

Spring 2020

Whitewashing Who We Worship: Amelioration and Cultural Imperatives in Neil Gaiman's American Gods

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WHITEWASHING WHO WE WORSHIP: AMELIORATION AND CULTURAL
IMPERATIVES IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*

by

SAMANTHA BAUER

(Under the Direction of Dustin Anderson)

ABSTRACT

Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* creates a penetrating and sharp commentary on the state of every aspect of contemporary American society by populating it with myths that arrive on American shores over countless generations. From the characters to the settings, Gaiman utilizes the often-overlooked fact that myths exist in every aspect of life. In many ways, Gaiman is building, or perhaps evolving, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* to discuss contemporary myths' unique nature and how ancient myths still play a role in our society. I contend that in *American Gods*, Gaiman has created an evolution of the kinds of mythologies that Campbell and Barthes develop by calling our attention to the fact that we actively avoid the knowledge of the unsavory nature of cultural— or for Gaiman, mythic— figures in our ancient and recent pasts.

INDEX WORDS: Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, Joseph Campbell, Roland Barthes, American Literature, Mythology, Contemporary Literature

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B.S. Georgia Southern University, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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Electronic Version Approved:
May 2020

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CHAPTER ONE: ORIGINS AND TRADITIONS

Odin the all-father was no longer gentle, wise, and irascible, but instead he was brilliant, unknowable, and dangerous.

-Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*

I. MYTHO- CULTURE COUTURE

Neil Gaiman's novel, *American Gods*, creates a penetrating and sharp commentary on the state of, primarily, every aspect of contemporary American society by populating it with the myths that arrived on American shores over countless generations. From the characters to the settings, Gaiman utilizes the often-overlooked fact that myths exist in every aspect of life. In many ways, Gaiman is building, or perhaps evolving, Joseph Campbell's *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* to discuss the unique nature of contemporary myths and how ancient myths still play a role in our society. I contend that in *American Gods*, Gaiman created an evolution of the kinds of mythologies that Campbell and Barthes develop by calling our attention to the fact that we actively avoid the knowledge of the unsavory nature of cultural—or for Gaiman, mythic—figures on our ancient and recent pasts.

This novel could not exist if it were to take place anywhere other than America. Gaiman knew from the beginning that this novel would have to take place in America because of the preconceived notions that accompany the country. People who live in America see their own country in many different ways. A person who is not from America sees the country entirely differently, and Gaiman can provide his perspective as someone who did not grow up in the country but currently resides within it. Taking a step back from something as demanding and obnoxious as American society allows Gaiman to look at the situation from a perspective in

which someone who has lived in the country would have extreme trouble processing. Gaiman is no stranger to feeling like an outsider, according to Cyril Camus, “His Jewish identity certainly made him an ‘outsider’ in his Anglican educational environment, but being half immersed in another belief-system than his family’s, from an early age on, allowed him to put both systems in perspective” (78). Gaiman grew up in a Jewish household, but his family insisted on sending him to Catholic school. From a young age, he has the perception of someone who is considered an outsider. Gaiman uses this technique with *Shadow* on a mythological scale. *Shadow* is continuously aware that he is among the gods throughout the novel. The outsider’s perspective allows Gaiman and, by extension *Shadow*, to look at the situation objectively.

Gaiman uses aspects of Campbell’s archetypal characters to allow readers to assume that they already understand the novel before the story truly begins. Throughout his study, the types of characters that Campbell analyzes have been so ingrained into the audience’s mind that he can use that to surprise his readers. The audience expects specific kinds of behavior from certain characters. That expectation lets him trick the readers the same way Wednesday and Loki are tricking everyone else in the novel. Campbell provides Gaiman with a solid basis for ancient myths and how they have operated in the past. Audiences usually expect the same pattern from these myths based on what Campbell has studied, and when that pattern breaks, the author deceives the audience and the entire meaning of the novel changes.

While Campbell lays the groundwork for traditional myths and how they operate, Roland Barthes focuses on the tales that emerge through social and cultural characteristics. Barthes focuses on every day, seemingly uncomplicated events, such as a wrestling match to explore the social and cultural truths that embed themselves in the act. Showboating wrestlers with screaming adoring fans is not much different from the cult following of larger-than-life

pantheistic gods and goddesses. “Each sign in wrestling is thus endowed with an utter clarity since everything must always be understood on the spot. Once the adversaries are in the Ring, the public is entrusted with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theater, each physical type expresses to excess the role assigned to the combatant” (Barthes 5). Wrestling, like most sports, is rather fast-paced and includes two men who possess predetermined personas in the ring. Wrestling has become more of a spectacle than a traditional competition, and as a result, the wrestlers have become more theatrical than they have been previously. Each wrestler adopts a particular persona to gain the audience’s support, and the event becomes less about the act of wrestling and more about the theatricality of the wrestlers.

The personas these wrestlers adopt often take the form of Campbell’s archetypes of the hero and the villain, but the difference lies in the specificity of the audience watching. The audience can ultimately support whichever wrestler they want, but there is a specific understanding concerning who will win the match before it starts. Much like reading the title of a play, the audience of a wrestling match can predict the outcome of the event based on the wrestlers’ personas. “... the crowd delights in it as if it were a well-timed episode in a novel, and the greater the contrast between the success of a stratagem and its collapse, the more satisfying the mimed performance is judged to be. Justice is therefore the body of a possible transgression; it is because there is a Law that the spectacle of the passions transgressing is so gratifying” (Barthes 11). So much more goes into the outcome of a wrestling match than the audience tends to realize, the forces of good, evil, justice, and suffering are all at play amid the event itself. Everyone in the audience has picked a side and desperately wants their wrestler to win based on the allegiance they have placed in their choice. The match becomes much more dramatized when

looked at through this perspective. It is no longer merely a competition determining the stronger wrestler; once the audience becomes emotionally invested.

The match itself stands for the most basic fight, which is useful for defeating evil with a sense of justice instilled in the audience to heighten the energy present. “In the Ring and in the very depths of their voluntary ignominy, the wrestlers remain gods, for they are, for a few minutes, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good and Evil and unveils the figure of a finally intelligible Justice” (Barthes 14). Barthes can describe how invested the audience becomes in the wrestlers in the moments of their match—referring to them as gods explain very merely that the audience is worshipping the two wrestlers for the duration of the match. They represent the forces of good and evil, and the audience can put their faith in the justice of the match itself. In those few moments, the match’s spectacle allows the wrestlers to be more powerful than the people watching because of the faith the audience has given them. The traditional myth of good versus evil is made contemporary through the mode people are consuming it.

As time progresses, myths are continually changing to blend into the culture of the contemporary world. The underlying basics remain the same, but the specificities of the tales are always changing. “... the sign is ambiguous: it remains on the surface yet does not renounce passing itself off as a depth; it seeks to make itself understood (which is praiseworthy) but at the same time presents itself as spontaneous (which is deceptive), it declares itself to be simultaneously intentional and irrepressible, artificial and natural, manufactured and yet discovered. Which serves to introduce us to a morality of the sign” (Barthes 21). The significance of the sign does not change; the sign itself has a shelf-life. There is no more explicit example of this in Gaiman’s novel than Wednesday. People can determine what the sign will be,

but the significance must be revealed by the sign itself. It needs discovering to be understood, but the understanding cannot exist until the culture has decided the significance. It is easier to determine past signs because we remove ourselves from them, which gives us clarity. Looking into the present's signs is much more difficult because separating ourselves from the lives we are currently living is nearly impossible.

According to Barthes, the writer is the one who can separate themselves from society to make sense of it all:

We know from this last piece of braggadocio that it is entirely 'natural' for the writer always to write, in all situations. First of all, it assimilates literary production to a kind of involuntary, hence taboo, secretion, since it escapes human determinisms: to put it more nobly, the writer is the prey of an internal god who speaks at all times, without concern, tyrant that he is, for his medium's vacation. The writer is on vacation, but his Muse is wide awake, and gives birth nonstop. (Barthes 23)

From years of practicing observation, the writer can see beyond daily life's surface and apply it to the signs. The writer can separate himself or herself from his/her life to see the world objectively. It is most comfortable for a writer to take advantage of a relaxing situation, such as a vacation, to observe who they are. Barthes says that the writer cannot help but notice the myths evolving along with the culture we have created. The writer sees that other people do not notice because they are not looking closely enough at the situation. This insight allows the writer to see society for what it is and take those ideas one step further with the characters they create.

Writers can see the truths about society because they are out on the fringes, which allows them to observe everyone. These observations include how we worship or praise certain people.

“What is more curious still, this mythic character of our kings is nowadays laicized yet not in the least eliminated by the expedient of a certain scientism: kings are defined like puppies by the purity of their breeding (Blue Blood), and the ship, privileged site of any ‘closure,’ is a sort of modern Ark which preserves the main variants of the monarchic species” (Barthes 27). We scrutinize people open to the public that we forget they are actual human beings. They have become secularized symbols of wealth, power, and knowledge. However, we fail to realize or refuse to face the truth that these people have faults the same way less-famous people do. Anyone in any spotlight faces this reality to an extent; the writer is the only person looking carefully enough to see the truth and therefore convey it to everyone willing to listen.

Those who do not wish to face their lives’ truths have become very skilled at avoiding those truths altogether. Facing the ugly truth about life is a frightening idea to face, so people will rely on their thought process and use their feelings as a scapegoat rather than realize that the first step to making things better is admitting that the problem exists. It is not surprising to see Barthes’ language reflect Cavell’s here. “The truth behind these seasonally professed inadequacies of intelligence is the old obscurist myth which holds that an idea is noxious if it is not controlled by ‘common sense’ and ‘feeling’: Knowledge is Evil, both grow on the same tree: culture is permitted, provided one periodically proclaims the vanity of its purposes and the limits of its power,” (Barthes 30). If we bring something to light that is too hard for people to face or understand, they rely on their emotions and the validation of like-minded people that the truth is false or does not apply to them. Believing that someone is the exception in the face of something ugly is more relaxed than admitting that person is part of the issue.

If the issue goes untreated, or in this case, unrecognized, the situation will only continue to become so out of hand that the only option left is to face the issue. The truths have become so

hard to bear that society pretends they do not exist. Once we take that mask off, the real face behind it is much more terrifying than before because we allowed it to progress to what it has become, and we can no longer ignore that fact. Society forces those who can face these truths to work and live in an environment that is determined to ignore them, the poor.

Poor people lead lives the higher classes of people would prefer to ignore because, they are living proof that society is not as perfect as everyone would like to believe. “In short, this is why Chaplin’s poor man triumphs over everything: because he eludes every temptation, rejects every partnership, and never invests in man except in man alone. His anarchy, arguable politically, represents perhaps the most efficacious form of revolution artistically” (Barthes 37). Poor men and women, for that matter, are forced to see the world for what it truly is. It is not glamorous or sugar-coated, and for that reason, they are the most authentic people that exist. This allows them to see people more clearly than others because reality cannot hide from them. The only people trying to protect them are themselves, which means that they need to face the ugly truths and learn how to live with them to survive.

Barthes uses the traditional archetypes Campbell explores and adds another layer of complexity to them by exploring the myths of his contemporary world and what they all represent. The aspects that Barthes focuses on also challenge some of the traditional views that Campbell discusses in his studies. Barthes’ chapter titled “Wine and Milk” outlines how such an integral beverage to the French culture has remained influential for many years, while also discussing how it has evolved to fit the current climate. “Being, in essence, a function whose terms can change, wine possesses apparently plastic powers: it can serve as an alibi for dreams as well as for reality, depending on the users of the myth” (Barthes 79-80). Barthes discusses how wine has remained the national drink of France, how it is perceived differently in other countries

and how its contribution to multiple aspects of the culture. The French attitude toward wine has remained relatively similar for thousands of years; however, the French people have assimilated with the contemporary culture at the same rate as the rest of the world. Barthes is exploring how certain aspects of cultures, in this case, wine, have remained relevant across generations of people while keeping the national identity intact.

While Barthes focuses on contemporary specificities of the world and how the traditional myths have evolved, Campbell focuses on the similarities of those myths and connects multiple cultures. These classic myths each critic discusses are elaborate because they have been ingrained in the world for centuries to explain the origins of our society. As time and culture evolve, the myths do as well. We begin to selectively remember certain aspects of these myths to have something appealing to look back on regarding the nation we have built as a result. For example, America is a country that used to pride itself on being a mixture of many different cultures full of people seeking refuge from unjust governments. Today, many Americans continue to believe that America is the best country globally and will use myths from when the country began as an explanation for this thought process. As a result, American citizens have failed to recognize the negative aspects of their country because some are too great to bear and will force people to realize that the basis for their argument is somewhat false.

Gaiman uses Campbell's work as an essential starting point for the characters he creates and the society he is discussing. Each character has attributes that are common to the process of the hero's journey, and Gaiman plays on the expectation readers have to trick them and make them realize that things have changed drastically in terms of reality and the hero's journey. Gaiman uses Campbell's idea about the modern version of the hero-cycle and puts it into practice to show what America has become rather than what it wants to be. He also uses Barthes'

theory regarding social myths to expose America's truth behind the mask of what we want it to be.

Campbell recognizes that the modern version of the hero's journey has changed drastically from what most people consider it to be, and Gaiman uses that realization in his novel as well.

It is the hero-cycle of the modern-age, the wonder-story of mankind's coming to maturity. The spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, was shattered with sure and mighty strokes. The dream-web of myth fell away; the mind opened to full waking consciousness; and modern man emerged from ancient ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon, or like the sun at dawn from the womb of mother night. (Campbell 334)

Humankind has come to believe that it has entered, as Campbell refers to it, a certain maturity that separates it from ancient times, and therefore, ancient myths. Of course, the argument that humans have evolved and progressed over time exists, which has resulted in life and mentalities changing drastically over the years. That is not to say that humans are more mature or less reliant on cultural myths. Assuming that we are more sophisticated today overlooks that complete maturity is not something to be obtained as a society, it is something to attempt to achieve. As a result of this blind spot, we begin to think that we are somehow better than past generations of people because we do not believe the same things they used to. For example, most people consider myths to be something stuck in the past to explain how humans used to live and answer life's questions, which prevents us from realizing that we still do that today, the only thing that has changed is the specificities of the myths we use.

Gaiman allows his reader to realize how essential these ancient myths are to contemporary American society while also encouraging them to acknowledge the contemporary myths in front of us. Gaiman's old gods represent the past cultures that mix together to create contemporary America. These cultures personify themselves in Wednesday, Mad Sweeney, Low-Key, Czernobog, the Zorya sisters, and many other old gods that are introduced throughout the novel. The contemporary myths personify themselves in the new gods such as Media, Technology, Mr. Town, Mr. World, Lakeside, and many others. Gaiman uses the conventional archetypes Campbell discusses as disguises for Gaiman's characters to exploit and trick America into believing what they want. Assimilating to American society forces these characters to be perversions of their primary roles. These contemporary characters and the novel's setting are somewhat complicated because Gaiman combines Campbell's and Barthes' theories to describe such a unique culture.

Gaiman combines Campbell's archetypes and Barthes' observations to show the reader that America's characters, places, and national identity are much more complicated once people look past the mask of it all. Everyone has an opinion on America's national identity, and it is no secret that Americans are very proud people. The pride is evident throughout the country, and the abundance of it oozes from every possible aspect of American society. Gaiman uses Campbell and Barthes as influences because they allow him to discuss the all-encompassing nature of American pride. Pride comes alive in the American people, but it also makes itself known from town to town, city to city, state to state to the point where American pride defines national identity. However, when one takes a more profound look behind all of the proud American patriotism, people can easily see that the vanity acts as a distraction from America's ugliness.

Barthes' spectrum of influence in Gaiman's novel consists of the contemporary aspect of the world Gaiman has created. Everything in America today represents some myth. People only need to look closely to discover what that myth represents. More often than not, these support the organically grown *cultural imperative* of the nation. This aspect is evident throughout Gaiman's novel. The characters complicate this idea because they blend the variations Barthes develops as myth into something new. They hold ancient values of the gods or goddesses they were when their people were consistently worshipping them. The gods need to change to stay relevant to the time and America's contemporary society.

Everything about contemporary America reflects a myth of what we want America to be. The town Lakeside is a perfect example of small-town America. No one locks their doors at night, people get to know and spend time with their neighbors, the chief of police can drive newcomers around the town instead of fighting crime every day because the town is such a great place to live. Wednesday represents the Wise Old Man character in that, by all appearances, he is a charming older man. He trusts doing things the old-fashioned way rather than relying on technology all the time. Once Gaiman gives his readers a look behind the curtain, it becomes clear that both of these significant aspects of the novel are not what they seem.

Wednesday's character is more upfront with his bad qualities from the first time Gaiman introduces him to the reader and Shadow. He shows Shadow time and time again that he is prepared to deceive every person he meets and only sees women as creatures to have sex with or take advantage of in some way. Wednesday is continually making it clear to the reader and Shadow that he is not exactly a man one can trust, but he uses Campbell's archetype of the Wise Old Man so well, that the reader cannot help but hold out hope that he is a good person at his core.

Lakeside is much better at concealing its sinister nature from the reader. Shadow and the reader comforted by the idea of a small American town that, at first, nothing seems out of the ordinary, which does not raise many questions. Gaiman created Lakeside so that most everyone can appeal to the idea because the myth of the small American town is so well-known in American society that most people can find aspects of Lakeside in their hometowns. Barthes' influence is evident here because the small American town is a more contemporary myth and represents everything America wants to be. The harsh reality that Gaiman focuses on is that these things cannot exist in American society today without having some harmful consequences.

No matter how hard we try, life in America is not anywhere close to the idealized dream we have in our heads. We ignore almost all of the hard truths in our lives because that is easier than dealing with our situation's reality. These truths are complicated in Gaiman's novel in the form of the old and new gods he has created for his readers. These gods come directly from ancient myths that built our world. Much like these myths, the gods are beginning to be misremembered and forgotten in some cases. Gaiman creates gods who, at their core, are the remnants of the gods from ancient myths but have adapted most of their personas to blend into contemporary America. As a society, some of these ancient myths have faded from our memories because they no longer hold relevance to our present lives. However, other myths have been consciously forgotten or misremembered because they force us to face daunting truths. Through his novel, Gaiman comments on America's misrepresentation in terms of individual mythologies and the gods involved with those myths. In doing so, Gaiman comments on contemporary American society as a whole, forcing his readers to realize that the world they live in is not the idealized version of the American dream.

The result of our forgetfulness has taken form in ameliorated versions of the myths that once existed. Through the years, these myths have taken on different styles to stand the test of time. The contemporary versions of these myths now represent the world today, which Gaiman reflects in the characters he creates. Everyone from the protagonist Shadow to the goddess of Media serves, among other things, aspects of America that the masses would rather ignore or forget. Each character represents a truth about society that people interact with daily but refuse to acknowledge once they realize that these truths, not only apply to them but also lead to something terrifying because they stand for something real. Whatever those truths may be, they force the audience to begin to contemplate aspects of their lives; they would rather sweep under the rug.

Readers want these characters to be exceptional people because that is easier than facing the reality that these characters are no better than those interacted with daily. Similarly, readers tend to hold him to a higher criterion with Wednesday's nature because of the necessity people feel that he is inherently good. The familiarity that accompanies characters taking on the father figure's role encourages the reader to assume the character is good, which leads to an amelioration complex if and when the character does not live up to the expectations the reader holds them to. Gaiman uses this new characterization of Odin for his novel because of the sense of familiarity and protection that comes with one of his many names, the All-Father. Using an ancient character such as Odin and giving him traits that allow him to fit into American society today, Gaiman can bring hidden truths into the spotlight.

Blending the old world from which the country began and the new world it has become to show what America has become. Building off these ideas allows Gaiman to add to the characters' complexity from the old myths because our society had changed them from what they

originally were. Their transformation from ancient to contemporary changes many things about them, except that they continue to represent an aspect of the society that created them. In Gaiman's case, they represent gruesome aspects of contemporary America that most Americans would instead ignore than to try and fix the problems.

The gods do not hide these ugly truths by any means, none of the gods or goddesses are necessarily likable, but society worships them regardless, sometimes unknowingly, sometimes blatantly. For instance, when Shadow meets Wednesday, the two do not start things off in the story as friends. It takes a while for Shadow to agree to work for Wednesday and even longer for Shadow to begin to like Wednesday. Also, when Shadow does feel a fondness towards Wednesday, he portrays his feelings as an after-thought. Wednesday's attitude and lifestyle start to grow on Shadow despite all the unlikeable things about Wednesday. Shadow seems to be holding out hope that, despite all of Wednesday's apparent flaws, that he is the right person at his core. This is a very romantic American ideal that despite all of the unpleasant aspects society has conditioned us to care about, we will make decisions out of the goodness of our hearts at the end of the day. Despite all odds, Shadow wants to believe that Wednesday is on the right side of the war between the gods because he is the right person.

As generations change, the gods' value and primacy change as well; Gramsci might call this a hegemonic shift. Still, it is not much different from watching trendsetters and influences that lead to the mass of American society's "follow this" or "like that." The reader is experiencing the war between the old and new gods through a limited viewpoint. The primary source of information for the reader is the protagonist, Shadow. Since Shadow is continually working for Mr. Wednesday, the leader for the old gods, and the man who is secretly scamming everyone else; the reader never fully understands what is going on behind the scenes of the

novel. Like Shadow, the reader trusts Wednesday, for the most part, without question because humans always want to believe that their side is just.

The Romantic notion of this is that Shadow and Wednesday are fighting for the nostalgic version of the American Dream. In contrast, the new gods try to force everyone to forget the past because the future is lucrative and glamorous. Despite always conning people out of their money and blatantly preying on young girls to have sex with, the audience cannot help but root for Wednesday and Shadow. We assume that Shadow is the hero and that Wednesday is the Wise Old Man, who will help Shadow along the way.

Stanley Cavell explores a notion similar to this in his book titled *Disowning Knowledge*. In his chapter focusing on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Cavell discusses the idea that critics treat characters in literary pieces as larger than life people based on the evidence from the words on the page. "What we can know about people cannot be known about characters" (40). This idea he presents creates a barrier between the reader and the characters in the story, which could explain why people tend to put the characters from these stories on a pedestal and hold them to a higher standard than that of actual people around them. For example, since the reader is not interacting with a real person, just dealing with words on a page makes it easier for the reader to detach from the character and simultaneously hold that character to a higher standard than they would for any regular person they meet. In terms of drama, the stage acts as a physical barrier from the audience; there is never a moment in which the viewer is unaware they are watching a play. Reading a novel creates another, and arguably more defined barrier between the characters and the reader. Reading is a solitary act that further lessens interaction with other people meaning the boundary between the reader, and the characters is even more robust, allowing the reader to place the characters on an even higher pedestal than actors participating in a stage play.

Since the characters in Gaiman's book continuously refer to themselves as gods, the reader automatically assumes that they are all-around superior in terms of morality and the belief that they will use their powers, whatever those may be for the greater good of humanity. As Joseph Campbell explains in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, mythical stories follow a similar plot and character pattern. The hero's journey usually consists of departure, initiation, and return with numerous variations along the way, depending on the story. The role of the hero also has a pattern to fit into as well. According to Campbell, the hero needs to accept adventure and is tasked with one mission to complete. "The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known" (Campbell 31). Gaiman's novel begins this way when he introduces Shadow; a soon-to-be ex-convict determined to keep his head down and lay low. However, Shadow's life is forever changed when he is released early because his beloved wife, Laura, dies in a car accident. On his journey back home, Shadow encounters an old businessman on one of his connecting flights who introduces himself as Mr. Wednesday.

Campbell discusses the specific aspects of the hero's life that allow the hero to complete the task laid out. These aspects include other characters along the way that exist to aid the hero on his journey. For example, "... the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (57). Readers tend to use the archetypes explained by Campbell as a crutch for the characters they encounter. It is more comfortable and less depressing for the reader to assume that the hero, or the wise older man aiding the hero, is called to act for the good of humanity. It is human nature that we all want to believe that the characters we are following so closely and are so involved with are acting for the good of all humanity within the conflict they

have found themselves. As readers, we accept that our hero and his team will have flaws; we expect that the characters will not be perfect, but we expect them to be good at their core.

Campbell references this throughout his discussion of the hero. Readers expect the hero and the Wise Old Man character to be good people operating to protect the rest of the world that cannot defend themselves. We want all of our heroes to embark on a journey leaving home to complete a quest for the good of the world and returning home happy with what they have accomplished. When that does not happen to be the case, we are unhappy with the story for various reasons because the truth makes us face facts we would instead go on ignoring.

Gaiman's novel turns this idea on its head when he reveals that the Wise Old Man character is the mastermind villain responsible for manifesting the nationwide conflict in the first place. The reader expects the Wise Old Man to be intrinsically helpful and kind, and the revelation that he is neither forcing the reader to realize that looks and character development can be incredibly deceiving. Throughout the rest of the novel, Wednesday continuously reminds the reader that he is a conman. However, when he embraces his true nature at the end of the story, the audience, along with the main character Shadow, is shocked at the revelation. The book consists of many hints that Wednesday is hiding something from Shadow, and by extension, the reader. Despite those hints, authors condition the reader to believe that the Wise Old Man character, who is Wednesday is inherently kind and helpful even when everything else in the novel tells the reader that he is not. The audience relies on what they wish to be accurate, that which Campbell lays out for them, despite all the information Gaiman provides about Wednesday that speaks to the contrary. Gaiman shatters the illusion of the Wise Old Man character in Wednesday.

Gaiman's novel uses the archetypes that Campbell explores in his work as an expectation that the reader will create for each character. Taking such a trusted role as the Wise Old Man and becoming the main antagonist of the story forces the reader to question how they perceive the world around them. Gaiman follows the logic of Stanley Cavell's argument to allow the reader to embrace the distance between themselves and the characters. However, the revelation at the end of the novel negates those assumptions and forces the reader to question them. He brings them to the readers' attention to show how convoluted, but obvious they have dared to become. His novel focuses on the content of these characters, and by extent, society, rather than the idealized construct of what he wishes they could be. Gaiman uses ancient myths as a way to set up his discussion about our current society.

Readers want these characters to be exceptional people because that is easier than facing the reality that these characters are no better than those interacted with daily. Similarly, with Wednesday's nature – and perhaps most tellingly with the Other Mother from Gaiman's *Coraline*, readers tend to hold these specific characters to higher criteria because of the necessity people feel that they are inherently good. The familiarity that accompanies characters taking on roles of mother and father figures encourages the reader to assume the character is enjoyable, which leads to an amelioration complex if and when the character does not live up to the expectations the reader holds them to.

Using an ancient character such as Odin and giving him traits that allow him to fit into American society today, Gaiman can bring hidden truths into the spotlight. Blending the old world from which the country began and the new world it has become to show what America has become. Building off these ideas allows him to add to the characters' complexity from the old myths because our society had changed them from what they originally were.

Generally speaking, the characters Gaiman has created in his novel are not necessarily likable people. Each character represents a truth about American society that most people are more comfortable ignoring because the fact forces people to reflect inwardly on the morality of our nature. If myths reflect the world we live in, the people involved in those myths represent essential aspects of life that need to be recognized. America specifically prides itself on being a country founded on freedom, underdogs, and equality for all. Nevertheless, when we take a closer look at the reality of our situation, the American Dream is never as pure as we want it to be. In most cases, the hard truth is that the American Dream cannot exist the way we dreamed it.

II. REMYTHIFICATION, OR THE NEW CRAFT IN THE WORLD'S OLDEST GENRE

American Gods sheds new light on the tradition of myths and the characters and places involved within them. Gaiman presents his reader with American versions of old gods from myths that have immigrated to the country with the people and cultures to which the myths belong. With the hopes to modernize the myths featured throughout the novel, Gaiman has brought to the reader's attention, this idea of new gods: Media, Television, and Technology, to name a few. Pitting the new and old gods' opposing forces against one another highlights something that American culture tends to overlook or forget.

This is what Cavell explores in *Disowning Knowledge*. There is a presupposition that we know everything there is to know about what we are reading. We are aware of dramatic irony. We are often actively unpacking the meaning of metaphors as we understand. This confidence in our analytic abilities sometimes, like Lear, blinds us to what is in front of our faces. We unconsciously assume mistakes on the characters' parts are unintentional. Like Barthes, Cavell

points to the notion that we know precious little about what we think we understand about these characters. Again, as Cavell says, “What we can know about people cannot be known about characters” (40).

Even the old myths brought over from other countries changed from what they once were to fit into this society. Gaiman clarifies the first of many flashbacks he includes within the novel, which he calls “Coming to America.” For the sake of the first flashback, this is the first time the Norse myths are coming to America. The Norse men in this story all die, but the gods’ legends remain in the stories the natives tell to explain what happened when these strange white men appeared. Already Gaiman is showing how these myths are changing since being brought to America. The versions of the Norse myths that remain are the retellings of what happened to the “scaeling” that the Norse men sacrificed to Odin. The myth that exists in America is a shell of the original because it is a version of the tale experienced by the rest of the scaeling’s tribe who came to avenge his death by killing the Norse men who sacrificed him. There is crucial information missing regarding why the Norse sailors sacrificed the “scaeling,” but that information dies with the men who killed him. Gaiman uses this story to show how these myths change from the stories that the Norse men would pass down to something completely different from the scaeling’s tribe, explaining what happened to him and why he died.

Building on the idea that today’s stories are perversions of what they once were, Gaiman can apply it to virtually every other aspect of the novel. Shadow, the protagonist, lives up to his name in terms of his relationships with other people. When his wife, Laura, is alive, he acts as her shadow. After she dies and he agrees to work for Wednesday, Shadow lives up to his namesake for his new boss because he only ever does what Wednesday orders him to do. The protagonist of the novel is very comfortable going through the motions as a shadow of a man.

Gaiman expertly applies the idea of a shadow of a former self to the rest of the novel because that is what, according to Gaiman, America has become. Therefore, everything associated with the culture has become a shadow of what it once was as well. "... the plot of Gaiman's critically acclaimed novel becomes a springboard for the author's exploration of the role of literature and space in the construction of national identity" (Carroll 308). Given that this novel's setting takes place in America, it is safe to assume that Gaiman picked said place because the real America operates in the nation's shadows that came before it.

The nation's formation has left a lasting effect on people and myths present in America. For example, one of the most recently successful movie franchises of all time, Marvel's *Thor*, has dedicated a set of three movies to the characters from Norse mythology. However, these are not the same characters Norsemen told tales of and worshipped hundreds of years beforehand. The stories have been adapted and changed for the movies to become successful and appealing to the audience. When the Marvel version of Thor takes on his poetic predecessor's appetites, viewers did not know what to do but laugh and pity "Fat Thor." They actively turned away from their knowledge of who Thor was in Norse myth. This is doubly ironic since in *Thor: Ragnarok*, Hel discusses how Odin and his sons ameliorated their past to make a digestible present. Readers interact with characters that we assume are true to form because we are not aware of who these characters were at their origin. Wednesday and Low-Key Lyesmith are shadows of the Norse gods Odin and Loki, much like Shadow is an empty shell of the man he once was. America is the perfect setting for this because everything around us is a shadow of what it once was.

The town of Lakeside that Gaiman created for the novel also applies to be a shadow of what it once was in that the concept of the prospering small town can never truly exist. These

towns have become an ideal of the past simply because society has changed too much to be prosperous without growing in size. Lakeside is a myth created by Gaiman to add to the overall theme of the book. “Things can become mythified, even if they are neither old gods nor new, and Lakeside can represent the mystified worship of an idea, even without conscious knowledge of its worshipers” (La Jeunesse 47). On the surface, Lakeside seems to be everything an ideal small town should be, but when Shadow takes a closer look into what is going on, the town turns into something much more sinister. Building off the theme that everything is not what it seems, Gaiman turns Lakeside on its head by revealing the truth about why it has remained the ideal small town for so long. The aspect of the town that sets it apart from worshipping a god, whether it be old or new, is that the townspeople did not realize that they were willingly participating in the sacrifices Hinzelmann was setting up. When Shadow finds Alison McGovern’s body frozen to the trunk of the old car positioned in the middle of the lake, Gaiman shows the reader the disturbingly brilliant aspect of Hinzelmann’s plan. Because the lake is in the center of the town and no one can be anywhere in the town without seeing it, the townspeople unknowingly participate in the sacrifice every time they look out onto the lake and wonder when the car will fall through the ice. Hinzelmann does not need them to pray to him to remain relevant. He needs everyone to participate by betting when the car will fall through the ice.

Gaiman brings the relationship between violence and the sacred to light with Hinzelmann’s annual sacrifice. Rene Girard pinpoints this idea by stating, “We persist in disregarding the power of violence in human societies; that is why we are reluctant to admit that violence and the sacred are the same thing” (277). As a society, Americans have become desensitized to violence when referring to the things we worship because we do not want to believe that the things that we love so much can be extremely harmful to us. Much like the idea

of the old and new gods, people do not want to face the reality that Odin was acting only for his benefit much in the same way that the new gods' main concern is to stay relevant and not disappear rather than make the lives of people more relaxed and more enjoyable.

Gaiman adds yet another layer to this theme in that places like these towns can be worshiped as myths the same way the old and new gods can be and what is more alarming, so to speak is that people do not realize that places like this can be put on a pedestal. Mostly the town of Lakeside and Hinzelmänn's sacrifices have become their type of god in the way they have been unknowingly worshiped. Gaiman is taking his theme one step further in this respect due to the unique aspect of the town and the situation the townspeople have found themselves.

Whether the townspeople knew what Hinzelmänn was doing to preserve the town or not, everyone would watch the old car fall through the ice and sink to the bottom of the lake in the center of the town. This sacrifice and the way Hinzelmänn orchestrated it was brilliant because he knew he needed to get everyone to participate but, at the same time he could not tell them what he was doing; it is a situation very similar to Wednesday's need for the old and new gods to battle each other, without telling them the actual reasoning for it. With this connection in mind, it is clear to see that Gaiman suggests that to have something that is considered an ideal aspect of American culture, one has to sacrifice something violently to achieve that aspect.

The idea of remythification presented by Rut Blomqvist in "The Road of Our Senses: Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*" perfectly represents the myths that remain in our society today. Since America does not have any ancient myths to call its own because those who remain first belonged to other countries, Gaiman knew he would have to change the stories' essence while trying to keep their appearance as close to the original as possible. Gaiman shows this in the retellings that Shadow receives from other old gods in the novel, such as Mad Sweeney and

Zorya Polunochnaya. “Mythification implies that new phenomena which are not part of any mythical or religious tradition are given symbolic, mythical value; in contrast, old myths and religious traditions are revived in the process of remythification” (Blomqvist 6). Gaiman plays off the idea of remythification for the basis of this novel because it is central to American society.

The American people have been taking and adapting myths from other countries since the settlers “discovered” the land several hundreds of years ago. Gaiman can use the idea of remythification to discuss the idea that America is still searching for its true identity among all of the ancient myths taken from other countries. The characters that Gaiman has created in this novel are shells of the gods from the original myths. Primarily, America has kept the appearance of these gods but has also changed certain aspects of them to fit into American society.

For instance, the first time Gaiman introduces Wednesday to the text, Shadow has just been released from prison and runs around an airport trying to catch a flight home. Aside from the fact that Shadow is coming back from prison, countless Americans have experienced what it is like to be running through an airport trying to get back home. Wednesday is sporting an expensive suit, and the first interaction he has with Shadow gives the impression of an impatient businessman sitting in first class. “... grinned at Shadow as he got onto the plane, then raised his wrist and tapped his watch as Shadow walked past” (Gaiman 19). Immediately Gaiman presents Wednesday as an influential person directly from his placement on the plane and the appearance he holds himself. He sits in the first row of first-class, wearing a suit and has the demeanor of someone very powerful. This is a modern version of what is considered dominant in today’s society rather than depicting Odin from Norse mythology.

Along with Wednesday, other characters are changing to fit in with society as well. Mad Sweeney's personality fits the mold of what many people consider an Irish man living in America. He provides the stereotype of the abrasive, drunk, and aggressive Irishman, and Gaiman portrays that perfectly throughout the novel, specifically the scene in which Mad Sweeney has recently passed away. "... explained that he was an artist and that his tales should not be seen as literal constructs but as imaginative re-creations, truer than the truth, and Mad Sweeney said, 'I'll show you an imaginative re-creation, my fist imaginatively re-creating your fucken face for starters'" (Gaiman 202). The vernacular Gaiman gives Mad Sweeney in this scene of the novel allows the reader to imagine the character's persona more clearly in that it fits with what most people consider the stereotype of a drunk Irishman to be. Gaiman's misspelling of the expletive in this sentence is certainly not a mechanical error on the author or the editor. To create the picture in the reader's head of the man Gaiman has created, such spelling of this word is necessary because it adheres to the type of person Gaiman needs Mad Sweeney to be.

There are countless aspects of Neil Gaiman's novel attributed to the American society that we have created today. Throughout the novel, the element present in every significant character, and the most central argument is that nothing about American culture is what it seems to be on the surface. Especially aspects that seem to fit the American narrative but are being used to hide the truth of what America has become. Reading this novel, analytically allows one to notice how brilliantly Gaiman has captured American society today that most people ignore. Those who ignore the imperative we have created choose to do so because the truth is ugly, and ignoring it is more comfortable than dealing with the situation's reality.

Real America hides behind the narrative of the country that was founded hundreds of years ago. The story includes aspects such as the bravery of the founding fathers, the idea that

working hard will allow one to create a better life for oneself, and the American small towns that supposedly exist throughout the country. Gaiman can bring the imperative into the spotlight through the characters of this novel. Wednesday and Loki represent the abuse of power that so many people face because those who possess such power use it for their benefit rather than using it to help others. The truth the so-called new gods represent is the reliability so many people have placed on the technology that surrounds us today, knowing full well that it has just as many adverse effects as it does positive. Simultaneously, the truth concerning Lakeside and Hinzemann is that the small towns America prides itself on cannot exist in the way society wants them to. For a small town to be prosperous, it must be willing to grow and change with the country's atmosphere. Therefore, affluent towns cannot exist without growth, which would mean that they are no longer small. Gaiman's creation of Lakeside exemplifies this idea by revealing that this town is much more sinister than the quaint little town seems to be at first.

Throughout the novel, Gaiman comments on America's lack of identity, which results in an overabundance of social myths that are misrepresentations of American life. American society tends to overcompensate idealistic aspects to hide that the fundamental elements that founded America do not apply anymore. Gaiman breaks down those myths by showing that every aspect of the country we have created is not what appears to be on the surface. Americans are obnoxious with the pride they have for their country, which prevents them from being able to accept their reality.

American national identity should no longer be rooted in the actions of men who lived, fought, and died, hundreds of years ago. While foundational myths are essential as a starting point, if we hold onto them too tightly, we fail to see the world. Myths of contemporary America

are evolving every day. If we continue to ignore them because we feel that they do not align with guidelines set so long ago, we will be living a lie on a national scale.

III. IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS... CAMPBELL

Joseph Campbell's theory allows those who study his work to understand the importance of the art of storytelling. The commonality among ancient myths worldwide allows those who read them to understand their significance and discover their identities. The common misconception regarding myths is that they only apply to ancient cultures because contemporary storytelling has advanced over time. The reality of the situation is that myths have been continuously evolving along with time and continue to hold similar importance as they did in ancient times. Campbell argues that myths are present in virtually every story written or spoken and hold so much more meaning than most casual readers realize.

The Hero's Journey theory can be evident in almost any storyline made available to people today, from movies to Netflix or television shows to popular novels. The Hero's Journey can be seen most clearly in stories about superheroes, wizards, or any mythical or supernatural being presented with a significant task. Throughout this journey, the hero faces many responsibilities they must overcome to succeed in their overall endeavor, whatever that may be. Usually, at the start, the hero is approached by an older, typically male character who will provide them aid as they embark on their adventure. Along with completing their primary task, the hero is also on a journey of self-discovery and, by the end of the experience, is surer in his or her own identity. While the specifics of these stories no doubt change over time, the essential elements of human nature remain the same.

The most crucial element of myths is the characters that reflect the period in which the myth takes place. According to Campbell in order,

...to grasp the full value of the mythological figures that have come down to us, we must understand that they are not only symptoms of the unconscious (as indeed are all human thoughts and acts) but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained as constant throughout the course of human history as the form and nervous structure of the human psyche itself. (Campbell 221)

The “spiritual principles” Campbell refers to allow everyone reading or interacting with myths to be connected with others around them because most of the myths from other cultures share many similarities in terms of plot, structure, and characters. Underlying these myths’ meanings does not lie in the symbols surrounding the characters; they lie with the characters themselves. Tales reflect life at any given time, and people often fail to realize how similar myths from their heritage compare to different cultures. Campbell focuses on how so many myths from all over the world can come together because they are essentially telling the same story. Campbell is also paying close attention to the importance of myths through these “spiritual principles,” he is making it clear that people still worship myths, they might not be aware of the extent of their worshipping. These myths always consist of a hero, or heroine, a wise character whose sole purpose is to aid the hero, other lesser characters who also support the hero, and the villain.

The hero possesses the most humanity because the myth exists in their perspective, which allows the reader to understand and identify with the hero more than any other character. Campbell explores every aspect of the hero’s life that pertains to the journey because it is widespread for the hero to prepare for the journey from childhood. Sometimes, this preparation

occurs as early as conception, although the hero is usually unaware of this before the journey begins. Gaiman takes this theme one step further by providing his readers with external points of view connected with Shadow's experiences. Gaiman does not hide anything from the reader, but it is not until the end of the novel that he gives the reader all of the information. The linked external perceptions provide the reader with slightly more information than Shadow has, but just enough to become more concerned and hopeful that Shadow survives the novel's course. Neither the reader nor Shadow is kept in the dark necessarily, but they are certainly not given all of the information regarding Wednesday and Loki's plan. This strengthens the relationship between hero and reader because they attempt to piece together this mystery based on the limited information they share.

The most important aspect of the contemporary hero that Campbell discusses is that they no longer need to possess supernatural abilities. The assumption that the hero needs to be entirely supernatural for defeating the villain is no longer the case; the most compelling hero prepares through hardship, not someone born with an abundance of power. "Now is required no incarnation of the Moon Bull, no Serpent Wisdom of the Eight Diagrams of Destiny, but a perfect human spirit alert to the needs and hopes of the heart. Accordingly, the cosmogonic cycle yields an emperor in human form who shall stand for all generations to come as the model of man the king" (Campbell 273). Whatever the physical, mental, or spiritual task the hero has to face, their journey's most compelling aspect is self-discovery. The hero's blatantly flawed elements of humanity are those which the reader clings to because they can identify with the hero that way. Allowing the reader to experience that process, and the hero opens the reader to the possibility of doing it for themselves. Myths remind people of their humanity, in the face of the

villain, most people tend to side with the hero because they invest themselves emotionally in the hero's journey of self-discovery.

All myths reflect human life, and contemporary tales specifically revolve around a current hero with no special powers prepared to rise to the occasion to defeat the villain. Heroes exist in anyone, and everyone and the Hero's Journey has made it possible for characters to become heroes through extreme hardship, rather than merely receiving their powers through birth. The tasks that the hero has to undergo and master encourage the reader to want the hero to succeed because the reader can identify with those hardships based on their life experiences. Myths portray life as it is, not how people wish it to be. If readers interact with a hero who can face extreme hardship and come out on the other side triumphantly, the hero provides a sense of hope for the reader.

The hero's journey begins with a call to action designed to destroy any life the hero had planned for themselves previously. "Tragedy is the shattering of the forms and our attachment to the forms" (Campbell 21). It is typical of the hero to feel as if the life they lead before the call to action is impossible to return to through some tragedy. This prevents the hero from having any reservations about the journey they are about to embark on; they need to give themselves to the journey completely, with nothing holding them back. It also encourages the reader to look at tragedy from a different perspective, rather than on the negatives of the situation; new opportunities present themselves in the face of adversity.

Usually, after the call to action, the hero's first interaction of his/her journey is with a wise old man or woman to aid the hero in any way they can. This character serves as someone who exists, it seems, to be a source of information and comfort for the hero. Campbell describes this character as "... a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the

adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he [or she] is about to pass” (57). This character is so prevalent in myths that the examples are countless. The hero knows he/she cannot complete their journey alone, so they must confide in someone who has previous experience concerning the journey they are about to embark on together. This character exists as someone the hero and the reader are expected and encouraged to trust. Everything about this character offers a sense of protection and stability in the face of the tasks they have to complete. Without question, the wise old character and the hero are working toward the same goal with pure intentions at heart.

Campbell discusses the villain in the terms of what he calls “the tyrant monster:”

He is the hoarder of the general benefit. He is the monster avid for the greedy rights of “my and mine”. The havoc wrought by him is described in mythology and fairy tale as being universal throughout his domain. This may be no more than his household, his own tortured psyche, or the lives he blights with the touch of his friendship and assistance; or it may amount to the extent of his civilization. (Campbell 11)

Much like with the wise old character, there is no question regarding the intentions of the tyrant-monster. The difference between the two lies in the plans they hold. The hero is fighting for the power of good with the help of their wise confidant, whereas the villain exists to antagonize and defeat the hero through evil forces. For the myth to stay with the Hero’s Journey pattern, the hero needs to interact with a character whose sole purpose is to prevent the hero from reaching their goal. The term Campbell has coined for this oppositional character is designed to stand the test of time. When looking closer at most villains from various myths, it is easy to notice the traits

Campbell lays out in his description of the tyrant-monster. There are countless examples for characters such as this one, and while some specifics change from character to character, the underlying intentions remain the same. This character is interested only in how he/she can benefit from stopping the hero.

Much like the wise old character, the tyrant-monster knows more about the ongoing conflict than the hero. While the reader and the more minor characters rely on the hero to defeat the tyrant-monster, the hero is almost always at a disadvantage at the start of the journey. There is usually some form of deliberate action that leads to choosing the hero before they are even born. Although they have been selected for this task primarily at birth, they are almost always kept in the dark before the journey starts, putting them at a seemingly severe disadvantage when facing the villain. This idea of the hero being the underdog encourages the reader to become even more invested in the hero's adventure. The triumph over the tyrant-monster is much more rewarding when the hero's chances of winning are significantly lower than the villain's.

Following all of this, the hero faces a more strenuous journey of self-discovery. Every aspect of the journey heightens when the hero begins to realize the severity of what he/she is facing. Gaiman is in a unique position to build this commentary on American myth. The American genesis story is one of fighting off THE most significant power in the known world. Historically, at least in America, the British as antagonists have been painted as mythically monstrous; the empire was larger-than-life, villainous, and above all, THE antagonist. As a British author treating the American cultural adoption and adaptation of world myths, Gaiman can see this from the cultural standpoint of the culture that *created* the American myth through negative interaction. This also encourages the readers to align the tasks the hero has to face hardships of their own because it is easy to feel as if problems are too big for people to contend.

Now that the reader has become more invested in the hero's journey to self-discovery, the reader can begin to identify with the hero. The tyrant-monster can represent any hardships presented in the reader's life and allow them to experience how the hero of the myth can overcome their obstacles; the reader can start to discover how they wish to deal with their hardships. Most, if not all, of these characters, represent people living during the myth's creation and circulation; the readers can expect to find meaning in themselves due to these stories. Although the pattern and characters in these stories seem to be repetitions of the same basic principles or plot points, the audience remains captivated by the story because they can assimilate to contemporary hardships specific to different people.

The audience can relate to the hero because the notion that heroes need to be exceptional people is not valid. The hero's journey is most compelling when the hero is an underdog character, equipped with characters prepared to aid them through their journey, and when the villain seems unbeatable, or the task at hand seems unsolvable. Myths remain relevant throughout our lives, whether we notice them or not because they reflect what we all go through daily. We all want to be the hero, and we all realize that we cannot complete our tasks or defeat the villain in our lives without help from others. Campbell discusses that these myths are not glamorized or romanticized; they reflect life as it currently exists.

Every myth Campbell discusses carries a sense of doom along with it. Doom is essential in most tales because, from the beginning of the story, the hero calls to action by some crisis that occurs, which alters the hero's life drastically. Along the way, the hero has to face tasks designed to prepare them to meet the villain at the height of the plot's conflict. These myths consist of a sense of fulfillment at their conclusion because the hero can accomplish their task and discover

their own identity along the way as well. The presence of doom provides the reader with the ability to use it against the villain, which gives the reader a sense of hope.

Campbell examines another crucial aspect of myths that Gaiman can capitalize on, the downfall of the tyrant.

The tyrant is proud, and therein resides his doom. He is proud because he thinks of his strength as his own; thus he is in the clown role, as a mistaker of shadow for substance; it is his destiny to be tricked. The mythological hero, reappearing from the darkness that is the source of the shapes of the day, brings a knowledge of the secret of the tyrant's doom. (Campbell 289)

Through the hero's journey, he or she can see the world for what it is, including witnessing the villain at face value. Gaiman takes this idea one step further by choosing a villain who is a quintessential trickster throughout mythology. Odin not only carries ancient weight as the ruler of the gods of Norse mythology; in recent years, he has resurfaced in the public eye as one of the most powerful characters in a hugely successful movie franchise. Using an aspect of that caliber and turning the tables so that he is the victim of being tricked by someone resonates with the reader and gives the hero an extremely evident sense of purpose. Campbell laid the foundation for Gaiman to create an incredibly compelling contemporary myth with this idea.

Campbell explores contemporary stories by comparing them to myths that have existed for thousands of years and focusing on the similarities among those stories. Each character in every story represents an essential aspect of life relating to the time in which the myth takes place. While there are significant, basic similarities in characters throughout thousands of years, each story's specificities reflect the period it comes from, which allows the myth to focus on the

time's truths. Whatever those truths are is unique to the period the myth originates from, but the fact remains that human nature relies on self-discovery journeys.

CHAPTER TWO: UNGODLY AMERICANA

*“Hey,” said Shadow. “Huginn or Muninn, or
whoever you are.” The bird turned, head tipped,
unsuspiciously, on one side, and it stared at him with
bright eyes.*

“Say ‘Nevermore,’” said Shadow.

“Fuck you,” said the raven.

*-Neil Gaiman *American Gods**

IV. LIES, LIARS, AND LAYMEN

Every aspect of *American Gods* is a lie based on preconceived notions of the people and places Gaiman discusses. For example, the protagonist, Shadow, is a unique version of a contemporary American hero because he is not what most would consider a hero to be. As the novel starts, we learn almost immediately that he is an ex-convict about to finish a three-year sentence. Despite being in prison, it is clear that Shadow is not unnecessarily violent or even an actual criminal. He got caught up with the wrong people. It soon becomes clear that Shadow did not go to prison for any noble cause. He is merely taking the fall for his wife, which may sound lofty, but his wife is no saint. Shadow is the hero of the story because he ultimately takes down Wednesday and lives to tell the tale while he does indeed receive much help.

Gaiman combines Campbell’s depiction of the hero with the mystical figure of a shaman. Mathilda Slabbert and Leonie Viljoen describe a shaman in concerning *American Gods* as, “The shaman possesses the ability to transcend the mundane and interact with beings and spirits on a higher level, without becoming their instrument or being possessed by them” (6). Throughout the novel, Shadow can discredit the so-called new gods and prevent them from using him as a pawn to turn against Wednesday and the old gods. It is clear that he does not have as much power as the gods, but he can stand his ground against them with that knowledge. Gaiman combines this

with Campbell's depiction of a true hero and produces Shadow as a result which is determined to fight for people who cannot protect themselves.

By that standard, Shadow is, without a doubt, the hero of Gaiman's novel; however, Shadow's journey of becoming the hero can only be complete once he fulfills his journey of self-discovery. To do that, Shadow must discover who he is independent of Wednesday and Laura, so when he adopts the personality of Mike Ainsel, he is given the opportunity of a clean slate. When Shadow is in Lakeside, he gets a glimpse of his life, but when his idealized dream comes crashing down, he accepts who he truly needs to fulfill his role as the hero.

Shadow's journey of self-discovery emphasizes his humanity through the tragedy he endures. Like any true hero, Shadow has his fair share of faults, but readers are not expecting a perfectly flawless hero anymore. Allowing the reader to experience all of the tragedy and grief with Shadow makes his journey all the more authentic because it is not a superficially romantic process. Campbell calls this process "the childhood cycle" because it consists of the hero discovering who he truly is. "This event may precipitate a considerable crisis; for it amounts to an emergence of powers hitherto excluded from human life. Earlier patterns break to fragments or dissolve; disaster greets the eye. Yet after a moment of apparent havoc, the creative value of the new factor comes to view, and the world takes shape again in unsuspected glory" (Campbell 282). When Laura and Robbie die in the car accident, the entire life Shadow had planned is brutally taken from him. The tragedy is necessary for Shadow because there was no other way he would have left this world and identity behind if Laura was still alive.

Before Wednesday sends him to Lakeside, and before Laura dies, Shadow is perfectly content living in everyone's background. When Gaiman introduces Shadow, he makes it very clear how devoted Shadow is to his wife. The first and only time Shadow interacts with Laura

before she dies, the reader learns the meaning behind Laura's nickname for Shadow, "puppy." "When they got married Laura told Shadow that she wanted a puppy, but their landlord had pointed out they weren't allowed pets under the terms of their lease. 'Hey,' Shadow had said, 'I'll be your puppy. What do you want me to do? Chew your slippers? Piss on the kitchen floor? Lick your nose? Sniff your crotch? I bet there's nothing a puppy can do I can't do!'" (Gaiman 9). Everything the reader needs to know about Shadow and Laura's relationship is in this exchange between the two. He is wholly devoted to her, like a dog to its owner. Shadow does anything Laura tells him to, and he ends up in jail because of it, but even that does not lessen his devotion to her. Shadow's identity is lost in Laura when they married; he devotes everything to her and is entirely comfortable living in her shadow.

Once Laura dies, Shadow changes his allegiance to Wednesday, living up to his given name and acting as Wednesday's shadow. It is not until Shadow gets to Lakeside, given a new name and new life, that he finally starts living. As Mike Ainsel, Shadow gradually learns what it means to be a hero. Gaiman presents him with the chance that is instead appealing to anyone when life becomes too much to bear. He can leave the life he was living behind and begin life again as a person who is everything he ever wanted to be. Lakeside represents the ideal American small town, and Shadow can finally have a place and a life to call his own. However, like everything else in *American Gods*, these are both tricks that can never truly exist.

Everything about Lakeside, including the identity that Shadow adopts there is an illusion constructed to prey on two fundamental American ideals. The small American town is one of, if not the greatest myth contemporary America has to offer. Based on equality and inclusion ideas, the American small-town prides itself on the idea that everyone in the town gets along and cares for one another while the town can prosper without ever-growing too much in population and

size. Similarly, when Shadow assimilates into Mike, he can separate himself from the consequences of his life and become a completely new person. The American Dream stems from the idea that receiving a clean slate and working hard enough means that anyone can obtain the life they desire. These ideas are exceptional in theory and may have worked in the past. Still, Gaiman uses both Campbell and Barthes' influence to make it clear that those ideas cannot exist in contemporary American society.

When Shadow first arrives in Lakeside, he meets the two people who prove to him and the reader that an authentic American small town can never exist. The first person Shadow interacts with from Lakeside, Alison McGovern, unfortunately, is the girl whose death reveals the insidious truth behind Lakeside's prosperity. The second person Shadow speaks to Hinzelmann is the man responsible for Alison's death and, by extension, proves that America is not the country fit for small towns anymore. Gaiman describes Hinzelmann as a man who is, "... old but contented, the face of a man who had sipped life's vinegar and found it, by and large, to be mostly whiskey, and good whiskey at that" (Gaiman 222). By all appearances, Hinzelmann seems to be a stereotypical older man who is extremely involved in his beloved small town's community. Gaiman plays on the concept of what Campbell calls the Wise Old Man character. Examples of this character exist across various myths and stories, and the general purpose of this character is someone, "... whose words assist the hero through the trials and terrors of the weird adventure" (Campbell 6). As Cavell pointed out to us, the reader often expects a character like this. Once the author introduces the character, they are almost automatically trusted and practically never pose any threat. Gaiman uses this to his advantage by making two of these Wise Old Man characters, Wednesday and Hinzelmann, into two of the novel's most sinister characters.

Both Wednesday and Hinzelmann embody the character of the Wise Old Man and the tyrant-monster simultaneously. According to Campbell, the tyrant-monster is someone who, "... is the avid for the greedy rights of 'my and mine.' The havoc wrought by him is described in mythology and fairy tale as being universal throughout his domain" (11). Both Wednesday and Hinzelmann act solely for selfish reasons and do not care for whoever might interfere with their plans. They use the archetype of the Wise Old Man to trick everyone into letting their guard down, but the reality of the situation is they are exploiting everyone for the life they want. The most compelling aspect Gaiman uses for both characters is that their sinister tendencies are blatantly apparent once the truth comes out.

Hinzelmann's sacrifice of teenagers every year proves that small-town America can never truly exist because there is always something sinister behind closed doors, or in this case, frozen cars. Gaiman uses one of the most famous American myths to reveal his characters' true insidious nature. Lakeside can stay prosperous without growing in size for so long because Hinzelmann has been tricking the town into taking part in the sacrifice of a teenager from the town since its inception. Gaiman's influences of Barthes and Campbell come together in this instance by taking the archetype of the Wise Old Man and the mythic social idea of the small American town, and using both as a con reveals the truth behind America itself.

Both Wednesday and Hinzelmann represent the contemporary versions of ancient gods. Still, Wednesday is more upfront about who he is, whereas Hinzelmann does not give much information about his real persona. Wednesday is the ameliorized version of Odin from Norse mythology, and this is important because Gaiman plays into the preconceived notions the audience has about Odin to reveal the truth about American greed. When Gaiman introduces Wednesday, his appearance is:

His hair was reddish-gray; his beard, a little more than stubble, was grayish-red. He was smaller than Shadow, but he seemed to take up a hell of a lot of room. A craggy, square face with pale gray eyes. The suit looked expensive, and was the color of melted vanilla ice cream. His tie was dark gray silk, and the tiepin was a tree, worked in silver: trunk, branches, and deep roots. (Gaiman 20)

Gaiman is exploiting one of the cornerstones of American society today, an impatient businessman sitting in first class waiting for his plane to take off to get to wherever he so desperately needs to be. The description Gaiman provides of Wednesday provides the reader with familiarity because of how familiar American businessmen are. Odin still represents power, and the contemporary American version of that is something anyone running through an airport will see.

Gaiman's use of Odin for Wednesday's base character encourages the reader to trust him because he has been part of American society for decades, first through comic books and now as a part of a hugely successful movie franchise. However, with everything else in the novel, Gaiman shows his readers that the image they have of Odin is not the exact version of the Norse god. Gaiman describes the correct version of Odin in his introduction to retellings of Norse myths by stating, "Odin the all-father was no longer gentle, wise, and irascible, but instead he was brilliant, unknowable and dangerous" (xiv). The white-washed version of Odin that so many people are used to now is not the same Odin that Norse people worshipped hundreds of years ago. It is essential to know who Odin was to prepare for what he might do throughout the adventure in *American Gods*.

At his core, Wednesday possesses Odin's main trait of being a manipulative trickster and has been able to disguise himself as the Wise Old Man in contemporary American society. Shadow's journey of self-discovery comes to an end when Wednesday admits that he and Loki had tricked everyone into thinking the war between the gods was real. Shadow now understands whom he needs to be to beat Wednesday at his own game and stop him from becoming too powerful. When Wednesday comes clean about who he truly is, Shadow accepts this reality for what it is, not for what he wants it to be.

Shadow is the true hero of the novel because he understands American culture's darkest aspects but believes that not everyone is acting to destroy everyone else. Campbell touches on an extremely dark issue of the ending of most myths he has studied. "The happy ending is justly scorned as a misrepresentation; for the world, as we know it, as we have seen it, yields but one ending: death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of our heart with the passing of the forms we have loved" (Campbell 19). The happy ending that Campbell is focusing on in Shadow's case is his idea of the American Dream. The idealized version of life that most Americans expect to have one day is rarely something that they can obtain. It is necessary to let go of the expectations that everything will be exactly the way one wants it. The only way to be truly happy is to understand that while ugliness exists, accepting that and improving the situation is better than merely pretending like it is not there.

Along the way, Shadow receives help from multiple characters throughout the novel, the most frequent of whom are his undead wife Laura, Sam Black Crow, and the Buffalo Man, who visits him in his dreams. Unlike Wednesday, these helpful secondary characters help Shadow with no ulterior motive. The person who helps and looks out for Shadow the most is his undead wife, Laura. Once she comes back to life, she is determined to protect Shadow at any cost, which

results in her killing quite a few men who want to kill Shadow. Keeping with the central theme of this novel that everything and every person is essentially a trick, Laura can play on society's expectations of getting what she wants. She is aware that she lives in a country controlled by men, and the only way for her to be able to interact with them is to appeal to their preconceived notions of her. Laura represents the understanding contemporary American women have that to get anything done in this country; one has to trick a man into helping one do it.

To fully understand Laura's situation in the novel through a feminist perspective, it is crucial to be familiar with Simone de Beauvoir's essay "The Second Sex." She discusses the idea of women filling the role of the "other" by claiming that they exist only as comparisons to men and because they are something that is not male, they are deemed as "other" (1266). Society writes them off to be something different from men based on their gender, which Gaiman clarifies in Wednesday's perspective of women in the book. de Beauvoir also discusses the claim that women experience a different set of "pains and burdens" instead of men (1267). The most critical aspect in connection to Laura is that although men see women as fellow people, they are still considered "inessential" (1272). Gaiman shows this in Wednesday and the old gods' attitude towards women countless times throughout the novel. In particular, Wednesday uses women either as pawns in the great con he is planning or as sexual objects that he can disregard once he stops using them. Most of the men in *American Gods* similarly see women as the "other" and inessential, which leads to these controlling behaviors and objectification.

de Beauvoir's emphasis on men's confusion regarding trying to fit women into one clearly defined myth, as she calls it, is shown time and time again with Laura. The reader's view of her can either be one extreme or the other. After reading the novel and knowing that Wednesday was manipulating Laura's death, Gaiman clearly states that she was a victim of

circumstances. After her death, she starts to use the confusing state of how men see her to her advantage. de Beauvoir discusses this idea in her essay when she mentions how women are either evil or guardian angels for “employing their erotic attraction” depending on whether they are using it on “young men or fathers of families” or if they are using it at home with their “husbands or lovers” (1266). Women are still under the male gaze and are objectified. Their identities are diminished from a “complete” human to an “incomplete” or inessential “other” that can be used or abused. After her death, Laura’s behavior demonstrates that even though women are objectified, they have agency and authority.

Laura is crucial to Shadow’s success because she can trick one of the ultimate tricksters in the novel, Loki, into stopping the battle he and Wednesday are trying to orchestrate. If it were not for Laura stabbing Loki, Shadow would not have been able to stop Wednesday and Loki’s plan. However, she is not the hero of the story because she does not survive to tell the rest of the gods that the battle was a complete lie. She is crucial to Shadow’s journey of self-discovery, but she will never reap the benefits or receive any recognition for what she did to help because her body does not survive. Women are an integral part of American culture, and yet, they exist in lenses of toxic masculinity. Laura acts as Shadow’s protector once she realizes that being undead means that no one can physically hurt her. After she dies, the roles reverse, and she exists in the background of Shadow’s life, protecting him when he is unable to help himself.

Laura is a combination of influences from Campbell and Barthes because America expects women to act a certain way toward their husbands, and she rejects that expectation completely. Once the reader learns how she died, it is safe to assume that most readers will jump to a conclusion about her without truly knowing who she is because of how she betrayed Shadow and her best friend, Audrey. Gaiman gives Laura the chance to explain why she cheated on

Shadow while he was in prison while hinting that she might not have been in control of her actions. After she stabs Loki through her own body, effectively ruining their plan, Wednesday explains the role Laura was supposed to play.

“I needed *you*, my boy. Yes. my own boy. I know that you had been conceived, but your mother had left the country. It took us so long to find you. And when we did find you, you were in prison. We needed to find out what made you tick. What buttons we could press to make you move. Who you were.” Loki looked, momentarily, pleased with himself. Shadow wanted to hit him. “And you had a wife to go back home to. It was unfortunate. Not insurmountable.”

“She was no good for you,” whispered Loki. “You were better off without her.” “If it could have been any other way,” said Wednesday, and this time Shadow knew what he meant. (Gaiman 475)

Laura represents American women at the mercy of men controlling their lives. Wednesday and Loki needed to get her and Robbie out of the way so that Shadow would have no one to go back to once he got out of prison. Wednesday reveals something fundamental concerning Laura at the end of the novel. It is clear to the reader that she genuinely loves Shadow, and if Wednesday needed her to hurt Shadow, it would have been all too easy for him to encourage Laura to cheat on Shadow with Robbie. Although Gaiman does not explicitly state this, Wednesday is a compelling character specializing in making people do what he wants. The claim that Wednesday somehow forced Laura to cheat on Shadow is not outlandish. When examining her death by those terms, Laura deserves more sympathy from the reader than she has received for most of the novel.

Campbell's explanation of women and their roles in mythology correctly describes Laura's character arch throughout the novel. "By deficient eyes she [women in general] is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world" (Campbell 97). According to Campbell, women only exist through men's eyes, and that is how Gaiman depicts Wednesday interacting with women throughout the novel. Every interaction Wednesday has with a woman is playing on the expectation that traditionally-minded men have that women are lesser than them and will never be considered equal. Wednesday uses women as pieces in his game, and Laura is no exception to that. Unfortunately, she has to operate in a world where people only see what they choose to see when they look at her. With that in mind, Laura is cunning enough to represent a contemporary aspect of American women, which fits Gaiman's theme of trickster characters.

Laura represents contemporary women who understand that to get what they want; they have to manipulate the people around them. She can play on the traditional expectations people have towards her while hiding the fact that she is dead for most of the book. Laura is a very hopeful character for female readers because, after learning the full extent of her character arc, Gaiman clarifies that if she had not intervened, Wednesday and Loki's plan might have worked. She is the only person to stand against them because they have already killed her, so they cannot hurt her anymore. The attitude she holds represents the same attitude many women have to use daily. To be taken seriously, women have to remove their emotions from a situation altogether; otherwise, men will consistently take advantage of it. American society regards showing any emotion as a weakness, and that viewpoint is even more severe when it comes to women.

Gaiman uses the supernatural aspect of her being undead to show just how unrealistic expectations are for women in America.

Laura represents the very dark reality of what women have to face in America regarding unrealistic and conflicting expectations placed on them. She is continuously defined by how other people see her. When Gaiman introduces her, she is Shadow's wife, wholly devoted to him and excitedly waiting for him to return home. At her funeral, when Audrey reveals the truth behind Laura's death to Shadow, she becomes an adulteress who betrayed her loving husband and childhood best friend. Within an instant, she becomes an entirely different person because of how other people perceive what she did. After she comes back to life, she is none of those people anymore. She cannot be the woman Shadow married because of what she did with Robbie, and she is no longer the woman that cheated on Shadow because that woman died in a car accident. Laura is allowed to reinvent herself because no one is paying her any attention. To be meaningful within the plot, she has to die first and lose all feeling, physically, and emotionally. She still exists as a pawn in their game, but she can make her own decisions. Laura is the one thing Wednesday did not account for, and his misogynistic view of her blinds him from realizing that she can ruin his entire plan.

Throughout his journey, the women who aid Shadow share a common theme of rebelling against the traditional expectations that are so ingrained in American society. Whereas Laura operates in a space defined by both conventional and contemporary expectations of her, Sam Black Crow rejects expectations from all sides. While she only appears in a couple of scenes throughout the novel, she also plays an integral role in protecting Shadow. Both of these women take it upon themselves to protect Shadow when he is unable to defend himself. Sam represents an entire generation of women who have been underestimated and ignored by American men.

These women are fully prepared to blatantly reject the patriarchal system that has existed in the country for centuries. Sam provides female readers with hope by showing that resisting the injustices women face is not only a privilege but a right.

From Shadow's first encounter with Sam, the word abrasive comes to mind concerning her character. The reality of the situation is that she is not afraid of being unapologetically herself, which takes readers by surprise because society expects women to be apologetic. She is also not afraid to take charge of a situation; when she sees Shadow asleep in his car, she taps on the glass to ensure that he is alive rather than minding her own business and continuing on her way. Sam comes into Shadow's life, which is yet another example of something Wednesday failed to consider. At any slight hint of men patronizing her, Sam shuts it down immediately, without fail. She is only rude when the situation is called for, even when Shadow attempts to watch out for her, she clarifies that she does not want him to treat her in that way. Shadow and Sam have an unspoken understanding with each other from the beginning, that he will not patronize her, but will still do anything he can to take care of her. He is not under the impression that she needs him; he is simply a nice enough man to want to make sure she is safe.

Alternatively, she understands that he is someone who sees her as a person instead of a girl who regularly needs looking after. The relationship the two have stems from mutual respect, which manifests in their unique way of protecting each other.

Shadow and Sam understand each other because they are both on the road to self-discovery in contemporary America. They both experience alienation from a society based on snap judgments made by people who never bother to understand them truly. Gaiman mentions throughout the novel, though, never dwells upon Shadow being a man of color, and Sam is very upfront about her heritage. She states that she is part Cherokee when Shadow asks, so her family

has been living in America longer than anyone else mentioned in the novel. Sam embodies what it means to be a young, twenty-something woman living in America. She is patronized continuously for being a woman and marginalized for her family's history. Still, she understands that feeling sorry for herself is a waste of time, and she uses both of those shortcomings to her advantage. Sam represents women who are familiar with the hardships of the world and that they are at the mercy of men who have been controlling the world for centuries. Nevertheless she refuses to accept that things need to stay that way.

Sam Black Crow is a minor character who holds much power because of how she sees the world. Campbell's depiction of the dreamer describes Sam rather well: "The dreamer is a distinguished operatic artist, and, like all who have elected to follow, not the safely marked highways of the day, but the adventure of the special, dimly audible call that comes to those whose ears are open within as well as without, she has to make her way alone, through difficulties not commonly encountered" (16). Sam is an entirely independent person and is integral to *American Gods* because she helps to open Shadow's eyes to see America for what it is. Rather than being caught up in mainstream America, Sam exists on the fringes of society. She pays close attention to the people around her, especially Shadow, and she prides herself on seeing the good in people. Taking the world at face value does not mean that Sam is a pessimistic person. She sees the good in Shadow, and she believes what he says to her. She embodies the spirit of a generation who understands that life is not fair while also refusing to accept injustices.

In a world ruled by tricksters, Sam is the only character other than Shadow, who is as honest as possible. She does not attempt to hide ulterior motives, nor does she have a hidden agenda. She acts impulsively and does what she believes is right, which helps Shadow along the

way. Sam shows Shadow how being firmly set in her identity is essential in the face of hardship. She can help Shadow realize that being a true mythological hero requires a strong sense of identity, and everything that one does has a more profound meaning than what people see on the surface. Shadow receives the most help from Sam because she encourages him to become active around him, rather than living in other people's shadows.

American Gods encapsulates what life in America is like, aside from all of the assumptions that accompany America's idea. American dream small towns do not exist, heroes come straight from prison, tricksters take many forms, the most common of which exist as American businessmen, and women are still defined by how the male gaze perceives them. Each social sign is rooted in tradition, but the truth behind the surface is that the contemporary world stands for something entirely different. America is a place that is continuously moving in multiple directions with a wide variety of people who exist to make up a unique country. Everyone has an idea of what they expect America to be, but much like Shadow, America is the only country that does not have one all-encompassing identity. All of the people living in America have a different experience of living here because American life's idealized dream is exceptionally subjective. Gaiman captures the complicated situation in America brilliantly by using ancient, traditional myths from other countries as America's basis. Although these myths are very different from life today, many people in America can identify their family history within these myths.

CHAPTER THREE OTHER READERS

“What’s your name,” Coraline asked the cat.

“Look I’m Coraline. Okay?”

“Cats don’t have names,” it said.

“No?” said Coraline.

“No,” said the cat, “Now you people have names.

That’s because you don’t know who you are. We

Know who we are, so we don’t need names.”

-Neil Gaiman, Coraline

V. IN CONCLUSION

Whether intentional or not, Joseph Campbell and Roland Barthes both serve as powerful influences in Gaiman’s *American Gods*. Working out of their unlikely aligned traditions, he has created extremely compelling characters, a gripping plot for his readers, and a novel that can impressively encompass life in contemporary life in America. Each character has their own identity that contributes to the collective that makes up America today. The old and new gods know whom they are supposed to be but adapt their personas to survive in America. Shadow is seemingly the only character who is genuinely embarking on his journey of self-discovery. Allowing the reader to embark on this journey with him automatically creates a strong bond between the reader and Shadow because his heroic journey is seated in the most common parts of everyday life.

The idea that readers *reading* their protagonist and secondary characters aiding the hero to be perfect people is not limited to one genre. Gaiman explores this idea in his young adult fiction as well with his children’s story, *Coraline*. The parallels between *American Gods* and *Coraline* lie in many aspects of each story. Although any number of indirect similarities can be evident, for the sake of argument, we could focus simply on the connections

between Shadow and Coraline and Wednesday and the Other Mother. Each character resembles their counterpart in very fundamental ways. Coraline and Shadow are embarking on their journey of self-discovery, which stems from concerns each character has regarding their respective names. Wednesday and the Other Mother are obsessed with exerting their power over others by tricking them. Each story invokes more significant overarching themes regarding identity and myths that reflect everyday life.

Gaiman takes the same ideas applied to Wednesday but delves deeper into this complexity when applying it to a mother figure. The sense of familiarity and comfort is similar, but Coraline and the Other Mother's relationship is somewhat different. Gaiman goes deeper into the different dynamic mothers have with their daughters while staying within the same theme used for Shadow and Wednesday. As a result, Gaiman places Wednesday and the Other Mother on a pedestal throughout their stories. The protagonist and the reader blindly trust them because of the role they have taken on as a parental figure. This blind trust makes it all the more shocking when both characters take on the antagonist's role. While *Coraline* and *American Gods* exist for different audiences, Gaiman can evoke the same themes in both of his stories.

Both antagonists, Wednesday and the Other Mother in *Coraline*, are manipulating people around them and the protagonists, which in this case would be Shadow and Coraline; for them to obey their bidding and come out victorious in a power struggle. The added aspect of *uncanny* elements that Gaiman uses to create the fantasy world instead of the real world in both works draws on even more similarities and parallels. "While conventional deployment of this pattern usually imposes strict boundaries between real and fantasy worlds, thereby containing uncanny effects within the fantasy realm, Gaiman begins to blur these boundaries

immediately” (Gooding 393). While this sentence refers to *Coraline*, the same idea exists in *American Gods* and what Gaiman refers to in the novel as the “behind the scenes.”

The supernatural elements in this selection of the story, specifically in chapter twelve, allow Shadow and Wednesday to escape the new gods that Wednesday feels are waiting for them when they are traveling later on in the novel. Gaiman uses these elements of fantasy to allow Shadow and Wednesday to avoid confrontation with the opposing side in the inevitable battle. Gaiman also uses uncanny elements throughout the rest of the novel in Shadow’s dreams and some of the gods’ abilities. Not to mention that for virtually the novel’s entirety, Shadow’s wife is, for lack of a better term, undead. These supernatural elements provide Gaiman with a kind of leeway that would not be possible in other literary genres. Gaiman knew that these aspects of his novel were crucial to the overall themes, and he can apply them to the greater overlying ideas that connect the novel to American society. “The uniqueness of this work of fiction lies in the fact that the main character co-exists in the worlds of both the living and the dead” (Chi Chang 9).

Along with the uncanny elements that thrive in the genre of fantasy, Gaiman provides a unique aspect to *American Gods* by focusing on something that only truly exists in America: the idea that the country rose from the ashes of what the forefathers left in their wake and the living society that exists today. While aspects of other countries are present within America, this country remains unique because it consists of various older societies’ remnants to become a country, *unlike* any other culture.

Gaiman’s commentary in these two stories is that these themes apply to people of all ages. Shadow is searching for his identity the same way Coraline is, and they both end up having to contend with the same hardships that come with that journey. Coraline is the hero of her own

story because she physically defeats the Other Mother and saves her birth parents. The ideas and themes Gaiman discusses in both stories can be traced back to the influence of Campbell and Barthes in the characters created to fit into the plot of each story.

The themes, questions, and issues Gaiman explore in *American Gods* are mythic in the sense that they underpin nearly every type of literature and genre. In essence, he makes his inhuman characters extremely humanistic. They are deeply flawed and by no means perfect, but they are not attempting to convince anyone. Joseph Campbell focuses on the patterns that emerge when telling different stories, specifically myths. His influence is evident in countless storytelling platforms, and Gaiman's influence is becoming just as extensive as Campbell's. He can further take Campbell's claims with the way his characters interact with one another and how he tells his stories.

Roland Barthes provides Gaiman with the tools to see everything for what it truly is, not what we wish it to be. The only way to truly understand America is to examine everything that makes the country what it is. Barthes provided Gaiman with a starting point for noticing that everything in the world around us has so much more meaning than we see on the surface. Gaiman takes Barthes' influence and uses it to create a realistic world within his novel. Paying attention to the signs that might seem insignificant allows Gaiman to see America for what it is.

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