

4-15-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Blomqvist, Rut (2012) "The Road of Our Senses: Search for Personal Meaning and the Limitations of Myth in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 30: No. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol30/iss3/2>

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## The Road of Our Senses: Search for Personal Meaning and the Limitations of Myth in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

### Abstract

Examines the intertextuality of culture and myth and the ways in which new myth is formed through an exploration of binaries throughout the novel and the added scenes in the 10th Anniversary edition.

### Additional Keywords

Binaries; Gaiman, Neil—Use of Myth; Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*; Intertextuality

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THE ROAD OF OUR SENSES:  
SEARCH FOR PERSONAL MEANING  
AND THE LIMITATIONS OF MYTH  
IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*

RUT BLOMQUIST

**Death, oddity, and knowledge**

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CULTURE IS BROADLY REFERRED TO in terms of mythology. This discourse can be traced back to the development of semiotics and has proliferated in today's discussion of a culture which, perhaps falsely, believes itself to be secular. In this study, I inquire into the concept of mythical secularity in the contemporary novel *American Gods* (2001/2011); the author Neil Gaiman lets his characters experience a mythical culture based on dubious binary pairs. If the protagonist Shadow can be interpreted as a realist element in this heavily symbolic and intertextual work, he can serve as one possible solution to the problem of defining truth and knowledge, and right and wrong, in the novel's America. Shadow does then, in spite of his many symbolic or archetypal traits, not become limited to any particular type of mythical figure. The protagonist realizes his own need to exist within a social context, but at the same time finds it impossible to wholeheartedly involve himself in American culture. He develops a critical view of the culture to which he nevertheless needs to belong, and the intermediary position he attains carries moral and ethical, as well as epistemic and ontological, implications.

In brief, *American Gods* is the story of the ex-convict Shadow who sets off on a classic road trip through America as a bodyguard to the grifter Wednesday—the American aspect of the Norse god Odin. Gradually, as Shadow is exposed to different elements of American culture, he becomes aware of its complexity, ambiguity and limitations. He struggles to make sense of what he sees and in doing so accepts the concept of binary division. Initially, opposites such as dead/alive, real/fake, light/darkness, good/evil, divine/human, old/new, and religious/secular seem to be mutually exclusive categories. These dichotomies can all be connected to the opposition between the old and new gods in the novel. After many journeys on physical American roads, in dreams and through the land of the dead, Shadow sees that the war between these two sides of gods has been staged by Wednesday and his partner to serve as a power-

generating sacrifice. When Shadow learns the truth about his employer, he decides to stop the war, and succeeds in doing so.

Shadow's success is entirely dependent on the help he receives from his dead wife Laura, his new-found friend Sam Black Crow and the buffalo man whom he mostly sees in dreams. Superficially, these three characters—especially the dead Laura and the odd buffalo man—seem to be anything but normal and trustworthy guides. However, in the novel's universe their peripheral positions give them a transcendental and reliable perspective of life; they know something important, "[s]omething that the dead are keeping back" (*American Gods* [AG] 543).<sup>1</sup> Dead, abnormal, and odd characters linger in the periphery and remain largely unbiased. Their interpretation of reality is of epistemic and ontological, moral and ethical value, and it is essential to Shadow in his search for personal meaning. This personal quest of Shadow's occurs on the novel's individual level, while the symbolic system that is American culture forms the text's cultural level. The present study discusses on the one hand the multifaceted culture to which Shadow is subjected, and on the other the protagonist's personal view of and relationship to this culture.

### **Culture: Myth creation and the absence of a center**

My analysis of the cultural level uses concepts from three different perspectives on contemporary western culture and fantasy literature: firstly, from Mathilda Slabbert's and Leonie Viljoen's "mythical" reading of *American Gods* and Avril Rubenstein's more general discussion of the mythical dimension of fantasy; secondly, from intertextual theory; thirdly, from Derrida's deconstruction theory.

When focusing on the notion of myth creation in fantasy, Slabbert and Viljoen and Rubenstein interpret elements of the narratives they discuss as archetypes. These archetypal symbols are then combined to form a mythical system; fantasy can, from this perspective, been seen as satisfying the need for myth in secular society. Slabbert and Viljoen's analysis of *American Gods* is based on the concepts "mythification" and "remythification," adopted from Eleazar Meletinsky's *The Poetics of Myth* (1998). 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. Slabbert deals mainly with the novel's cultural level: "Gaiman's novel *American Gods* focuses on the function of meta/multi-mythology in contemporary literature (especially the fantasy genre)

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of the novel's epilogue, but the same line occurs earlier and is a quotation from the Robert Frost poem *The Witch of Coos*, although Gaiman refers to the poem as *Two Witches* (192).

and on what these qualities reveal about society and its concerns and values" (*Inventions and Transformations* [*Inventions*], summary n.pag.). She concludes that Shadow's position in this culture is somehow extraordinary: "[I]t becomes clear that Shadow's interactions with gods and demons and his qualities as saviour or mediator establish him as a shaman in the meta-mythology presented in the novel and reinforce his liminal role in the in-between place he occupies in the world of the novel" (*Inventions* 167). However, perhaps due to a preconception that fantasy literature would incorporate the "powerful symbolism contained within the archetypal image" (Rubenstein 26), Slabbert's outlining of Shadow's intermediary position is symbolic and therefore results in a firm identity over which Shadow himself has no power.

The tendency of a mythical system to take form in secular culture can be explained by means of intertextual theory, which aims to make apparent the "relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life" (Allen 5). In *American Gods*, Gaiman uses intertextuality as a narrative technique in order to represent the intertextual system he identifies in real-life American culture. This culture is an eternal process of self-reference and thus never refers to a first principle outside itself; it uses itself as proof for its veraciousness. I thus understand the symbolic system in *American Gods* as a form of mock symbolism—it mocks the self-referentiality of American culture.

This system of endless internal reference can be understood as a fictionalization of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory; Derrida's technical vocabulary deepens the theoretical comprehension of Gaiman's fictional adaptation of contemporary American culture. I have used "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1970) because it accounts for the theory in a clear and concise manner. In Derrida's view, "structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a *center* or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin" (Derrida 247, emphasis added). The notion of a center is essential: "[T]his certitude" means that "anxiety can be mastered" (248). Nevertheless, the essence of the center is elusive because throughout history, humanity has experienced how "[s]uccessively, and in a regulated fashion, the center [has] receive[d] different forms or names" (249). Derrida's contention is that "in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse" (249). On many points, this description applies to the culture in Gaiman's *American Gods*. The solution to the problems caused by this state is not, according to Derrida, to exclude oneself from the structure: "We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is alien to this history" (250). This, however, does not justify an uncritical existence within this system or language; even "if nobody can escape this necessity [of existing within a system], and if no one is therefore responsible for giving in to it, however little, this does not mean

that all the ways of giving in to it are of equal pertinence. [...] [I]t is a question of a critical relationship to the language" (252). In *American Gods* and the journey of its protagonist, we encounter both the necessity of the notion of center and of structure, and the individual's responsibility to be critical of this structure's limitations.

### **Individual experience: Shadow's view of the cultural limitations**

An obfuscation of the novel's binary pairs is achieved if we focus on the individual efforts of the characters in the novel, regardless of their possible symbolic qualities. These efforts, such as Shadow's development of a critical position in relation to American culture, embody the dominant ideology of *American Gods*; an ideology which indicates an alternative to the problematic values and limited choices of lifestyle suggested by the binary pairs of American culture in the novel. I discern this ideology in passages which comment on, as I would call it, "the state of things," and it is through this dominant ideology that Gaiman manages to impart a vague but profoundly relevant idea of reality, something that reaches beyond the limiting cultural image of the real. The ability of characters and narrators to comment on the state of things can be connected to the ability to external and free focalization, in terms of narratology; focalization is a useful concept in my analysis of the point of view and thus the reliability of specific utterances or of a speaker or narrator more generally.

In Gaiman's *American Gods*, I distinguish one general narrator—the omniscient third-person narrator—as well as several characters who deliver reliable comments and, most interestingly, two "character-narrators." The general narrator's position in terms of space "takes the form of a bird's-eye view" (Rimmon-Kenan 78). This is a common form of narration, where the narrator is an "external focalizer (or narrator-focalizer) [who] knows everything about the represented world" (80) and whose "ideology [...] is usually taken as authoritative" (83). The character-narrators are remarkable because they take the form of external focalizers in certain passages; when they act as narrators, they temporarily lose their partiality. This should not be possible according to narratology, but the strength of *American Gods* lies in such unexpected crossings of boundaries.

Mr. Ibis is indisputably a character-narrator because his *Notebooks* are incorporated in the narrative as if they were real publications outside it. They are cited (AG 544) in the same manner as, for example, a Tom Waits song (260) or an excerpt from a book about Hindu Myths (155). Mr. Ibis also narrates two entire passages of 11 and 19 pages respectively (92-102, 321-339). Consequently, he does not have to earn his reliability—Mr. Ibis is capable of external focalization due to his divine sides which give him a temporal and spatial overview of America as well as an intellectual ability to analyze what he sees and knows. Wednesday,

who is arguably a character-narrator, has similar qualities; he has experienced the development and transformation of America from the arrival of the Vikings and he is, as the American manifestation of Odin, supposed to know all the names of the gods (289). Whereas Wednesday is unreliable in the sense that he cons practically every character in *American Gods*, he provides us with some insightful comments which are connected thematically to other remarks on the state of things. Thus, he has two roles in the narrative: he is a partial or biased character in the story and as such takes part in Shadow's journey, but he is also an impartial, reliable character-narrator whose ideology is authoritative. The ideology of the narrators and the other commentators on the state of things should be seen as reliable because it anticipates and contributes to Shadow's ontological, epistemic, moral, and ethical conclusions and his choice of lifestyle. When Shadow is being false to himself, the narrators and commentators know this and remark upon it, and when Shadow reaches perceptiveness, their point of view correlates with his.

In short, my contention is that *American Gods* lends itself to a discussion of the social need for a cultural system and the simultaneous limitations to its symbolic representation. I focus on Shadow's non-symbolic, non-archetypal functions in the novel and his strategy for handling life in a society where he is subjected to a limited and limiting symbolic system concerning the state of reality. My analysis is divided into three sections, each centered around one stage in Shadow's development; from *dutiful acceptance* of binary opposition, through *doubt* concerning its veraciousness, to a *critical position* made possible by his resolve to follow his own will and to live in a morally and ethically defensible manner. His development is dependent on his relationship to Laura, Sam, and the buffalo man, whose opinions correlate with the narrators' view of reality. The conclusion Shadow reaches suggests a solution to problems in contemporary America and similar Western societies.

### **Duty: Shadow numbly accepts cultural inconsistency**

Initially, one can attempt to make sense of the novel's system of intertextual references. The result is a perceived conflict between the old and the new gods in America. The new gods express contempt for the old ones: "We're shopping malls—your friends are crappy roadside attractions" (176). Wednesday—obviously one of the old gods—attempts to convince the diverse old divinities that their existence is threatened by these "new gods growing in America, clinging to growing knots of belief: gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone [...], gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon" (137-138). Each side despises the other, which results in an association of the old/new dichotomy with that of good/evil. Shadow endeavors to pick sides in this conflict and distinguish the good gods from the evil ones.

Before discussing these and other gods further, I need to define the concept 'god' within the context of the novel. The American gods are consecrated ideas (443)<sup>2</sup> which *either* stem from pre-colonial Native American and immigrant myth, *or* materialize from new phenomena such as capitalism. The revival of pre-modern mythological characters is necessarily an intertextual process; in creating characters such as Wednesday, Czernobog and even Shadow, Gaiman refers to the texts of the old myths they derive from. Intertextual reference is also present in the new symbolic system based on modern phenomena such as cultural heroes, for example when Gaiman mentions the "fakelore" lumberjack Paul Bunyan (352-353), and in the author's usage of songs, poems, novels and non-fiction; the author introduces every chapter with a citation and throughout the novel the songs and stories incorporated give us hints and tips as to what is going on. Most importantly, however, the references to roadside attractions and other material features of American culture form part of the intertextual system in *American Gods*.

Shadow's point of view is at this stage one of acceptance; he does not question the arbitrariness of the intertextual system. After having learned of his wife's death, Shadow simply goes on in a disconnected, numb manner: "It occurred to him that he had not cried yet—had in fact felt nothing at all. No tears. No sorrow. Nothing" (14-15). "Shadow thought there was a lot to be said for bottling up emotions. If you did it long enough and deep enough, he suspected, pretty soon you wouldn't feel anything at all" (57), and this seems attractive to him as he has lost all familiarity in his life: his wife and his home in prison. He is eager to follow Wednesday's lead; Shadow's duty, not his own will, is his motif. He tries to find his determined purpose in the system he experiences himself as part of:

"I have to wait here," said Shadow. "Until my boss needs me."  
"That's not living," said Laura. (371);

or, when questioned by the buffalo man about his destination:

"Where are you going, Shadow?"  
"Cairo."  
"Why?"  
"Where else have I got to go? It's where Wednesday wants me to go."  
(162)

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<sup>2</sup> Gaiman's definition of gods as the essence of ideas is similar to the concept in Terry Pratchett's novels *Small Gods* (1992) and *Hogfather* (1996): in the latter, human beings unintentionally invent gods of hangovers and sock theft, simply by assuming or suggesting that these gods might exist. Gaiman co-authored *Good Omens* (1990) with Pratchett.



Wednesday then stages his own death and leaves Shadow to his own devices, and because Shadow does not have a strategy for making his own decisions, he completely loses his direction:

He [Shadow] was passing the time. He was numb.

He missed Wednesday, then, sudden and deep. He missed the man's confidence, his attitude. His conviction. (409)

Even when Shadow's duty is at its strongest, however, a change is anticipated because of the narrative's persistent ambiguity and the ever-present critical comments on the state of things. Throughout the novel, Gaiman voices a social critique which is common in contemporary criticism and research; using myth to describe a cultural tendency is an efficient way to satirize the dominant paradigm:

Figuratively speaking, *postcapitalism* could be described using terms connected to religious studies.

There is a whole set of beliefs that "explains" the reality: for example, capitalism is the best of systems, an individual can only be free and happy in capitalism, the one "who works hard, will get there."

There are also doctrines: the right to own, the free market, the freedom of entrepreneurship. There are places of worship: shopping malls, banks, financial centres, or television programmes devoted only to the economy.

[...] Finally, there is the area of *sacrum*: the "*Invisible Hand of the Market*" [...]. (Macewicz 110, italics in original)

A successful myth corresponds with humanity's search for clear answers and epistemological satisfaction. According to Avril Rubenstein, "[h]umanity runs riot, seeking salvation in diverse and eccentric ways" (50) and a result of this has been that, throughout history, as Derrida puts it, "the center [has] receive[d] different forms or names" (249). It is Rubenstein's contention that fantasy responds to this cultural search for coherence or center. Whereas I do not interpret *American Gods* as this type of fantasy novel, the culture *within* it is a secularized culture which seeks salvation and coherence in whatever is at hand. Two sources of epistemological satisfaction—two concepts perceived as center—are drugs and roadside attractions; Mad Sweeney sees that "opiates have become the religion of the masses" (AG 221) and Wednesday is upset by how "[t]hese days, people can't just go and see a mountain. Thus, Mister Gutzon Borglum's tremendous presidential faces [Mount Rushmore]" (341). "'Now that,' [Wednesday] said, 'is a holy place'" (340).

Mad Sweeney's remark is philosophically relevant for two reasons. Firstly, the statement alludes to and plays with "religion is the opiate of the

masses"; a paraphrase of Karl Marx which is practically an idiomatic expression today. Secondly, as I have mentioned, those who are in some way not included in the center of culture, experience reality in *American Gods*. The dead are one example; drunks another. Shadow is made aware of this when a diorama in the House on the Rock shows him "the world as it is" (123): "The *drunk* in the *graveyard*" sees "a grasping *corpse*; a headstone turned around, flowers replaced by a grinning skull. A *wraith* appeared on the right of the church [...]. Then [...] a priest came out, and the ghosts, haunts, and corpses vanished [...]. The priest looked down on the drunk disdainfully" (123, emphasis added). The drunk sees the real world while the priest disdains the truly experienced. This diorama scene takes place in a graveyard, which is a setting to which Gaiman returns.

Wednesday's comment connects to the important theme of the roadside attraction, the essence of holiness in the novel's America:

[P]eople feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and *profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that*. (118, emphasis added)

The general narrator also comments on this dissatisfaction: "[People] leave bemused, uncertain of why they came, of what they have seen, of whether they had a good time or not" (487), visiting the roadside attraction. Moreover, Gaiman himself expresses this view of roadside America; in an interview, he points to the absurdity in how real-world Americans ascribe roadside attractions value without knowing really *what* it is they find meaningful. Gaiman dramatizes a conversation with Americans on the subject: "'Tell me why five million people go to [the roadside attraction] the House on the Rock.' [People answer], 'Uhhhhhh . . .'" (Wagner, Golden, and Bisette 493).

In addition to this omnipresent social critique, the buffalo man, Laura, and Sam continually discuss important matters with Shadow and awaken in him his ability to form his own opinions, and thereby contribute to a challenge to Shadow's sense of duty. When duty and binary opposition are viewed critically, the novel raises uncomfortable questions about personal purpose in relation to culturally constructed myths. Eventually, Shadow starts to doubt his duty.

### **Doubt: The unclear position of the dividing line between opposites**

Shadow's development is obvious; part one of the novel is concerned with "Shadows" (1), as its title tells us, while part two narrates the stage in the protagonist's journey where he becomes his own self, or, in the Northumbrian

dialect, "My Ainsel" (231)<sup>3</sup>. In the first chapter of part two, Shadow is actually reborn, though in a dream, through the Earth (246-247), and is then shortly given his Mike Ainsel identity. This change in Shadow's character leads to a more general doubt in relation to the novel's binary pairs and symbolic system; *American Gods* with its social criticism does not defend the society and culture it embodies. Due to the ambiguity of the novel's symbolism and its references to a center which is absent, it is difficult, or even impossible, to attain an accurate overview of the system. This empty or shallow intertextual experience is described by the critic Fredric Jameson: "[D]epth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what if often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)" (12). A self-referential symbolic system can communicate the *idea* of meaning—the notion of center—but will when analyzed give rise to questions which the system cannot answer. This is what Gaiman humorously comments on in the interview where he describes Americans as unable to explain why millions visit the House on the Rock. Gaiman questions the system's tendency to justify itself; he says that a culturally important phenomenon such as a roadside attraction "exists because it exists. And its existence generates more things around it" (Wagner, Golden, and Bisette 493). The things generated around it refer to the roadside attraction, which then seems to be—must be—the center. The roadside attraction in the geographical center of America is in the novel a place "'[o]f negative sacredness. [...] All of America has it, a little,' said Czernobog. 'That is why we [gods] are not welcome here. But the center,' said Czernobog. 'The center is worst'" (AG 430). The expectation of symbolically communicated meaning in the novel has a purpose nevertheless; it embodies the tendency of myth creation which Gaiman identifies in American society. This meta-perspective may seem confusing, but then, *American Gods* is a confusing novel.

There are many remarks on the state of things which form the novel's social critique; a few examples will suffice here. A preeminent one is Wednesday's sacrilegious view of the American god Liberty as "'a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses'" (105). The concept of liberty permeates the American nation and many of its citizens' national identity. Wednesday's ideas about roadside attractions are included in the same category as this statement—they too are blasphemous and uncomfortable, and question the very core of American culture. Another instance of the novel's social critique is found in Mr. Ibis's writings, where it says that "American history [...] is fictional, a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily bored. For the most part it is uninspected, unimagined, unthought, a *representation of the thing*, and not

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<sup>3</sup> *My own self* or *My ainsel* is the title of a folk tale in which a fairy who calls herself Ainsel teaches a little boy a lesson (Ashliman).

*the thing itself*" (92, emphasis added). This particular comment on American history echoes a widespread view of postmodern culture which Jameson voices: "[W]e are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (25). In short, the dominant ideology of *American Gods* tells us that symbolic representation of reality is not the same thing as reality in itself. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in *American Gods* is not dystopian. Following this, I am inclined to look for an alternative to the criticized system.

This atmosphere is created by Gaiman's focus on Shadow's experience of the system; Shadow is a pragmatic person who never stops moving. Doubt leads him to wonder about his origin and identity; it is unclear whether he is human or divine, insignificant or a hero, and whether his identity can fully be described in the language of binary opposition. It is impossible to pin down the position of the dividing line between coin tricks and magic, between real and fake, divine and human. Human limitations are exemplified by the coin tricks Shadow performs, whilst Mad Sweeney's actual magic in relation to coins indicates a divine and thus implicitly non-human ability (AG 39-40), but the ability to perform coin tricks and real magic merge into each other as Shadow *learns* magic (229). Similarly, the light/darkness or good/evil contrast is questioned in Gaiman's adaptation of the dualistic Slavic mythological characters Czernobog and Bielebog. Czernobog's role in the story serves a purpose similar to the coins when Czernobog asks questions concerning his and Bielebog's nature:

When we are young, his hair, it is very blond, very light [...] and people say, he is the good one. And my hair it is very dark [...] and people say I am the rogue, you know? I am the bad one. And now time passes, and my hair is gray. His hair, too, I think, is gray. And you look at us, you would not know who was light, who was dark. (79)

Furthermore, the pieces in the checkers game Shadow and Czernobog play could be clear symbols of light and darkness, good and evil, but instead "[Shadow's] flat, round pieces were the color of old dirty wood, nominally white. Czernobog's were a dull, faded black" (80). This is one of the first events in Shadow's life as Wednesday's bodyguard and it is significant that the challenge to binary division is apparent already at this point in the narrative.

Shadow's road trip experiences, such as the visit to the center, awaken questions in him which cannot be answered within the cultural system of meaning. This becomes clear when he moves from an uncritical existence within the symbolic system toward a critical view of it. Shadow's extreme sense of duty is put to the test when he starts to admit his doubt to himself:

[H]e was numb: heart-numb, mind-numb, soul-numb. And the numbness, he realized, went a long way down, and a long way back.

So what do I want? he asked himself. He couldn't answer, so he just kept on walking. (156)

One doubts the depth of Shadow's sense of duty which is associated with his negative traits "lack of ambition" and "numbness." These traits correspond to his blindly following Wednesday's orders. However, when Shadow cries in his motel room, even though he has not cried for "so long he thought he had forgotten how" (66), a change in his character is suspected.<sup>4</sup>

The anticipated change is a long process through which Shadow is guided by the buffalo man, Sam and, most importantly, his dead wife Laura. One of the most enlightening encounters with her occurs on one of the long walks Shadow goes on during the Mike Ainsel part of the novel (363 and 366-372). When he ventures out in the wood around the small town of Lakeside—a place of residence chosen for him by Wednesday—he is not completely idle and does not passively wait for Wednesday's directions. He is restless and needs to do something with his time. It is also typical that Shadow meets Laura in a graveyard (367): a place of the dead, peripheral beings that recognize all those things the living pass unknowingly. In this scene, Laura explains why she cheated on Shadow and pins down the issue of his numbness:

"It must be hard," said Laura, "not being alive."

[...]

"You're not dead," she said. "But I'm not sure that you're alive, either. Not really."

[...]

"It's like there isn't anyone there. You know? You're this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world." (370)

This indicates that the binary pair dead/alive is not definite, which Mr. Ibis later emphasizes when he escorts Shadow through the land of the dead: "You people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories. As if you cannot have a river that is also a road, or a song that is also a color" (480). In the graveyard scene, Laura goes on to describe Robbie, and contrasts him to Shadow: "The best thing about Robbie was that he was *somebody*. He was a jerk sometimes, and he could be a joke [...] but he was *alive*, puppy. He *wanted* things. He filled the space" (371; italics in original). Laura tells her husband what he should look for within himself: his will.

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<sup>4</sup> As Rimmon-Kenan points out, "[o]ne-time actions tend to evoke the dynamic aspect of the character, often playing a part in a turning point in the narrative" (61).

Gaiman thus approaches issues in American culture from an individual's perspective. Shadow's doubt could lead him to a nihilistic conclusion, because the notion of center is necessary for mastering anxiety. As Graham Allen puts it, the "intertextual codes and practices predominate because of a loss of any access to reality" (183) in postmodern Western civilization. People cling to what is held to be self-evident in their society because it is convenient to be told what to do. Duty in general, and specifically Shadow's duty, is self-referential—one follows orders because orders should be followed. The individual struggles to make sense of life when he or she is subjected to a culture which imitates meaning, much like Shadow's coin tricks in *American Gods* imitate magic. Imitation fails to provide a feeling of profundity. Nevertheless, this culture cannot be relinquished because the individual needs to partake in a social context. The solution is found in the development of "a critical relationship to the language" (Derrida 252) or, more generally, to culture. This relationship—this critical position—is what Sam, Laura and the buffalo man urge Shadow to pursue.

### **Will: The necessity and insufficiency of cultural meaning**

One conclusion drawn in the previous sections of my analysis is that the symbolic process of mythification or myth creation is a seemingly inevitable result of the construction of society, and that such symbolic systems—though their existence is inevitable—always simplify reality. This has been shown to be the narrators' conception, for example when Mr. Ibis claims American history to be "a charcoal-sketched simplicity for the children, or the easily bored" (AG 92). The general narrator defines religion as such an attempt to represent reality:

Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a father, a city [...].

Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.

So none of this is happening. Such things could not occur. Never a word of it is literally true. (508)

Conveyed here is a social constructivist view of culture, meaning that myth "is what we speak, think, act, breathe with. Yet, we do not realize it or notice it; we can not look at it as something 'outside'" (Macewicz 110-111). It is practically impossible for a limited human being to view the system from the outside. Thus, the system is real because it is the only way we can talk about reality, in the same way as, following Derrida, language with its many limitations is still the only efficient means of communication. A representation of reality, such as religion in the recently cited passage, is neither real nor fake, as established by the general narrator when he or she tells us that the symbolic controversy between the old

and the new gods does takes place: "Even so, the next thing that happened, happened like this" (508). The position of the dividing line between real and fake, true and false, literal and metaphorical, is unclear.

A similar obscurity is found in Shadow's identity. It is repeatedly suggested that Shadow is a Native American (12, 166, 302-304). Moreover, as indicated by many intertextual elements, the protagonist is an American version of Norse pantheon's Balder. Firstly, the manifestation of Loki—Low-key, or Mr. World—would use a weapon made of mistletoe, which is the only type of wood that could injure Balder (Lindemans), in order to kill Shadow (525-526). Secondly, "The Monarch of the Glen" (2006) reveals that "[T]he name on Shadow's birth certificate was Balder" (Gaiman, "The Monarch of the Glen" ["MG"] 311) italics in original). Balder is a Christ-like half man, half god who is seen as a possible Christian influence on the Norse pantheon due to the many traits Balder and Jesus share (Page 50, and "Balder"); would this then make Shadow a Redeemer, a Christ archetype? There are in fact direct similarities between Shadow and Jesus, the most obvious one being when Shadow dies and passes through the land of the dead later to be resurrected by Easter. However, Shadow's ordeal on the tree alludes to Norse Myth as well as to the Christian gospel; it is an adaptation of Odin's sacrifice of himself to himself (Page 39), juxtaposing Shadow with Odin. While it is shown in "The Monarch of the Glen" that Shadow's name is Balder, the short story also partakes in the obfuscation of Shadow's identity; he fights Grendel and is thus juxtaposed with Beowulf.

The ambiguity of Shadow's identity is something Slabbert emphasizes: "The fact that Shadow's roles are never clearly identified, but only alluded to, adds to the complexity of the novel's achievement in terms of mythification and suggests a tantalisingly postmodern refusal of closure" (*Inventions* 159). Rather than seeing this refusal of closure as part of a complex, cloudy mythical system, I interpret it as a break with mythification. This break is possible on a personal level, not on the cultural, symbolic one where the individual must limit himself or herself to the narrow definitions available. On this personal level, the protagonist is "merely" a human being and consequently *one example* of how a human being may cope with contemporary Western society's ontological and epistemic issues. Whilst Slabbert and Viljoen claim that the reader is offered "universal truths about human nature" ("Sustaining the Imaginative Life" 138), my contention is that truth in the novel is not defined in universal terms.

Additionally, this reading of Shadow can be connected to a recurrent theme in Gaiman's fiction, namely that of crossing boundaries. In the introduction to a Gaiman interview book, Joseph McCabe indicates this: "Neil Gaiman's stories have always crossed boundaries. The boundaries between life and death, between reality and dream, between male and female, and between humans and gods" (1). Transcending the particular divide human/divine is a

main concern of Gaiman's novel *Anansi Boys* (2005), where divine is not defined as suprahuman or supernatural but as part of human nature. *Anansi Boys*'s protagonist Charlie's initial lack of divinity is, according to Andrew Wearing, susceptible to change because Charlie's childhood neighbor "Mrs. Higgle [...] and her friends had performed a ritual on him that had separated his divine deviousness from the human" (Wearing 246). Charlie, similarly to Shadow, arrives at a point where he finds his own will: "Charlie gains the confidence needed to inherit the divinity of his father, and [...] discovers his secret passion—music" (246). Finding your divine side means that you realize your potential, which is what Shadow does—without relinquishing his humanity.

Shadow the individual thus finds his purpose in the search for his own will. Cultural truth, in contrast, is invalid—not false, but insufficient. Realizing that he has escaped life by fleeing from his will, Shadow decides to take a risk and do something drastic; he holds Wednesday's vigil. This is in a sense his duty, as he has promised Wednesday to do it, but his attitude toward this action is new. Shadow is committed: "He hoped he would live through this, but he was willing to die, if that was what it took to be alive" (AG 451). Seeing this, he manages to change not only his own life but to see the big picture and prevent the war. Instead of his Shadow self's cowardice, he connects with "another part of him[self]—maybe it was Mike Ainsel, he thought [...]—who was still trying to figure it all out, trying to see the big picture" (452). His ordeal on the tree results in two things; he sees what is truly going on between the old and the new gods, and he gains the ability to act.

Crucial here is that Shadow considers a divine existence before choosing his human identity, and my contention is that he chooses this because he feels that people do not need yet another Savior. This conclusion of Shadow's is the result of a vision he has when hanging on the tree. As Gaiman says, Shadow talks to "somebody who very well might have been Jesus. [...] He meets this man who lives in a gorgeous Spanish-American hacienda type of place. He is sitting in this huge office and he has a baseball cap on. He's a good guy, obviously very, very rich, and he and Shadow are having a very pleasant conversation and drinking wine" (interview with White)<sup>5</sup>. The guy who may very well be Jesus talks about the "new gods. Bring them on. [...] All the gods of ignorance and intolerance, of self-righteousness, idiocy and blame. All the stuff they try and land me with" (*American Gods: 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition* 458). Christianity and the name of Jesus have been used as justification for war and other atrocities and another excuse for such stupidity is not what people need;

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<sup>5</sup> This scene is included in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *American Gods*.



not another person who “give[s] up [...] mortal existence to become a meme:<sup>6</sup> something that lives forever in people’s minds, like the tune of a nursery rhyme. It means that everyone gets to recreate you in their own minds. You barely have your own identity any more. Instead, you’re a thousand aspects of what people need you to be” (457). Jesus is a meme and Shadow does not need to fill a position which is already occupied by a successful god. Shadow can be himself, and that is indeed what he finally chooses to be, although his identity and sense of self are as unclear to him as to the reader.

In the first edition of *American Gods*, it is instead Loki who, patronizingly, explains to Shadow how divine existence is “not magic. It’s about being you, but the *you* that people believe in [...] the concentrated, magnified, essence of you” (443). Shadow reaches this state, and there is “[n]othing left but essence” (478). When he has thus found his potential of being a god, just as he has learned to perform actual magic and not only coin tricks, he chooses what to be: “I think I would rather be a man than a god” (539), because “[w]e don’t need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow” (539). Gaiman connects this to the road trip culture: “In America, the journey is the destination. And with Shadow, the journey really was the destination” (*Bookreporter*). The ultimate result of Shadow’s new-found conviction is extraordinary: He succeeds in stopping the war. After Wednesday has bragged to him about how “the outcome of the battle is unimportant. What matters is the chaos, and the slaughter” (506-507), Shadow sees the big picture clearly: “This is the battle you’ll be feeding on” (531). He sees how belief when molded into the form of a dominating system can be abused by characters like Wednesday and Loki, or, in reality, by those who benefit from any other modern or postmodern myth—be it reckless capitalism or fundamentalist religion; elitist communism or neoliberalism’s confusion of the freedom of people with the free market.

In a sense, Shadow’s preferred path is a third alternative to being either a god, and thereby abusing a position of power in the symbolic system, or a human being, and thus accepting human insignificance and powerlessness. This third alternative is based on the message “believe” (18, 133, 245, 354) repeated without specification (without direct object) to Shadow by the buffalo man, and the recurrent idea that one needs to “keep on walking” (156-157, 262-263, 363, 539, 554, 588). The novel ends on this note: “[Shadow] tossed the coin into the air [...]. [It] hung there [...] as if it was never going to come down. Maybe it never would. Shadow didn’t wait to see. He walked away and he kept on walking”

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<sup>6</sup> A meme is a “cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene” (*Oxford English Dictionary*); it is an idea which is passed down through generations.

(588). Shadow focuses on the road ahead instead of waiting, as he has dutifully done to a far too great extent; whether the coin is magical, real, or even a hybrid of both natures is irrelevant. The transformed Shadow is also aware of his need for a cultural context, even if he wishes to escape the limitations of such a context: "'Nothing to go back [to America] for,' said Shadow, and as he said it he knew it was a lie" (587). Oddly enough, Slabbert omits the last part of this sentence and uses it to prove that "Shadow exits from the meta-mythology presented in the novel [...]. He decides not to go back to America, because there is '[n]othing to go back for' [...]. His freedom and future lie in his inner transformation and his new understanding of the transcendental nature of reality, and not in a watered-down concoction of belief systems" (*Inventions* 189). Furthermore, in "The Monarch of the Glen," Shadow ends his vacation from American culture and goes back to Chicago: "Shadow knew it, then. Perhaps he had known it all along. [...] 'I guess I'm going home'" (355).

The path Shadow chooses is anticipated by Sam, who has already reached the point of knowing her own will when Shadow and the reader meet her. She echoes the buffalo man's message "believe" when she, in a fiercely straightforward credo, sums up her ambiguous, multifaceted beliefs:

"I can believe things that are true and I can believe things that aren't true and I can believe things where nobody knows if they're true or not. [...] I believe that people are perfectible, that knowledge is infinite [...]. I believe that the future sucks and I believe that the future rocks [...]. I believe that mankind's destiny lies in the stars. [...] I believe in a personal god who cares about me and worries and oversees everything I do. I believe in an impersonal god who set the universe in motion and went off to hang with her girlfriends and doesn't even know that I'm alive. I believe in an empty and godless universe of causal chaos, background noise, and sheer blind luck. I believe that anyone who says that sex is overrated just hasn't done it properly. [...] I believe in absolute honesty and sensible social lies. [...] I believe that life is a game, that life is a cruel joke, and that life is what happens when you're alive and that you might as well lie back and enjoy it." She stopped, out of breath. (394-395)

One great religious belief, or cultural myth, cannot relate all aspects of life, but neither can atheists' refusal to believe. A possible term for Sam's stance in relation to epistemic and ontological, as well as moral and ethical, questions is agnosticism; she asserts that knowledge is possible and that she firmly believes *something*, but that something is practically impossible to define—at least in the language of binary opposition. There is a pragmatic tone to Sam's speech which corresponds with the pragmatic strategy which the general narrator suggests:

All we have to believe with is our senses, the tools we use to perceive the world: our sight, our touch, our memory. If they lie to us, then nothing can be trusted. And even if we do not believe, then still we cannot travel in any other way than the road our senses show us; and we must walk that road to the end. (139)

The general narrator includes the reader in a *we* which I interpret to mean *mankind* and both seriously and without sarcasm proposes one possible solution to the problem of doubt.

What makes this conclusion, to believe and to keep on walking, empowering is the novel's suggestion that there is something beyond the cultural representations of the real. This is the conviction of the character Whiskey Jack—the Cree Indian god Wisagatcak or Wisakedjak, who “created the world, and was a trickster god” (Share). Whiskey Jack explains how his people

figured that maybe there's something at the back of it all, a creator, a great spirit, and so we say thank you to it, because it is always good to say thank you. But we never built churches. We didn't need to. The land was the church. The land was the religion. [...] And we were the children of the land. (AG 513)

One might then conclude that the land is the true god, but instead the buffalo man says “I am the land” (549) and refuses to be called a god. The land is no god to Whiskey Jack either, and he says that in spite of all the bad, empty places—the ones with symbolic value such as the center of America—“There are a lot of good places” (514). Underneath the polished roadside attraction Mount Rushmore, there is a real mountain. Whiskey Jack goes on to tell Shadow that this is “kind of the point. Listen, gods die when they are forgotten. People too. But the land is still there” (514). Even when the faces on Mount Rushmore are worn down and forgotten, the mountain itself will still exist. There is something persistent to rely on.

An even clearer example of the existence of reality beyond the cultural representations is the place in *American Gods* which is called “backstage.” The battle between the old and the new gods is finally stopped in this odd place, which the general narrator describes as

somewhere real. He [Shadow] was Backstage. [...]

This [...] was the quintessence of place, the heart of things as they were. Compared to it, the Lookout Mountain [where the battle materially takes place] he had left was a painting on a backdrop, or a papier-mâché model seen on a TV screen—merely a representation of the thing, not the thing itself.

This was the true place. (535).

Being in the true place is nauseating to a human being; it is too naked and too real. Human beings can therefore only choose to *believe* in the existence of this true place or, in platonic terms, world of forms.<sup>7</sup> The real is only accessible to us through representations of it, or possibly during brief visits—Shadow exemplifies this. How can the real then be represented in a serviceable way? Mr. Ibis provides an answer—through fiction:

*One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? [...] The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless.*

*The tale is the map that is the territory.*

*You must remember this.*

— from the Notebooks of Mr. Ibis (545)

A fascinating example of what happens when Shadow has found a firm ground in the strategy to believe and keep on walking can be seen in his last visit to Czernobog. He and Shadow had made a deal: If the old god agreed to help Wednesday, he would get to kill Shadow after the battle. Shadow decides to follow through on this promise, although “[t]here was no magic forcing him to wait [for Czernobog] [...]”. This was him. It was one last thing that needed to happen, and if it was *the* last thing that happened, well, he was going there of his own volition” (581). Then Czernobog enters, and “[t]he sunlight glinted on his gray hair and mustache, making them appear almost golden” (582). Czernobog refuses to kill Shadow because he is grateful for what Shadow has done: “Because of you, things are changing. This is springtime. The true spring” (582). Even before Shadow succeeded in stopping the war, Czernobog suggested that the light/darkness binary pair might dissolve: “I dreamed that I am truly Bielebog. That forever the world imagines that there are two of us, the light god and the dark, but that now we are both old, I find it was only me all the time, giving them gifts, taking my gifts away” (424). In part three of the novel, “The Moment of the Storm” (419), this anticipated change is abruptly brought about: “The paradigms were shifting. [Shadow] could feel it. The old world, a world of infinite vastness and illimitable resources and future, was being confronted by something else—a web of energy, of opinions, of gulfs” (536). Sam feels this, and wonders if it might be true that America is changing. At least, she says, “everything just feels suddenly good right now. Maybe it’s just spring coming a little early. It was a long winter, and I’m glad it’s over” (575). According to the boyish IT god, “[i]t’s all about the dominant fucking paradigm” (54), so perhaps

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<sup>7</sup> In contrast to many postmodern philosophers, Gaiman seems to believe in the existence of truth beyond cultural representation; he would probably object to Baudrillard’s conclusion that the world of forms in postmodern society is an empty “desert of the real” (1).

this change, this arrival of spring, really does make a difference. When the sun shines on Czernobog's hair, we understand that the difference between light and darkness, good and evil, is illusory, a misleading simplification of reality. Neither Shadow nor Czernobog consider what they are supposed to do; both follow their own will. Shadow willingly confronts Czernobog, and Czernobog chooses to spare Shadow. Mercy and mutual understanding—moral and ethical consideration—is present in this situation.

As a final comment on the emphasis on the individual's own will, I would define the solution as personal, but not as individualist. This definition is crucial and reinforces the moral and ethical dimensions of the novel's epistemic and ontological questions. Nothing in *American Gods* propagates individualism as an ideology. Nothing rejects compassion and cooperation. When Shadow comes to understand his own will he still only serves as *one* example of how and where one might find meaning. Journeying through the land of the dead, Shadow learns that his revelation concerns only himself: "'All revelations are personal', [Bast] said. 'That's why all revelations are suspect'" (476). That is the state of things. If Shadow's revelation were ideologically individualist, it would instead claim universality. Furthermore, Shadow's journey itself is a lengthy example of a human being's need for guidance, help and advice; Sam, Laura, and the buffalo man are necessary in Shadow's development of a critical view of his culture. Additionally, the reliable Mr. Ibis spurns the insulated individual's unsympathetic approach to others' suffering and offers fiction, again, as a solution to this numbness:

We are insulated (a word that means, literally, remember, *made into an island*) from the tragedy of others, by our island nature. [...] Without individuals we see only numbers: a thousand dead, a hundred thousand dead [...]. With individual stories, the statistics become people—but even that is a lie, for the people continue to suffer in numbers that themselves are numbing and meaningless. [...] We draw our lines around these moments of pain, and remain upon islands, and they cannot hurt us. [...] Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes. (323, italics in original)

Fiction, such as *American Gods*, pulls us away from our insulated existence on these islands and allows us to see the world as other individuals see it. As a result, "we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle" (Jameson 54). The solution does not lie in either egoistic individualism or bland collectivism, and again, *American Gods* refuses to pick sides.

### The empowering pragmatic solution

As we have seen, the plot in *American Gods* revolves around the possibility of war between the old and the new gods. In connection to this conflict and to the protagonist's struggle to make sense of reality, the novel presents a number of binary pairs; dead/alive, real/fake, light/darkness, good/evil, divine/human, and religious/secular. Shadow experiences how he as an individual is diminished and lost in the cultural process of myth creation and he eventually chooses to adopt a critical view of this system. As Shadow develops this new strategy for coping with life in his cultural context, the symbolism and intertextuality of the novel becomes a form of mock symbolism which satirizes—though not in a condescending way—contemporary American culture. The narrators and several characters recommend this strategy of Shadow's in passages which comment on the state of things in a key of reliability. These remarks depict and create the novel's dominant ideology, which becomes an alternative to a world view based on binary pairs. Shadow's dead wife Laura, his friend Sam, and the buffalo man emphasize the nuanced world view of the novel's dominant ideology and encourage Shadow to choose a full life. Their help is substantial; without it, Shadow would have continued to bury his will deeply. In connection to this, I indicated the difference between individualism and the idea that the individual can base decisions on his or her will. Shadow's life strategy is non-confessional and therefore susceptible to modification as he keeps on walking down the road of his senses, with the journey itself as the destination. Nothing is set in stone and although this may appear frightening, it can also be empowering if we choose to believe—there is after all a real place, backstage, which we can briefly experience—and keep on walking.



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