loki’s agenda is to have his story believed, trying to gain the reader’s sympathy through tales of his own misery can be gauged as one strategy to accomplish his goal. He could potentially lie or exaggerate his misfortune to gain sympathy and increase the likelihood of being believed. Still, I maintain that Loki’s show of vulnerability remain a sign of reliability. Loki never flaunts his vulnerability enough to tip over the scales as to invite suspicion; his personal tragedies are well balanced with his victories.

The second manner in which intertextuality is used to build trust consists of Loki trying to establish himself as someone belonging to the implied reader’s group. Hogan speaks of research proving that “familiar personified figures” have preferential trust in real life and that this type of relationship occurs in fiction too: “people respond with fear or vigilance to people from out-groups” and are more trusting and comfortable with people from “in-groups” (166). Loki associates himself with the reader, trying to show that they belong to the same group and are kin, through several means. As mentioned above he proves that he is an underdog among the Aesir, “the Popular Crowd” as he calls them (Harris “The Gospel of Loki”). Not being accepted by a popular group is something most people have experienced and can associate with and this wins him sympathy. He also places himself in the same intellectual crowd as the implied reader. The implied reader is someone who has an interest in Norse myths, a person who lives in the twenty-first century and has the mindset of a critical thinker, and therefore enjoys the jabs at Christianity that Loki delivers. He comments on Christianity several times, though it is only inferred, drawing parallels between the religion he is a deity in and



Christianity and showing that both are fictionalized versions of events where history over time has gained more meaning (ibid 6). By not stating outright that he is referring to Christianity, but drawing on the implied reader's intertextual knowledge, the implied reader is flattered. It is subtle, which earns affection for the flatterer. The implied reader is allowed to feel like someone knowledgeable when inferences appear, the largest of which occur at the novel's close with a reference to the *Genesis* story of the Bible. Here a seed is planted, suggesting that although Loki is at his lowest point, imprisoned after the end of his world with Ragnarok, he may be in a much better position in our world. It is as Jones says in her review: "But when all the Gods are dead, and our anti-hero utters his ironic 'Let there be light', it crossed my mind that arguably, it is Loki who rules the world we live in now."

And so I waited in darkness, and dreamed, and thought to myself:  
*Let there be light.*  
*Let there be light.*  
*Let there be...* (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki" 296)

If the reader shares the traits of the implied reader they will be suitably impressed and entertained by the implication, which puts Loki more firmly in the readers in-group as someone whose words matter and should be respected; the reader is more inclined to view Loki as a reliable narrator.

### **3.2 Meta-Elements**

The next tool that strengthens Loki's developing reliability is connected to intertextuality in that it reaches beyond the text in which it is occurring by being self-aware. The novel has a few meta-elements that appear with more density in the introduction than in the rest of the text. The first several chapters of the novel are not used to set the scene in the usual manner; rather than solely focusing on setting up the geographical as well as temporal location and introducing the characters that will appear on the metaphorical stage, these introductory chapters discuss what a story is and the implications of storytelling. The narrator's role in the telling of a story, in the forming of narrative, is painstakingly explained and a web of rational explanations is woven to convince the reader of Loki's reliability: "Take it with a pinch of salt, but it's at least as true as the official version and, dare I say it, more entertaining" (ibid 2).

The very nature of truth in writing and truth in history is discussed in the opening pages: “this is the thing about history. His story. That’s all it is. The Old Man’s version of events, which basically the rest of us are supposed to accept as the undisputed truth” (ibid 1); through discussing the nature of history writing, the novel becomes “its own first critical commentary” (Hutcheon 6). However, while the text invites critical reflection on its own form, self-reflection is not the main purpose behind the act. The story of Loki’s tale, which is yet to come, is set against the stories of *The Eddas* which are attributed to Odin. Loki says that words hold the very power to form the understanding of how the world was made, and they hold the power to decide the truth: “Words can shatter faith; start a war, change the course of history [...] *writing* history and *making* history are only the breadth of a page apart” (Harris, “The Gospel of Loki” 7). He accuses Odin of using the power of words to do all of that: “with the right words you can build a world and make yourself the king of it. King, or even god – which brings us back to the Old Man [Odin]; that master storyteller; keeper of runes; lord of poetry; scribe of First and Last Times” (ibid 2) who as “the King of Stories ended up being King of the gods” (ibid 7). Anything the implied reader knows about Norse mythology is marked as being subjective at best, and at worst, as outright lies that serve to set a man up as a god. Doubt is given to the old knowledge, to history, and that makes it easier to accept another point of view as the true account of events or at least as a source of new knowledge that provides more pieces of the puzzle, making a fuller picture visible. Loki continues to criticise the Norse creation myth and Odin’s involvement in it, now not only saying that the stories are subjective, but that they are outright incredible and should not be believed:

Odin, Vili and Ve – finally killed Ymir and made the Middle Worlds from what was left of him; the rocks from his bones; the earth from his flesh; the rivers from his steaming blood. His skull became the Firmament; his brains the clouds; his eyebrows the division between Inland and the Outlands.

Of course there’s no way of proving this – let’s face it – rather unlikely hypothesis. All of the possible witnesses have disappeared, except for Odin, the Old Man, the only survivor of that war; architect and chronicler of what we now call the Elder Age (ibid 6)

It becomes a question of internarrational unreliability where different narrators tell contrasting versions of the story and the discrepancy leads the reader to distrust the deviating version (Hansen 241). While there are no third parties that can validate either Loki’s or Odin’s stories, by illuminating the shortcomings of someone else, and the farfetched stories they are

responsible for, the reader is invited to mistrust Odin and preconceived notions about the events of Norse mythology. The internarrationally unreliable narrator becomes Odin and Loki dispenses with this role. Following Rimmon-Kenan's model that states that reliability is the absence of signs of unreliability Loki has gained reliability by asserting that he is not the internarrationally unreliable, Odin is the one who is unreliable.

### 3.3 Rhetorical Studies

To convince someone of an opinion employing the cornerstones of rhetoric is advisable; fictional characters and narrators are not exempt from this, nor are fictional narratives. They too, like living people, can use pathos to awaken emotions, ethos to come off as authoritative, knowledgeable or otherwise believable, and logos to appeal to their audience's sense of logic. Stories are not usually discussed within rhetorical studies. Even though they often play a part in building an argument, they are not seen as carrying the argument, only providing neutral background information. However, how the story is told can influence an argument and itself be an argument (Hellspong 133). If a story within a speech can be argumentative and persuasive the same applies for a novel; a novel can be written with the purpose of persuading an audience and this is the case with *The Gospel of Loki*. As stated in the introduction, Harris wants to show that Loki has a side other than the one that has been remembered by history; he is more complex than his assigned archetypes of villain and trickster. The three modes of persuasion can all be found in the discussion about narrators and their reliability, though they are not explicitly referred to.

When Hogan claims that the narrator starts off in a position of structural authority (155) it is the narrator's ethos that is discussed. Loki is, through his archetype and the paratext, an intertextually unreliable narrator, a narrator who lacks ethos; his morals and character are questionable. To become more reliable he needs to strengthen his ethos. Loki never tries to convince the reader that his morals are high. He admits to cheating on his wife: "So shoot me. Turns out I'm not naturally monogamous" (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki"), that he is a being of Chaos: "Wildfire is hard to control: volatile; unpredictable. I'm not making excuses or anything, but it's in my nature to be troublesome" (ibid 19), and that he is for more than half of the narrative on the path of revenge: "Till then, I bided my time, and smiled as sweetly as my scarred lips would allow, until the day I would take my revenge and bring the gods down, one by one" (ibid 71). However, ethos as a rhetorical appeal is more than possessing appealing morality, authority gained from previous actions or backing of other authoritative

figures. Ethos can be gained through knowledge and credibility, which Loki does through his use of logos.

To establish a bond with the reader and make himself authoritative Loki presents himself as the voice of reason by appealing to the reader's sense of logic. The creation myth of Norse mythology is, as Jones described it in her review, "quirky". In the beginning there is fire and ice, a giant, and a cow which licks a man from the ice. The world is made from the giant's body after he is killed by the grandchildren of the first man (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki" 5-6). A human of the twenty-first century does not take this for truth, yet this is the truth that the intelligent beings of the world in *The Gospel of Loki* have to believe, because the only person who was there and knows the truth is Odin, their leader, and these are his words. Loki, however, is not convinced and he knows that the narratee is not either. What he says about the creation myth is the following: "Call me cynical if you like. But it all sounds a bit too convenient" (ibid 6). He says this in reference to Odin being the one who has written history and through constructing the truth has made himself a god. An author who has won everything does not equal a trustworthy source. As in the meta-section the focus has been shifted to Odin, who in contrast with Loki is shown as unworthy of trust. The contrast makes Loki seem the better choice, the one whose story has more logos, which builds up his ethos.

Pathos was indirectly brought up previously in the analysis, in the section about intertextuality as a tool to construct reliability. Pathos appeals to emotions and feelings. In creating familiarity with the reader likability is gained and with likability comes trust which is an important factor of reliability (Hogan 166). Likewise showing that something is not done for personal gain increases the chance of being believed because then the reader does not suspect an ulterior motive. Loki uses both. As previously stated he admits to being an underdog. He is an outcast who is disliked for being different:

It wasn't just that I was racially different, or physically less imposing, or radical in my opinions, or unfamiliar with their ways. It was simply (and I say this in all modesty) that I was a whole lot *cleverer* than the rest of the folk in Asgard. Clever folk aren't popular, by and large. They arouse suspicion. They don't fit in. (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki" 33)

Being different and feeling like one does not belong is relatable and appeals to the implied reader, strengthening Loki's pathos.

The revenge Loki is seeking is also something that appeals to pathos. While previously it was used to exemplify that Loki is not a character of perfect morals who wishes harm on no one, agreeing that his longing for revenge is justified is plausible. Prior to announcing that he wishes to take revenge on the Aesir, he has his lips sewn shut for losing a bet. He was humiliated, painfully: “much as it hurt, it didn’t hurt as much as did their laughter. Yes, they *laughed*, my so-called friends; they laughed as I struggled and whimpered, and no one moved a finger to help” (ibid 70). Being betrayed, being vulnerable, awakens sympathy, but outwardly nothing is gained by telling a story that portrays weakness and thus it is more believable and easy to regard as truth compared to something that shows strength (Hogan 166).

### **3.4 Narratology**

In the previous three sections of the analysis, fields outside of narratology have been considered. Much of what the angles of intertextuality, rhetorical studies and studies on meta-narratives yield connect with narratology, which will be seen in this section. Once more following Rimmon-Kenan’s statement about reliability appearing as the absence of signs of unreliability (100), suggested signs of unreliability by various theorists will be tested against Loki to see if he is guilty of these signs. Loki will then be tested against criteria for reliability, to discuss if they are part of the tools that are used to construct his reliability.

One type of unreliable narrators is narrators who misreport factual information. This can involve self-contradictions by the narrator, or the contradictory information can be given by other narrators or characters through dialogue (Hogan 152). The opposite of this unreliable trait would be to give correct factual information that is not contradictory throughout the narrative. Loki does not contradict himself. He is direct and sure in his language. He speaks from a position in time when all the events he is relaying have already occurred. He has thought well of how to tell his story, leaving no room for discrepancies.

Factual information can be reported faultily either by being left out, or by being insufficient to understand the story. Hogan claims this as another sign of unreliability (ibid 152). Loki does not do this either. Harris was accused of not creating something new, only rearranging the Norse myths to conform to a chronological timeline (Jones *online*). However, this benefits Loki as all the information is there, displayed in an order that is easy to follow. It is clear that no pivotal part of the story has been excluded.

The third sign of factual unreliability suggested by Hogan is one which partially does apply to Loki. It is the misdirection of attention, something Hogan labels “the most interesting of the three. The direction of attention is one of the main concerns of literary authors and film directors, since readers simply cannot notice everything” (Hogan 152). The question is whether Loki misdirects attention or if he merely directs it. He directs the implied reader’s ire towards Odin. As previously discussed, Loki identifies Odin’s unreliable traits. It might be to hide his own unreliable character, but that is not his objective. He admits time and again to being a trickster; he never hides it from the reader. What he wants is to show that the leader of the gods was one too. No, Loki does not misdirect attention, but his view of the world is biased and subjective.

Being biased and subjective is another unreliable trait shared by nearly all first-person narrators, especially of “the fictional autobiographer who recounts his own life, or a portion thereof, in his own voice and in a conscious act of writing” (Riggan 15). Hogan has developed a hierarchy regarding which types of narrators readers are most likely to trust. Personified narrators have less trust than nonpersonified narrators (ibid 167). A narrator who is personally involved is something Rimmon-Kenan also mentions (100). Loki as the protagonist and narrator of the story has a subjective view of the story and an agenda, an agenda to say that any story is biased and itself serves an agenda. He wants to reveal that the *Edda*-stories too have a hidden “I”, they are not exempt from the hidden “I” that Bal identifies within all narratives (20). That he is subjective and has an agenda negatively impacts his reliability.

The first definition of what an unreliable narrator is goes back to Booth. It says that an unreliable narrator is one whose morals are different than those of the implied author (Murphy 67). In the case of *The Gospel of Loki* the author herself has expressed some of her values regarding the story, and they shine through in Loki’s voice. Harris thinks of Loki as a very modern individual, plagued by insecurity and cursed to live on the fringes of society. She says that during the last century people have become more fascinated by characters that are ambivalent and do not conform to archetypes; unredeemable villains and perfect heroes no longer interest us. Harris comments that Loki’s struggles with fitting in and his refusal to conform mirror the experience of today’s youth (Harris, “The Gospel of Loki – Background” *online*). From her statements, it can be determined that the author supports the narrator and, connecting back to the tools of reliability found within the fields of meta studies and intertextuality, the same sentiment can be found with the implied author. Loki is given tools that display an understanding of how storytelling functions, giving him a close connection to

the person writing his story. When the implied author is in agreement with the narrator the effect is such that the reader does not notice his faults (Riggan 35); the narrator becomes reliable by default.

Murphy's signs of reliability begin with the narrator having a secure speaking location, a location where he feels comfortable, for example his home (84). Loki is not in an evidently comfortable position when he does his telling. His location is ambiguous. In the last part of his narrative the world has ended. He is not dead, but close, he says that he is in a place that defies names as he suggest it might be "Dream, or Hell, or Pandaemonium" (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki" 294), yet as mentioned in the section on intertextuality it is hinted that the world was remade in light and that it was from Loki's thoughts that the new world took form. If this idea is accepted, Loki is in a comfortable position, a position of power, providing him with another sign of reliability.

The second sign of reliability in Murphy's model denotes "the use of the classical middle style of standard English" (84). Loki does not conform to the suggested form of English. He does not precisely use vernacular English, but he blends his style by constantly using expressions denoting a lower more verbal style of English than the style Murphy exemplifies in *The Great Gatsby's* narrator Nick Carraway: "OK, so I watched. Is that so bad? Besides, it was a Hel of a show" (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki" 79). In this aspect his reliability can be questioned, although I dispute Murphy's suggestion and refer to Hogan's claim that in-groups and familiarity with the narrator build trust and with an implied reader in mind who is a young adult, language that is relaxed and resembles spoken language invites a sense of familiarity. Loki does not lose reliability because of his language style.

Murphy's next sign contradicts Loki's autobiographical nature. Murphy says that narrators who are observers and thus not directly involved with the plot are reliable narrators. (85). As stated above, because of his subjectivity Loki is unreliable.

"[E]thical maturity, which is secured before the novel commences" (ibid 85) is the next sign of reliability suggested by Murphy. Loki's entire life-story takes place before he begins to tell it and he has gained wisdom, but ethical maturity is another matter. Loki's Wildfire nature opposes moral growth: it is in his nature to be troublesome (Harris, "The Gospel of Loki" 19) and his experiences do not encourage him to change into someone who acts with the good of others in mind. Loki's story is that of an outsider who has been punished for both his nature and actions all his life, whether it has been justified or not. No, Loki has not reached 'ethical maturity' and this makes him less reliable than someone who has reached it.

The last of Murphy's sign of reliability requires a "plot structure which involves the retrospective reevaluation or Aristotelian anagnorisis of a character other than the narrator" (85). Previously in this section it has been stated that *The Gospel of Loki* has a first-person narrator who tells an autobiographical story, a story revolving around the narrator. This does not create the best foundation for reflection or for critical discoveries regarding other characters. The sign of reliability is non-existent and lends to Loki's unreliable qualities.

Loki does have unreliable qualities; this is true. However, having unreliable qualities does not make a narrator unreliable. It is a question of where on the scale the signs for reliability and unreliability place the narrator. Rimmon-Kenan discusses this, concluding it ultimately comes down to the subjective judgement of the reader (102). Signs for and against the narrator's reliability are weighed against each other. The judgement does not have to be one of the two, it is a scale with infinite gradation and it is possible to decide that a narrator is reliable in certain parts but less likely to be in agreement with the world of the implicit author in others. Loki's signs of reliability outweigh his signs of unreliability.



## 4 Conclusion

Loki is an intertextually unreliable narrator because of his trickster and villain archetype and the novel's paratext that reinforces the same. All the evidence originating outside the text suggests that he is unreliable. Through the narrative, however, signs suggest that he is not an indisputably unreliable narrator. He possesses many signs of reliability that are not only absence of signs of unreliability.

Through analysis of the novel, signs of unreliability and reliability are shown to work together to form the level of reliability a narrator possesses. It has also been argued that contrary to with how narrators normally begin as reliable and then lose the reader's trust, a narrator who is internarrationally unreliable can change status.

What is concluded from the signs of reliability used in the construction of Loki's narrative voice is that the three main rhetorical appeals are valid when considering how a fictive narrator is understood. Logos: the narrator needs to be logical by showing a sound understanding of the world and reporting it knowledgably. Pathos: awakening the reader's emotions, winning sympathy and building bonds of familiarity creates trust and strengthens the narrator's level of reliability. Ethos: the narrator's credibility is important. If the narrator appears knowledgeable, ethical and authoritative, his reliability is strengthened.

The signs of reliability that construct Loki's level of reliability are the use of logical reasoning to simultaneously build up ethos and logos. The logic is seen in the values expressed and in the reporting of events where there are no missing story portions or misreports. When there are misreports that might impact the narrator's reliability they are disclosed and expressed as a character flaw of which the narrator is aware and are therefore negated. The narrator places himself in the implied reader's in-group, by displaying like-mindedness through expressed values, shared experiences of vulnerability and a relaxed language, thus gaining sympathy and trust.

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