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## Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*: A Postmodern Epic for America

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### Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*: A Postmodern Epic for America

#### Abstract

*American Gods* presents a postmodern view on America and its people and engages with the epic genre both in terms of form and content. This engagement with epic does not present a coherent view of the nation, as other epics do, but instead highlights multidimensionality and irony, demonstrating potential new ways in which the epic can remain important to literary work. Evaluates Gaiman's use of formal elements of epic such as the use of the national past and national tradition as well as content components such as the presentation of the epic storyteller and the epic hero as it evaluates how the incorporation of epic elements adds to the meaning of the work.

#### Additional Keywords

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*; Genre; Epic (genre); United States in fantasy



NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*:  
A POSTMODERN EPIC FOR AMERICA

SUSAN CORDDAN

NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS* PRESENTS A VIEW ON AMERICA that is messy, multi-vocal and destabilized; there is not much certainty that comes out of this book, which demonstrates its connection to postmodern ideas. These traits are not ones that are commonly associated with the epic genre, which in its older forms is solidly associated with creating a vision of a community's coherence and stability. Some critical attitudes toward the epic genre have suggested that its time has passed, that it is no longer relevant. However, Gaiman repeatedly incorporates elements both of epic's form and of epic's content as he creates *American Gods*, and these additions work to create irony and depth for his text. Gaiman's *American Gods* plays in the postmodern, and, as a consequence, it creates a revised sense of the United States, one that is open to micronarratives as well as metanarratives and that shows how stories shape our world. In epics, communities' histories, traditions, heroes, and gods are organized and put into their places; in Gaiman's *American Gods*, such categorizations are exposed as artificial and illusory, yet still the epic remains significant. While the binary oppositions that underpinned the search for coherence in epic have disintegrated and been exposed as inapplicable in this new postmodern context, the epic genre itself remains, adding meaning to its content. Now, instead of using epic elements to create a unitary world, the epic features help to showcase multiplicity. By using epic tropes, Gaiman aligns his work with previous literary formulations of gods and society while still demonstrating the particular contexts of the postmodern United States. The older type of epic may have decomposed, but a new use for epic remains, creating the potential for its reinvigoration, as Gaiman demonstrates.

Neil Gaiman's sweeping 2001 work *American Gods* includes many plot events and theoretical positions related to American-ness and mythology. Most directly, it focuses on Shadow Moon, an ex-convict who, upon being released two days early from prison to attend his wife's funeral, embarks on a sort of quest as the bodyguard of a character who introduces himself as Mr. Wednesday but who ultimately turns out to be the American version of the Norse god Odin. Wednesday is rallying other members of a group of Old Gods against the New Gods, gods of technology, media, and globalization, so that they will not lose their power further. When briefly imprisoned for bail jumping,

Shadow sees Wednesday shot on closed-circuit television during peace talks between the Old and New Gods, which prompts the reluctant Old Gods to agree to fight. Shadow performs Wednesday's vigil by hanging on a world tree, situated in Virginia, for nine days, paralleling Odin's hanging on the world tree Yggdrasil. While hanging on the world tree, Shadow gains insight into the events of the proposed war and realizes that this conflict is really a conspiracy between Wednesday and Shadow's former prison cell mate, Low Key Lyesmith, who turns out to be the Norse trickster god Loki who also pretends to be the most powerful of the new gods, Mr. World, to gain massive sacrifices to himself and Wednesday. When Mr. World/Low Key/Loki is killed by Laura, Shadow's deceased but reanimated wife who has been helping him periodically, Shadow is able to defuse the coming war by sharing the truth about Wednesday and Mr. World's plot. There are two additional important storylines, one encapsulated in sections titled "Coming to America" which explains how some of the Old Gods were brought to the U.S. by immigrants and nomads, and the other which centers on one of Shadow's hideout places, a town called Lakeside which appears idyllic and prosperous but which ultimately turns out to be protected by an evil spirit who has taken the name Hinzemann and who kills a child each year as a sacrifice for the town's continued prosperity.

*American Gods* crafts a postmodern presentation of what America is, highlighting multiplicity rather than singular notions of truth or of American identity. Gaiman creates characters such as Mr. Ibis who talks about the subjective nature of American history (85) and Mr. Nancy who discusses the instability of the center (437), clearly picking up on concepts from postmodernism and Derridean deconstruction. Although subtitled as "a novel," this work engages with various genres at different points. Irina Rata writes:

*American Gods*, as a postmodern novel, disrupts the genre boundaries in a melting pot of genres. At first glance it is a road trip novel, or an Americana (a novel about America), a fantasy novel, while simultaneously pertaining to speculative fiction, with elements of detective fiction, gothic fiction, science fiction and horror. ("The Role of Intertextuality in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*" 109)

While she does not mention epic as a genre that Gaiman includes within his blending of literary forms, this work will focus on that genre in particular; it is clearly present in both the content and form of the work.

Gaiman's postmodern moves appear, for example, in the discussion of roadside attractions. Gaiman's America is playful and ambiguous, at times both at once. The setting of *American Gods* is one where important spiritual sites do not serve as the location for churches but instead for the construction of roadside attractions. As Wednesday tells Shadow, the signs of spirituality become

dislocated from religious beliefs and instead become commercialized. According to Wednesday, people in other times and in other places would build “temples, or cathedrals, or erect stone circles,” yet contemporary Americans instead create

a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they have never visited, or [erect] a gigantic bat-house inside part of the country that bats have traditionally declined to visit. Roadside attractions: people 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. (106)

Americans have turned the spiritual into the commercial, thereby turning powerful lands into whimsical locations for hot dog stands. Meaning has not been denied to these places, but it has been redirected, no longer religiously holy but now linked to kitsch and consumption. In Gaiman’s work, spirituality moves from the high culture of cathedrals into the low culture of tourists (and not especially highbrow ones at that), reveling in its movement. In this America, powerful land is not fully understood except in that it is powerful. Meaning is dissociated from its origins, indicating an example of postmodernity’s effect on the world of this narrative. In *American Gods*, once-powerful genres, such as epic, are also changed as they adapt their presentations of meanings to demonstrate this new take on the world.

The past of the nation or community is important to epic. Homer’s epics retell the story of the Trojan War which supposedly happened approximately four centuries before as they create their personal stories of rage and homecoming; Virgil actively reorganizes the past to create a sense of the fated nature of the Roman Empire in *The Aeneid*. In fact, incorporation of the past is one of the three constitutive elements that Mikhail Bakhtin said formed the epic genre (13). This component is visible in Gaiman’s *American Gods*, even though it initially begins as the story of one man’s desire to leave prison and return home to his wife. From Shadow’s personal, unique story, the focus in *American Gods* shifts to include not only a large-scale conflict between the Old Gods and the New, but also to incorporate “Coming to America” stories that explain how the gods were brought to the U.S.; these stories also show how waves of immigration and conquest brought other inhabitants to this country. These sections, peppered through the main Shadow/Wednesday narrative in the following order, tell the stories of: an 813 AD arrival of Scandinavian sailors who bring the Norse gods to America but who then are killed by the inhabitants of the land they find there (*American Gods* 62–64); a 1721 woman named Essie Tregowan who brings her loyalty to the pixies with her from Cornwall (85–93);

a 1778 story of an African girl sold into slavery by her uncle who brings her devotion to Eleggba with her through her life of slavery in North Carolina and Louisiana where she becomes known as a practitioner of voodoo (284–98); and a 14,000 BC story of a woman named Atsula and her community's mammoth god (366–71).

To take one of these stories in more detail, the story of the Viking raiders is especially illuminating. In this short interruption to the broader plotline, Gaiman presents the arrival of followers of Odin to America. A group of sailors arrive at the shore, haggard and travel-worn with "teeth [...] loosening and eyes [...] deep-sunken in their sockets when they made landfall on the green land to the West" (62). They tell stories of Odin, Ymir, and Thor, and their bard "sang of Odin, the all-father, who was sacrificed to himself as bravely and as nobly as others were sacrificed to him. He sang of the nine days that the all-father hung from the world-tree" (63). On the next day, they kill an indigenous American as a sacrifice to their gods, which ultimately prompts a war band of local men to wipe out the Norse raiders, burning all the remains of this sailing band. Gaiman concludes this section by writing, "It was more than a hundred years before Leif the Fortunate, son of Erik the Red, rediscovered that land, which he would call Vineland. His gods were already waiting for him when he arrived: Tyr, one-handed, and gray Odin gallows-god, and Thor of the thunders. They were there. They were waiting" (64).

This story accomplishes a number of objectives in *American Gods*; first, it provides the background as to why Odin has developed into Wednesday in this new context. He arrived early into this new land, in the year 813 AD, as specified underneath the title of the tale (62). He has thus had time to change here, growing differently from how he was understood in Scandinavia. Second, this story provides a challenge to conceptions of American-ness, which may popularly begin—even if such accounts are acknowledged to be inaccurate—with the arrival of Columbus in 1492. The actual history of the "discovery" of the United States is less important to constructions of meaning for the American nation than the stories of it. With this encounter between the Norsemen and the native Americans, Gaiman suggests a story that is not a large, all-encompassing tale, but rather a small piece of a story of the development of the United States. Simply because it would not be part of the dominant tale of American history does not mean this story or others like it should be ignored. Gaiman's fictional story takes its place alongside more dominant tales of the American national past; in so doing, he does not rewrite American history but instead opens it up. He makes a place for additional voices that may not otherwise be heard to tell new stories of this nation and its past, which reconfigures power relationships between those histories and voices; instead of using this formal component of

epic to create a singular voice of the past, Gaiman uses this epic element to multiply the historical voices, creating additional depth to that past.

A second example of these “Coming to America” stories is dated from 1778, thus positioning it during the middle of the American Revolution (284). This story does not begin with stories of colonials fighting the British that would make sense based on its timing; instead, Mr. Ibis starts it with a meditation on stories of tragedy which readers have to harden themselves against. Mr. Ibis writes, “There are accounts which, if we open our hearts to them, will cut us too deeply,” after which he imagines a punctilious German who goes about his efficient work in a concentration camp during the Holocaust in a way that would calm down the Jews who were about to step into a gas chamber. He feels bad only, Mr. Ibis tells us, in that “he still allows the gassing of vermin to affect him. Were he a truly good man, he knows, he would feel nothing but joy, as the earth is cleansed of its pests” (284). With that brief consideration of how nations become involved in acts of horror, he begins his story with the italicized line: “*There was a girl, and her uncle sold her*” (285). Mr. Ibis then movingly tells the story of an African girl sold at the age of twelve with her twin brother, then put on a ship and forced to endure horrifying conditions as they sailed across the ocean (288). Upon arrival in Barbados, she is separated from her brother, who—unknown to the girl but known to Mr. Ibis—remains in the islands, ultimately taking part in Haiti’s slave revolution of 1791 (292). Although he took part in the revolt, he dies at the hands of a French soldier before being able to see the fight’s end (293). The story then shifts back to his sister, sequentially called Wututu, Mary, Daisy, Sukey and Mama Zouzou as she moves from her home through various locations in the American South (293). As she grows older, she changes from being a nanny to developing her interest in “cures and love charms and little fetishes,” which gains her increased renown and status (294-95). She teaches a mixed-race protégée, the Widow Paris, her skills and knowledge; Gaiman writes that Mama Zouzou:

did her best to teach her the hidden truths, the deep knowledge, to tell her of Elegba, of Mawu, of Aido-Hwedo, the *voudon* serpent, and the rest, but the Widow Paris (I shall now tell you the name she was born with, and the name she later made famous: it was Marie Laveau. But this was not the great Marie Laveau, the one you have heard of, this was her mother, who eventually became the Widow Glapion), she had no interest in the gods of the distant land. If St. Domingo had been a lush black earth for the African gods to grow in, this land, with its corn and its melons, its crawfish and its cotton, was barren and infertile. (296)

In this story, Mr. Ibis highlights how she was forgetting the words she once knew, and she tells her freedwoman student that the “words did not matter,

only the tunes and the beats," highlighting a loss in meaning of the rites (298). This story of pain and loss, of slavery and oppression, can also be marginalized in the dominant American story. Gaiman makes of it one of the most emotional narratives in *American Gods*, as it is an affecting and moving story of lost family, lost home, and lost meaning. This story, like the one of the Viking raiders, is being thrust alongside more dominant stories of American history, bringing West African gods into the story of America and highlighting how African traditions were being passed down, even if only in part. This story, too, is an opening up of the American past, now one that emphasizes the efficient horror of slavery in the time period of the American Revolution and early development of the American nation.

These "Coming to America" stories make significant contributions to the overall narrative. They demonstrate that in this work, there is no unified, singular American History, but rather there are many histories, both of America's people and their gods, and Gaiman grounds his development of gods in America in these very personal immigration stories. Siobhan Carroll emphasizes the continued vision and revision of American history that is present in Gaiman's work, and she writes that "[t]he more Shadow sees of the United States, the less he feels that there is such a thing as a 'real America,' and the more he appreciates the national fiction that holds it together" (Carroll 320). As Americans are so widely different in their backgrounds, there is no singular national identity in which American history can be grounded. Instead, as Wednesday points out to Shadow:

San Francisco isn't in the same country as Lakeside any more than New Orleans is in the same country as New York or Miami is in the same country as Minneapolis. [...] They may share certain signifiers—money, a federal government, entertainment; it's the same *land*, obviously—but the only things that give it the illusion of being one country are the greenback, *The Tonight Show*, and McDonald's. (270)

Not only is there no unified American past from which to draw for this postmodern epic, but there is no unified America, Wednesday claims, outside of a shared present of pop culture. In this work, the national past remains significant in the crafting of meaning, but instead of working within a metanarrative such as the creation of Roman-ness that happens in the *Aeneid*, Gaiman's narrative highlights the multiplicity of the "Coming to America" micronarratives, none of which can tell the whole story of what America is and which serve to highlight the futility of presenting a cohesive nation and also the benefits of opening up History to histories. Virgil's epic was used as a way to craft Roman identity: Romans were the people who were intended "to establish peace, to spare the humbled, and to conquer the proud" as Aeneas's father



Anchises famously instructs him in Book 6 (159). Gaiman, however, does not craft an American-ness with a specific task for Americans; instead, he highlights its many disunities. More specifically, Mr. Ibis, the “author” of the “Coming to America” sections, explicitly highlights these ideas when he writes, at the start of the story of Essie Tregowan, that “the important thing to understand about American history [...] is that it 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 the thing itself” (85). Even as he crafts the history of an America, Mr. Ibis is aware that American history can claim no truth. It is not unmediated; instead, *American Gods* exposes the contradictions and unrealities in American history’s story. In this work, instead of using the national past to create this story as older epics did, *American Gods* shows how much the national past *is* a story, crafted and continually revised, which demonstrates a connection to the epic genre at the same time at which the epic is transformed in relation to this new understanding of multiple national pasts instead of a singular national past. By doing so, he allows new stories to be told and for new power relationships among those stories to develop.

The national tradition also plays a role in the form of an epic. Mikhail Bakhtin noted the foundation in national tradition as one of the formal characteristics of an epic (13), and as Dorothy Noyes writes, scholars on epic began to study tradition more as they sought to understand the Homeric question (237–38). Noyes stated that “[t]he enduring contribution of this school was to validate tradition as ‘multiform,’ existing in its varying realizations rather than decaying from a single Ur-form” (238). Epic scholarship that engages with tradition can posit no dominant, singular sense of it, but rather a realization of its multiple expressions. Gaiman does not incorporate an oral tradition in the same way as an epic such as *The Odyssey* or *Sundiata* might, as they emerged from orality, but he does incorporate components of a national American tradition. Gaiman plays with tradition when he adds quotations at the beginning of his chapters. He uses sources that privilege the oral tradition such as songs, folklore and adages, but he also moves into the literary when his use of tradition shifts to letters and religious scholarship. These epigraphs engage with the tradition of American writing, whether that be songs (*American Gods* 65, 231, 339, 375, 408), jokes, commentaries (454, 485), poetry (94, 171, 207, 491), scholarship on Hindu myths (138), adages from *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (258), essays (299), letters (433) and a quotation from a notorious con-man named Canada Bill Jones (418). This wide variety of types of traditional elements crosses numerous ways to categorize them. It blends poetry sources that are sound-driven such as Wendy Cope’s “A Policeman’s Lot” together with a very visual poem by e.e. cummings. He uses real sources as well as a fictional one written by his character Mr. Ibis.

The specific connections that he makes between these "traditional" epigraphs and his particular content add to the irony in *American Gods*' chapters. For example, as he begins the very first chapter of this work, Gaiman includes a quote attributed to "The American" in *Joe Miller's Jest Book* which states: "*The boundaries of our country, sir? Why sir, onto the north we are bounded by the Aurora Borealis, on the east we are bounded by the rising sun, on the south we are bounded by the procession of the Equinoxes, and on the west by the Day of Judgment*" (3). The first, un-italicized line of the work, following immediately after this epigraph, is "Shadow had done three years in prison" (3). The contrast between the quotation, with its emphasis on expansiveness, idealization, and nature, and the static, confined space of three years in prison immediately sets the tone for the chapter to follow. While in jests Americans may see their country as, basically, the center of the world and fully integrated within Nature, in the reality of this novel, that expansiveness is not open to everyone. Shadow is only let out of prison and able to move through the world because of his wife's unexpected death in a car accident, and as he travels through the United States, he is frequently confined, either because he is seized by agents of the New Gods or he has to hide out to wait for Wednesday. The national tradition demonstrates, then, what one view of America could be while Gaiman's work also shows its flipside; while these two visions of America's space differ, they also coexist in this book.

In another example, Chapter Two begins with an epigraph attributed to an "Old Song" that states: "*They took her to the cemet'ry / In a big ol' Cadillac / They took her to the cemet'ry / But they did not bring her back*" (29). This long and wandering chapter highlights the theme of death in many ways: Shadow learns that not only has his wife died, but so has his good friend Robbie Burton (29); Wednesday makes Shadow agree to work for him, which means that, among other duties, Shadow would have to hold a vigil in the event of Wednesday's death (34); Shadow goes to the funeral home for his wife Laura's wake where he learns that she died while having oral sex with Robbie (45); Shadow throws a coin that he had gained in a fight from Mad Sweeney onto Laura's grave which later turns out to allow her reanimated body to leave her burial place (46); and he talks to a character later known as Technology Boy who tells him that Wednesday's "time is over" and Wednesday is completely obsolete (49-50). While the old song at the start of the chapter highlights the ultimate finality of death as the "her" in the song lyrics remains in the cemetery, the chapter continually undermines that idea. Wednesday, as a god, can escape death in coming back after his vigil has been performed even if he cannot escape obsolescence, and Laura, Shadow's dead wife, can also come back even if not in completely human form as her body continues to decay as she pursues her storyline in the work. Shadow's vision of Laura also changes, as he learns more

about the cause of her death and hears of Robbie's wife's point of view on their affair; neither her body nor her meaning are finalized. Using these epigraphs locates the world of *American Gods* at a crossroads of inherited wisdom and its repeated destabilization.

This American tradition is multifold and cannot be singularly characterized, and yet all of it works to integrate *American Gods* in the wider world. This text is not distinctly distant from other works but instead closely tied to them, even as the tradition itself is fragmented into many different pieces because of how Gaiman links up the plotting and characterization of his work to these other texts that form an American tradition. Irina Rata characterizes Gaiman as an author-*bricoleur*, in that

According to Levi-Strauss, the author-*bricoleur* works with signs, constructing new arrangements by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and conveying his message 'through the medium of things' — by the choices made from 'pre-constrained possibilities.' In *American Gods* Gaiman plays with countless references, allusions and quotations from earlier sources to mould new stories and myths, and express his views of America and its identity. ("The Role of Intertextuality" 103)

Through his weaving together of these epigraphs and also by drawing upon myths and characters unique to America's story of itself like John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed), Gaiman works to complicate his presentation of the American tradition. Instead of being a national tradition which is composed by and curated by a singer of tales or *griot*, for example, this American tradition is sustained in many different ways, through multiple genres. He uses the national tradition, shows a value for it, but also works to expose its lack of truthfulness or stability. *American Gods* complicates the presentation of the national past and the national tradition that would normally work to formally characterize a work as an epic, but he still returns to them as ways to position his own narrative as both created by and creating those same elements. Even as he opens up the past and destabilizes the tradition that are so important to the epic genre, he nevertheless works them into his text, even if primarily in ironic fashion.

Shifting away from discussions of the national past and national tradition, I turn now to another common feature of the epic genre, the emphasis on the epic storyteller. Epics, whether coming out of an oral tradition or a literary tradition, tend to highlight their own speakers. For example, Homer's voice begins his two epics, as he calls for inspiration from a Muse or Memory that then tells the story. Versions of the *Sundiata* epic frequently start with the genealogy of either the text or the *griot* to provide the firm foundation for the authority of the epic that is then provided. Frederick Turner notes that epics'

beginnings frequently include self-referential comments that highlight the role of the epic singer in creating the work (37). In this way, the epic is created by a singular voice but that singer is helped by a divinity to tell "a universal history" (49). Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* plays with this feature of epic interestingly. In 2011, a Tenth Anniversary Edition of the work was issued that was also labelled the "Author's Preferred Text." Gaiman added "An Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Edition" in which he discusses briefly across three pages how he came to write this book, first receiving the inspiration "during a stopover in Iceland" and then writing the book while road tripping across the United States (ix-x). After that introduction, Gaiman then included "A Note on the Text," a two-page section in which he discusses the various versions of the text that exist, explaining that the first published version differed from the original version which was longer and more developed, and which he liked better. However, he acknowledged making editorial changes from that original version, so the consequence is that this current version is a blending of his original one with changes made, then further combined with the changes he made to the galley proofs and then also with changes he saw to correct errors in the first published version (xiii).

The result of both the introduction to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition and the note is an emphasis on the process of writing and revision. Importantly, Gaiman makes himself someone who is channeling the story being told as it came to him through inspiration, much like the epic poets channeled the voice of the muse to produce their texts, a fact that links him to the epic genre. He then, however, knocks off-balance the print versions by highlighting the many different forms and the fact that there is no singular *American Gods*. There are, instead, multiple versions of *American Gods*, each with different claims to authenticity but none of which are the singular definitive version. This work, then, right from the start is playing with the field of the postmodern epic, teaching the reader how to read it in light of both postmodernity and epic theory.

It could be argued that these apparatuses only appear with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary version and thus were not part of the version that appeared in 2001, which could minimize the link to the self-referentiality of the epic storyteller. Gaiman, though, also accomplishes these goals in his third piece of prefatory material in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, which was also in the originally published version from 2001, titled "Caveat, and Warning for Travelers." This caveat establishes that Gaiman wrote "a work of fiction, not a guidebook" (xv); however, just after that statement, he acknowledges that the places in the book are not entirely fictitious. He blurred out the details of some of the places mentioned like his town of Lakeside but included other places like the House on the Rock that can actually be visited. He writes about Lakeside and the farm

that holds the world tree that “[y]ou may look for them if you wish. You might even find them” (xv). He finishes this section with a boilerplate statement that all the characters are fictional, but he closes with “Only the gods are real” (xv).

In this one-page section included with all versions of *American Gods*, Gaiman calls attention to himself as storyteller, highlighting the pronoun “I” and hearkening back to the epic element of showing readers how, as Turner puts it, “the poet looks us in the eye, and his throat and tongue quiver with the live intention of a human presence” (37). Gaiman ensures that at the beginning of his work, the authorial presence is there, framing the narrative that is to come. This authorial presence then begins the process of presenting contradictions and blurring boundaries, in a similar way to how he treated both the past and tradition. He also returns at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary text, including a section in which Shadow meets Jesus—a section that will be discussed in more detail below—complete with the author’s notes about why this section was not included in the larger narrative but where it could have fit in (527). This feature of calling attention to the author and highlighting the variability of what is real, what is authorized, and what is blurred out and kept apart from the reader shares the same function of the two previous prefatory materials included with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, which is to teach the reader how to read this example of the postmodern epic, alerting him or her to look at the real/fictional binary skeptically. By calling attention to the author who sings this American story, Gaiman engages with epic. By blurring the real/fictional dualism, he disorients his readers as he does so.

In terms of content, epics can be thought to tell stories that include gods and formation of a community. Those epics that do not tell a creation story still, according to Turner, deal with the impetus behind that type of tale, which is the explanation and grappling with the “encounter [with] radical otherness in some other way” (55). Epics chronicle the transformation of nothingness into a world, so dealing with radical otherness of some type mirrors that process when a creation story is not included within the work, chaos and nothingness being prime examples of otherness. *American Gods* does not start off with a creation story of how the United States came to be per se, although as discussed earlier Gaiman does provide small stories that explain how certain gods came to America. This work redefines “the rules of recombination,” in Turner’s terms, of the gods, explaining how they came to be in their current forms (60). In the final part of the story, Shadow travels to Iceland where he meets Odin, and this meeting emphasizes how much the Wednesday in America is not the Odin in Iceland. Other gods in the United States also discuss their differences from the gods in their native lands when they meet beyond the Carousel at the House on the Rock. At that moment, Mama-ji—an Indian goddess who appears to be a version of Kali—states that “back in India, there is an incarnation of me who

does much better, but so be it. I am not envious" (124). This statement acknowledges that shifting the context in which the ritual or reverence for a god is practiced changes the god him or herself. For Wednesday, he is not Odin, even though he is an Odin figure. There is no unity of the sign and the signifieds of Odin and Wednesday. Instead, in *American Gods*, the gods in the United States recognize their own dual realities. They are not imitations of a "real" god, but a separation of the sign from the signified that then develops on its own in this new space, creating a new reality. When Shadow travels to Iceland and meets with Odin, Shadow talks to him as though he were Wednesday and had Wednesday's experiences. Odin then says, "He was me, yes. But I am not him" (521). This statement demonstrates the extent to which the sign of Odin may connect to Wednesday, but the sign for Wednesday does not link to Odin. This alienated reality demonstrates how the concept of the simulacrum works in this context, and it links to epic by demonstrating the fragmentation of the national narrative that is told by reference to new gods. This work plays with the American narrative in the sense of how Derrida would use the term. Without a definite center of reality in the story, the elements are destabilized; having moved so far from the center in which Odin is defined, the language to reference him becomes untethered and thereby gains multiplicity.

Shadow's encounter with Jesus, which as mentioned above is not part of the overall narrative, further complicates the presentation of divinity in *American Gods*. It would be reasonable to expect that a text that focuses on American gods would include Jesus. Gaiman only includes Jesus, though, in an appendix, and in the preface to that appendix, he dubs what follows "an apocryphal scene" (527). In this section, Shadow meets a wine-drinking, baseball-cap wearing man who extols the purifying nature of suffering (*American Gods* 528). This Jesus, identified as such in Gaiman's italicized notes but not in the episode itself, then says:

Have you thought about what it means to be a god? [...] It means you give up your mortal existence to become a meme: something that lives forever in people's minds, like the tune of a nursery rhyme. It means that everyone gets to re-create 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. And everyone wants something different from you. Nothing is fixed, nothing is stable. (*American Gods* 528)

In this quotation, Jesus discusses the process by which the sign becomes dislocated from the signified and then becomes its own postmodern reality. Gods in the United States become unstable references, removed from their initial guiding metanarratives to instead become substituted in to individuals' micronarratives as "a thousand aspects of what people need you to be"

(*American Gods* 528). Gaiman puts the ultimate postmodern summation into the mouth of Jesus who then states that he “welcome[s] new gods. Bring them on. The god of the guns. The god of bombs. All the gods of ignorance and intolerance, of self-righteousness, idiocy and blame. All the stuff they try and land me with. Take a lot of the weight off my shoulders” (528). As new ideas take hold, as new ideologies rise in American culture, their gods also are created and take hold, reflecting the significance of context and the historical nature of these gods and exposing the fraud of ahistorical thinking about them. These gods have unique histories, both the gods created a long time ago and those being newly created, and they have different meanings as they develop differently, demonstrating the fragmentation of singular thinking about religion, culture and literature. If an epic creates a world and organizes it, transforming chaos into understandable organizations of matter, *American Gods* takes what had been created out of nothing and then exposes how what had been crafted has disintegrated. Once this new perspective on gods is in place, then the text can move on to its epic hero.

Epic heroes work to define the genre in interesting ways. These characters often perform multiple functions for the communities that write them into epics. For example, Aeneas can be both the standard by which Roman stoicism is measured as well as an agent of fury at the end of Virgil’s epic. Turner expresses some of these contradictions in the epic hero as he writes that epics “locate the hero both at the margins of human society and at its center—as both the extreme case and the universal representative” (74). The epic hero is someone who goes beyond the norm but also reinforces the community’s rules. An epic hero like Gilgamesh will both leave his community behind and exceed its limitations as he searches for the secrets for immortality from Utnapishtim, but he also reinforces the importance of the community when he praises Uruk’s walls and, by extension, its inhabitants upon his return.

*American Gods’* Shadow is also a paradoxical figure. When the work begins, Shadow is in prison but on the cusp of parole, which places him in an immediately liminal state. He then becomes, as Irina Rata says, “a symbol of every American. He is an ‘average Joe’ or average American. He is a middle-class man, married with no children, unaware of his ethnical origins, a misfit, unattached to any place” (“Only the Gods Are Real” 38). When a community within a text can create an “average Joe” hero who is a “misfit” with no origin, that community presents itself paradoxically. Mathilda Slabbert and Leonie Viljoen have suggested that Shadow is a shaman-like figure who gains knowledge through what seems to be a trance-like experience when hanging on Gaiman’s novel’s World Tree, now located in Virginia (140). The important facet of Shadow’s character here is that he is able to negotiate various binaries that are comparable to other epic’s heroes. Aeneas embodies piety and fury, Dante

demonstrates pride and humility, and Beowulf plays both the hero and the king; Shadow is also an in between character. He travels between knowing and not knowing as he traverses the space between living and dead; he is a demigod, the son of Wednesday and a mortal woman, akin to Baldr, the son of Odin in Norse myth. He is both isolated and a mediator, according to Slabbert and Viljoen (140). Siobhan Carroll notes that even his name, Shadow, presents him as someone who travels in between "intangible and relational" (318); he is substantial and insubstantial at the same time. Rut Blomqvist presents this liminal nature of Shadow's as a part of other binaries in this world, noting that "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" (14). Turner notes that these binary oppositions that are found in the hero are "constitutive of epic, as can be shown by a larger survey of the genre" (94).

If Shadow participates in the trope of the epic hero because of his embodiment of binaries, what does the negotiation of these binary oppositions indicate about this world that Gaiman has created in *American Gods*? In the text, the artificiality of binary oppositions is pointed out most directly by Mr. Ibis when Shadow encounters him during his *katabasis*, after having seemingly died when hanging on the World Tree. Mr. Ibis presents himself to be a *psychopomp*, someone who "escort[s] the living to the world of the dead" (428). Expanding on his theme of passing through oppositions, Mr. Ibis laments how "people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories" when in fact they are "different sides of the same coin. Like the heads and tails of a quarter" (428). In this discussion, Mr. Ibis demonstrates how thinking in binary oppositions here is to think simplistically, looking for order when there is only disarray.

Later, when presented with a binary opposition between Old Gods and New Gods, Shadow is initially on the side of the Old, once he is pulled into service as Wednesday's bodyguard of sorts. He quickly finds himself integrated into Wednesday's world, acting on his own initiative to persuade others to follow Wednesday's plans. He even is willing to sit Wednesday's vigil on the World Tree for nine days, suffering greatly. However, upon a second reading, it is clear that just as Loki (Low Key Lyesmith) and Wednesday have been performing a con throughout the narrative, so too has Gaiman been toying with the reader's knowledge. The first character mentioned other than Shadow is Low Key Lyesmith, who is described as "a grifter from Minnesota" who is Shadow's cell mate for part of his time in prison (3). Low Key is Shadow's mentor of sorts in prison, encouraging him to read Herodotus's *Histories* and practice coin tricks, the latter skill which he carries with him throughout the



narrative. Since Low Key turns out to be Loki in disguise, who then further disguises himself as Mr. World, the leader of the New Gods, Shadow has never really been solely on the side of the Old Gods but has been associated with the New from the very first page of the work since Low Key/Loki/Mr. World is there also.

Additionally, instead of firmly choosing the Old Gods or the New Gods in this epic battle, Shadow instead chooses to decenter the whole binary through his actions. When the Old and New Gods are lined up, preparing to fight, Shadow walks into the center of the action and reveals the truth, as he sees it. He says, "This is a bad land for gods [...] You've probably all learned that, in your own way. The old gods are ignored. The new gods are as quickly taken up as they are abandoned, cast aside for the next big thing" (*American Gods* 478). He then further explains Wednesday and Low Key's machinations, stating, "The battle you're here to fight isn't something that any of you can win or lose. The winning and the losing are unimportant to him, to them. What matters is that enough of you die. Each of you that falls in battle gives him power" (479). The binary relationship set up between the Old Gods and the New was never real, as Shadow explains. There was no power differential between them that favored the New Gods at the expense of the Old; instead, Wednesday wanted to create deaths dedicated to himself to shore up his power, and Low Key/Loki wanted to create chaos that would add to his power. There was only the illusion of an opposition, of tension.

In undermining this central opposition of his novel, Gaiman makes of Shadow the ultimate revealer of truth, but of a truth that lays naked the power and hidden desires in the language and motivations of his gods. Shadow is both at the center of this fight between the gods, literally when he stands between the two sides in order to expose Wednesday's plot, and also outside their structures. As he says when leaving the arena, "I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do" (480). Despite his status of being Wednesday's son and thus a demi-god, he aligns himself linguistically with mortals, using the pronouns "we" and "us" to indicate his solidarity with mankind and not the gods. The hero of *American Gods* cannot be pinned down, remains shadowy, and leads to greater understanding on behalf of the characters in the work. He is an epic hero, a character who trades in binary relationships as Turner indicated, but Gaiman's epic hero is not content to merely demonstrate binary characteristics. Instead, he exposes the power imbalances of those dualisms in order to diminish their clout. Binary relationships are a way of organizing the world, but Gaiman's world is not so easily understood or mastered; its epic hero, too, resists such facile categorizations.

*American Gods* demonstrates that while there may be trajectories of development for gods, for American history, for epic heroes, and for genres, these movements do not have to mean the complete outmodedness of the starting points. That is, progress does not have to mean extinguishing the beginning, but sometimes it can mean the opening up of parallels. Alan Jacobs writes of Gaiman's work that "one of the wonderful things about *American Gods* is that it sides not just morally but also narratively with the Old Gods, the dirty and cheap ones who have fallen on hard times—the gods of poem and story and codex rather than of screens and bits; that is, the novel says that resistance is not futile after all but can really work—at least for now" (15). Jacobs' analysis of the work, that it chooses to affiliate itself with the older gods, can be extended out to the older gods' genre: epic. Gaiman does not actively advocate for either the Old or the New Gods in this postmodern America even though he may focus more of the story on the Old Gods, but he demonstrates a world in which they can both exist and continue to make meaning, differently than they previously did, to be sure, but they are still there. Epic, too, remains; it has changed, undeniably, but it continues to engage with the world and present new ideas.

For Gaiman's *American Gods*, incorporating epic elements helps to complicate the meaning of the narrative and also to complicate the presentation of the genre. This work is, in part, about how appearances are not what they seem, about the creation of national identity and about the relationship between gods and man. Including components of the epic genre links up to a literary tradition that—at least in its earliest examples—establishes communities' identity and a codified version of the past. Here, in this work, a stable identity and a codified past are impossible to create in this new context. There is no History, but there are histories. There is no America, but there are americas. There is no God, but there are gods. Just as the gods struggle amongst themselves for power, so too do histories and a sense of what it is to be American. The abilities of harnessing power that epic has always demonstrated are shown and taken advantage of, now in a new way. *American Gods* is an example of a work that exposes the fictions that epic create, but it still is not a dismissal of how the genre can create meaning. This new type of epic, one that does not produce a coherent point of view on a community but instead presents multiple views of it, creates new life for the genre, even if it can no longer produce meaning in the same way.

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