

Building Blocks of Unnatural Narrative in Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief*

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Abstract

Unnatural narratology has significantly challenged the well-defined field of narrative studies by critically examining unnatural and unrealistic narratives in fiction. Questioning the mimetic basis of fiction, Jan Alber, in his influential book *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (2016), introduces analytical and interpretive strategies that assist readers in making sense of antimimetic narratives. The unnatural is possible to be permanently traced in such a wide range of speculative fiction as fantasy, science fiction, and magical realism; the unnatural, therefore, seems to have become a constructional and distinctive feature of these genres. Fantasy writers and critics, however, believe that the supernatural is a defining characteristic of the fantasy genre. Since supernatural elements lie beyond the limits of human logic and empirical understanding, fantasy can be approached as an unnatural narrative. In addition to the principal feature of the supernatural, such decisive elements as the hero, the quest, the secondary world, and the collision between good and evil are typically required to consider a text as fantasy. In this context, the researchers argue that the application of Alber's theories of unnatural narratology to Rick Riordan's young adult fantasy, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2005), not only facilitates the interpretation of the unnatural by examining its building blocks, antirealist figures, unnatural temporalities, and antimimetic spaces, but also assists the readers to deepen their reading through Alber's strategies of blending of frames, generification, and satirization and parody. Thus, an unnatural narratological reading of fantasy may open an underexplored area of research.

Key Words: Fantasy, Unnatural Narratives, Antirealist Figures, Unnatural Temporalities, Antimimetic Spaces, Jan Alber, Rick Riordan

Introduction

Postclassical narratology, a term coined by David Herman, refers to some new approaches that differ from the earlier structuralist and poststructuralist ones. Unnatural narratology, a recent trend within postclassical narratology, therefore, seeks to “address and potentially remedy some of the shortcomings” of classical narratology (Alber and Fludernik 2010, 11). Unnatural narratology studies “antimimetic narratives that challenge and move beyond real-world understandings of identity, time, and space by representing scenarios and events that would be impossible in the actual world” (Alber and Fludernik 2010, 14). Not all antimimetic narratives, however, are unnatural: verisimilitude fulfills another stringent criterion; “it makes no sense to criticize” a narrative that lacks “verisimilitude, since they make no pretensions to realism” (Alber and Richardson 2020, 4–5). Although the term “unreal” encompasses a wide range of speculative fiction, “from high fantasy to science fiction, magical realism to ghost stories to dystopias, that either in a created or existing setting focuses on events that don’t occur in our current conception of the physical world” (Stevenson 2024, 148), not all unnatural narratives are considered fantasies or dystopias. In fantasy, for instance, the unnatural can be seen as a mode of representing the antimimetic, supernatural, and other impossibilities.

Despite the enormous body of scholarly studies, neither fantasy writers nor critics have reached a consensual definition of fantasy and its features. As a result, the definition of fantasy as a fuzzy genre encompassing myths, romantic fairy tales, legends, and modern fantasy has been established. However, this fuzzy attitude seems to cause more confusion than clarity by introducing numerous and nonconsensual elements as the characteristics of fantasy. Thus, in this essay, the researchers suggest examining the most common features of fantasy through Jan Alber’s building blocks of unnatural narratives: “antirealist characters,” “unnatural temporalities,” and “antimimetic spaces” (2016, 8). Moreover, Alber not only establishes and examines the features of unnatural narratives, but also argues for reading strategies of “blending of frames,” “generification,” and “satirization and parody” (ibid. 47–48).

According to Alber, when readers are confronted with impossibilities, they use the cognitive approach of blending frames, that is, generating “new frames by blending preexisting schemata” (2016, 49). He also asserts that through repetition of such impossibilities in the text, the process of generification or “evoking generic conventions from literary history” begins. Consequently, some of the impossibilities have “already been conventionalized” by “belonging to a particular literary genre”

such as witches, magic, and beasts in fantasy (ibid.). Satirization and parody, Alber's other reading strategy, helps readers make sense of fantasy and interpret it, since such narratives "may also use unnatural scenarios or events to satirize, mock, or ridicule certain psychological predispositions or states of affairs" (ibid. 52).

In this essay, the researchers have chosen Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and The Lightning Thief* (2005), a young adult (YA) fantasy from the five-volume series *The Olympians* (2005–2009), to study the different manifestations of the unnatural in the light of Alber's unnatural narratology. Riordan, in this series, incorporates Greek myths into a teenager's life in modern Western society, creating a storyworld in which Greek gods and mythological creatures live among humans and, by bringing different times together, reinvent myths for the modern reader.

Literature Review

After the publication of *The Lightning Thief* in 2005 and its immediate success, even before the rest of *The Olympians* were published, researchers produced analytical works on it. The examples below were selected and listed by the frequency of their subject matter, not by publication date. Researchers have mostly focused on coming-of-age aspects and teenagers' identity formation and crises from different psychological perspectives, as in Katie Weber's *Demigod and Delinquent: Percy Jackson and the American Teenager* (2023). Heroic traits and the archetypal hero have also been examined, as in "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work: Reimagining Depictions of Mythological Heroism through a Collaborative Framework" (2023) by Charnice Hoegnifioh. Mythological studies have also been a remarkable area of research on the series, as seen in Tahsin Jahan Bushra's *Postmodernism on Greek Mythology in Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series* (2024). Researchers have also analyzed the portrayal of children and teenagers with dyslexia and ADHD in the novel, as in *Representing Dyslexia in Children's Literature: Comparing the School/Diagnosis Story with the Fantasy* (2025), a recent thesis by June Cui. Lastly, Marija Paljuši's thesis, *Genres in Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians Series* (2022), examines the diverse and integrated literary genres and "distinguishes six genres" of the series (v). In Paljuši's view, although "myth, fantasy and adventure" are the "prominent" genres, the genres of "family story," "school story," and "Bildungsroman" are also partly manifested in the series (ibid.).

The examination of these analytical works indicates that, with the partial exception of Paljuši's thesis, most researchers have treated the antimimetic and fantastical elements of the novel as given and have not paid sufficient attention to the various unnatural events, characters, and spaces that contribute to the construction of fantasy. Therefore, this essay identifies an unexplored area of research: the study of the unnatural in a YA fantasy as a binding characteristic in light of Alber's unnatural narratology. The primary aim of this research is to examine the most common features of

fantasy through such building blocks of unnatural narrative as antirealist figures, unnatural temporalities, and antimimetic spaces. Furthermore, Alber's reading strategies, blending of frames, generification, and satirization and parody, offer new insights into the interpretation of fantasy as an unnatural narrative.

Theoretical Framework

Pioneers of unnatural narratology, Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson argue that not all narratives "only mimetically reproduce the world as we know it. Many narratives confront us with bizarre storyworlds" (2013, 2). They believe that narrative theories, from Aristotle to cognitive narratology, exhibit "mimetic bias," and therefore theoretical models based on them are inadequate (ibid. 4). Richardson was the critic who coined the term "unnatural" to refer to antimimetic models.

Alber, in his 2016 book *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, defines the unnatural as "physically, logically, and humanly impossible scenarios and events," according to "the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic (such as the principle of non-contradiction), or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge and ability" (25). He identifies two forms of the unnatural: the conventionalized, no longer odd and "turned into basic cognitive frames" and the non-conventionalized, which "still strike[s] us as odd and disconcerting" or "defamiliarizing in Viktor Shklovsky's sense" (ibid. 42). Thus, whether unnatural instances have already been conventionalized within the context of generic conventions or not, Alber considers four elements as the building blocks of unnatural narrative: "impossible narrators or storytelling scenarios, antirealist characters, unnatural temporalities, and antimimetic spaces" (ibid. 8). Alber believes that unnaturalness is the product of human authors' imagination and should be "approached from the vantage point of our (human) world" since "there is nothing beyond our cognitive architecture that we could potentially use to engage with the unnatural" (ibid. 17–18). Therefore, he introduces such reading strategies as "blending of frames," "generification," and "satirization and parody," to assist readers in making sense of such narratives (ibid. 47–48).

Alber argues that unnaturalness "urge[s] us to create new frames" by blending frames, which may occur through "recombining, extending, or otherwise altering preexisting cognitive parameters" (2016, 49). Thus, to "reconstruct and interpret a fictional world, the reader has to reorient his cognitive stance" (Doležel 1998, 181) by readjusting the unnatural in fantasy. When the reader's mind embeds the anomaly within the conventions of a specific literary genre, he would no longer be "shocked or surprised by the specific uses of the unnatural" (Alber 2016, 50). In most fantasies, unnaturalness is "often merge[d]" with satire that is "critique through exaggeration, distortion, or caricature" of events

and characters; therefore, Alber's reading strategy of satirization and parody offers an interpretation of such texts (ibid. 52).

Despite its longevity, fantasy is notoriously difficult to define. When Brian Attebery used the mathematical term "fuzzy sets" to delineate fantasy as a genre "defined not by boundaries but by a center," he gained great admiration among critics (1992, 12). To elaborate on fuzzy sets, Attebery refers to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's explanation that "a category such as 'bird' consists of central, prototypical examples like 'robin,' surrounded at greater or lesser distance by more problematic instances such as 'ostrich,' 'chicken,' 'penguin,' and even 'bat'" (ibid.). Although there may exist no consensus definition of fantasy, "fuzzy sets" may be applied to capture such innumerable illustrations of the genre as myth, fairy tales, folklore, legends, and fables. By accepting the fuzzy definition of fantasy, therefore, critics have not only introduced nonconsensual features to fantasy but also shifted their focus to their interpretations.

For this essay, the researchers identify the five most frequently cited yet nonconsensual characteristics proposed by the most prominent critics of the field. According to them, the only consensual feature of fantasy, or its constitutive element, is "the presence of the impossible and the unexplainable" (Mendlesohn and James 2012, 3); thus, fantasy "has no set conventions apart from anti-realism" (Gwenllian Jones 2005, 160). Second, fantasy usually takes place in a "secondary" world or an alternative world (Stroud 2023, 13–4). In fantasies, however, "travel between these alternative universes and our own" or the existence of a fantastic realist world is also possible (Grenby 2008, 214). Third, in almost every fantasy text, a hero exists, or at least "one character in the work should be explicitly rendered as human or human-like," so that the readers identify with "him, her, or it" (Gates, Steffel, and Molson 2003, 7). Fourth, the hero most often embarks on a "quest," and fifth, the "struggle between good and evil" is a central element, either as a whole or as part of the quest (Nikolajeva 2012, 59).

Similarly, Catherine Kurkjian, Nancy Livingston, and Terrell Young, in their collaborative essay "Worlds of Fantasy" (2006), used an inductive approach to examine numerous modern children's and YA fantasy works. These critics have also identified the same features as integral conventions of fantasy. They also suggest that satirical, symbolic, and allegorical readings of the works offer readers "painfully realistic themes in a way that is more palatable" (492). Thus, as the Greek root of the word fantasy suggests –making visible– fantasy truly makes visible the world, since it is "not an escape from reality but a response to it" (Attebery 2022, 45). In other words, fantasies are "modified echoes of the world, and like echoes, they bounce back" (Sangster 2023, 50).

Methodologically speaking, the researchers, by closely reading the novel and foregrounding physically, logically, and humanly impossible events, scenes, and figures, seek to study the most

common features of fantasy, including the presence of the unnatural or supernatural, the secondary world, and the hero, through the lens of Alber's theories on antirealist figures, unnatural temporalities, and antimimetic spaces. The initial step involves analyzing the essential element of fantasy, the presence of the supernatural and the unreal. This element is primarily depicted through strange characters or the hero's supernatural abilities, which Alber refers to as antirealist figures. He categorizes these figures into such subcategories as "blends of humans and animals" and "metamorphoses and transforming figures" (2016, 107–129). Second, the present essay examines the construction of an alternative fantasy world in the novel through time- and space-related concepts. The researchers foreground instances that challenge commonsense understandings of time, such as "forwardness," linearity, and fixed flow (ibid. 149). According to Alber, unnatural spaces—which encompass the environment inhabited by the characters of the story—are measured against "the foil of the natural" (ibid. 26). Therefore, the researchers survey how narrative space becomes antimimetic through the "manipulation of the extension of space," "disruption of spatial orientation," and the "formation of unnatural (i.e., nonactualizable) geographies" (ibid. 187). Finally, Alber's strategy of the blending of frames is employed to study the cognitive amalgamation of the natural and the supernatural. Through generification, the essay not only examines the aforementioned characteristics of fantasy, but also surveys the hero's quest and the theme of good versus evil as additional constitutive features. Furthermore, through Alber's strategy of satirization and parody, the exaggerated and comic representations of unnaturalness are to be analyzed and interpreted.

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The Examination of the Features of Fantasy through the Lens of Unnatural Narratology

Percy Jackson, the hero of this series, is a struggling teenager with ADHD and dyslexia. In the first book of the *Olympian* series, *The Lightning Thief*, Percy is forced to take refuge at the Camp of Half Blood, where he learns that he is a demigod and his father is Poseidon. His adventure begins as he tries to retrieve Zeus's stolen lightning bolt with the help of his friends. Thus, the presence of unnatural or supernatural elements as the essential and only consensual feature of fantasy is evident in the novel through gods, demigods, monsters, and other mythological creatures living alongside realistic characters. As Grenby states, "the supernatural and the normal exist together in fantasy texts, in various proportions and combinations, but that there is no ratio which governs their relationship" (2008, 150). In addition to the unnatural figures, the setting of the novel also contributes to the construction of the unnatural by presenting nonactualizable spaces such as Olympus and the Underworld located within the actual USA. The anachronistic representation of the Greek Pantheon alongside the "depiction of cities, monuments or the everyday objects and gadgets" not only foregrounds the unnatural but also constructs an alternative fantasy world that "does not involve a

complete exclusion of reality” (Paljuši 2022, 18). It seems that the “secondary world exists within the primary world,” and fantasy merges with realism (Gates, Steffel, and Molson 2003, 113).

Presentation of the Unnatural/Supernatural through Antirealist Figures

As mentioned before, the presence of the unnatural in fantasy is usually manifested through characters with supernatural abilities, and especially heroes. The hero is characterized by the fundamental notion of heroism formed “through various myths, legends, and even historical biographies,” which involves “the willingness and wherewithal to persevere, to confront challenges to our ability to thrive or our very existence, and expand[s] to include other elements that are essential aspects of being human” (Quartarone 2024, 997). Thus, the presence of a hero with supernatural abilities is one of the most common features of fantasy. The “reader of a fantasy expects to read a story removed from the hard limits and realities of modern life” (Cui 2025, 44); hence, the reader wants “wizards, heroes, and superheroes” in such narratives (Stroud 2023, 12). Moreover, the hero, in addition to possessing supernatural abilities, guides and mediates readers’ exploration of the fantasy world, so that they gradually “become accustomed to the weirdness” of it (Paljuši 2022, 19).

In *The Lightning*, apart from mortals, the rest of the characters, like the Pantheon, monsters, demigods with supernatural abilities, mythological creatures that are blends of human and animal, and anthropomorphic entities, portray different degrees of “physical, logical, or human possibilities” (Alber 2016, 104). A large number of these figures metamorphose into human beings and back to their original form. Thus, the interaction between supernatural figures and natural beings occurs through the shape-shifting or disguise of these antirealist figures. An analysis of the numerous antirealist figures of the novel is not possible in this essay. Thus, only a few figures are selected: the hero of the novel, Percy, his friend, Grover, his mentor, Mr. Brunner, and a Fury, Mrs. Dodds.

Allen Stroud believes that the “unique qualities” of characters that “make them extraordinary, are related to us through the characters who possess them in fantasy stories. These characters are often like us, with experiences we can understand” (2023, 12). Although the novel begins with an epilogue in which Percy directly addresses the readers and reveals that he is a half-blood, or demigod, up to chapter four, he is presented as an ordinary teenager, even facing greater difficulties in school due to his dyslexia and ADHD. However, by virtue of being Poseidon’s son, Percy possesses supernatural powers of controlling water, breathing underwater, and communicating telepathically with sea creatures and horses. Besides these newly realized potentials, Percy understands that his disabilities were actually his supernatural abilities: “the ADHD...That’s your battlefield reflexes...As for attention problems, that’s because you see too much Percy, not too little. Your senses are better than a regular mortal’s” (Riordan 2005, 88). Therefore, the immediate traces of Alber’s antirealist figure are presented through the hero of the novel, Percy, a half-blood with unearthly features, as well as

other demigods, “each with a special set of abilities inherited from their immortal parent” (Paljuši 2022, 15). Moreover, it can be concluded that besides the above-mentioned strange abilities, Percy’s bravery, loyalty, and righteousness construct him as the generic hero of fantasy: a creature whose attributes cannot be explained by common sense.

Moreover, the monsters and mythological creatures in *The Lightning* present the unnaturalness through a strange blend of human and animal features or through anthropomorphic qualities. Most of these creatures were depicted anti-mimetically in Greek mythology, a convention Riordan follows, though he adds humorous details as he incorporates them into *The Olympians* series. Grover, as a satyr, is an example of an antirealist figure, fitting Alber’s classification as a blend of human and animal. His identity is revealed at the end of chapter three, as Percy, still in confusion, describes him as follows: “Grover didn’t have his pants on—and where his legs should be...there were no feet. There were cloven hooves” (Riordan 2005, 42–43). Also, Mr. Brunner, Percy’s Latin teacher, being a centaur, fits this category. At first, he was described as being paralyzed from the waist down and using a wheelchair. Later, his identity was revealed at the Camp, when he rises from his wheelchair and transforms into a centaur and introduces himself as Chiron to Percy: “I stared at the horse who had just sprung from the wheelchair, a huge white stallion. But where its neck should be was the upper body of my Latin teacher, smoothly grafted to the horse’s trunk” (ibid. 74). Through these examples, Riordan not only constructs the most common characters in fantasy, figures being blends of humans and animals, but also he creates a storyworld in which the realms of the natural and the unnatural are woven together.

Furthermore, in *The Lightning*, the reader witnesses the metamorphoses of several characters, through which they once more challenge the physical and logical possibilities of the empirical world. Riordan consequently constructs, in Alber’s terminology, antirealist figures that represent unnaturalness in fantasy. Most mythological creatures undergo metamorphosis and transformation to hide their true identities. Mrs. Dodds, Percy’s math teacher, for example, is one of the Furies. Thus, not only is she an antirealist figure, a blend of human and animal, but she also transforms into a human to disguise her true identity. Her disguise, however, is removed when she metamorphoses into a monstrous creature that tries to kill Percy: “Her eyes began to glow like barbecue coals. Her fingers stretched, turning into talons. Her jacket melted into large, leathery wings. She wasn’t human” (Riordan 2005, 12).

Apart from the mythological creatures, Percy’s mother, a mortal character, also undergoes metamorphosis. In the scene where the Minotaur attacks Percy, his mother, and Grover, the monster tries to strangle Percy’s mother, and “she dissolve[s], melting into light, a shimmering golden form, as if she were a holographic projection. A blinding flash, and she [is] simply...gone” (Riordan 2005,

53). Percy believes that his mother is dead, however, later, Ares reveals that she is not dead, and is kept hostage in the Underworld as a leverage bargaining for Hades: “She’s not dead...She was taken away from the Minotaur before she could die. She turned into a shower of gold, right? That’s metamorphosis. Not death. She’s being kept...Hostage” (ibid. 244). Near the end of the novel, Percy’s mother returns to her apartment with no reminiscence after her encounter with the Minotaur.

Construction of the Storyworld through Unnatural Temporalities and Antimimetic Spaces

Whether the secondary world of a fantasy is set in a separate alternative universe or the actual world is presented as hosting fantastical entities from an alternative world, the presence of the impossible in fantasy texts can be achieved by building a storyworld with unnatural temporalities and antimimetic spaces. According to Herman, “time, space, and character can be re-described as key parameters for narrative world-building” (2012, 17). In *The Lightning*, time is not manipulated as it is in the rest of the series, and no unnatural temporalities occur, except for one incident. When Percy and his friend arrive in Las Vegas, they enter the Lotus Hotel and Casino to spend the night and treat themselves by playing video games. Percy notices that some players use old slang and wear old-fashioned clothes. When Percy asks about the year, some players answer 1977, some 1985, and some 1993. Realizing that something is wrong, Percy gets his friend out of the hotel. Percy later claims, “We stayed for about an hour. When we came out, five days had passed. It makes time speed up” (Riordan 2007, 180). Thus, the flow of time is different in the enchanted Lotus Hotel.

Riordan, in the series, “draws inspiration from myths, but uses their material freely, transforming” them (Paljuši 2022, 15). Consequently, the representation of mythological figures in modern society frequently results in comic anachronism, since they are placed “outside of [their] historical era” (Abrams and Harpham 2015, 300). In *The Lightning*, numerous anachronisms are intentionally used to present Greek myths as more accessible, relevant, and humorous to the modern reader, including new technology, modern clothing, language, and slang. For example, in the Underworld, the ancient guards use cameras and metal detectors. Even in Olympus, the anachronism continues; Percy describes Poseidon wearing “leather sandals, khaki Bermuda Shorts, and a Tommy Bahama Shirt with coconuts and parrots all over it” (Riordan 2005, 340). However, the most important example of anachronism is the placement of Greek gods in the USA. As Chiron explains:

Greek gods— are very much alive...What you call Western civilization...The gods are part of it...The fire started in Greece, then the fire moved to Rome...The gods simply moved to Germany, to France, to Spain...They spent several centuries in England...And yes, Percy, of course, they are now in your United States...And so Olympus is here. (ibid. 67, 72–73)

The Lightning incorporates the elements of an alternative world into the actual world, not only constructing unnatural geographies, in Alber’s terminology, but also disturbing the spatial orientation by locating the entrance to the secondary world in different cities in the USA or at national

monuments. In this way, he connects Greek mythology to American history, since a “place with a past and a (pre)history is more compelling, more realistic, more believable than a place that is no more than a blank slate” (Sundmark and Malilang 2024, 47). In the novel, according to Alber’s theory, the Camp of Half Blood, the Underworld, and Olympus all manipulate the narrative space by extension. Their spacious environment disturbs the realistic world through stretching. The strawberry field seems to be the exterior facade of the Camp: “From the outside, mortals look into the valley and see nothing unusual, just a strawberry farm” (Riordan 2005, 97). Beyond the enchanted borders, however, “the landscape was dotted with buildings that looked like ancient Greek architecture – an open-air Pavilion, an amphitheater, a circular arena” (ibid. 61–62).

According to Alber’s theory, Olympus can be considered an example of nonactualizable geography because it is located on “the six hundredth floor” of the Empire State Building (Riordan 2005, 99). Therefore, in *The Lightning*, the exaggerated manipulation of spatial extension constructs an unnatural geography. Ironically, even the hero cannot believe such an unnatural space: “This place can’t be here...The tip of a mountain hanging over New York City like a billion-ton asteroid? How could something like that be anchored above the Empire State Building, in plain sight of millions of people, and not get noticed?” (ibid. 338). A nonactualizable geography is also constructed in the novel by comically placing the Underworld in the USA, with its entrance in Los Angeles, spreading infinitely beneath the city. Percy describes the fields of Asphodel, one of many sections of the Underworld, as “the largest concert crowd you’ve ever seen, a football field packed with a million fans. Now imagine a field a million times that big, packed with people, and imagine the electricity has gone out, and there is no noise, no light” (Riordan 2005, 300). Consequently, the presence of such antimimetic places in the storyworld renders the narrative unnatural.

These antimimetic spaces are hidden from mortals by the Mist, a spatial entity that, according to Alber’s theory, causes “disruption of spatial orientation” and misconception (2016, 187). It is not a literal mist or even a magical object, but a supernatural entity that blurs the mortals’ perception. Chiron describes the Mist to Percy as: “a powerful thing...Whenever divine or monstrous elements mix with the mortal world, they generate Mist, which obscures the vision of humans” (Riordan 2005, 155).

Since Alber, in his definition of antimimetic spaces, also includes “objects (such as houses, tables, chairs) or other entities...that are part of the setting” (2016, 185), the examination of the magical objects of the novel also seems necessary. The existence of magical objects with both good and evil functions is a conventional feature of fantasy. These objects may be purely fantastical, ordinary or everyday objects that transform into such supernatural objects as “portals,” “healing” objects, “flying” objects, and objects with “invisibility” powers (Stroud 2023, 6; 134; 174; 240). One

of the first magical objects that Percy employs in the novel is a “ballpoint pen” that, when uncapped, turns into a sword (Riordan 2005, 13). Another ordinary object that is enchanted is a “Yankee cap,” which turns invisible whoever wears it (ibid. 149; 153). The other example is a pair of “sneakers,” which, by the utterance of the word “Maia,” became flying shoes which assist Percy in his quest; moreover, they were enchanted to drag Percy to Tartarus (ibid. 151; 305). Also, enchanted “pearls” were given to Percy, acting as portals, transporting him to sea (ibid. 272–273). Therefore, they are examples of both good and evil magical objects.

Using Alber’s Reading Strategies to Make Sense of Fantasy

In *The Lightning*, with its numerous and varied unnatural elements, readers should blend their “real-world knowledge (acquired through our physical being in the world)” and their “literary knowledge (acquired through our exposure to narrative literature)” with the impossible to construct a storyworld in which modern creatures and Greek gods coexist (Alber 2016, 47). Thus, to make sense of Percy’s split identity, readers have to blend their real-world knowledge of human and adolescent with their literary knowledge of divine and hero. Additionally, the magical objects, which usually blend the supernatural and the natural, ask readers to make sense of them, generating “new frames by blending preexisting schemata” (ibid. 49). Thus, as Attebery asserts, fantasies “reframe and reinterpret myths, but at the same time update and revalidate them” (2022, 53). Thus, the blending of frames not only becomes a cognitive world-building strategy but also an interpretive one.

Due to the antiquity and popularity of fantasy, the “process of blending” of most impossibilities has “already taken place”: they have “already been conventionalized” and they “no longer strike us as being strange or unusual” (Alber 2016, 49–50). However, in *The Lightning*, Alber’s reading strategy of generification not only refers to the identification of such features of YA fantasy, as the presence of supernatural elements through antirealist figures, unnatural temporalities, antimimetic spaces, and magical objects, but also foregrounds the existence of an adolescent protagonist undertaking a heroic quest to resolve the battle between good and evil.

As mentioned before, one of the most common features of fantasy is the presence of a hero that the reader can identify with. Thus, in YA fantasy, the protagonist is typically an adolescent undertaking a heroic quest to save the world. In *The Lightning*, Percy, a twelve-year-old boy, with the help of his friends, embarks on a quest to find Zeus’s stolen lightning bolt and hence prevents a war among the gods. Mythological heroes, therefore, have been refashioned as superheroes. However, whereas in ancient myths, collaboration was considered as “devaluing the importance of heroic accomplishments” (Hoegnifioh 2023, 1) in the *Olympians* series collaboration is considered as a virtue and the heroes have no need “to achieve all of their glory solely by relying on their own skills” (ibid. 6). As Attebery suggests, “fantasy is often characterized in terms of a battle between good and

evil” (2022, 58). Conventionally, in YA fantasy, moreover, the good always triumphs over evil. In *The Lightning*, for example, Percy and his friends are the core representatives of good, struggling to restore justice and order to the world and to defeat the chaos and terror brought by the evil forces of Kronos.

Since parody has been defined as the “serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work” (Abrams and Harpham 2015, 41), and since it usually emerges “when a genre has been through its ‘classic’ stage, and its conventions have become overused and overfamiliar” (Paul 2013, 287), *The Lightning* neither merely adapts nor departs from Greek myths. Instead, by distorting the boundaries between the real and the mythological worlds, it employs comic anachronism to parody and satirize not only Greek myths but also their modern manifestations. Percy, as the narrator, depicts the fantastic realist world and its figures “not through an epic lens, but through the eyes of a reluctant, sarcastic, and socially displaced teenager” (Linul Qalbi and Agung 2025, 79). This feature is evident in the descriptions of gods, demigods, monsters, mythological creatures, and sacred and divine places. For example, in the Underworld, Percy depicts Charon using an elevator to transport souls downward, then forward toward the River Styx, and finally into a boat. The guards in the Underworld also use cameras and metal detectors. Ares’s appearance, moreover, exemplifies comic anachronism: he wears a “black leather duster” and “red wraparound shades” and rides a giant Harley motorcycle (Riordan 2005, 225). The parodic representation of sacred and divine places, Olympus and the Underworld, takes place through the juxtaposition of the mythical landscape of Greece and the modern urban setting in the USA. Thus, in the novel, the “sacred is not mocked; it is modernized, dressed in the language of familiarity,” which “allows for a unique type of reader engagement” (Linul Qalbi and Agung 2025, 81).

Alber defines satire as “critique through exaggeration, distortion, or caricature” of events and characters (2016, 52). Moreover, satire is traditionally known to have a “corrective” effect on “human vice and folly” (Abrams and Harpham 2015, 352); therefore, in *The Lightning*, such authority figures as gods and parents are satirized for neglecting their children and for being absent from the critical stage of adolescent identity development. The gods, acting as political leaders, are also satirically criticized for allowing their pride and personal conflicts to influence the welfare of others. Additionally, losing track of time at the Lotus Hotel in Las Vegas satirizes not only casinos and gambling but also video game arcades and gaming addiction, which result in neglecting life responsibilities. In *The Lightning*, the entrance to the Underworld is located in Los Angeles, a city known for its air pollution, traffic, violence, and celebrity culture, thereby satirizing unsafe modern cities and the superficiality of Hollywood culture. Furthermore, the association of Western civilization with the presence and movement of Greek mythological gods and their sacred and divine

places across different countries in Europe, and then to the USA, satirically criticizes the Eurocentric and Anglo-centric belief in world history. Thus, the unnaturalness presented in these sections of the novel can be interpreted through Alber's reading strategy of satirization and parody.

Conclusion

In the present essay, the researchers apply Alber's theories and reading strategies concerning unnatural narratives to Riordan's young adult fantasy novel, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. The objective is to examine the concept of the unnatural as an essential and only consensual element of fantasy. The survey encompasses the creation of a hero with supernatural abilities and other unrealistic characters, the construction of an alternative fantasy world through time- and space-related anomalies, and the hero's quest, along with the conflict between good and evil within that realm. Thus, the essay demonstrates that by employing Alber's building blocks of unnatural narratives—namely, antirealist figures, unnatural temporalities, and antimimetic spaces—readers can systematically analyze, classify, and interpret the most common features of fantasy. Furthermore, the present essay introduces three of Alber's reading strategies to illustrate how their application facilitates the development of the readers' interpretations. These strategies include blending frames and generification (cognitive mechanisms), and satirization and parody (thematic interpretation). Consequently, the researchers argue that reading *The Lightning Thief* generates new cognitive frameworks through blending preexisting real-world frames—comprising realistic representations of the world and characters, along with literary knowledge, including familiarity with such recurring features of fantasy as the supernatural hero embarking on the quest in an alternative fantasy world—and with such newly introduced unnaturalness as the presence of Greek gods and mythological creatures in a modern setting. Moreover, the analysis of the novel, considering Alber's strategy of generification, indicates that the embedded anomalies can be regarded as conventional features of the fantasy genre. Additionally, the comic anachronism and parodic depiction of Greek myths in the novel aid readers in comprehending its unnaturalness through what Alber calls satirical reading. Therefore, the researchers intend to demonstrate that analyzing a YA fantasy text through the lens of Alber's unnatural narratology facilitates and enriches the understanding and interpretation of its fantastical features.

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