

# Comparative Analysis of Gaiman's American Gods and Norse Mythology

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Diplomski rad

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS* AND NORSE  
MYTHOLOGY**

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## 2. Introduction

Mythology is an important aspect of every culture and has played a crucial role in the development of human societies throughout the world. In one way, mythology offers an explanation of the mysteries of the world, a tool for instilling cultural and moral values, and a way to create, nurture and maintain a sense of social unity and group identity. Even today, mythology continues to surround us. And one of the most famous mythological systems today is Norse mythology, in the Western hemisphere, at least. From literature, music, and art, all the way to video games, and English names for days of the week, Norse mythology has influenced and permeated Anglophone societies and cultures for centuries. One such work of literature which will be examined in this thesis is Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, a novel that revolves around Shadow Moon, who, upon leaving prison, discovers not only that gods, all gods, are real, but finds himself in between the two factions of gods who are at war. On one side are the Old Gods, the gods of the Old World, led by Mr Wednesday, an American incarnation of the Norse god Odin, and with the New Gods on the other, the gods of modernity, technology, and progress, with Mr World, the Norse trickster god Loki as their leader. Guided by Mr Wednesday, Shadow undergoes a mythical journey where he will not only reconcile two opposing sides, but also learn about his own demigod origins.

This thesis will offer a comparative analysis of *American Gods* and Norse mythology and examine shared elements between the novel and primarily Norse mythology, all in order to show how Gaiman envisions the continued presence of Norse mythology in the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to show how it has been muted, and partially replaced by the New Gods, but has also proven to be resilient enough to find its way back in the popular consciousness. Moreover, it will be shown how Gaiman's employment of mythology is not limited to Nordic myths, but he also incorporates mythological stories and characters from all parts of the world,

which will be shown in further analysis, proving how much ancient mythologies, despite being considered as “mere” stories, still reverberate in the minds of modern humans and teach us about ourselves and the society we inhabit.

The first part of this thesis will establish the conceptual framework on which the further analysis will build. The first chapter will use Northrop Frye’s theory to define myth, its role and purpose within society, and the changes that myths undergo through time. While continuing to build on Frye’s model, it will rely on Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural analysis of myth to offer a method of reading and analysing myths. Also, the key points of both Frye’s and Lévi-Strauss’s theories will be supported by Gaiman’s theory on myth in order to show how these different theories support each other.

Having established a conceptual framework for the analysis of myth, the second chapter will introduce and analyse one of the key motifs of Norse mythology and *American Gods*, namely, the motif of war. The chapter will show how Gaiman takes vital elements from Norse mythology and rearranges and moulds them to weave a modern mythological story that attempts to describe how America understands itself.

The third chapter will focus on the characters. Namely, it will compare Mr Wednesday and Shadow with their mythological counterparts, Odin and Baldur. The thesis will show how Mr Wednesday represents a weakened, starved, and malicious version of the original Odin, who uses his godhood and status as the leader of the Old Gods to secure his own survival. As for Shadow, on the other hand, it will be shown how he realises his true nature and potential, learns that he is actually the son of Odin, and manages to stop the conflict between the gods by revealing the true intention behind Wednesday’s attempt to rail gods against each other.

### 3. DEFINING MYTH

In its most general definition, myth can be defined as an authorless folklore tale or a type of literature that is usually orally transmitted and incorporates many cultural images and characters vital to the culture they stem from. However, as further analysis will show, such a definition of myth could be considered too simplistic and reductionistic. In *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Northrop Frye provides several perspectives that offer a better definition. For Frye, myth, in its primary sense, is “*mythos*, plot, narrative, or in general the sequential ordering of words” (Frye, 1981: 31). But since all stories are in one way or another, a sequence of words, what separates myth from any other type of story is that myth has developed a certain specialisation or a social function within the society:

Certain stories seem to have a peculiar significance: they are the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure. These stories may be called myths in a secondary sense, a sense that distinguishes them from folktales—stories told for entertainment or other less central purposes (32-33)

Therefore, myths are stories that could be considered sacred, as they “illustrate specific social concern” that is “charged with special seriousness and importance,” as opposed to folk story, which could be characterised as profane, as it relates to “social concern much more distantly: sometimes, at least in their origin, not at all” (33). Moreover, Frye emphasises two qualities of myth that cannot be found in a folk story. Firstly, there is a certain “sense of a *canon*” that relates myths to one another: “a myth takes its place in a mythology, an interconnected group of myths, whereas folktales remain nomadic, travelling over the world and interchanging their themes and motifs” (33). Secondly, myths “outline a specific area of

human culture and mark it off from others” (34), verbally representing a specific culture the myth grew in. In this second sense, a myth can be understood as “a part of imaginative insulation that separates us from the environment” (37). According to Frye, “a mythology rooted in a specific society transmits a heritage of shared allusion and verbal experience in time, and so mythology helps to create a cultural history.” (34). This notion aligns with Gaiman’s understanding of myth, especially in the context of the identity-forging potential of myth: “all our memories include the tales we were told as children, all the myths, all the fairy tales, all the stories. Without our stories, we are incomplete” (Gaiman, 1999: 76). Simply put, since myths contain “a great deal of legendary and traditional history” (Frye, 1981: 34), they directly participate and contribute to the creation of cultural history. Therefore, myths can be seen as origin tales, stories that describe the beginnings of the world humanity inhabits. Myth is “not a *datum*, but a *factum* of human existence: it belongs to the world of culture and civilisation that man has made and still inhabits” (37). Moreover, a mythical story can be considered somewhat of a primitive form of thinking about the world, a story that deals not only with the origin of things but also with how those things function.

For example, a primitive man could believe that storms are a discharge of god’s anger, which would be a sufficient explanation for why storms happen in his world. However, that is not the primary concern of a myth. For Northrop Frye, the real interest of myth “is to draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community, not to inquire into the operations of nature” (37). In other words, myths are stories whose interpretation speaks less about the nature of the world and more about the nature, psychology, and identity of the society that nurtures those myths.

Realist literature tries to put into text that which is already known or which already exists in the world, and evokes the response of “how like that is to what we know” (Frye, 1971: 136), and is primarily based on the employment of verisimilitude and the faithful and consistent

imitation of human experience (135). On the other hand, for Northrop Frye, myth is “an art of implicit metaphorical identity” (136). As stated above, myths draw a circumference around society, separating it from nature and other societies by offering a sense of group identity, a sense of social unity tied through a sequence of interrelated mythical stories about society’s origin. In this sense, it can be said that “myths are obliging” (Gaiman, 77), as they tie the individual to the collective experience of the society they are a part of, obliging them to experience the world in a similar way as their culture of origin.

Following this notion, myth should be understood as “a narrative in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that ‘happen only in stories’; hence, a conventionalised or stylised narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or ‘realism’” (Frye, 1971: 366). Moreover, unlike the characters in realist literature, a mythical hero is “superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men” (33). Therefore, they are “a divine being, and the story about him will be a myth in the common sense of a story about a god” (33). Following this notion, Frye states that, just like in painting, where structural principles are derived “not from an external analogy with something else, but from the internal analogy of the art itself” (134), so does the literature derive its structural principles mainly from mythology and comparative religion (134) to constitute a spectrum of literal modes that throughout history developed from myth to realistic fiction: “myths of gods merge into legends of heroes, legends of heroes merge into plots of tragedies and comedies; plots of tragedies and comedies merge into plots of more or less realistic fiction” (51). Gaiman’s understanding of how myths came to exist corresponds with Frye’s. Gaiman claims that “they begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow... And then, as the religions fall into disuse, or the stories cease to be seen as the literal truth, they become myths” (Gaiman, 1999: 76). It can be said that this falling into disuse resonates with Frye’s



differentiation between the sacred and profane, where myths lose their sacredness over time, but become “fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers” (77).

In Neil Gaiman’s writing, myths play a central role. Some of his most notable works, *The Sandman* (1989), *Neverwhere* (1996), *Good Omens* (1990), *American Gods* (2001), *Anansi Boys* (2005), *The Monarch of the Glen* (2006), all the way to his *Norse Mythology* (2017), rely heavily on the use and re-use of mythological themes, figures, and tropes. This thesis will show how Gaiman uses old myths as an inspiration to create a mythological edifice that not only incorporates myths of the old but manages to invent his own myths and mythological figures that retain their relevance to the contemporary context. It will also offer an analysis of his fantasy novel *American Gods*, a book that incorporates a large number of myths to produce a narrative that tries to understand and “make sense of the myths that make America” (Gaiman 1999: 83). But despite setting Norse mythology at the heart of *American Gods*, Gaiman enriches Shadow’s journey with the grimness of Slavic deities, with the light-hearted banter of the African trickster god Anansi, the ancient wisdom of the Egyptian pantheon, and with a myriad of other gods, heroes, and characters that came to America and brought with them their unique cultural flavour and that continue to exist and build new cultural identities that come under the umbrella term “American”.

### 1.1. Structural analysis of myth

In order to show how Gaiman takes key characters and events from Norse mythology and transposes them into the narrative of *American Gods*, this thesis will rely on Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach to myth. Before delving deeper into the relationship between mythical images of Norse mythology and *American Gods*, the subject requires a brief introduction to the thought of Lévi-Strauss and how it relates to Gaiman’s understanding of myth.

Most prevalent theories that came before Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach to myth range from a psychoanalytic understanding of a myth either as a manifestation of collective dreams or expressions of repressed emotions, to the anthropological understanding of myth as fictionalised expressions of hate, love, fear and other emotions shared among humanity (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 207). However, Lévi-Strauss rejects such theories because they reduce myth "either to an idle play or a coarse kind of speculation; or... they try to provide some kind of explanation for phenomena which they cannot understand otherwise" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 428). According to Lévi-Strauss, the contradiction ingrained in the structure of myth made mythology resistant to a precise and all-encompassing definition. In myths, Lévi-Strauss points out, "any characteristic can be attributed to any subject; every conceivable relation can be met" (1955: 429), while on the other hand, this lack of continuity is contrasted by "the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions" (1955: 429). Furthermore, he notices how the problem of understanding mythology resembles the linguistic problem philosophers of antiquity faced when they attempted to reconcile the fact that linguistic expressions carry definite meaning attached to them, with the fact that in other languages the same sequence could carry a completely different meaning. The solution to this old linguistic problem was found in the Saussurean discovery that "the combination of sounds, not the sounds in themselves" (1955: 429) are of much greater significance for the study of linguistics. Following Saussure's notion, Lévi-Strauss came to the conclusion that myth should be approached as if it were a language. Moreover, he explicitly states that "myth *is* language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech" (1955: 430)

For Lévi-Strauss, the adoption of the Saussurean premise offered a solution that could not be reached through psychoanalysis and anthropology. He noticed how the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, an essential dichotomy ingrained in every language, the two levels on which the language operates, can also be observed in the structure of myths.

According to Saussure, *langue* refers to the unchanging internal set of rules and norms that structure any given language's grammar and vocabulary. Since *langue* represents the aspect of language that does not change, time referents implied are revertible, meaning that the rules that govern the structure of language operate synchronically. On the other hand, *parole* is an actual utterance and the actualisation of the beforementioned linguistic system that is *langue*, referring to the diverse and constantly shifting manner in which language is expressed and used in everyday speech by any particular member of a language group. In doing so, it expresses non-revertible time referents, meaning that the rules that govern *langue* operate diachronically (1955: 431-432). This same dichotomy between language and speech, the two levels on which all languages operate, can be found in mythology, differing only in the fact that these two levels operate simultaneously in myth. In other words, myth must be considered both as an individual story and as a cycle of stories with interchangeable elements, that is, as long as the myth retains its structure, elements that constitute that structure can be subject to change. Or, considering the *langue* in myth in the context of their time referents, Lévi-Strauss notices how

myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages – anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future. (1955: 430)

By recognising that this double structure of *langue*, along with their “historical and ahistorical” (1955:430) time referents, exists and operates simultaneously, myth becomes explainable as a linguistic phenomenon, but one “whose substance cannot be found in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells” (1955: 431). In other words, a myth can be read individually, just like individual words within a sentence. However, its meaning can only be conveyed through the mythological system or, in Lévi-Strauss's words, through a bundle of relations that comprise the mythological system a particular myth belongs

to, just like the meaning of the word should be derived from its position and function within a sentence. As Lévi-Strauss says: “it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined as to produce a meaning” (1955: 432), relations which are expressed both diachronically and synchronically. In simpler words, analysing myths is comparable to the reading of musical notes:

an orchestra score, in order to become meaningful, has to be read diachronically along one axis – that is page after page, and from left to right – and also synchronically along the other axis, all the notes which are written vertically making up one gross constituent unit, i.e. one bundle of relations. (1955: 33)

Lévi-Strauss’s method implies that only by examining the body of available versions of any particular myth can the reader come close to comprehending its elusive and ever-changing meaning. For example, in Norse mythology, a synchronic reading of the myths about Odin would show that they are connected to several themes, such as the creation of the world, war, trickery, the search for knowledge, and others. Taking only the theme of Odin’s search for knowledge, a diachronic reading would reveal that throughout the Nordic mythological opus, there are several different versions of the myth that combine different elements characteristic of this theme. For example, stanza 29 in *Voluspa*, a poem in the *Poetic Edda*, hints that Odin’s eye is hidden in Mimir’s Well, a well in which wisdom and knowledge are contained: “I know where Othin’s eye is hidden / Deep in the wide-famed well of Mimir” (Bellows, 2004: 13). The reason why his eye is hidden in Mimir’s Well is given in the *Gylfaginning*, a chapter in Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*: “All-father came there and asked for a single drink from the spring, but he did not get it until he had given one of his eyes as a pledge” (Sturluson, 1965: 43). This example shows that when analysing myth, a synchronic reading takes into consideration all retellings of that story, whereas a diachronic reading only looks at one specific version. For example, in the myth about Odin and his eye, a synchronic reading

would recognise that the idea of Odin trading his eye for knowledge is a recurring theme in different versions of the myth, while a diachronic reading would only focus on one specific telling of the story where Odin's eye is hidden in a well. Other examples of Odin's search for knowledge describe Odin hanging from Yggdrasil, the World Tree, for nine days and nights, after which he gains knowledge about sixteen runes that give him magical powers (Bellows, 2004: 60-61). He also disguises himself as a traveller who participates in poetry contests, plays mind games with his interlocutors, and so on, all in the desire to win the battle of wits and acquire new knowledge. It is important to keep in mind that one original or true version of this myth does not exist, but all these different myths should be understood as integral parts of one grand myth about Odin: "there is no one true version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth" (Lévi-Straus, 1955: 438).

This process of continuous transformation, which can be observed from the examples above, is precisely what Lévi-Strauss postulates as the essence of mythic thought:

Mythic thought operates essentially through a process of transformation. A myth no sooner comes into being than it is modified through a change of narrator, (...); some elements drop out and are replaced by others, sequences change places, and the modified structure moves through a series of states, the variations of which nevertheless belong to the same set. (Lévi-Strauss, 1981: 675)

Myths depend on transformation, change, and retelling for their survival. In other words, despite changes that myth might endure as its retellings pass from one group of people to another and from one period to another, the fact that it is undergoing perpetual transformation ensures its survival. The infinite number of possible alterations, reversals of characters or binary oppositions, and other types of transformations testify to a "kind of principle of conservation of mythic matter, by the terms of which from one myth another can always emerge" (Lévi-Strauss, 1974: 270). This also aligns with Gaiman's previously mentioned

notion that “myths compost down to dirt, and become a fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers” (Gaiman, 1999: 77).

However, Lévi-Strauss recognises that myths can die as well. Two instances mark the death of myth: a moment when myth becomes a “romantic elaboration”, which turns it into a legendary story, and when a myth becomes a “re-deployment for the purposes of historical legitimation” (281). A similar idea is present in Frye’s writing, who states that literature, just like painting, derives its structural principles “not from an external analogy with something else, but from the internal analogy of the art itself” (Frye, 1971: 134). Consequentially, structural principles of literature are derived mainly from mythology and comparative religion (134), constituting a spectrum of literal modes that span from myth to realist fiction: “myths of gods merge into legends of heroes, legends of heroes merge into plots of tragedies and comedies; plots of tragedies and comedies merge into plots of more or less realistic fiction” (Frye, 1971: 51). Both Lévi-Strauss’s and Frye’s explanation on the evolution of myth corresponds with Gaiman’s “cruelly Darwinist” (81) attitude, where myths “begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, and as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow... And then, as the religions fall into disuse, or the stories cease to be seen as the literal truth, they become myths” (76), which ultimately, if not used, become lost: “the forms of the tales that work survive, the others die and are forgotten” (81)

Lévi-Strauss distinguishes three basic logical processes that govern mythical thought, which are reflected in his notion that “mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 440). Therefore, the first step of this process implies that myth begins with irreconcilable, polar oppositions, which are in the second step replaced by two equivalents mediated by the third party, or the hero of the myth, ultimately resolving into a new set of polar oppositions which will be replaced by a new triad in further iterations of that myth (440). Through this dialectical process, Lévi-Straus

postulates, “myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has originated it is exhausted” (443). It is precisely through this tripartite process, which begins with polar oppositions that are further reconciled through an intermediary figure, and finally reiterated into a new set of oppositions, that the purpose of myth becomes apparent, that is: to “provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions” (443). A similar idea can be found in Gaiman’s statement that the purpose and function of myths can be found in “all the ways we try to make sense of the world we inhabit, a world in which there are few, if any, easy answers” (Lévi-Strauss, 1955: 79). The following chapters will show through comparative analysis how Gaiman’s employment of a mythical narrative follows this structure. Namely, they will show how the overarching narrative works toward the resolution of two polar opposites, that is, between the New Gods and the Old Gods, where in the end, both sides continue to exist in a state that excludes the necessity for the primacy of one side over the other, while at the same time, allowing the protagonist of the story, Shadow, to discover his true identity and fulfil his potential through this process.

However, it is important to emphasise that myths never offer a simple or a straightforward solution. The resolution they do offer is temporary at best, as one resolution of polarities, by definition, invites another set of polarities that demands attention. Just like the world and society they try to describe, myths are riddled with complexities that invite new questions into the equation. That is precisely why Lévi-Strauss states that myths cannot tell anything

instructive about the order of the world, the nature of reality, or the origin and destiny of mankind. We cannot expect them to flatter any metaphysical thirst, or to breathe new life into exhausted ideologies. (Lévi-Strauss, 1981: 67)

What mythical stories have to offer is an insight into the mind of the people to whom the myth belongs and the manner in which they understand and explain irreconcilable

contradictions and oppositions that the world has presented before them. Myths help us “to lay bare their inner workings and clarify the *raison d’être* of beliefs, customs, and institutions, the organisation of which was at first sight incomprehensible” (67). Through that process, they reveal the fundamental logic that governs the human mind, or “operational modes” (67) that have remained unchanged throughout the centuries and which are so fundamental that we can “seek to find them in other societies and in other areas of mental life, where their presence was not suspected, and whose nature is thereby illuminated” (67). That is precisely why Gaiman states that “retelling myths is important. The act of inspecting them is important” (Gaiman, 1999: 80). Even if they are lost or forgotten, it is important to “tell the stories anew, and to retell the old stories. They are our stories, and they should be told.” (80)

Having defined what myth is and its function within a society, that is, a form of language used to articulate, confront, and conceptualise antinomies people face in their everyday life, and an instrument that ties group identities together, it is time to introduce Norse myths that will be referred to in this thesis.

## 1.2. Norse myths

The Norse is a term that refers to the people who inhabited the European North, that is, people who lived in Scandinavia, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, from the late Bronze Age up to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century AD (Daly, 2009: vii). The Norse are not to be confused with the Vikings, the people who lived in the time when the Norse culture underwent a period of radical expansion. The Norse were known for being one of the most innovative shipbuilders and navigators of their time, who nurtured a strong sense of honour and loyalty to their family and their clan (vii), values which are strongly reflected in their myths. Since the Norse culture relied on oral transmission, not much is known about their mythology until the period of intense



Christianisation that began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (viii). Most of what is known about Norse mythology comes from two primary sources, the Icelandic texts of *The Poetic Edda*, known as the *Elder Edda*, and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, also known as the *Younger Edda*. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of thirty-four anonymous prose poems written in skaldic verse that deals with mythological tropes and figures of the Icelandic and Scandinavian traditions. Among the most famous poems in the *Poetic Edda* are *Voluspa* and *Havamal*. *Voluspa*, which translates to *The Prophecy of the Seeress* or *Sibyl's Prophecy*, is a poem that narrates the conversation between Odin and the High Priestess, where the High Priestess tells Odin about the events from the creation of the world to its end and new rebirth. *Havamal*, or *The Ballad of the High One*, is a gnomic poem that contains proverbs, wise sayings, and advice for proper conduct narrated directly by Odin and represents an important insight into the philosophy of the Old Norse. *Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241 AD), an Icelandic scholar, law-speaker, and poet, is a prose work consisting of an extensive collection of mythological stories that explain the essential figures and tropes of Norse poetic diction (Bellows, 2004: xiii). It consists of three sections: *Skaldskaparmal*, a book that elaborates on the art of Norse poetry, *Hattatal*, a book that provides examples of verse forms prevalent in Nordic poetry, and *Gylfaginning*, or *The Fooling of Gylfi*, which narrates the Swedish king Gylfi's journey to Asgard and his conversation with its rulers.

Old Norse cosmology describes the world as divided into nine worlds or planes, with Asgard, the home of the gods, at the top; Hel, the Nordic version of the Greek Underworld and the final destination for the souls which have not died in battle, as the lowest, and Midgard, the home of humanity, in the middle. The other six worlds are home to different mythological beings, such as ice giants, elves, dwarves, and so on. All nine worlds are centred around the ash tree called Yggdrasil, also known as the World Tree (Daly, 2009:119). Yggdrasil is also inhabited by other creatures, such as Ratatoskr, a messenger squirrel that carries messages

between eagles nested above Yggdrasil, and Nidhög, a dragon that lives under Yggdrasil and gnaws at its roots (84). At the base of the World Tree live three Norns called Wyr, Skuld, and Verdandi, female entities that watch over the fates of all living beings (74). Below Yggdrasil is the sacred lake Urd and three Norns are tasked to water Yggdrasil with the water from the sacred lake. Cosmological stories of *Eddas*, namely, the *Voluspa* poem, describe time as cyclical, as the world that we currently inhabit is prophesied to end and will begin again. The current cycle began when Odin and his three brothers slew the primordial giant Ymir and made the world out of his flesh, along with the first two humans (119), and ends in *Ragnarök*, a term which translates as *the twilight of the gods*, a series of events that will precede the destruction of the world and the death of gods (82). After *Ragnarök*, according to *Voluspa*, a new world will be reborn from the ashes of the old one, and only a handful of surviving gods will have an opportunity to enjoy its “wondrous beauty” and “fields unsowed” (Bellows, 2004: 25).

The Norse pantheon consists of two groups of gods, the Aesir and the Vanir, who were at war at one point in time before the human race came into existence. The realm of the Vanir was called Vanaheim, and they were “beautiful beings of light and wisdom” who sent down “sunshine and rain and fertility” (Daly, 2009:1), while the Aesir were the gods of war who invaded the realm of the Vanir. This myth will be explained in more detail in the following chapter, where it will be shown that the overarching narrative of *American Gods* is a reiteration of the myth about the war between the Aesir and the Vanir. For now, it will suffice to say that their war ended with their incorporation into a single pantheon.

The central figure in Norse mythology is Odin. He is the ruling god and the oldest among them, who also goes under the names of All-Father, Wotan, Othin, Grimnir, and so on. *Eddas* describe Odin as an ambivalent figure characterised by a perpetual thirst for knowledge. He is also a god of war, death, wisdom, and poetry (76). He has many sons, but the most important are Baldur and Thor. He is also followed by two ravens, Hugin and Munin, whose names mean

thought and memory and who report to Odin what they see while flying around the world. His spear is called Gungnir, his eight-legged horse Sleipnir, and his two wolves, Freki and Geri (76). He also has just one eye, as he exchanged the other for Mimir's wisdom. Odin also has a gift of poetry because he drank the Mead of Poetry which gave poetic inspiration to anyone who drank it (78). He is also called the Gallows God, a name he got when he hung from the Yggdrasil for nine days and nights, where he sacrificed himself to himself in order to acquire secret knowledge about the runes (78). Baldur, known as Balder or Baldr, is the most beloved of all gods, a symbol of light and purity who is known for his beauty and for being almost invulnerable. There is only one known myth where Baldur is the main character, but it is one of the most famous stories in Norse mythology. It tells how Baldur's mother, Frigg, the goddess of fertility, made all beings in existence swear to her that they would not hurt Baldur, all except the mistletoe, whom she considered too young to pose any danger to anyone. Despite her effort, Loki manages to trick Baldur's blind brother Hodur into throwing a mistletoe at Baldur and killing him (9). Baldur is revived at the end of Ragnarök and becomes one of the gods who inherit the new earth.

These are the principal gods and motifs of Norse mythology that are relevant for the analysis of *American Gods*. The following chapters will introduce the plot of *American Gods* and then closely inspect the relationship between the central theme of Norse mythology and *American Gods*, that is, the war between the gods. After that, the analysis will examine the two main characters of the novel, Mr Wednesday and Shadow, and their relationship to their mythological counterparts, Odin the All-father and his son, Baldur.

## 4. War Between the Gods

In order to properly analyse Gaiman's employment of mythology, his incorporation of mythical stories into the plot of *American Gods*, and finally, to examine how Gaiman's characters relate to their mythological counterparts, it is necessary first to introduce the novel itself and the myths that form its structure, and then proceed to analyse three key stories from Norse mythology and their presence within the narrative.

### 4.1. Introduction to *American Gods*

Neil Gaiman wrote *American Gods* in 2001, and the novel won several literary awards, Hugo and Nebula being the most prestigious. The novel can be described as a mythopoetic narrative that combines elements of several distinct genres such as fantasy, gothic, horror, and americana. The story begins with the protagonist Shadow, who is released from prison three days early due to the untimely death of his wife, Laura. On a flight to her funeral, he meets a mysterious Mr Wednesday, who offers Shadow a job as his bodyguard, and in the unlikely event of his death, Shadow would be the one tasked to hold a vigil for him. After accepting the offer, Mr Wednesday takes Shadow on a journey across America, during which Shadow learns that Mr Wednesday is actually an American incarnation of the Norse god Odin and that he is the leader of a group of gods who were brought to America by early settlers and immigrants, deities who call themselves the Old Gods. He also learns that there is a war brewing between the Old Gods and their opposing faction, the New Gods, incarnations of modern inventions and beliefs, such as technology, media, globalisation, and so on. At one point during the narrative, Mr Wednesday is killed, and his death galvanises the Old Gods to bring the conflict between

the two opposing factions to the boiling point. With Mr Wednesday dead, Shadow soon learns what holding a vigil for Mr Wednesday really means, that is, he has to repeat the mythological event where Odin hung from Yggdrasil for nine days and nine nights, during which he learned nine runes and eighteen magical charms. After deciding to hold his end of the bargain, Shadow is hanged on the World Tree, where he dies and returns to life through the intervention of Easter, the goddess of spring, and Horus, the Egyptian sun-deity. While his body hangs on Yggdrasil, Shadow's consciousness travels to the Underworld, where he learns the truth about his origin and the real reason for war. Namely, he finds out that he is Mr Wednesday's son and that the conflict between the Old Gods and the New Gods is orchestrated by Mr Wednesday and Mr World, the leader of the New Gods and Norse trickster-god Loki in disguise, all in order to feed on the death and chaos the war would create. After being resurrected from Yggdrasil, Shadow travels to the House on Rock, where the final war is about to happen, and tells both sides the truth about their war, an act which ultimately leads to the resolution of the conflict.

#### 4.2. War in the Norse Mythology and *American Gods*

Since the overarching narrative of *American Gods* is based on the theme of war between the Old Gods and the New Gods, it is appropriate first to examine how the events in the narrative relate to the Norse myth about the war between two groups of Norse gods introduced in the previous chapter, the Aesir and the Vanir gods.

The concept of war drives the plot and themes of both *American Gods* and Norse mythology. The Old Gods, who came to America along with immigrants, and who have been forgotten in the meantime, as their believers died off or simply stopped believing, are locked in a conflict with the New Gods, who reflect society's modern obsessions with technology, media, and fame. Their conflict ends when Shadow reveals the real reasons why Wednesday

insisted on gathering the Old Gods and leading them into the war. For Limpár, the relationship between the Old Gods and The New gods signifies the following:

The physical condition of the old gods metaphorically stands for the faith people have in them, and the weakened spirituality of mankind thus becomes manifest in the battered existences of these gods, who, in general, represent the spiritual awareness of the people; in contrast, modern gods, such as the gods of credit card and freeway, media, Internet, and telephone, to mention a few, appear as powerful characters of the present world, manifesting the belief people have in them, replacing the spiritual with the material. (Limpár, 2014: 82)

In Norse mythology, war is almost a central theme. Not only is the war present in almost every mythological story, but it also marks the beginning and the eschatological end of the Norse world. However, while the theme of war is present in both *American Gods* and Norse mythology, how it is depicted and the specific context in which it occurs differ. In *American Gods*, the employment of the theme of war between the Old and New Gods can be understood as a metaphor for the way in which belief and culture can shift and evolve over time, and how different and disparaging systems of belief can merge and coexist, while in Norse mythology, war is often depicted as an integral part of life that permeates lives of gods and mortals alike.

In the novel, the Aesir and Vanir, the Norse gods of war and gods of agriculture, are replaced with the Old Gods, the representations of cultures and beliefs brought to America from the old world, and the New Gods, modern deities representing contemporary inventions, concepts, and technologies. Their conflict can be understood as a clash between the worlds: “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.” (Gaiman 2001: 418). The Old Gods, estranged and alienated from their places of origin, are forced to fight their

decline and eradication by continuously attempting to reinvent themselves, while the New Gods are in constant danger of being lost in the inexorable march of modernity: “The old gods are ignored. The new gods are as quickly taken up as they are abandoned, cast aside for the next big thing. Either you’ve been forgotten, or you’re scared you’re going to be rendered obsolete” (420).

The old Norse literature contains several reiterations of the myth about the war between the Aesir and the Vanir (also called Wanes) gods. *Poetic Edda*, namely the 21<sup>st</sup> stanza in *Voluspa*, describes their clash as the first war since the world began: “the war I remember, the first in the world / When the gods with spears had smitten Gollveig” (Bellows 2004: 10). The conflict apparently begins when Gollveig, the witch also called Heith in the following stanza, enters the realm of the Aesir and starts bewitching the gods:

22. Heith they named her who sought their home,  
The wide-seeing witch, in magic wise ;  
Minds she bewitched that were moved by her magic,  
To evil woman a joy she was (10)

This causes Odin to gather his forces to retaliate and escalate the conflict into the first war in history:

23. On the host his spear did Othin hurl,  
Then in the world did war first come ;  
The wall that girdled the gods was broken,  
And the field by the warlike Wanes was trodden (11)

The 23<sup>rd</sup> stanza describes the beginning of the battle, which starts with Odin throwing his spear toward the Vanir gods, and the narrative shifts to the image of the Vanir gods defeating the Aesir by destroying their fortress.

The motif of throwing Gungnir, Odin's spear, across the battlefield before the very beginning of the battle is the motif that repeats in *American Gods* as well. In the final part of the story, in the moments before the war starts, Mr World, Loki in disguise, points out that he needs a branch cut off from Yggdrasil, which would take on the symbolic function of Odin's spear and dedicate the battle to Odin: "I'm going to take the stick, and I'm going to throw it over the armies as they come together. As I throw it, it will become a spear. And then, as the spear arcs over the battle, I'm going to shout 'I dedicate this battle to Odin'" (395). When asked about the meaning of this symbolic act, Mr World, answers: "Power... And food. A combination of two. You see, the outcome of the battle is unimportant. What matters is the chaos, and the slaughter" (395). If Wednesday's and World's scheme had succeeded, if Shadow had not woken up from Yggdrasil, and if the battle had actually happened, it would have turned into a sacrificial massacre which would have served only to fuel their own power.

When considering the end of the battle between gods, what would be the aftermath and the resolution of the conflict in *Voluspa*, in *American Gods* becomes the reason for it. Namely, *Voluspa* describes the aftermath of the battle in the following way:

24. Then sought the gods their assembly-seats,  
The holy ones, and council held,  
Whether the gods should tribute give,  
Or to all alike should worship belong. (11)

As it can be seen, after the Aesir gods lose the war, they hold a council and discuss how to distribute the worship they receive from the believers, that is, whether the rights of worship should belong solely to the victors or should be divided equally among all gods. In *American Gods*, Gaiman takes this motif and turns it into the very reason as to why gods are in conflict at all. In order to secure their survival, each faction in this conflict strives to monopolise the



belief, worship, and attention of ordinary humans. What belief means to gods is best reflected in Mr Wednesday's words to Shadow at the beginning of the novel:

My kind of people see your kind of people..." he hesitated. "It's like bees and honey. Each bee makes only a tiny, tiny drop of honey. It takes thousands of them, millions perhaps, all working together to make the pot of honey you have on your breakfast table. Now imagine that you could eat nothing but honey. That's what it's like for my kind of people ... we feed on belief, on prayers, on love. (225)

This quote reveals what every god in the novel desires: belief. Belief is their sustenance, without which they wither and die, abandoned and forgotten. The desire to secure an infinite source of belief by eliminating competition is the very reason why Mr Wednesday and Mr World organise their elaborate scheme. In the end, the resolution of the war comes when Shadow, resurrected from Yggdrasil and having learned the truth, steps into the battlefield and reveals to both sides that their conflict is orchestrated by Mr Wednesday and Mr World only for them to feed on the death and chaos the bloodshed would create:

the battle you came here for 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. Every one of you that dies, feeds him (420)

After Shadow gives his speech, which makes the gods realise that there are no substantial differences between the two factions, the battle stops, and the gods start dispersing: "The gods were leaving that place, first in handfuls, and then by scores, and finally in their hundreds" (421), marking the end of the conflict without the victorious. Although it is not explicitly stated in the narrative, the ending suggests that the Old Gods and the New Gods continue to exist, if not unified, then at least as parts of the larger American mythos.

This conclusion is supported by Daly's and Lindow's analysis of Norse mythology. When interpreting the symbolism of the Norse myth about the war between the Aesir and Vanir, both Lindow and Daly agree that this myth potentially signifies a historical event that marked the conflict and integration of two different cults. For Daly, this myth represents a "folk memory of the conflict between the adherents of two different cults, which were then brought together" (Daly 2010: 2), while Lindow claims that the "war has often been understood as the reflection of the overrunning of local fertility cults somewhere in the Germanic area by a more warlike cult, perhaps that of invading Indo-Europeans" (Lindow, 2001: 53), which ultimately "explains symbolically how a religious system contains various kinds of deities with varying functions" (53). The new Norse pantheon, now a conglomeration of the Aesir and the Vanir gods, is still ruled by Odin, who retains his status as the chief Norse god. In the context of *American Gods*, same phenomenon can be observed. In Shadow's efforts to make sense of reality, war between the gods is another binary opposition in the sequence of binarities, such as life-death, real-artificial, light-dark, good-evil (Blomqvist, 2012:24). What the war between the gods ultimately results in is Shadow choosing "to adapt a critical view of this system" (24). Moreover, Shadow's rejection of this binarity and the adoption of a more nuanced worldview ultimately turns the novel into a "form of mock symbolism which satirizes – though not in a condescending way – contemporary American culture" (24)

### 3. Comparative Analysis of the Characters in *American Gods* and Norse Mythology

Having established war as a motif that moves the narratives of both *American Gods* and Norse mythology, the door is now open for an examination of key figures in the novel, Mr Wednesday and Shadow, and their mythological counterparts, Odin and Baldur. The first part of this chapter will deal with Odin and Wednesday, and it will be shown how Gaiman's Odin, Mr Wednesday, represents a lesser version of Odin, a version deprived of his original traditions, habitat, and sustenance, and in a way, represents Gaiman's examination of what happens to gods after they are cut off from their believers and left to survive on their own. The second part of this chapter will more closely examine Shadow, his journey throughout the novel, and Gaiman's arrangement of events that allow him to discover his true nature as Odin's son, the Norse god Baldur.

#### 3.1. Wednesday and Odin

The first time Mr Wednesday reveals his true identity to Shadow is during their visit to the World's Largest Carousel in the Rock City. There, Shadow sees Odin in his true form and learns who he really is:

This is what they call me. I am called Glad-of-War, Grim, Raider, and Third. I am One-Eyed. I am called Highest, and True-Guesser. I am Grimmir, and I am the Hooded One. I am All-Father, and I am Gondlir Wand-Bearer. I have as many names as there are winds, as many titles as there are ways to die (Gaiman, 2001: 104).

This quote signifies many names of Odin as they appear throughout *Eddas*, but this single quote appears to be a reference to stanzas 46 to 48 of *Grimnismol*, a poem in the *Poetic Edda*, which offers a sort of a catalogue of Odin's names:

46. Grim is my name, Gangleri am I,  
Herjan and Hjalmbéri,  
Thekk and Thrithi, Thuth and Uth,  
Helblindi and Hor ; (Bellows: 103)

The listing ends similarly to Wednesday's quote from the novel, where he explicitly states that Odin has a multitude of names:

48. Sithhott, Sithskegg, Sigfather, Hnikuth  
Allfather, Valfather, Atrith Farmatyr ;  
A single name have I never had  
Since first among men I fared. (103)

As Mr Wednesday and Shadow journey through America, recruiting other gods to their side, the similarities between Gaiman's Odin and the mythical Odin become more apparent. During one such journey, Mr Wednesday recalls the time he was hung on Yggdrasil: "Nine nights I hung on the bare tree, my side pierced with a spear's point. I swayed and blew in the cold winds and the hot winds, without food, without water, a sacrifice of myself to myself, and the worlds opened to me." (226). He then proceeds to recount what he gained from that experience, namely, the eighteen charms he learned during his sacrificial hanging on the Yggdrasil (225-226), all of which remarkably resemble the ones outlined in stanzas 145-167 in *Havamol* (Bellows, 2004: 62-67), a list which is far too long to appear in this thesis. Some of the charms he lists are exemplified in the novel as well. Just like his mythological counterpart, Mr Wednesday has the power to change his appearance according to his needs, an ability which is most often paired with trickery and deception. An example of this happens soon after Shadow starts working for him, when he tricks a young cashier to avoid paying for

gas: “he seemed very old, suddenly. (...) Wednesday was obviously on the verge of tears, an old man made helpless by the implacable plastic march of the modern world” (Gaiman, 2001: 36). But the most significant testament to his talent for trickery and deception comes to the foreground when Shadow reveals that Odin and Loki riled up the gods against each other to increase their own power:

Somewhere in there—maybe fifty years ago, maybe a hundred, they put a plan into motion, a plan to create a reserve of power they could both tap into. Something that would make them stronger than they had ever been. After all, what could be more powerful than a battlefield covered with dead gods? The game they played was called ‘Let’s You and Him Fight’. (420)

As for the mythological figure of Odin, the scriptures abound with descriptions of his feats and adventures. In *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson offers an explanation as to why Odin is held in such high regard among other gods, as “he was so handsome and noble to look at when he sat among his friends that it gladdened the hearts of all” (Sturluson, 2011:10). He also has the power to change his appearance to suit his needs, and he “spoke so well and so smoothly that all who heard him believed all he said was true. All he spoke was in rhymes and is now the case in what is called skaldship” (10). However, in times of war, Odin reveals his grim side as he is able “to cause his enemies to be blind or deaf or fearful in battle, and he would curse their swords to cut no better than wands” (10). Aside from his impressive ability to influence his enemies, he has the power to inspire those who follow him: “his own men went to battle without coats of mail and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, and neither fire nor iron affected them” (10). To add to his dark side, Odin also practices a forbidden form of magic previously attributed to Haith/Gollveig, a witch that caused the Aesir gods to fight a war against the Vanir. According to Sturluson,

“it is called *seith* [sorcery], and by means of it he could know the fate of men and predict events that had not yet come to pass; and by it he could also inflict death or misfortunes or sickness, or also deprive people of their wits or strength, or give them to others. But this sorcery is attended by such wickedness that manly men considered it shameful to practice it, and so it was taught to priestesses” (11)

However, as evil as *seith* might have been considered, it is not a testament to Odin’s fundamental wickedness but more of a symbol of his complex character and multifaceted nature. As described in previous paragraphs, mythological Odin is the father of all life, which implies he fathered both the positive and negative aspects of creation. He is beloved by his peers and respected among his enemies, whose unyielding dedication to acquiring knowledge makes him more of a towering and all-encompassing figure in Norse mythology and less of an antagonist. On the other hand, Mr Wednesday, a version of Odin who is deprived of his basic sustenance and forced to survive in unfriendly America, can be seen as Odin who is stripped of his thirst for knowledge, forced to resort to his darkest instincts and abilities to ensure his survival. As such, Mr Wednesday can be seen as a more one-sided version of the original Odin, a version focused on fulfilling his own needs at the cost of the wellbeing of others. This is also confirmed in the postscript, Gaiman’s final chapter where Shadow meets the original Odin from Iceland, accusing him of the crimes Wednesday did:

“I saw you die,” said Shadow. “I stood vigil for your body. You tried to destroy so much for power. You would have sacrificed so much for yourself. You did that.” “I did not do that.” “Wednesday did. He was you.” “He was me, yes. But I am not him.” (Gaiman, 2001: 460)

At last, the most defining myth about Odin, and the one which is of the greatest significance for the analysis of *American Gods*, is when Odin hangs from Yggdrasil, the World tree, which is also the reason why he is called The Hanged God, the god of gallows or Grimnir.

However, since this myth paves Shadow's path towards his self-realisation, it is most appropriate to be presented in the context of the comparative analysis of Shadow and Baldur.

### 3.2. Shadow and Baldur

Having described how Mr Wednesday and mythological Odin relate, it is now appropriate to describe how Shadow undergoes a similar journey in the novel, which reveals his true identity to be the Norse sun god Baldur, but not before traversing the similar path as Odin. In other words, in order to achieve self-realisation, Shadow first has to find himself in Odin's shoes, that is, he has to experience the same sacrifice on Yggdrasil as Odin did, but unlike him, Shadow does so in order to stop the war between the gods, and not for his own gain.

After Mr Wednesday is killed and while Shadow is travelling with Czernobog and Mr Nancy to retrieve his body, he decides to hold up to his end of the bargain, that is, to hold vigil for Mr Wednesday. What he does not know at that moment is that holding a vigil for Mr Wednesday implies repeating the same mythological event when Odin hung from Yggdrasil. Having taken his body, Mr Nancy, Czernobog, and Shadow drive to a farm in Virginia. There they find the Yggdrasil tree and meet three Norns, maidens from Norse mythology who spin and weave the fates of men and gods. *Voluspa* describes them in the following way:

20. Thence come the maidens mighty in wisdom  
Three from the dwelling down 'neath the tree;  
Urth is one named, Verthandi the next, -  
On the wood they scored,- and Skuld the third.  
Laws they made there, and life allotted  
To the sons of men, and set their fates (Bellows, 2004: 9)

In *American Gods*, when Shadow meets the Norns, they resemble a set of Russian dolls: "a tall one – she was Shadow's height, or even taller – a middle-sized one, and a woman so

short and hunched that at a first glance Shadow wrongly supposed her to be a child” (Gaiman, 2001:355). Three Norns prepare Shadow for the vigil by taking off his clothes, helping him to climb on Yggdrasil, and tying ropes around his body, marking the beginning of the process of Shadow’s death and rebirth.

The Norse myth about Odin’s sacrifice on Yggdrasil is told in *Havamal*, a poem in the *Poetic Edda* narrated by Odin himself. In the poem, Odin recounts the ritualistic self-sacrifice to himself, where he was hanged on Yggdrasil for nine days and nights, wounded by his spear, and resurrected with esoteric knowledge. The myth starts with Odin’s description of the setting:

39. I ween that I hung on the windy tree,  
Hung there for nights full nine;  
With the spear I was wounded and offered I was  
To Othin, myself to myself,  
On the tree that none may ever know  
What root beneath it runs (Bellows, 2004: 60)

Stanza 139 describes the event when Odin is hanging on Yggdrasil and the price it took for him to acquire the magic runes. He is wounded by the spear as a sacrifice to himself, and by being hung on the World Tree, he is in a space that is outside of the nine realms that structure Norse cosmology. The following stanza describes the culmination of his sacrifice:

140. None made me happy with loaf or horn  
And there below I looked ;  
I took up the runes, shrieking I took them,  
And forthwith back I fell (61)

According to *Voluspa*, Odin peers below Yggdrasil, takes the runes with a scream and falls from the World Tree. He is then nurtured with “the goodly mead” (61) and nine songs he got from his uncle, who Bellows claims to be Mimir himself (61). Having acquired the runes and having been replenished, Odin starts changing:



142. Then began I to thrive, and wisdom to get,  
I grew and well I was ;  
Each word led me on to another word,  
Each deed to another deed (61)

Stanzas 143 to 164 describe the aftermath of Odin's resurrection, and they recount all the things Odin learns while hanging on the three. Stanza 145 lists the eight runes Odin learned, representing the knowledge of writing, reading, painting, judging, asking, offering, sending, and sacrificing (62), while stanzas 147 to 164 describe the details of the eighteen magical charms Odin learned during that process (63-67).

The narrative of *American Gods* follows the similar pattern. Having undergone preparation with Three Norns, Shadow is left to hang on Yggdrasil for nine days, and he goes through three different stages before he is finally dead and resurrected. He first starts experiencing the pain and discomfort of ropes cutting into his flesh while being tortured by thirst and hunger. He then starts experiencing himself as the Yggdrasil tree, and finally, he experiences death, where he goes to Underworld to be judged by the Egyptian god Anubis and is finally resurrected by Easter and Horus. While in the Underworld, Shadow learns who he truly is, that he is Odin's son and that Odin and Loki orchestrated the war. However, to reach that truth, he has had to sacrifice parts of himself: Zorya Polnochnaya, a Slavic deity he met on one of his journeys with Mr Wednesday, takes away his name, while Bast, an Egyptian deity, takes away his heart. He then proceeds to the final judgement where Anubis, a deity from Egyptian mythology, weights his heart against the feather. Shadow passes the test and gets to choose what happens next: "I want nothing. No heaven, no hell, no anything. Just let it end." (378).

While Shadow's consciousness is in the underworld, Mr Town, one of Mr World's lackeys, follows the order to bring a branch cut from Yggdrasil intended to serve as a

symbolical spear that would be thrown across the battlefield and dedicate the incoming battle between Gods to Odin, finds the farm where Yggdrasil is located. He also finds Shadow's body hanging from the tree. Having taken the branch, he makes a stabbing gesture towards Shadow's body: "And then he jabbed the stick in the air toward the hanging man, in a stabbing motion. It was an instinctive gesture, containing all the frustration and rage inside Town. He imagined that he was holding a spear and twisting it into Shadow's guts." (389). Soon after, Shadow's body starts bleeding: "On the tree, Shadow's body began to bleed. The wound was in his side. The blood that came from it was slow and thick and molasses-black" (390).

This moment has a dual significance. On the one hand, it can be understood as a synchronisation between Shadow's spiritual and physical state, marking Shadow's death and the divergence from the path that Odin had in plan for him, and his alignment with the Buffalo Man, the incarnation of the land that frequently visits Shadow's dreams throughout the story. On the other hand, the purpose and the outcome of his death are the same as Baldur's, that is, both of them had to die in order to be resurrected as the inheritors of the new earth that comes after Ragnarök, the final battle of the gods.

In the meantime, while experiencing the ending he asked for, Shadow is in a state of being "without form, and void. He was nothing" (398). Whiskey Jack, a Native American trickster figure, wakes Shadow up by offering him a beer. Shadow then enters into a conversation with Whiskey Jack, during which he realises the nature of Mr Wednesday's and Mr World's trickery and the real reason why all gods are struggling in America: "It's not good growing country for gods. They don't grow well here. They're like avocados trying to grow in wild rice country" (401). For native Americans, as Whiskey Jack told Shadow, "the land was the church. The land was the religion. The land was older and wiser than the people who walked on it" (400). Soon after, Shadow is brought back to life by Easter, the goddess of spring, and Horus, the Egyptian sun god, who takes him off Yggdrasil and sends him to stop the war

between the Old Gods and the New Gods that was reaching its boiling point. Resurrected, Shadow notices how he feels good, as he “couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so alive, and so together” (402), marking the beginning of the gradual transition into his new identity. However, it is important to point out how Gaiman takes all these different deities and mythological figures from the cultures they stem from, and creates a dynamic world where they live together. In this patchwork-world, the Old Gods, the New Gods, and the ordinary humans on whom gods depend, all become a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 1997:146), inhabiting a space that does not support a singular ideology, but becomes a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash” (146).

When it comes to Shadow’s true identity, his name is not explicitly stated in the novel. However, *The Monarch of The Glen*, a sequel of *American Gods* inspired by *Beowulf*, which follows his adventures in Scotland, establishes Shadow as the Norse sun god Baldr or Baldur. At several points during *The Monarch of The Glen*, Shadow is referred to as Balder and even finds his birth certificate with the name Balder Moon on it (Gaiman 2004:11). However, throughout the narrative of *American Gods*, several moments reveal Shadow’s real identity, especially in the final chapter, when Shadow meets the original Odin from Iceland.

One of the first instances that foreshadow this is when Horus visits Shadow while he is hanging on Yggdrasil and, after being asked who he is, says “I am the sun, as you are” (Gaiman, 2001:364), pointing out that Shadow is, just like the mythological Baldur, a deity of sun and light: “He is so fair of face and bright that a splendour radiates from him and there is one flower so white that is likened to Baldr’s brow” (Sturluson, 1966:51). Another moment which points to the fact that Shadow is Baldur happens in the Underworld, during his conversation with Bast, the Egyptian cat-goddess of protection, pleasure, and health, when she mentions that “my people have been keeping their eyes on you, for me” (Gaiman, 2001:374); or when Mr Ibis, a

psychopomp from Egyptian mythology says “it doesn’t matter that you didn’t believe in us, we believed in you” (376); or when Horus comes to Easter to ask her to resurrect Shadow, because “if he’s gone forever, it’s all over” (392).

All these moments point out how Shadow occupies everyone’s attention. Despite playing games with him throughout the story, Old Gods care for Shadow and hold him in high esteem, just like the Aesir gods loved their Baldur, but still played games with him, while the New Gods were focused on Shadow because Wednesday considered him important. This is explicitly stated in the novel, in the final meeting between Wednesday and Shadow:

You did everything you were intended to do, and more. You took everybody’s attention, so they never looked at the hand with the coin in it. It’s called misdirection. And there’s power in the sacrifice of a son—power enough, and more than enough, to get the whole ball rolling. (414)

Soon after this, Easter and Anubis pick up Shadow and take him to Rock City, where the final battle is about to happen. Shadow intervenes with his speech, revealing Mr Wednesday’s and Mr World’s true plan and that their conflict was “never intended to be a war” (420) but a mass sacrifice that would only fuel their power. After his speech, the gods disperse, and the battle is over before it reaches its peak. However, chapter 20 and the postscript establish two important and final connections between Shadow and Baldur.

In chapter 20, Shadow returns to Lakeside, a small town where Wednesday hid Shadow from the Old Gods and where he lived as Mike Ainsel. By all parameters, Lakeside is an ordinary working-class town with two peculiarities. First, every year, a child from Lakeside would disappear without explanation, and no trace of them would be found. Furthermore, while living there, Shadow experiences the most intense winter in his life (see 205-207), and Lakeside seems like a place where time stopped moving, and everything remained the same throughout

decades. The winter Shadow experiences in Lakeside resembles Fimbulwinter, the same winter that precedes Ragnarök, which covered the land with ice and snow for three years and which disrupts normal laws of nature (Lindow, *Old Norse Mythology* 2012:154). In the novel, after the battle ends, Shadow remembers the words of Ganesh, the Indian elephant deity: “it’s in the trunk” (360), and finally realises their meaning. Namely, he figures out that missing children can be found in the trunk of a car placed in the middle of a frozen lake every year. And a local man, Mr Hinzelmänn, the first person Shadow meets upon arriving at Lakeside, at the end of each winter organised a humanitarian lottery, where people would bet on the day and time the car would fall through the ice and sink. He also realises that Hinzelmänn is behind these ritualistic annual sacrifices, which kept Lakeside a haven for him. Namely, Hinzelmänn was a kobold, a creature from traditional German stories who was used to scare children into obedience and was using Lakeside as his own source of power. When Shadow reveals his true identity, Hinzelmänn is killed, marking the end of his reign over Lakeside. Unbearable winter, ice, the changelessness of Lakeside, and the way Hinzelmänn dies, marking the ending of an era and the beginning of a new one, are all motifs that resemble the descriptions of the Fimbulwinter across *Eddas*.

And finally, in the postscript, the narrative provides the strongest suggestion that Shadow is indeed Baldur. After all events in the novel develop and reach their conclusion, Shadow visits Iceland. As Shadow strolls Iceland’s grassy fields and hillsides (see 458-459), they resemble the *Eddic* descriptions of Earth after Ragnarök:

61. In wondrous beauty once again  
Shall the golden tables stand mid the grass,  
Which gods had owned in the days of old (Bellows, 2004:25)

As he sits on the grassy bank, Shadow finds himself in conversation with Icelandic Odin, who immediately recognises him: “You and I, we have walked the same path. I also hung

on the tree for nine days, a sacrifice of myself to myself. I am the lord of the Aes. I am the god of the gallows.” (Gaiman, 2001:460). During that conversation, Odin clarifies that he is different from his American counterpart, and Shadow decides to keep moving to places he has never been. As they end their conversation, Shadow gives Odin the glass eye that belonged to Wednesday, but not before showing him a magic trick, leaving Odin thrilled: “the old man grinned and laughed and clapped his hands together.” (461). He then asks Shadow to show him more tricks, and Shadow reaches into the air and plucks a gold coin out of the air, a coin which belonged to Mad Sweeney, who gave the coin to Shadow at the beginning of the novel, which was taken from the sun’s treasure (178) and represents the sun itself. Following this conversation, the novel ends with a description of Shadow throwing a golden coin in the air while it keeps spinning: “He tossed the coin into the air with a flick of his thumb. It spun golden at the top of its arc, in the sunlight, and it glittered and glinted and hung there in the midsummer sky as if it was never going to come down” (461). This final description, not as much in its wording, as it is in the mood, resembles the ending of *Voluspa*: “the fields unsowed bear ripened fruit, All ills grow better, and Baldr comes back” (Bellows, 25). The golden coin, and the way Shadow tosses it in the air, where it remains spinning in the midsummer sky as the sun spins around the earth, are the final proof that Shadow is indeed the Norse sun deity Baldur.

## 4. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to show how ancient mythological systems are very much alive in the contemporary context by providing a comparative analysis between Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* and Norse mythology. In the first part of this thesis, the aim was to offer a comparative definition of myth, its role, purpose, and dynamic within societies, as well as to offer analytical tools that can help the reader better analyse and understand the composition and structure of myths. In the attempt to define myth, it has been shown how Northrop Frye understands myth as a symbolic and metaphorical narrative used to explain the world and its cultural significance. In Frye's theory, myth can be defined as a unique position from which the world can be comprehended, which is not based on historicity or science, but rather employs metaphor and symbol to understand reality.

Having defined myth, the thesis introduces Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, which is used as a tool for the analysis of myth. For Lévi-Strauss, myth is not just a catalogue of old stories and legends but a language with its own rules and grammar. For Lévi-Strauss, myths can be used to analyse the underlying structures and patterns of the culture they stem from, as well as a way to reconcile apparent polarities present in the world, whether they be the polarity between the human and nature or the intersocietal dynamic that shapes the group identity and cultural worldview of a society.

Having defined myth and established a conceptual framework for its analysis, the thesis proceeds to analyse the relation between *American Gods* and Norse mythology, starting from the motif that drives both narratives, war. Therefore, it has been shown how Gaiman replicates the conflict between two factions of Norse gods, the Aesir and the Vanir, and places them in the modern context, where they become the Old Gods and the New Gods, the gods of tradition and gods of modernity. It has also been shown that the resolution of the conflict in the novel

resonates with the resolution of the conflict in Norse mythology. Namely, it ends with the incorporation of two warring sides into a singular pantheon. The only difference is, in the novel, the war ends without an apparent leader among them, while the conflict in Norse mythology establishes Odin as the leader of all gods.

After examining the motif of war, the thesis moves on to the analysis of characters, namely, Wednesday and Shadow, and how they relate to the mythological figures of Odin and Baldur. It has been shown that Mr Wednesday is a bleak copy of the original Odin. Deprived of his fundamental sustenance and decontextualised from his native land, Mr Wednesday is a figure who is ready to sacrifice everything and everyone, all in order to increase his own power. Shadow, on the other hand, is revealed to be Odin's son, and consequentially, he is also Baldur, the Norse sun god. Shadow's journey to self-realisation starts with him working as Wednesday's bodyguard until he is required to hold a vigil for him. Then, as Shadow is hanged on the world tree Yggdrasil, he realises the true intent behind everything Wednesday has done so far. He dies on the world tree and resurrects, but with full realisation of who he is and with the knowledge that's crucial for stopping the war between the gods.



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## 6. Abstract

This thesis has provided a comparative analysis between Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* and Norse mythology. The analysis aimed to show how Gaiman employs Norse mythology, along with other mythologies from around the world, to weave a contemporary story about how America understands itself. The first part of this thesis provided a theoretical framework for understanding and defining myth in order to understand its role, purpose, and dynamic within the societies that gave birth to it. In that endeavour, the thesis relied on Northrop Frye's definition of myth, followed by Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of myth, which provided a necessary framework for the comparative analysis. The second chapter analysed the motif of war between two groups of gods in Norse mythology and the war between the Old Gods and the New Gods in *American Gods*. The goal of this comparison is to show how Gaiman takes fundamental mythological elements, such as the element of war, and fits them into the contemporary context, proving their timeless relevance. And finally, the third chapter focuses on the relationship between the characters in *American Gods*, namely Mr Wednesday and Shadow, and their mythological counterparts, the Norse chief god Odin and the sun-deity, Baldur. Ultimately, it has been concluded that Gaiman's employment of Norse mythology proves that the passing of time does not take away from their relevance and that they still help the reader better understand the world in and around themselves.

## 7. Key words

Gaiman, Norse, Mythology, myth, Odin, Baldur, War