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Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se bude věnovat problematice využití a modernizace folklorních a mytologických prvků v současném žánru fantasy, specificky v díle *American Gods* amerického autora Neila Gaimana. V úvodní části diplomant stručně pojedná o žánru fantasy především s ohledem na jeho využívání prvků folkloru a mytologie, představí zvolené dílo a zařadí jej do literárního kontextu. Dále vysvětlí pojmy folklór a mytologie a rovněž osvětlí zvolený teoretický rámec práce – tj. teorii recepce. Jádrem práce pak bude jednak analýza Gaimanova díla a jeho filmové adaptace z hlediska toho, jak pracují s tradičními motivy folklóru a mýtů (např. s motivem hledání, hrdinovy poutě, apod.), jakým způsobem je modernizují či adaptují do současného amerického prostředí. Práce se soustředí nejen na prosté porovnání původních a Gaimanových verzí mýtů a folklorních motivů, ale též na jejich narativní roli. Diplomant své analýzy a komparace shrne a vysloví obecnější závěr o Gaimanově práci s mytologií.

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Prohlašuji:

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Annotation

This diploma thesis deals with the question of a depiction of mythology and folklore in Neil Gaiman's American gods. This thesis briefly introduces the work itself as well as its tv show adaptation. The paper then analyzes the physical representation of several characters and how the author of the novel works with such representation. Next, the paper outlines the issues of place and also their depiction in the novel. Other parts of the thesis deal with the theme of dual realities, binary oppositions, and also symbolism and analyze their depiction in the work. The aim of this thesis is to present how Neil Gaiman works with mythology and folklore and how he depicts them in the work itself.

Key words

Mythology, Folklore, religion, gods

Název

Folklór a mytologie v díle Američtí bohové Neila Gaimana

Anotace

Tato diplomová práce věnuje otázce zobrazení mytologie a folklóru v díle Američtí bohové Neila Gaimana. Tato práce nejprve stručně představí samotné dílo a také její seriálovou adaptaci. Diplomová práce poté zanalyzuje fyzické vyobrazení několika postav a jak s takovým vyobrazením autor díla pracuje. Dále nastíní problematiku místa a také jejich vyobrazení v díle. Další části diplomové práce pracují s tématem duálních realit, binárních opozicí a také symbolismu a zanalyzuje jejich vyobrazení v díle. Cílem této práce je přiblížit, jak Neil Gaiman pracuje s mytologií a folklórem a jakým způsobem je vyobrazuje v samotném díle.

Klíčová slova

Mytologie, folklór, náboženství, bohové

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Introduction

Since time immemorial, people have told stories to each other. Such stories include knowledge about various places, people, and events, as well as supernatural figures such as deities of various cultures. Such stories are also known as myths and folk tales. The author of this thesis has always been fascinated by mythology, and stories about Odin, Ragnarök, and other Norse myths are still his favorites. He also appreciates it when stories and events from the past are somehow connected, perhaps slightly adapted, and brought to life in the present. Therefore, he chose to work with a novel of American gods for his thesis, as he found it very interesting and saw the potential for literary analysis.

American gods is a novel written by Neil Gaiman that tells a story about a man named Shadow and his journeys beside the Gods. Neil Gaiman takes myths and folklore stories and reimagines them in his way to create an incredibly exciting story. The aim of this diploma thesis is, therefore, to point out how Gaiman is working with the original concept of the myths and folklore portrayed in the novel and how is further depicting it in the story.

The first part of the diploma thesis focuses on a brief introduction to the novel and also on its tv show adaptation. The original intention was to also analyze the tv show in a similar way as with the novel. However, since the author of the thesis did not find the tv show sufficiently interesting for the analysis and the novel seemed to be written in a much better way, the tv show is mentioned only negligibly. Also, since most of the analysis will be related to Norse mythology, one of the main sources used to present the myths and stories is the collection of poems on which most of the myths are based. In addition, the topic of myth and its sources was rather challenging for the author since some of the information that the author used seemed to be, from his point of view, regarded as widely known. In such instances, like Odin being the most powerful god in Norse mythology or Ganesha being a Hindi god, the author did not include a source since such information seemed to be a piece of general knowledge in his opinion. There are, however, several stories and knowledge that are supported by an appropriate source which seemed interesting and helpful.

The next part of the paper focuses on how Gaiman is portraying some of the characters in their physical appearance. Since more than half of the characters are Gods of various cultures, it was interesting to see how Gaiman is working with the original depiction of the Gods and how is he portraying them in the novel as humans.

Furthermore, the novel focuses on the topic of place. Places like the World Tree Yggdrasil or Odin's Hall Valaskjalf are one of the most known places in Norse mythology. Such places are depicted in the novel as coexisting with other places in real life. This part, therefore, focuses on how Gaiman depicts them and what kind of significance he gives them.

Other major topics that the diploma thesis is focusing on are 'dual realities', 'binary opposition', and 'symbolism'. Since Gaiman uses these literary approaches quite differently and unconventionally, it is interesting to see how it is portrayed in the story itself. The chapter on dual realities is focused mainly on the main character Shadow, since according to many sources, the conception and analysis of such a character vary greatly. The topic of binary oppositions, on the other hand, is describing how is Gaiman working with the concept of opposites and how he uses them more as subversions. The last chapter then points out how symbols play a significant role in the novel. *American gods* is full of symbols and hints to the reader and can be seen from many different points of view. The author of the diploma thesis also describes in this chapter how various symbols are describing not only myths and folk tales but also the overall concept and idea of the novel.

1. Brief introduction of the novel and its adaptation

American Gods is a novel written by Neil Gaiman. The novel is a mixture of fantasy and mythology. The novel tells a story about a war between the Old Gods and New Gods. The Old Gods are the gods and supernatural entities from various mythologies and cultures that were brought to North America thanks to human activities. The New Gods, who are also called Modern gods or the Gods of progress, are just like the Old Gods born out of belief and worship. However, unlike the Old Gods, New Gods do not obtain the belief and faith of people through culture, mythology, or folklore, but through conspiracy theories, various urban legends, and other ways.

Also, another difference between these two groups of gods is that New Gods disappear quicker than the Old Gods. As the main character Shadow states: “There was an arrogance to the new ones. Shadow could see that. But there was also a fear. They were afraid that unless they kept pace with a changing world unless they remade and redrew and rebuilt the world in their image, their time would already be over.”¹ This caused there are now only three main New Gods and those are Technical Boy, Media, and Spooks. Nevertheless, there used to be more New Gods, but they faded rather quickly because people stopped believing in them. One of the characters Mama-Ji, who represents Kali a Hindu goddess, talks about a former New God in chapter six by saying: “They worshiped the railroads here, only a blink of an eye ago. And now the iron gods are as forgotten as the emerald hunters.”² Therefore a New God could be almost anything from recent years as long as people worship it. That is the reason Technical boy is so powerful since he represents the Internet and IT technologies in general. Media is a personification of television and Spooks are members of a group that represents today’s powerful organizations such as the FBI, CIA, and others. All of the New Gods are led by Mr. World.

In addition, the Old Gods are more numerous than New Gods. However, even though the novel introduces a lot of the Old Gods throughout the story, the main aim of this paper is to discuss only a particular selection of them.

The novel itself received many positive reviews and in 2002 won the Hugo and Nebula award for the best science fiction, fantasy, and horror book and the novel has been successful

¹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 410.

² Gaiman, *American Gods*, 436.

since, with Bryan Fuller and Michael Green developing a television show based on it.³ The first season premiered on April 30 in 2017 exclusively for the premium network cable Starz.⁴ The show differs from the novel in many aspects, therefore it will not be the main focus of this paper even if it is mentioned occasionally to illustrate the differences.

In order to understand what the author of this thesis is trying to point out and depict it is also important to know what the key terms that are going to be used in this thesis are and how it is going to be worked with them. *American gods* works and uses different stories of different characters to depict and portray them in the novel. Most of the main characters from the story are somehow connected to myths and folklore of different cultures. Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud state that myths are:

Stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system; they are revered as true and sacred; they are endorsed by rulers and priests, and closely linked to religion. Once this link is broken, and the actors in the story are not regarded as gods but as human heroes, giants or fairies, it is no longer a myth but a folktale. Where the central actor is divine, but the story is trivial, as in the tale of Jesus and the owl, the result is religious legend, not myth.⁵

Interestingly enough, since Gaiman depicts characters, such as Mr. Wednesday who portrays the role of Odin, as a regular human, it could be argued by the definition provided by Simpson and Roud that the stories about the mythic gods could no longer be regarded as stories of myth but rather folktale. The same approach could be applied to other characters as well. Characters like Mr. Ibis, Czernobog, or Loki all represent gods from different mythologies, but in the novel are mainly depicted as human characters.

However, according to Géza Róheim, the definition of myth and folktale is not easy to define. Róheim states that:

In a myth, the actors are mostly divine and sometimes human. In a folk-tale the dramatis personae are mostly human and especially the hero is human frequently with supernatural beings as his opponents. In a myth we have a definite locality; in a folk-tale actors are nameless, the scene is just anywhere. A myth is part of a creed; it is believed by the narrator. The folk-tale is purely fiction, and not intended to be anything else.⁶

³ "2002 Award Winners & Nominees," Worlds Without End, accessed October 25, 2022, http://www.worldswithoutend.com/books_year_index.asp?year=2002.

⁴ "Watch American Gods Online: Stream Full Series on Starz - Free Trial," Starz.com, accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.starz.com/us/en/series/american-gods/31151>.

⁵ Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *A Dictionary of English Folklore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 254.

⁶ Géza Róheim, "MYTH AND FOLK-TALE," *American Imago* 2, no. 3 (1941): 266. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26300894>.

American gods describes a story of Shadow, who gets caught in the middle of a conflict between two groups of gods. His enemies for most of the story are the New Gods, who could be definitely described as supernatural beings, therefore, making the novel more a folktale than a myth. However, all of the places in the story are known, some of them are even real, and since, according to the statement by Róheim, the scene in a folktale is usually unknown, the novel could also be described as a mythic story. Additionally, Gaiman tries to make the reader think that some of the events and thoughts that he communicates through the story might be real, as it is described later in this thesis. Therefore, the novel could also be described as a mythic story in this sense as well.

Additionally, according to José Manuel Losada, myth could be described as “a relatively simple oral narrative of an extraordinary event with a transcendent and personal referent, theoretically lacking historical evidence and comprising a ritual, a series of constant components, and a conflictive, functional, and etiological nature.”⁷

Another interpretation of a myth is made by Stith Thompson who states that “myth has to do with the gods and their with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth.”⁸ But what about all the other characters Gaiman introduces in the novel? Hinzelman, for instance, is a kobold and not a god. The same point can be made about Laura, who is not a god, not a figure from folktales or legends, but is not an ordinary human either. However, Thompson further states that “if we confine ourselves to European we find myth sometimes applied also to the hero tales, whether those hero tales with demigods or not.”⁹ In addition, Thompson adds that “whether we use the strict definition of myth suggested or include hero tales and those of animal origins, there is a point at which any confusion between folktale and myth ceases.”¹⁰ Thompson then continues his statement with an example of fairytales. If fairytales are taken into account, for instance, Cinderella or Snow White, one may find several of the usual characteristics of myths. “They are filled, of course, with the supernatural, but most narratives going back a long way are filled with the super- natural.”¹¹ But that does not mean that they are considered real. At least from a European point of view, fairy tales are mostly considered to be pure fiction. However, as Thompson argues, “here is a difficulty in any such

⁷ José-Manuel Losada-Goya, and Marta Guirao Ochoa, *Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 4.

⁸ Stith Thompson, “Myths and Folktales,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 484. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536773>.

⁹ Thompson, *Myths and folktale*, 484.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Myths and folktale*, 485.

¹¹ Thompson, *Myths and folktale*, 485.

assertion, because stories with exactly the same plots are frequently told among tribes where they seem to be implicitly believed in.”¹²

Additionally, Victoria Somoff states that according to Lévi-Strauss “Tales are miniature myths, in which the same oppositions are transposed to a smaller scale, and that is what makes them difficult to study in the first place.”¹³ From this point of view, it could be assumed that myths and folktales are indeed very closely related and it is rather difficult to distinguish between one and the other.

Nevertheless, despite the attempts to approach the issue of myths and to state a clear definition of them, there seems not to be a clear answer. John S. Gentile in his article lists a decent number of definitions of myth by various authors and their essays. However, as he further states “a closer consideration of the definitions of myth, including many of those presented above, reveals myth's close and vexed relationships with truth, falsehood, belief, identity; the nature of being, and the sacred. The featured essays explore those relationships in different ways and in different contexts.”¹⁴ Gentile then concludes his article stating that “the variety and range of these essays, along with their variety of approaches and their different understandings of myth, seem to argue that no single definition is possible when it comes to the study of myth - nor, I would say, is desirable.”¹⁵

In conclusion, as it was stated above, there are many approaches and concepts of myths and folktales. Some of the definitions of myth stated in this thesis could be rather accurately applied to the novel itself. There are, however, also assumptions and depictions of folktales which the novel could also be described with. In other words, it is nearly impossible to describe the novel with a single definition since it contains many aspects of different literary genres. Some parts of the novel seem to be closer related to myths, and other parts to folktales. Nevertheless, since Gaiman mostly used characters that are known mainly from myths, this thesis is therefore going to work with the novel and the stories depicted in it as with the stories of myth.

¹² Thompson, *Myths and folktale*, 485.

¹³ Victoria Somoff, “On the Metahistorical Roots of the Fairytale,” *Western Folklore* 61, no. 3/4 (2002): 277. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1500423>.

¹⁴ John S. Gentile, “Prologue: Defining Myth: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Storytelling and Myth,” *Storytelling, Self, Society* 7, no. 2 (2011): 88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41949151>.

¹⁵ Gentile, “Prologue: Defining Myth,” 89.

2. Analysis of the physical depiction of the characters

Gaiman introduces throughout the story many characters. They are interesting from many aspects and many points of view, such as their physical depiction, the choice of name and nickname, the story they portray, and many others. However, since the number of characters in the novel is rather extensive, only some of the characters are going to be analyzed from these points of view in this thesis. The first aspect of the characters that is going to be analyzed is their physical appearance Gaiman chose to describe them with. The author of the paper chose two characters from the novel that seemed to be the most interesting from the point of their physical appearance. One of the characters who appears in the story very often is Mr. Wednesday who is portraying Odin.

The first time Shadow sees Odin in his true “nature”, as he looks like a god, he can see him wearing a dark cloak. It is described as: “He wore a cloak with a deep, monk like cowl, and his face stared out from the shadows.”¹⁶ However, Shadow sees Mr. Wednesday mostly in his human nature wearing a white suit, just like when he meets him for the first time. The page states: “the suit looked expensive, and was the color of melted vanilla ice cream. His tie was dark gray silk, and the tie pin was a tree, worked in silver: trunk, branches, and deep roots.”¹⁷

Colors in Norse mythology do not seem to play an important role. Most of the gods are not connected to one particular color. However, there are still some possible options why Gaiman decided to choose such a portrayal of Odin in his human form. For instance, according to the Danish national museum, in one of the graves at the Viking fortress, Fyrkat in Denmark was found a body of a female, who supposedly might have been a prophetess or a seeress, also known as *völva* according to Old Norse dictionary.¹⁸ Such figures are fairly well known mainly in Norse mythology. The source also states that among other unusual objects, the archeologists also found what seems to be a *völva*'s wand or magic wand.¹⁹ Additionally, the archeologists found in her buckle white lead, which was sometimes used as an ingredient in skin ointment.²⁰ It is possible to read throughout the book how Odin uses his magic powers even in his human form. For instance, Odin can be seen talking about his charms. He states: “I know a charm that

¹⁶ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 114-115.

¹⁷ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 31.

¹⁸ Ross G. Arthur, *English–Old Norse Dictionary* (Cambridge, Ontario: In parentheses Linguistic series, 2002), 111, accessed October 25, 2022, https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/language/English-Old_Norse.pdf.

¹⁹ “A Seeress from Fyrkat?,” National Museum of Denmark, accessed October 25, 2022, <https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/a-seeress-from-fyrkat/>.

²⁰ National Museum of Denmark, “A Seeress from Fyrkat?.”

will heal with a touch. I know a charm that will turn aside the weapons of an enemy. I know another charm to free myself from all bonds and locks. A fifth charm: I can catch an arrow in flight and take no harm from it.”²¹ And since völvas are also known for working with hallucinogenic herbs, the color of the suit, therefore, might only be a reference made by Gaiman to portray the magic abilities of Odin the same way that völvas might used to do.

Additionally, as it was stated above, most of the gods and characters from Norse mythology are not connected to colors in any significant way. However, there is one figure from Norse mythology who is associated with a certain color. Heimdall, the watchman of the gods, is also known as ‘the White God.’²² He is also Odin’s son and the bearer of the Gjallarhorn, the horn which declares the beginning of Ragnarök once the sound of the horn is heard.²³ Therefore, Neil Gaiman might have used the color of the suit as a reference to this figure and since it is one of the first things Shadow is able to notice and see about Odin, it might also serve as a direct metaphor for the upcoming beginning of an end which is Ragnarök.

However, the suit might only play a role of a symbol of guidance and protection that serves Odin in his human form on Earth. As it is widely known in today’s society, expensive clothes, especially suits are usually seen as a symbol for the higher class of society. By wearing this, Odin gained slight protection from other people in a way that they would not suspect him of anything bad. To put things into perspective, Odin changes his clothes in order to look like a security guard. The change of clothes then brings him a sort of protection from suspicions, and he can then proceed with robbing people of their money. The book describes it as follows: “He was now wearing a dark blue jacket, with matching trousers, a blue knit tie, a thick blue sweater, a white shirt, and black shoes. He looked like a security guard.”²⁴

In addition, as one of the names that Odin introduces himself with suggests, the white suit might also serve as a metaphor for it. Odin uses names such as Highest and All-Father and as these names suggest, and as Edith Hamilton states, just like Zeus is the ruler of the Greek gods, Odin is the ruler of the Norse gods.²⁵ Thus, the color of the suit might also symbolize the

²¹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 226.

²² John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 167.

²³ Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 143.

²⁴ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 98.

²⁵ Edith Hamilton and Steele Savage, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1989), 22.

power of Odin, his position among other gods, and the overall wisdom that he gained from the Well of Wisdom.

2.1. Mad Sweeney - Leprechaun

The second character that is going to be analyzed from the point of view of his physical appearance is Mad Sweeney who portrays the role of Irish leprechaun. Even though he is not as important of a character as Mr. Wednesday is, Mad Sweeney still plays an interesting role in the story. In addition, the way Gaiman chose to depict him is rather interesting since some of the aspects he described Mad Sweeney with seem to differ from the traditional concept of a leprechaun.

Mad Sweeney is introduced in the novel as follows:

He had a short ginger beard. He wore a denim jacket covered with bright sew-on patches, and under the jacket a stained white T-shirt. On the T-shirt was printed: IF YOU CAN'T EAT IT, DRINK IT, SMOKE IT, OR SNORT IT . . . THEN F*CK IT! He wore a baseball cap, on which was printed: THE ONLY WOMAN I HAVE EVER LOVED WAS ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE . . . MY MOTHER! He opened a soft pack of Lucky Strikes with a dirty thumbnail, took a cigarette, offered one to Shadow.²⁶

However, Leprechaun himself is not as easy to describe as it may seem. Even though Leprechaun is an Irish creature, the description is often very different. His depiction and also the name he is described with are different depending on the country's districts. For instance, according to McAnally, Leprechaun in the northern countries is called Logheryman and he is usually described as wearing “the uniform of some British infantry regiments, a red coat, and white breeches, but instead of a cap, he wears a broad-brimmed, high, pointed hat.”²⁷ In the town of Tipperary, on the other hand, he is called Lurigadawne and he is described with “an antique slashed jacket of red, with peaks all round and a jockey cap, also sporting a sword, which he uses as a magic wand.”²⁸ Luricawne is the name used in the country Kerry and is described as a fat and pousy man with a round and red face who wears a jacket that “has seven rows of seven buttons in each row, though what use they have never been determined, since his jacket is never buttoned, nor, indeed, can it be, but falls away from a shirt invariably white as the snow.”²⁹ What is interesting is that Leprechaun in today's perception is usually described with a green color. However, as it is stated in the descriptions by McAnally, one of the colors

²⁶ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 40.

²⁷ D. R. McAnally Jr., *Irish wonders*, (New York: Weathervane books, October 2006): 142.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19486/19486-h/19486-h.html#toc67>

²⁸ McAnally, *Irish wonders*, 142.

²⁹ McAnally, *Irish wonders*, 142.

that he seemed to be associated the most with was red.³⁰ Nevertheless, since the green color is the national color of Ireland, the depiction of the Leprechaun might also have changed over time based on this fact.

Gaiman, however, uses quite a different and original approach to portraying Mad Sweeney. The denim jacket with patches and the stained white T-shirt possibly only portray the state Mad Sweeney is in. Gaiman portrayed Sweeney as a junkie who was at the end of his rope and who later dies of his alcohol addiction when he drinks himself to death. Still, it is possible that Gaiman was inspired by the depiction of Luricawne who seems to be the closest in terms of the visual portrayal of Mad Sweeney. In addition, McAnally states that Luricawne usually wears a helmet, but since this type of hat might be too conspicuous in some countries, he wraps his head in a handkerchief, making him less suspicious and more hidden.³¹ A similar approach might be applied to Mad Sweeney's baseball cap. The baseball cap might "play" the role of the handkerchief that Luricawne uses to fit in with the rest of the people in America. Also, since baseball is the national and one of the most popular sports in America, another interpretation of the cap could be that it also symbolizes the influence that America has on Mad Sweeney as a character, which seems to be quite a common theme that is reoccurring in the novel.

In addition, one of Mad Sweeney's patches Mad Sweeney shows a picture of two vultures on a dead branch. This patch could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, this might be another hint to the readers, which is also further described later in this paper, that Shadow is going to hang himself as a sacrifice made for Mr. Wednesday. And the dead branch might symbolize the branch from the World tree that Mr. World uses as a tool for the last battle. Secondly, two vultures might be a symbol of the whole conflict, one of them representing Mr. Wednesday and the other Mr. World. It might portray how both of the leaders of the conflict treat the Old and New Gods only as tools and how would they let them die during the battle purely for their own needs, just like vultures waiting for their prey to die so that they could finally devour them.

Additionally, the pack of cigarettes Mad Sweeney offered to Shadow is, yet another nice metaphor made by Gaiman since the name of the cigarette pack directly suggests and is connected to the figure of Leprechaun since he is usually associated with the symbol of good luck.

³⁰ McAnally, *Irish wonders*, 140.

³¹ McAnally, *Irish wonders*, 142.

In conclusion, Gaiman depicts the character and the Gods and figures they portray only partly the myth they are based on. Both Mr. Wednesday and Mad Sweeney seem to carry at least some hints of their mythical origin. However, Gaiman portrays them rather differently. Mad Sweeney instead of being a positive and funny leprechaun is depicted as a pessimistic junkie and drunk. There are some hints about the leprechaun he is portraying, for instance, his hair or some of the symbols on his clothes, but it could be rather challenging for some readers to realize what he really is without reading it later in the novel. That might be, however, the reason why Gaiman portrays him in such a way since all of the figures, including Old and New Gods, are trying to blend among people and not to draw attention. Odin's suit, on the other, might carry some explanation or hints to Odin. Nevertheless, Gaiman does not confirm the assumptions of the author of this paper in the novel itself and therefore the reason behind it might be different.

3. Places and their depiction in the novel

Places in literature can play an important role not only in terms of storytelling but also in terms of the overall setting and atmosphere. Many places in the novel might seem like regular places to the reader at first glance. However, some of the places that are depicted in the story carry much deeper and more complex hidden meaning and that is what this part of the thesis is going to be about. Also, all of the places in the novel could be seen from two different points of view. One of them is to look at the places from the point of view of mythology since Gaiman introduces places that seem to be connected to the myths. The other view is from their real location and form since *American gods* presents places that can be also found in the real world.

But what even is place? How can one define it? For instance, Cresswell defines the concept of a place as “a word that seems to speak for itself.”³² It can refer to a city, but it can also refer to “more of a sense of position in a social hierarchy.”³³ However, Cresswell also adds that “the most straightforward and common definition of place is a meaningful location.”³⁴

Milford A. Jeremiah, on the other hand, states that a place in a literary sense can be described in several ways.

For one thing, we may define place as the physical aspect of the environment at hand. In another sense, we may define place as the environment removed from the speaker or writer. In some instances, place is the term used to describe the setting in which issues of writing and other language-related skills are housed and discussed. In the literary world, place is usually combined with time and events to establish what is known as the social setting or the social context of a literary work.³⁵

Jeremiah also adds that place is a central or starting point of authors to their works, “it places a writer's work within a specific location.”³⁶ Also, “place serves a function in that it puts the reader where the writer intends him or her to be mentally, and this information gives the reader some insight into the history, the terrain, the people, the customs of a community, and so forth.”³⁷ Gaiman, in this sense, is using the places to put the reader in a certain state of mind as well. At the beginning of the novel, Shadow enters a plane during a thunderstorm which might symbolize the transition from his past life in the jail into the new life beside the Gods,

³² Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction [second edition]*, (London, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 1.

³³ Cresswell, *Place*, 2.

³⁴ Cresswell, *Place*, 7.

³⁵ Milford A. Jeremiah, "The Use of Place in Writing and Literature," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 16, no. 2 (2000): 23. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1352>

³⁶ Jeremiah "The Use of Place," 25

³⁷ Jeremiah, "The use of place," 25.

just like flying in a plane from one place to another. Gaiman is also combining two types of places in the novel. He is using places that can be found in the real world and combine them with places that are known from myths and legends. By doing so, he is depicting how the world of myths, together with Gods, is coexisting with the real world, just like the Gods are coexisting in one place, one world, with ordinary people.

Another purpose of place in literature, according to Jeremiah, is that “it serves to activate the reader's senses and to evoke an emotional response on the part of readers.”³⁸ Also, as Jeremiah adds and cites Zinsser’s work, “what might be of interest to the writer might not be of interest to the reader. It is the writer's responsibility to draw the reader to the page.”³⁹ William Zinsser in his work also adds an example of such an instance. If the author is describing a beach, then he should not write that “ ‘the shore was scattered with rocks’ or that ‘occasionally a seagull flew over.’”⁴⁰ Gaiman’s description of places is in agreement with Zinsser’s claim. For instance, while looking at the Ash tree, Gaiman is using adjectives such as spectral, but also real to show the reader the contrast the tree is portraying. Another example might be the carousel which, at first glance, seems to be an ordinary attraction. However, Gaiman continues with the story and also with the description of the carousel and therefore shows the reader how important the place really is.

Also, while talking about a place, one should not omit the term ‘space’. According to Cresswell, “Space is a more abstract concept than place. Spaces have areas and volumes. Places have space between them.”⁴¹ Once space is made meaningful by humans, then it becomes a place. As Cresswell states “This is the most straightforward and common definition of space – a meaningful location.”⁴² Cresswell further states that “naming is one of the ways space can be given meaning and become place.”⁴³ Space in this sense and its definition can be found in the novel as well. One of such examples of space might be the Backstage. The first time when Shadow visits this place it is very unknown for him. He does not know where he is, it also seems infinitely large and therefore it is space in this sense for Shadow. However, once Mr. Wednesday tells Shadow that this place is called the Backstage and explains to him what it is, Shadow starts to be familiar with it and in that moment Backstage becomes a place to him.

³⁸ Jeremiah, “The use of place,” 26.

³⁹ Jeremiah, “The use of place,” 26.

⁴⁰ William Zinsser, *On writing well*, (New York: HarperResource Quill, 2001) 118-119.

⁴¹ Cresswell, *Place*, 8.

⁴² Cresswell, *Place*, 7

⁴³ Cresswell, *Place*, 9

3.1. House on the Rock and the carousel

Throughout the novel, Gaiman uses and depicts many places that can be found in today's United States of America, giving them different reasons and purposes in the story. One of these places, and probably the most important for *The Old Gods*, is The House on the Rock, which is going to be analyzed in this section of the paper. Located in the state of Wisconsin, it is a famous attraction for tourists from all over the world. According to the official website of this attraction

It began in 1945, when a man named Alex Jordan had a towering goal: to build a man-made retreat as awe-inspiring as the view from the rock upon which the house would eventually be built. From that spark of imagination, the House on the Rock has evolved to include displays and collections of the exotic, the unusual and the amazing that can be viewed as three separate tours.⁴⁴

The first time The House on the Rock is portrayed in the novel is when Mr. Wednesday takes Shadow to meet with the Old Gods for the first time. The house itself contains many different attractions. For instance, at Czernobog's urging, Shadow dropped a coin into a machine called The Drunkard's Dream. This attraction portrays a scene about a drunkard in a graveyard in front of a church. Ghosts and dead corpses come from the graveyard, but nevertheless, they are soon banished by the priest who comes out of the church. He looks at the drunk man disdainfully and returns to the church, leaving the drunk behind and on his own. The significance of the scene is later depicted by Czernobog who states that "That is the world as it is. That is the real world. It is there, in that box."⁴⁵

The whole scene and Czernobog's comment might serve as a metaphor for the whole situation the Old Gods are in. The priest, as a symbol of faith, is mostly seen as a positive figure and a guide. The Old Gods live from faith after all, but in this case and this scene Czernobog might be suggesting that faith is sometimes not enough. And even though some people still believe in them, they have left the Old Gods to their own devices, just like the priest did to the drunk. Wednesday also confirms that in a way with his speech to other gods during the first meeting. He states: "Soon enough, our people abandoned us, remembered us only as creatures of the old land, as things that had not come with them to the new."⁴⁶

Another attraction and probably also more important than Drunkard's dream is the carousel. The novel depicts the carousel with a sign. "A sign proclaimed it was the largest in the world, said how much it weighed, how many thousand lightbulbs were to be found in the

⁴⁴ "About," House on the Rock, August 28, 2021, <https://www.thehouseontherock.com/about/>.

⁴⁵ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 107.

⁴⁶ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 118.

chandeliers that hung from it in Gothic profusion, and forbade anyone from climbing on it or from riding on the animals.”⁴⁷ Wednesday also adds that “it’s not there to be ridden, not by people. It’s there to be admired. It’s there to be.”⁴⁸ The same logic could be applied to the House on the Rock itself. Wednesday did not choose this place to be the meeting point of the Old Gods because it was built for the gods and their purpose. The reason was because the place attracted people, tourists. People are coming to this place just to see it, to be mesmerized by the attractions, and to praise the place in a way just like people praise the gods. In other words, the House on the Rock is a place full of attention and that might be for the Old Gods some kind of faith from which they live. Mr. Nancy confirms this idea in a way by commenting on the carousel: “Like a prayer wheel goin’ around and round. Accumulating power.”⁴⁹ Additionally, Mr. Wednesday also comments on such places and attraction saying:

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.⁵⁰

In addition to the House on the Rock, as Veera Pohjalainen states, according to David Morgan there are two ways of understanding religious space. “First, it is a socially constructed location that derives its sacredness from rituals and worship, and second, it is a location whose power people recognize before entering into a relation with it.”⁵¹ From the definition made by Morgan one could argue that House on the Rock falls into both categories. As the official site of the attraction state, Alex Jordan built this house out of pure imagination and inspiration meaning therefore that the House on the Rock could be described as a place with power that was recognized by people. On the other hand, however, since the attraction is nowadays mainly used for entertainment purposes and for people to admire it, the first way of describing a religious place by Morgan could be applied to the House as well. Pohjalainen confirms this idea as well by stating: “Locations like Ash tree farm where the world tree is and Lookout Mountain with Rock City are places that have been defined by their rituals, but simultaneously they are manifestations of power, as is the House on the Rock.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 110.

⁴⁸ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 111.

⁴⁹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 111.

⁵⁰ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 103.

⁵¹ Veera Pohjalainen, “‘Think of us as symbols’”: Embodied Gods and Material Worship in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*” (MA Thesis, University of Turku, March 2020), 56.

⁵² Pohjalainen, “Think of us”, 56.

However, that does not necessarily mean that all famous places and attractions in the world are a place of power. Shadow states that based on the theory of Mr. Wednesday about attractions being places of power, then Disneyland would be the most sacred place in America. However, Mr. Wednesday argues that this is not the case and states:

Walt Disney bought some orange groves in the middle of Florida and built a tourist town on them. No magic there of any kind. I think there might be something real in the original Disneyland. There may be some power there, although twisted, and hard to access.⁵³

Another interpretation of the House on the Rock might be that it is a place of nostalgia. As Mark Hill states “The influence of this American nostalgia can also be seen in roadside attractions like the House on the Rock and Rock City, places of power that allow gods to war over belief as countries war over borders.”⁵⁴ Hill compares this situation with a description of a cowboy in which he states: “It is almost impossible to imagine a cowboy, however, without also imagining the places where cowboys are found, the plains, ranches and camps in which they once thrived.”⁵⁵

Even though Shadow visits many places throughout the book, he always prefers to stay in smaller villages, just like Lakeside. And there is no other place in the book that would be described more as nostalgic, romantic, and idyllic than Lakeside. As Hill argues: “Similarly, Gaiman aligns the road trip, roadside attractions, and the experience of small town life with Wednesday, his followers, and the cowboy myth. There is a powerful sense of nostalgia for a simpler life in the road trips that Shadow experiences on account of Wednesday.”⁵⁶

However, even though Lakeside might be seen as a perfect place to live, it also contains a dark secret. Hinzemann, one of the citizens of the town, seems like a kind person and keeps telling different stories about the town to Shadow. But after the story of the novel progresses, it turns out that Hinzemann was annually sacrificing young girls as a way to keep the town rich and prosperous. Nevertheless, Hinzemann’s actions are later discovered by Shadow.

Also, as Mark Hill adds, despite the dark secret this town has, “Lakeside is still painted as idyllic and romantic, recalling the nostalgia inherent in the heritage industry. In fact, the

⁵³ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 104-105.

⁵⁴ Mark Hill, “Neil Gaiman's American Gods: An Outsider's Critique of American Culture” (A thesis, University of New Orleans, 2005), 13.

⁵⁵ Hill, “Neil Gaiman's American Gods”, 12.

⁵⁶ Hill, “Neil Gaiman's American Gods”, 12.

horror only emphasizes power of this nostalgia, as the residents of the town are half-aware of the price demanded for their lifestyle and deep down inside they do not mind paying it.”⁵⁷

In addition, the carousel can also be analyzed based on which animal each Old God chose to ride. After Shadow and the others got on the carousel, they started spinning and Shadow saw the true form of the gods. Each of them also mounted different animals. Each animal might contain a different metaphor or symbolism. Wednesday rides a golden wolf. In this case, the reason behind such a choice is quite clear since Mr. Wednesday later reveals that he owns two wolves, Freki and Greki. However, Gaiman might have used the wolf as a direct metaphor and symbol for the giant wolf Fenrir. According to the Poetic Edda, which is a modern name for the collection of old Norse anonymous narrative poems, Odin is killed by Fenrir during the Ragnarök, and Fenrir is then later killed by Víðarr.⁵⁸

The poem states:

Then is fulfilled Hlín's second sorrow, when Óðinn goes to fight with the wolf, and Beli's slayer, bright, against Surtr. Then shall Frigg's sweet friend fall. Then comes the tall child of Triumph's Sire, Víðarr, to strike at the beast of slaughter. Into Hveðrungr's son with hand he sets the sword to halt in the hart – then his sire is avenged!⁵⁹

Czernobog and Mr. Nancy both ride the animals that represent their god form and personas. Czernobog rides an armored centaur, which might portray the power, combativeness, and ruthlessness that Czernobog represents in the novel. Mr. Nancy rides a leaping lion and since he represents Anansi, the African folktale hero, the lion might be portraying his African origins.⁶⁰ However, most of the time he is portrayed as a spider. Therefore, Shadow sees him during the carousel ride in two forms that are depicted in the novel as:

He was looking at Mr. Nancy, an old black man with a pencil mustache, in his check sports jacket and his lemon-yellow gloves, riding a carousel lion as it rose and lowered, high in the air; and, at the same time, in the same place, he saw a jeweled spider as high as a horse, its eyes an emerald nebula, strutting, staring down at him.⁶¹

Shadow chooses an animal that is a combination of a tiger and an eagle. An eagle is a powerful animal that rules the skies, while a tiger is a powerful animal that rules the ground.

⁵⁷ Hill, “Neil Gaiman's American Gods”, 14.

⁵⁸ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda; Volume II: Mythological Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 21.

⁵⁹ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda; Volume II*, 21-22.

⁶⁰ M. Kete Asante, "Ananse," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 15, 2014.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ananse>.

⁶¹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 114.

Since Shadow does not represent a god at this point in the story, and it is shown later in the story that he is neither a part of the Old Gods nor the New Gods, the hybrid animal could also be a metaphor by Gaiman, suggesting that he is a powerful figure on both sides of the conflict between the Gods. This idea is also confirmed by Susan Gorman, who says that upon the first reading, it may seem that Shadow is purely on the side of The Old Gods.⁶² However, Gorman also argues that “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.”⁶³ Additionally, it is highlighted in the final battle where Shadow instead of choosing a side, “chooses to decenter the whole binary through his actions.”⁶⁴

Shadow then arrives together with Mr. Wednesday and others in a hall. “The hall was huge but primitive. The roof was thatched, the walls were wooden. There was a fire burning in the center of the hall, and the smoke stung Shadow’s eyes.”⁶⁵ And since the whole meeting was happening in the mind of Mr. Wednesday, the hall was a recreation of Valaskjalf, Odin’s old hall.

3.2. Yggdrasil

Another place that can be found both in the novel and as an actual place in the real world is the world tree, also called Yggdrasil. The tree itself does not, obviously, exist in the real world, however, Gaiman chose a farm that can be found in the real world. “The tree was in Virginia. It was a long way away from anywhere, on the back of an old farm.”⁶⁶ When Mr. Wednesday dies and Shadow recovers his body from the New Gods, he goes together with Mr. Nancy and Czernobog to the ash farm. There he then decides that he is going to be the one who takes the vigil and will mourn Mr. Wednesday. Shadow then had to remove his clothing before he was hanged from the tree for nine days. Quite clearly it is a reference to Norse mythology where Odin hangs from the world tree to gain knowledge, as it is stated in the old Norse poem *Hávamál: The High One’s Lay*.⁶⁷ However, the difference is that Odin did not die. Shadow got punctured the branches of the tree inside his body so severely that he dies afterward.

⁶² Susan Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American Gods: A Postmodern Epic for America,” *Mythlore* 37, no. 1 (133) (2018): 178.

⁶³ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 178.

⁶⁴ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 179.

⁶⁵ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 115.

⁶⁶ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 349.

⁶⁷ Benjamin Thorpe, *The Poetic Edda* (Lapeer, Michigan: The Northvegr Foundation Press, 2004), 80.

But to return to the subject of this section of the paper, the Ash tree Yggdrasil is arguably one of the most important symbols in Norse mythology. As Gaiman describes it, “It grows between nine worlds and joins them, each to each. It is the biggest of all the trees there are, and the finest. The tops of its branches are above sky.”⁶⁸ The fact that the tree connects the nine worlds from Norse mythology might also be portrayed in the novel as well but in another way.

The tree is not as big as it is in the myths however it is still able to serve as a connection between several things. Firstly, the tree can be seen as a symbol of alliance among the Old Gods. Shadow hanged from the tree to mourn the death of Mr. Wednesday. He has experienced incredible torment for someone who he arguably barely knows. Therefore, the tree could be seen as a symbol of his unlimited loyalty towards Mr. Wednesday but also towards the Old Gods.

In addition, the tremendous pain not only allows Shadow to see into the past, but he also realizes that Mr. Wednesday and Mr. World are planning to betray everyone. Yggdrasil should work as a connection to other worlds in Norse mythology and the tree works similarly in the novel as well. The only difference is that Shadow cannot connect to other worlds in a physical sense, but he can connect to the past, see his thoughts, and also see through the plot of Mr. Wednesday and Mr. World.

Furthermore, the tree could be perceived as a connection to the worlds of mythology and the real world. Since the tree is real, it is in a real place, it represents the real world. However, upon Shadow’s arrival and during his vigil, he meets characters from different mythologies. For instance, he meets Ratatosk, who is according to Gaiman “a squirrel who lives in the branches of the world tree. It takes gossip and messages from Nidhogg, the dread corpse-eater, to the eagle and back again. The squirrel tells lies to both of them, and takes joy in provoking anger.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Ratatosk in the novel seems to behave quite differently since the only thing he says is his name and he only brings water to Shadow. Another example of figures from Norse mythology is the three norns, who are, according to Gaiman, wise maidens that tend the well and make sure that the roots of Yggdrasil are covered with mud and cared for.⁷⁰ The novel depicts them quite similar since they give water to Laura. Also, in addition to the figures from Norse mythology, Shadow during his vigil meets an elephant-headed man, who is, as it is later in the novel revealed, Ganesha, a Hindu god. During this part, the reader

⁶⁸ Neil Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 19.

⁶⁹ Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 19-20.

⁷⁰ Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 21.

can also see how Gaiman is playing with the words. Ganesha tries to perform a small trick for Shadow by hiding a mouse somewhere in his palm. Shadow tells him that the mouse is in the trunk. Ganesha then answers him “Yes. In the trunk. You will forget many things. You will give many things away. You will lose many things. But do not lose this.”⁷¹ And as it is later revealed, Ganesha did not mean the trunk of the tree but the trunk of the car at the bottom of the lake. Additionally, Shadow also meets a madman whose name is Horus. As was described in the novel, Horus sometimes turns himself into a hawk and is a figure from Egyptian mythology. As it was stated above, the Yggdrasil is supposed to be a connection to nine worlds and since Shadow meets on this tree figures from different mythologies, it serves as a connection to other worlds in the novel as well.

Similar to the other places mentioned, the tree is a source of power. The difference is that, unlike other places, Shadow feels connected to the tree. The reason behind it might be because of the whole purpose of the tree. As Pohjalainen states “The vigil helps Shadow find his identity, but it is also a ritualistic way to worship Wednesday, which constructs the sacredness of the place. In other words, the location is powerful on its own, but using the tree for a ritual enhances this power.”⁷² In addition, Gaiman works with the real places and their interpretation in the novel rather interestingly. As Siobhan Carrol states:

The novel’s representation of place is further complicated by the climax of the novel, in which Shadow learns that the war between the old and new gods, and between the spaces of history and the ahistorical non-places of modernity, is, in fact, an artificial conflict engineered by Wednesday, who intends to profit from the slaughter of the gods.⁷³

Therefore, all of the mentioned places in the novel could be viewed from two points. The reader might perceive them as the real places on the Earth or as places that represent the old world and the world of Gods.

To conclude, *American gods* introduces many places throughout the story. Gaiman uses them to portray both the side of myths and also the side of real life. The places such as the World Tree Yggdrasil and the carousel serve not only in a symbolic way but also as important milestones in the story. Gaiman is also depicting them in a way that portrays the connection between the real world and the world of myths that the whole diploma thesis has. The places also deal with a question of religion, faith, nostalgia, and migration, all of which can be seen behind the lines of each example.

⁷¹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 354

⁷² Pohjalainen, “Think of us”, 58.

⁷³ Siobhan Carroll, “Imagined Nation,” *Extrapolation* 53, no. 3 (2012): 320.

4. Dual realities

Similarly to places, the reader of the novel is constantly challenged to look at the story, setting, and characters from two points of view. Most of the situations and other instances are divided into a view of myth and a view of our real world. There are, however, some examples that could be perceived differently and that is the topic of this section of the paper.

Another major topic portrayed in the novel is the topic of dual realities. As Susan Gorman states “The gods in the United States recognize their own dual realities.”⁷⁴ The issue of dual realities, duality or also sometimes referred to as Doppelgänger, a double, is a topic that is portrayed in many literary works. According to S. Meckled, “In the imaginary, and therefore in folklore and literature, the ‘double’ stands for the psychic split of the self carried out by the ego as a defensive measure to counteract the fear of death. It is one of the themes that Freud called ‘of the uncanny’, all of which are determined by the castration complex.”⁷⁵ Meckled also adds that “the so-called literature of ‘the marvellous’ is always based on - or related to - mirrors, or mirror-relation.”⁷⁶

In addition, according to Vera Temkina, the “doubles” or Doppelgänger is closely connected to ancient mythological systems and is also connected to the double structures of ancient societies and wide spreading myths about twins. Temkina also adds that “the doppelgänger phenomenon reveals itself essentially opposite in the world literature: firstly, as a soul twin, guardian, and protector, and secondly, completely opposite, the protagonist, the embodiment of evil and a sign of impending disaster.”⁷⁷ This idea could be also applied to the plot and some of the characters of the novel. Czernobog, for instance, is a character who is portraying both himself but also his kinder and calmer brother. In this sense, Czernobog is truly portrayed as a disaster for Shadow since he insists on killing Shadow because of the bet. Bielebog, on the other hand, represents redemption and forgiveness for Shadow, as he decides to spare Shadow and not kill him.

Additionally, as Temkina states, according to Agranovich and Samorukova there are three types of doubles “which differ in terms of origin (genesis), the model of representing society, the relationship of double characters with each other, the structure of plot development

⁷⁴ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 176.

⁷⁵ S. Meckled, “The Theme of the Double: An Essential Element throughout García Márquez Works,” *The Crane Bag* 6, no. 2 (1982): 108.

⁷⁶ Meckled, “The Theme,” 108.

⁷⁷ Elena V. Ena, and Vera L. Temkina, “The Phenomenon Of Doppelgänger And Types Of Doubles In Literature,” *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences* 83, no. 1 (2020): 695.

and genre models in which this or that type of dualism is predominantly embodied.”⁷⁸ The three types are “doubles - antagonists; carnival pairs; twins (the ‘Russian type’).”⁷⁹ In addition, although this theory is usually applied to a single character who represents two different sides, it can also be applied to *American* gods, but in a slightly different way. The paper applies this theory, in some cases, to more than one character, as it still yields interesting results.

Firstly, “Double-antagonist is the most common and most obvious type of duality. The relations connecting the antagonists are confrontation and competition.”⁸⁰ Temkina also further adds that, unlike the carnival type, antagonistic doubles have common roots.⁸¹ Upon analyzing the novel from the point of view of this type, one can describe some of the characters. For instance, despite the fact that Shadow and Mr. Wednesday are allies throughout most of the plot, they eventually end up becoming enemies. Shadow, however, is Mr. Wednesday's son, they therefore have common roots. A similar approach could be applied to Shadow and Loki, Mr. World. They share a common past since both of them were locked up in the same prison.

Secondly, the carnival doubles, on the other hand, “do not oppose each other, but complement, realize the idea of the unity. Carnival pairs always balance on the verge of worlds.”⁸² This type of double does not seem to be present in the novel very clearly. Temkina states that such doubles usually share a common special place. “The presence of a special space, as if delimited from the rest of the world, is the most important structural feature of the carnival pair as a special type of duality. If such a space collapses, the carnival pair also disappears.”⁸³ By this definition and view on the issue, the duality could be seen in the Gods and people who believe in them. Both groups of Gods share a common place with ordinary humans. Without the people who believe in the Gods, the Gods would soon have perished.

And thirdly the twins might be the most distinctive type that is portrayed in the novel. As Temkina states, according to Meletinsky, like other types of twins, the twin pair has a mythological origin. Additionally, Meletinsky writes about “the class of stories in which twins, most often brothers, perform the function of ancestors and cultural heroes. Twins may be antagonists but may embody different origins (e.g. the Moon and the Sun).”⁸⁴ As it was stated earlier, this can be clearly seen in the character of Czernobog and Bielebog. Additionally,

⁷⁸ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 696.

⁷⁹ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 696.

⁸⁰ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 696.

⁸¹ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 697.

⁸² Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 697.

⁸³ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 697.

⁸⁴ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 697.

Temkina further states that “unlike the other two types of duality, the twin model often remains hidden. The characters exist as a pair of conflicting, but in the course of the plot always reveal the imaginary conflict and the identity of the characters.”⁸⁵ Yet again, this can be applied to Czernobog as well, since the fact that he is also portraying his brother Bielebog is revealed towards the end of the novel. A similar approach can be also applied to Shadow and Mr. Wednesday as well. Even though they are not brothers, they do not portray one character, they are still related by blood. Again, the reader does not know this until the end of the novel.

Gaiman, however, works with the characters in quite a different way. Most of the characters in the novel do not look like they are related to the gods, legends, or basically any figure from mythology and folklore that they portray, at least not at first glance. While taking into account the Old and New Gods, for instance, the novel portrays all of them as human, with human qualities, physical appearance, and even with human desires and lust. However, all of the characters in *American gods* are not a mirror image of the true gods, legends, and figures from myths and folklore, but rather their alternative representations. In other words, Gaiman is not portraying them as their exact and perfect copies but rather as a sort of characters of different worlds, of dual realities.

For instance, Mr. Wednesday is only portraying Odin as a figure. In other words, all the gods are not imitations or clones of the ‘real’ gods. They are rather “a separation of the sign from the signified that then develops on its own in this new space, creating a new reality.”⁸⁶ When Mr. Wednesday acts, he acts as Odin, he is portraying him, but Odin is not portraying Mr. Wednesday. When Shadow meets the ‘real’ Odin in Iceland, he talks to him thinking that he is talking to Mr. Wednesday together with all the memories and experiences he had. But Odin answers: “He was me, yes. But I am not him.”⁸⁷ And as Susan Gorman argues:

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.⁸⁸

The dual realities can be seen in other gods as well. Mad Sweeney, who portrays the Irish folklore legend leprechaun, carries throughout the novel several paradoxes and values that differ from the actual leprechaun. As an Irish character, the choice of a drink should obviously

⁸⁵ Ena et al., “The Phenomenon,” 697.

⁸⁶ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 176.

⁸⁷ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 447.

⁸⁸ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 176.

be the Irish Guinness. Instead, he drinks Southern Comfort and Coke. Shadow points to this unusuality by asking: “Shouldn’t you be drinking Guinness?”⁸⁹ Mad Sweeney replies that such presumptions are only stereotypes and that “there’s a lot more to Ireland than Guinness.”⁹⁰ He also does not have an accent, but that is probably caused by the amount of time he has spent in America. Additionally, Gaiman might portray Mad Sweeney and other gods with differences from their “real” god selves to depict the influence America has.

A similar approach might be applied to Shadow as well. At first glance, Shadow could be described as an American citizen or even a Native American. However, after further reading Shadow could be also depicted as an American version of the Norse god Balder.⁹¹ When Mr. World, who is also Loki, talks with Shadow’s dead wife Laura, he tells her that after everything is settled, he would go to the Ash tree, where Shadow is hanging for Odin, and stab Shadow with a spear made of mistletoe. He says: “When this is all done with, I guess I’ll sharpen a stick of mistletoe and go down to the ash tree, and ram it through his eye.”⁹² And as Rut Blomqvist argues, mistletoe is the only type of wood that could hurt Balder.⁹³

Another example of dual realities can be seen in the case of Hinzelmännchen. As it is stated above, Hinzelmännchen secretly sacrificed a child every year in order to keep Lakeside town prosperous. However, Hinzelmännchen also does not represent only his human side but also a side of Kobold. Next, when he is confronted by Shadow about his murders, Hinzelmännchen reveals that he used to be a child who was sacrificed. It is described in the following part:

His hair was dark brown, and long. He was perfectly naked, save for a worn leather band around his neck. He was pierced with two swords, one of them going through his chest, the other entering at his shoulder, with the point coming out beneath the rib-cage.⁹⁴

As the novel suggests, Hinzelmännchen still contains part of the Kobold inside him. This can be seen in the line: “And then the bloody child was gone, and the blood, and there was only an old man with a fluff of white hair and a goblin smile.”⁹⁵

Gaiman throughout the novel uses different characters to show and depict different mythologies and it is not different with the case of Hinzelmännchen and his murders. And since

⁸⁹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 41.

⁹⁰ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 41.

⁹¹ Rut Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses: Search for Personal Meaning and the Limitations of Myth in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*,” *Mythlore* 30, no. 3/4 (117/118) (2012): 17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26815498>.

⁹² Gaiman, *American Gods*, 402.

⁹³ Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses,” 17.

⁹⁴ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 433.

⁹⁵ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 433.

human sacrifice is quite widespread across different cultures, Gaiman uses Hinzemann and his annual rituals to depict other cultures as well. For instance, as Anawalt states, one of the cultures that practiced human sacrifice are people of Totonac and Aztecs.⁹⁶ An expedition by Hernan Cortés to Mexico revealed that Aztec people demanded thirty young men and women from Totonac to be sent for a sacrifice.⁹⁷ The sacrifice was usually made by extracting hearts and other organs.⁹⁸

However, as Robin Law argues, “a further conceptual difficulty is that the term 'human sacrifice' naturally connotes the idea of killing, with the implication that the victim was passive, even if not actively uncooperative.”⁹⁹ As Law then furtherly explains, human sacrifice in West Africa was sometimes a case of voluntary suicide, rather than a ritual killing or even a murder.¹⁰⁰ A similar approach might be applied to the sacrifice Shadow made when hanging from the world tree. But in the case of Hinzemann, on the other hand, the sacrifices he made are quite clearly closer to the ones practiced in the culture of Aztecs.

4.1. Shadow the Shaman

The main and most important character of the novel is undoubtedly Shadow. Despite the fact that he could be seen as Balder, he might also portray another character that is also connected to rituals and sacrifices. Shadow performs some incredible feats in the course of the story. He seems to be always in the center of things, he portrays magic and is also somehow connected to what appears to be rituals. Mathilda Slabbert and Leonie Viljoen argue that Shadow might be also seen as a shaman. Firstly, one of the reasons for such a claim is the recruitment of Shadow. “Traditionally, one becomes a shaman through genealogical transference or supernatural election. Both recruitment forms, heritage, and election, apply to Shadow’s initiation, thus rendering the ritual doubly significant.”¹⁰¹ In addition, since Shadow is Odin’s son, it is confirmed this way that he carries a shamanic heritage.¹⁰² Secondly, “Shadow’s initiation starts in Jack’s Crocodile Bar when he drinks the mead or ‘Honey wine ... drink of heroes ... drink of the gods’ Wednesday gives him, and is completed after his death and

⁹⁶ Patricia R. Anawalt, “Understanding Aztec Human Sacrifice,” *Archaeology* 35, no. 5 (1982): 39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41727796>.

⁹⁷ Anawalt, “Understanding Aztec Human Sacrifice,” 39.

⁹⁸ Anawalt, “Understanding Aztec Human Sacrifice,” 39.

⁹⁹ Robin Law, “Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa,” *African Affairs* 84, no. 334 (1985): 59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/722523>.

¹⁰⁰ Law, “Human Sacrifice,” 59.

¹⁰¹ M. Slabbert, and L. Viljoen, “Sustaining the Imaginative Life: Mythology and Fantasy in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*,” *Literator* 27, no. 3 (2006): 140.

¹⁰² Slabbert et al., “Sustaining the Imaginative Life,” 140-141.

resurrection.¹⁰³ And lastly, as it is stated above, Shadow's death, which can definitely be described as ritualistic is also another evidence of this theory. Slabbert and Viljoen confirm that by stating: "Shadow's ordeal and death on the tree reveal these shamanic initiation and ritual elements."¹⁰⁴

However, another approach that could be applied to Shadow's character and is very similar in many aspects to the Shaman theory is described by Roslan. The novel *American gods* focuses on telling a story that is influenced and driven by several other stories from mythologies of different cultures and folklore. One of the communal traits of myths and old folklore tales is the framework of storytelling called Hero's Journey. Such narrative progression is also very common among some of the more recent literary and also cinematic works and therefore it is not limited to the old mythical stories. One of the recent examples could be the movie series Star Wars in which the author George Lucas also follows this framework. Roslan follows in his journal the Hero's Journey theory made by Campbell and applies it to the story of *American god's* and Shadow's character.¹⁰⁵ The theory consists of three stages and seventeen steps. The stages are Departure, Initiation, and Return. The steps are

The Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Supernatural Aid, The Crossing of the First Threshold, The Belly of the Whale, The Road of Trials, The Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, The Ultimate Boon, Refusal of the Return, The Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, The Crossing of the Return Threshold, Master of the Two Worlds and Freedom to Live.¹⁰⁶

However, this part of the thesis is not going to cover all of the steps, only the ones that the author of the paper found interesting. As it is stated above, the first step is called "The call to adventure". Roslan states that "in the grand scheme of things, this 'call' is not by Shadow's own choosing as Odin and Loki had to kill Laura and his best friend who had offered him to work with him."¹⁰⁷ Interestingly enough, this part of the theory is very similar to the Shaman theory made by Slabbert and Viljoen as well. Slabbert and Viljoen, as it is stated above, argue that both the recruitment of a shaman and Shadow are connected to supernatural selection. They state that "it becomes apparent that Wednesday has orchestrated the storm in order to force

¹⁰³ Slabbert et al., "Sustaining the Imaginative Life," 141.

¹⁰⁴ Slabbert et al., "Sustaining the Imaginative Life," 147.

¹⁰⁵ Syed M. M. B. M. Roslan, Rohimni B. Noor, and Hardev Kaur, "Modern Day Myths in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 10, no. 3 (February 2020): 371.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁰⁷ Roslan et al., "Modern Day Myths," 375.

Shadow into a position where he becomes the god's envoy and sacrificial victim."¹⁰⁸ Therefore it is quite clear that the recruitment of Shadow could be seen as a recruitment of a hero or a shaman. Also, another step similar to the Shaman theory is the initiation of Shadow. Roslan states that "in this section, the hero travels outside his natural world, undergoes and successfully completing trials, and completes his heroic deed as a consequence rewarded with what the hero desired."¹⁰⁹ The trials described by Slabbert and Viljoen could be seen in the drink that Shadow had. Also, during the initiation at Jack's Crocodile bar, Mad Sweeney challenges Shadow to a fight and if Shadow wins, he tells him one of the coin tricks Mad Sweeney did. However, as it is later revealed, Mad Sweeney fought with Shadow only because Mr. Wednesday told him to as a test of Shadow's abilities. Such a test from Mr. Wednesday could be either seen as a trial described in the Hero's Journey theory and also as a ritual initiation depicted by Slabbert and Viljoen.

In addition to the trials, Campbell states that during the trials "the hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage."¹¹⁰ Despite the fact that Campbell clearly states that the hero is aided during these trials, Roslan does not comment anything on it in his analysis and in this step. However, the reason behind it might be because Roslan mentions the guidance Shadow receives in the step called Supernatural Aid.

Campbell describes the step Supernatural Aid as follows: "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass."¹¹¹ As Roslan states, figures like Mad Sweeney, Laura, Zorya Polunochnaya, and others are the ones that aid Shadow throughout the story in their own different way. For instance, Ganesh helps Shadow to uncover the mysterious disappearances in Lakeside and to find the body in the car. Anubis, Bas, Zorya, and Thoth all help Shadow when he was in the land of the dead. Also, one of the most influential guides that Shadow meets is the Buffalo man, who is depicting the Land. However, the Buffalo man is described in the later part of this paper and therefore he will not be mentioned in this section. Additionally, the amulets, that Campbell

¹⁰⁸ Slabbert et al., "Sustaining the Imaginative Life," 141.

¹⁰⁹ Roslan et al., "Modern Day Myths," 377.

¹¹⁰ Campbell, *The Hero*, 89.

¹¹¹ Campbell, *The Hero*, 63.

mentions could be, according to Roslan, seen in the coins that Shadow receives from Mad Sweeney and Zorya.¹¹²

Interestingly enough, Roslan uses only the framework made by Campbell. There is, however, another approach to the theory of the Hero's Journey made by Christopher Vogler and which can also be applied to the novel rather accurately. Despite the fact that Vogler works with the framework similarly to Campbell, there are still some differences and some of which can be appropriately applied to the novel. The first difference that one can notice is the breakdown of the individual stages of the story. Vogler works with individual stages and steps as well, he uses the basic framework of Campbell's theory, takes out individual steps, and then proceeds to depict and describe them in his own way. However, the main stages differ from Campbell's concept. Vogler divides the Hero's journey into three acts and twelve stages. The acts are Separation, Descent and Initiation, and Return. The steps are Call to an Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting with Mentor, Crossing First Threshold, Test, allies, enemies, Approach, Ordeal, Reward, Road back, Resurrection, and Return with Elixir.¹¹³

To start with, Vogler rephrases Campbell's beginning of Hero's journey and adds a new concept, and point of view to the first step. Vogler states that the beginning of a story comes down to conjuring up a mood and an image for the reader, giving him a better experience. "The mythological approach to story boils down to using metaphors or comparisons to get across your feelings about life."¹¹⁴ In addition, Vogler states that it is during this part of the story that the author should introduce to the reader an 'ordinary world'. "Because so many stories are journeys that take heroes and audiences to Special Worlds, most begin by establishing an Ordinary World as a baseline for comparison. The Ordinary World is the context, home base, and background of the hero."¹¹⁵ Gaiman similarly introduces the main character Shadow. He states that he was in prison, tells the reader about his life outside the prison bars, and also introduces some of the other characters like LowKey Lyesmith. The jail and the life Shadow had before it is for him, but also for the reader, the Ordinary World. The Ordinary world is for Shadow a world in which he does not know that Gods exist, he does not know that many figures from mythologies and legends are living among people in their world. The other world, Special World, is then for Shadow the life and events that happen to him after he meets Mr. Wednesday

¹¹² Roslan, et al. "Modern Day Myths," 375-376.

¹¹³ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, Calif: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 188.

¹¹⁴ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 84.

¹¹⁵ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 87.

and other Gods. An interesting detail is that Gaiman is combining and connecting two different worlds for the reader as well. The reader reads about an ordinary world, the life of an ordinary American. The reader reads about all the places that can be visited also in real life outside the lines of the book. Gaiman, however, is also combining this Ordinary world with all the stories from mythologies, making it a Special world for the characters in the novel and the reader as well.

Vogler further states that “writers often use the Ordinary World section to create a small model of the Special World, foreshadowing its battles and moral dilemmas.”¹¹⁶ The first interaction that Shadow has with someone in the story is with LowKey Lyesmith who tells him a joke which later names as ‘Gallows humor’. And since Shadow is going to hang himself for Mr. Wednesday later in the story, the joke could be described as foreshadowing future events in the story, just like Vogler argues. In addition, another role that the name of the humor might serve is as a reference to Odin himself since according to Norse mythology he hangs himself to gain knowledge.

Another interesting point step that Roslan makes is stated in the step called Resurrection. During the step, the hero of the story is supposed to face death and later be resurrected as better and pure. Vogler states that “so-called primitive societies seem better prepared to handle the return of heroes. Returning hunters may be quarantined safely away from the tribe for a period of time. To reintegrate hunters and warriors into the tribe, shamans use rituals that mimic the effects of death or even take the participants to death's door.”¹¹⁷ He further explains that after the ritual burying of hunters and warriors, they are then resurrected and welcomed to the tribe once again as newborns.¹¹⁸ Interestingly enough, Vogler mentions that such rituals are executed by shamans. Shadow goes through a similar process in which he dies in a way that could be definitely described as one of the rituals. He is also brought back to life, and as a sign of new life, a newborn, he now knows what Mr. Wednesday and Loki want to do. Therefore, this Vogler’s assumption also confirms in a way the statement made by Slabbert and Viljoen about Shadow being a shamanic figure. Additionally, according to Vogler “the threat of death is not just to the hero, but to the whole world. In other words, the stakes are at their highest.”¹¹⁹ In

¹¹⁶ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 87.

¹¹⁷ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 198.

¹¹⁸ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 198.

¹¹⁹ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 199.

this sense, Shadow's permanent death would cause the battle to happen, and then probably destroy or at least damage the world.

Vogler's concept of resurrection can be seen also in the character of Mr. Wednesday. There are two ways of looking at this situation. Firstly, one might look at this resurrection from the point of view of the novel and of Mr. Wednesday. The novel describes the first death of Mr. Wednesday as a tragic murder by the New Gods. However, as it is later revealed, Mr. Wednesday is alive, 'resurrecting' him from the point of view of the reader. And secondly, one might look at this resurrection from the point of view of Norse mythology itself. Odin hangs on the world tree and sacrifices his life in order to gain knowledge and even though he does not die, it still can be interpreted in this way.¹²⁰

In conclusion, dual realities are another topic that is majorly depicted in the novel. Gaiman is using the original concept of each God and portrays it in a way that is both closely related to ordinary people and also to the Gods themselves. Shadow, for instance, is a complex character that can be seen and analyzed from several different points of view. He can be seen as the hero of the whole conflict, as the demigod among other Gods, or as a shamanic figure. One of the examples that nicely describes this topic of dual realities is the example of Mr. Wednesday who is portraying Odin, but Odin is not Mr. Wednesday. It is also the character of Odin who symbolically closes the circle of the world of myth and folklore and the real world since Shadow and also the reader ends up 'meeting' the true form of the god.

¹²⁰ Thorpe, *The Poetic Edda*, 80.

5. Binary oppositions

In addition to dual realities, Gaiman also uses another literary approach in his novel. There is no doubt that the novel portrays several key symbols and topics. Such symbols play different roles in the story, however, if the symbols are analyzed from a different point of view, one may suggest that Gaiman also portrays some of the symbols using binary oppositions. Nevertheless, Gaiman does not work with binary oppositions traditionally but rather quite unconventionally. In order to truly understand the issue, it is important to state what subversion and binary opposition are. According to Greg Smith, binary opposition is “the system by which, in language and thought, two theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another but simultaneously arranged, somewhat paradoxically, in pairs.”¹²¹ It is important to mention that Gaiman truly works with binary opposition in this sense to some extent. Nevertheless, the approach he chooses is using subversions rather than binary oppositions.

Subversion, on the other hand, is, according to José Manuel Losada Goyam, “universal: anything can be overturned, not only in the material domain, but also particularly in the spiritual one: subversion is an eminently moral act. Indeed, if subversion were not possible, the freedom of the human mind would stand in doubt.”¹²² Goyam then continues his statement with an example from fashion. He says that “the original holes in blue jeans come to be replaced by other, no less original decorative innovations. It happens with fashion as with contemporaneity: in always seeking to break with tradition, each is, paradoxically, thereby instating a tradition of breaking.”¹²³ A similar approach can be applied to Gaiman’s novel and his style of storytelling. He works with the traditional concept of myths and folktales and at the same time recreates them into something completely different. However, Goyam’s example was used mainly to show that “everything is susceptible to subversion, even fashion.”¹²⁴

The subversion of myths, on the other hand, can affect three different factors. Firstly, it can affect “the oral narrative and its subsequent versions, on one hand, or the intrigue and conflictive character on the other: the narrative dimension of the myth.”¹²⁵ Secondly, it can affect “the relatively simple narration, on the one hand, or the ritual and series of constituent

¹²¹ Greg Smith, "Binary opposition and sexual power in 'Paradise Lost,'" *The Midwest Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1996): 1.

¹²² José Manuel Losada Goya, “The Subversive Triad: A Theoretical Approach,” in *Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel*, ed. José Manuel Losada Goya, and Marta Guirao Ochoa, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge scholars publishing, 2012), 3.

¹²³ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 3-4.

¹²⁴ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 4.

¹²⁵ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 4.

components on the other: the structure of the myth.”¹²⁶ And thirdly, it can affect “the extraordinary event with a transcendent and personal referent, on one hand, and its functional and etiological nature on the other: the dogmatic dimension of the myth.”¹²⁷ Goyam then proceeds to call them subversions of “narrative”, “structural” and “transcendental”.¹²⁸ The narrative and structural subversions, according to Goyam, go ‘hand in hand.’

Goyam further mentions an interesting example from French novels. As stated by Goyam, “the anti-novel *Francion* imparts a syncretistic wisdom, the story *Bijoux* maintains an anti-absolutist political statement, and the novel *Germinal* posits the imminent arrival of laborers’ rights. Increasingly over the years, this liberation from traditional literary forms entails the abandonment of inherited contents.”¹²⁹ A similar analogy can be applied to Gaiman’s novel as well. By portraying the characters and stories of mythology in the book, Gaiman might be pointing to the problems of today’s society. He is using the Old Gods and the mythic character on their side as a metaphor for the old times and the times when people believed in something. He portrays them, except for Odin, as the group of heroes and the right, bright side of the whole conflict. The New Gods, on the other hand, portray a change in society, the arrival of technology, and the associated arrogance and sometimes even blindness of people. By describing the war between the Old Gods and New Gods, Gaiman might be depicting how technologies and media are taking over the world and how the old traditions and beliefs are trying to fight back. In other words, Gaiman is pointing with the novel to other problems in the real world people have, just like Goyam describes the French authors.

Therefore, the following part of the novel is going to focus on how Gaiman is portraying subversions or binary oppositions using several symbols and themes. A similar approach is described by Olesia V. Naumovska et al. According to their article:

The folk prose narratives include the concept of binary opposition, which means the juxtaposition of two opposite concepts. At the same time, the research results have shown that this concept can have a figurative meaning if the boundaries between the juxtaposed categories are quite unsteady and blurred.¹³⁰

Gaiman works with binary oppositions in a similar way. Almost none of the symbols, themes, or topics could be described as polar opposites. Therefore, some of the examples

¹²⁶ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 4.

¹²⁷ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 4.

¹²⁸ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 4.

¹²⁹ Goya, “The Subversive Triad,” 6.

¹³⁰ Olesia V. Naumovska, Nataliia I. Rudakova, and Nataliia Ie. Naumovska, “The ‘life/death’ binary opposition in folk prose narratives,” *Linguistics and Culture Review* 5, no. S4, (2021): 541.

mentioned in this part might be classified as both examples of binary oppositions and subversions and since the distinction between those examples is in some cases rather unclear, the author of this paper worked with most of them as with examples of binary oppositions.

5.1. Coins and Life and Death

One of such symbols that is often repeated in the novel and could be seen as an example of subversion or binary opposition is the coins. While Shadow was serving his sentence in prison, he learned many magic tricks with coins from one of the books he had read there. One of the examples can be seen right at the beginning of the novel. During one of the nights, when Shadow talks with Zorya Polunochnaya, she reaches for the moon and gives Shadow a silver dollar coin. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the moon is not the only attribute the coin carries. It also provides Shadow protection from death. After he hangs himself, the coin turns back into the moon and lights the path for Shadow to go through the underworld. However, the binary opposition can be clearly seen when compared to the other coin he receives, the gold coin.

Shadow receives the gold coin from Mad Sweeney, a leprechaun. The purpose of the coin is quite clear in the story. Shadow throws the gold coin into the grave of his dead wife Laura which resurrects her to a state in which she is neither dead nor alive. The fact that the silver coin protected Shadow from death and the gold coin, on the other hand, brings the dead ones to life could be interpreted as a nice binary opposition or rather subversion in this case. Just like Shadow is alive, one of his closest people Laura is partially dead and they both therefore represent polar opposites. A similar analysis could be applied to the coins as well. Even the fact that the very colors and material from which the coins are made, gold and silver, could be perceived as binary opposites.

Additionally, the gold coin itself also portrays the polarity of life and death. For instance, the gold coin brings life to Shadow by resurrecting his wife, making the coin a rather positive symbol. But if one takes a look at Mad Sweeney and what the coin did to him, then it is rather clear that the gold coin brought him only death since when Shadow did not give him the coin back, Mad Sweeney dies soon after. The gold coin, therefore, can be also seen as a symbol of death and negativity for Mad Sweeney, making it a symbol of two opposites.

Nevertheless, the polarity of life and death is definitely one of the most interesting opposites in the novel. The binarity between life and death is quite a common topic in literature, mainly in fairy tales, folktales, and myths. Olesia V. Naumovska et al. argue that this binary opposition can be portrayed in different ways and by using different symbols and themes. One

of the ways to look at this binarity is by describing it with the word 'soul.' According to Naumovska et al. "the term 'soul' is often applied to both the deceased and the living person. There are such phraseological units in folk and author' prose narratives as 'not a single living soul' (empty, there is no one), 'barely keeping body and soul together' (about a weak, sickly person)" and other examples.¹³¹ Even though, Gaiman does not work with death in a sense of 'souls', Laura could be seen as a figure, an empty shell who cannot keep her body together but since Shadow is able to communicate with her, it might suggest that he is only talking to her soul. The concept of soul is portrayed in the novel but only very rarely. For instance, Mr. Wednesday says: "They don't sacrifice rams or bulls to me. They don't send me the souls of killers and slaves, gallows-hung and raven-picked."¹³²

Also, as Naumovska further states, it is believed in Serbian folklore that a deceased person only moves the temporary life he had into eternal life.¹³³ This, yet again, could be applied to Laura since she only moves after her death to a state in which she is not alive nor dead. She is able to visit Shadow, talk with him, and move her body, but her physical appearance visibly suggests that she is still a dead corpse. Therefore, one could not perceive Laura as an example of binary oppositions since she is not one of the living, but she is not one of the dead either, she is somewhere in between, making her an example of how Gaiman portrays subversions in his novel.

Such use of 'Life/Death' subversion can be seen in the novel itself as well. Mr. Ibis describes this by saying: "You people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories. As if you cannot have a river that is also a road, or a song that is also a color."¹³⁴ The statement could be directly applied to Gaiman and his novel as well since he similarly uses binary opposition or subversions.

Additionally, another theme connected to 'life and death' is the theme of water and dryness in narratives. "Notably, water (moisture, dampness) or, in other cases, dryness (drought, dry wood) is an ambivalent symbol associated with both life and death in many cultures, including Slavic."¹³⁵ As Naumovska et al. add that in this case the binary opposition of 'life and death' is transformed into a binary opposition of 'dry and wet'.¹³⁶ It is also important

¹³¹ Naumovska, et al., "The 'life/death'", 544.

¹³² Gaiman, *American Gods*, 245.

¹³³ Naumovska, et al., "The 'life/death'", 544

¹³⁴ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 369.

¹³⁵ Naumovska, et al., "The 'life/death'", 548.

¹³⁶ Naumovska, et al., "The 'life/death'", 548.

to mention that this approach differs depending on the culture and geographical factors. “In a desert area, the attitude towards water and moisture is completely and more explicit: water brings life.”¹³⁷ Whereas in other parts of the world, water could be associated with death. For instance, “Vepsians perceived water as synonymous with death. Drowning in water is reflected in the traditional Vepsian divination practices. Popular beliefs have it that the lavation of a deceased meant washing the life off. Thus, the soul of the deceased, while passing through the water, had to be cleansed.”¹³⁸ One of the situations in which water represents death can be seen in the novel as well. Hinzelmann was drowning young girls in the lake in the middle of the town. It was his ritual, a sacrifice to become invincible, to live eternal life. Naumovska et al. also add that “Vepsian folk prose narratives provide many examples that point to the symbolic connection of water and future life’s birth and development along with its augmentation and renewal.”¹³⁹ This approach could be applied to Hinzelmann as well since the death of the drowned girl inside the car brings Hinzelmann ‘a new life’. The sacrifice provides him with eternal life and gives him more years to live. Therefore, water serves in the novel as a symbol of death, but also of life, making it a binary opposition.

In addition, another example of water that represents life and death can be seen in the character of Laura. The more the story progresses the more Laura rots. Her body, at the end of the story, is visibly decomposed, just like any corpse would do. However, since she is still partially alive, her festering body could be also theoretically marked as depicting another example of water picturing life and death.

5.2. Binary opposition in the characters

Similarly, almost no topic or theme of the novel could be described as solely one-sided. One of such examples is Shadow himself. As it was mentioned above, Shadow seems to be in the middle of the dispute between the Old and New Gods. At first, he just blindly follows Mr. Wednesday and works for him. But as it turns out, Mr. Wednesday is not entirely on the side of the Old Gods as well. Additionally, even though the reader does not know the origins of Shadow, his real name, or practically anything besides his nickname and his wife, he plays a positive figure in the whole story despite his criminal record. Susan Gorman argues that Gaiman uses Shadow as a role model for the so-called ‘average Joe’, a symbol for an average American. “He is a middleclass man, married with no children, unaware of his ethnical origins, a misfit,

¹³⁷ Naumovska, et al., “The ‘life/death’”, 549.

¹³⁸ Naumovska, et al., “The ‘life/death’”, 549.

¹³⁹ Naumovska, et al., “The ‘life/death’”, 549.

unattached to any place.”¹⁴⁰ Gorman also further describes Shadow by: “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.”¹⁴¹

Also, even though Shadow rejects to join either side of the conflict at the end of the novel, he does not reject the Gods in this way. According to Mark Hill, “Shadow does not reject all of his former connections; to do that would also be a rejection of their better traits, the historical construction of American identity – charm, kindness, determination, goodness.”¹⁴² Therefore, Shadow keeps on being a human, an average American, but keeps his connections with the Gods, putting him once again in the middle of things.

The same approach can be applied to Czernobog and his life. Gaiman illustrates Czernobog in two ways, with two different characters. During the winter, Czernobog is dark, he carries his hammer around and is very pessimistic, and cruel, and wants to see violence. But when winter is over, Czernobog turns into his brother Bielebog and becomes the exact opposite. And such contradiction might illustrate not only the good and evil side of things but also the difference between summer and winter, how winter is seen as dark and cold, just like Czernobog’s hammer but also how summer is warm and bright, just like Bielebog’s hair.

The transition in the novel can be seen in the following part where Shadow is supposed to pay Czernobog’s debt and let Czernobog kill him with his hammer. But Czernobog does not fulfill the promise he gave to Shadow and decides to spare him.

Pock! There,’ said Czernobog. ‘Is done.’ There was a smile on his face that Shadow had never seen before, an easy, comfortable smile, like sunshine on a summer’s day. ‘Czernobog?’ asked Shadow. Then, ‘Are you Czernobog?’ ‘Yes. For today,’ said the old man. ‘By tomorrow, it will all be Bielebog. But today, is still Czernobog.’¹⁴³

In addition, as Blomqvist states: “When the sun shines on Czernobog’s hair, we understand that the difference between light and darkness, good and evil, is illusory, a misleading simplification of reality. Neither Shadow nor Czernobog consider what they are supposed to do; both follow their own will.”¹⁴⁴ Also, such contradictions and binary oppositions can be also seen in the smallest details. For instance, it can be seen in the following line in

¹⁴⁰ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 177.

¹⁴¹ Gorman, “Neil Gaiman’s American God,” 178.

¹⁴² Hill, “Neil Gaiman’s American Gods”, 25.

¹⁴³ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 444.

¹⁴⁴ Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses,” 20.

which Czernobog states: “Next time you want to play checkers, you know where to find me. This time, I play white.”¹⁴⁵ The color of the checkers does not only portray the nature of each brother but also their names since both of them are Slavic gods. Czernobog playing with black and Bielebog playing with white. The importance of colors in this particular situation is also quite significant. Black color, which is usually associated with death and being negative in general nicely captures Czernobog’s nature through the whole story. He joins Mr. Wednesday just so he can kill Shadow because of the bet he won against him. He is also quite aggressive, pessimistic, and violent throughout the whole story, just like the color black might be seen as. However, when spring comes, he turns into his polar opposite brother Bielebog, who is much calmer, kinder, and also more peaceful, making him a more positive figure, just like the color white is usually perceived by people.

Another interpretation of binary opposition could be seen in the character of Mad Sweeney who portrays Leprechaun. McAnally states that Leprechauns are not good, or bad figures and they are usually living alone. They perform mischiefs on people, but such pranks are usually innocent, not dangerous, and playful.¹⁴⁶ Since Mad Sweeney portrays the Leprechaun in this novel, one might suggest that he should be a funny and positive part of the novel as well. However, Gaiman portrays this character quite differently. Mad Sweeney is a character who is portrayed in a very pessimistic and negative way. Gaiman depicts him as a junkie and alcoholic who only serves Mr. Wednesday because he fears him. When Shadow sees him, he describes him having junkie shivers and being covered in mud and dirt.

There is, however, an attribute that could be applied to both Mad Sweeney and Leprechaun similarly. As McAnally states, Leprechauns usually hide gold somewhere. The symbol of gold can be also seen in the character of Mad Sweeney since he carries gold coins in the pocket of his jacket. He even gives the gold coin to Shadow, the one that Shadow carries with him almost the entire story and is magical. The difference is that according to McAnally Leprechauns usually do not give away their gold unless they are somehow forced to do so. Therefore, if someone catches a Leprechaun, they might be able to make them give the gold away.¹⁴⁷ Shadow, however, receives the gold coin from Mad Sweeney without forcing him to do so. In addition, despite the fact there seems to be no evidence of Leprechauns predicting the future, Mad Sweeney predicts Shadow’s fate in a way. He tells him:

¹⁴⁵ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 444.

¹⁴⁶ McAnally, *Irish wonders*, 140.

¹⁴⁷ McAnally, *Irish wonders*, 146.

You're walking on gallows ground, and there's a rope around your neck and a raven-bird on each shoulder waiting for your eyes, and the gallows tree has deep roots, for it stretches from heaven to hell, and our world is only the branch from which the rope is swinging.¹⁴⁸

This statement might be clearly hinting that Shadow hangs himself later in the story. However, it might also be a reference to Odin himself since he is usually portrayed with ravens, and he is also hanged from the World tree to gain knowledge.

To conclude, when it comes to the topic of binary oppositions, Gaiman seems to work with it rather differently. In some parts of the novel, he uses the original concept of this approach. Nevertheless, there are also some parts of the novel where he uses rather subversions. One of such examples can be seen in the character of Laura who is portraying an 'in-between' state. She is neither portraying life nor death and therefore can not be marked as an example of opposites but rather as an example of subversions. Another example can be also seen in the symbol of coins that are guiding Shadow on almost the whole journey. They do, at first glance portray two polar opposites, upon closer inspection and analysis, however, it turns out that just like many of the symbols in the novel, the coins could be also depicted from different points of view.

¹⁴⁸ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 178.

6. Symbolism

Another major topic portrayed in the novel is the topic of symbolism. Whitehead defines symbolism as:

The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of its experience. The former set of components are the 'symbols,' and the latter set constitutes the 'meaning' of the symbols.¹⁴⁹

Gaiman makes use of a relatively large number of symbols. Some of the symbols that are reoccurring in the novel have been already mentioned in this novel. This part, however, is going to analyze them only from the point of view of symbolism. As Whitehead states “In a discussion of instances of symbolism, our first difficulty is to discover exactly what is being symbolized. The symbols are specific enough, but it is often extremely difficult to analyze what lies beyond them, even though there is evidently some strong appeal beyond the mere ceremonial acts.”¹⁵⁰ Whitehead also adds that one of the most important symbols that one may use is the language itself. He states that the meaning of words and their enveloping suggestiveness can carry an emotional efficacy. “This function of language depends on the way it has been used, on the proportionate familiarity of particular phrases, and on the emotional history associated with their meanings and thence derivatively transferred to the phrases themselves.”¹⁵¹ The novel confirms this assumption as well. For instance, while talking about names later in this thesis, one might suggest that the name of Shadow’s former jail mate Low-Key LyeSmith is a major hint and suggestion to the reader of who he really is and that he portrays Loki. However, similarly as Whitehead argues, if the reader does not have certain knowledge about Norse mythology, it is also quite possible that he will not see through this name reference. René Wellek and Austin Warren also confirm this in a way by stating that in “literary theory, it seems desirable that the word should be used in this sense: as an object which refers to another object but which demands attention also in its own right, as a presentation.”¹⁵²

In addition to language and symbolism, Northrop Frye states that reading and understanding the issue can lead to two directions.

One direction is centrifugal, moving from the words to the things they mean, or, in practice, to our memory of the conventional association. The other direction is

¹⁴⁹A. N. Whitehead, “Uses of Symbolism,” *Daedalus* 87, no. 3 (1958): 109.

¹⁵⁰ Whitehead, “Uses of Symbolism,” 111.

¹⁵¹ Whitehead, “Uses of Symbolism,” 113.

¹⁵² René Wellek, and Austin Warren, *Theory of literature*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1949), 193.

centripetal, trying to build up out of the words a larger pattern or context, an attempt which normally expands until it reaches the whole verbal pattern. In the centrifugal movement, the word is a symbol in the sense of a sign, or representation of a thing outside the pattern of words. In the other movement the word is a symbol in the sense of an image, or unit of a verbal structure.¹⁵³

It seems that Gaiman is using both of the stated movements in the novel. While taking into account the stick, for instance, Gaiman is portraying it as an ordinary tree branch, an image of a spear, and a weapon that is used in the final battle. On the other hand, however, the stick represents imagination, belief, or faith and therefore it is representing a sign in this sense.

Another important aspect of this claim is also the writer's intentions. As Frye states, if the aim of the writer is not literary, the writer then tends to describe the words in a way that reader is able to read them "for their value as signs."¹⁵⁴ The author is "then judged by his truth, or correspondence between his words and the things they signify. Failure to correspond is falsehood; failure to make contact is a tautology, a pattern of words which cannot come out of itself."¹⁵⁵ However if the writer's intention is literary, then the approach is very much different, "for in literature the relation of words to things is not true, not false, not tautological, and yet not meaningless either."¹⁵⁶

In addition, there is another approach to approaching the symbolism. Whitehead is using the term 'reflex action' to describe a certain reaction to a symbol. He states that "the response of action to a symbol may be so direct as to cut out any effective reference to the ultimate thing symbolized. This elimination of meaning is termed reflex action."¹⁵⁷ Whitehead then further explains that the reflex action is closely related to social symbolism which can carry double meaning. "It means pragmatically the direction of individuals to a specific action; and it also means theoretically the vague ultimate reasons with their emotional accompaniments whereby the symbols acquire their power to organize the miscellaneous crowd into a smoothly running community."¹⁵⁸ One of the examples that nicely illustrate this principle is the contrast between a state and an army. "The trained soldier acts automatically on receiving the word of command. He responds to the sound and cuts out the idea." Such behavior can be described as 'reflex action.'¹⁵⁹ However, in the army, there is also another set of symbols. The flag, the memorials

¹⁵³ Northrop Frye, "Three Meanings of Symbolism," *Yale French Studies*, no. 9 (1952): 11.

¹⁵⁴ Frye, "Three Meanings of Symbolism," 11.

¹⁵⁵ Frye, "Three Meanings of Symbolism," 11.

¹⁵⁶ Frye, "Three Meanings of Symbolism," 11.

¹⁵⁷ Whitehead, "Uses of Symbolism," 116.

¹⁵⁸ Whitehead, "Uses of Symbolism," 117.

¹⁵⁹ Whitehead, "Uses of Symbolism," 117.

of honorable service, or even the medals are all symbols that appeal to patriotism. “Thus, in an army, there is one set of symbols to produce automatic obedience in a limited set of circumstances, and there is another set of symbols to produce a general sense of the importance of the duties performed.”¹⁶⁰ For most of society, there is no exact symbol that would cause reliable automatic obedience, such as word commands for soldiers. The only exception one might state is, also as Whitehead states, the signals of the traffic police. While applying this view to the novel itself, one might see certain similarities. Shadow learns to follow Mr. Wednesday’s commands as a soldier follows his general. He is, after all, a ‘soldier’ of Mr. Wednesday to a certain degree. Shadow also carries several items with him, for instance, the coins, as a reminder not only of his past but also of his current duties, just like a soldier might look at his medals as a symbol of the acts he has done and also as the duties he has to do in order to respect the country he is fighting for.

6.1. The Coins and the Influence of America

As it is stated above, one of the things that Shadow carries with him throughout the story is the coins that represent the moon and sun. However, the coins do not only represent the sun and the moon but also other more abstract metaphors. Gaiman throughout the book uses several stories called Coming to America which describe how the old gods arrived in America. It is not surprising that almost the whole story of the book is actually happening only in American lands, making America the center of space in this story. However, there is also quite a significant display of the topic of the so-called ‘American dream’. In other words, America is displayed here as the land of opportunity, dreams, and future and it is worth noting that it is quite a common theme that reoccurs in other books as well. The coins also portray this theme in a way. The silver coin contains a picture of Liberty Lady which is obviously a symbol of freedom and liberty and that is also further portrayed in the story on several occasions. When Shadow is locked in a cell, he hides the silver coin in his sock and then takes it out when he is feeling hopeless. Together with the recent death of Wednesday, Shadow feels like there is no way of escaping his fate and that he is doomed in a way. However, after Shadow takes the coin out and holds it tightly, a rescue comes to him, and he gets out of the prison cell. This could be perceived as a direct metaphor for the opportunities and freedom America might offer.

Also, the influence America has can be also seen among the gods as well. Despite the fact that most of the gods, including the most important god and a leader of the Old Gods Mr.

¹⁶⁰ Whitehead, “Uses of Symbolism,” 117.

Wednesday, are not from America but countries and cultures, they still picked America as their sanctuary and a place they want to stay in. Gaiman also plays with the traditional concept of history and tries to portray some of the events a bit differently. When Shadow meets Mr. Ibis for the first time, he tells him several stories, including one that is about the gods in America and Columbus. He says that Ancient Egyptians and many other different cultures traveled to America even before Columbus in order to trade their goods.

He says:

The misconception is that men didn't travel long distances in boats before the days of Columbus. Yet New Zealand and Tahiti and countless Pacific Islands were settled by people in boats whose navigation skills would have put Columbus to shame.¹⁶¹

Additionally, these kinds of stories, together with the stories 'coming to America', could be seen as a symbol of the migration of nations. According to Veera Pohjalainen, while talking about migration in America, it is important to look at the issue from two sides, from the side of newcomers, which is usually the side that is most focused on, and also the side of the natives, people who were already there. "Several peoples in America have been designated as native based on the fact that they were in the Americas before the greater waves of post Columbus immigration."¹⁶² This claim might be also applied to the novel as well. Gaiman might be describing this issue of immigration with Mr. Ibis's statement about gods being in America before Columbus.

Furthermore, the symbol of America can be seen in another example. Shadow throughout the story, usually during his dreams, meets a character who is half a buffalo and half a man. It is rather unclear whether Gaiman was trying to portray any folklore legend or myth with this character. Nevertheless, the combination of half a man and half an animal is rather common in folklore and myths and it is possible that Gaiman was inspired by some of them, for example with the Greek folklore legend Minotaur who is half a human and half a bull. However, despite the fact that the buffalo man does not seem to represent any particular god or even a creature from folklore, his role in the story is still interesting. He acts as a sort of guidance and spiritual advisor towards Shadow throughout the story. Gaiman also portrays him in a way that could be compared to an Indian chief or elder. The Buffalo man, therefore, further confirms the Shaman theory by Mathilda Slabbert and Leonie Viljoen since he acts as Shadow's main

¹⁶¹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 161.

¹⁶² Pohjalainen, "Think of us", 17.

advisor. In addition, Roslan also confirms this idea. He states that “the Land is the ultimate source of guidance. It is the Land that gave Shadow confidence to face the Gods and personification. It is also the Land that presented to Shadow about the gods and the world, letting him to decide on his own what the truth is rather than forcing it upon him.”¹⁶³ And as Roslan further adds the Land also predicts the future and tells Shadow that “there will be heroes, who will defeat monsters and gift profound knowledge.”¹⁶⁴

Additionally, another interpretation of the character of the Buffalo man could also be as a personification of the sacred land. This claim is also confirmed by the Buffalo man himself in the novel where he states that he actually is the land. In addition, together with the character of Whiskey Jack, who is Wisakedjak, the reader might think that ‘the land’ is the true god. However, as Blomqvist states, the buffalo man refuses to be called a god and that the land is no god to Whiskey Jack either.¹⁶⁵ Blomqvist continues his argument with an example of Mount Rushmore. He states that “underneath the polished roadside attraction Mount Rushmore, there is a real mountain. And even when the faces on Mount Rushmore are worn down and forgotten, the mountain itself will still exist. There is something persistent to rely on.”¹⁶⁶ Whiskey Jack also confirms this idea in the novel by saying: “Listen, gods die when they are forgotten. People too. But the land’s still here. The good places, and the bad. The land isn’t going anywhere.”¹⁶⁷

Rut Blomqvist also argues that Gaiman’s style of writing and storytelling aims to include the readers as a part of the story itself. In other words, the general narrator Gaiman uses includes the reader ‘in we’ which then Blomqvist interprets as being part of mankind.¹⁶⁸ It makes the reader think and look at the story from a different perspective suggesting that “there is something beyond the cultural representations of the real.”¹⁶⁹

Another metaphor that the coins might portray is the magic itself. American gods as a story clearly contains many elements of magic and supernaturality. Shadow throughout the story performs ‘magic’ on several occasions and for different reasons. The ‘magic’ he performs is nothing more than simple tricks he learned while being locked in the prison at the beginning of the book, but also from Mr. Wednesday himself. He uses these tricks to calm his mind, to

¹⁶³ Roslan et al., “Modern Day Myths,” 375.

¹⁶⁴ Roslan et al., “Modern Day Myths,” 376.

¹⁶⁵ Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses,” 21.

¹⁶⁶ Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses,” 21.

¹⁶⁷ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 394.

¹⁶⁸ Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses,” 21.

¹⁶⁹ Blomqvist, “The Road of Our Senses,” 21.

entertain others but also for his own benefits. While these tricks are not magical themselves, they might serve as a hint to the reader that Shadow is not a simple man and human, but he is also a part god. These tricks might also portray the magical theme the story could be described with. And since both Old Gods and New Gods live from the faith of others, the magic tricks Shadow performs might also portray the importance of believing in something. For instance, when Shadow showed one of the coin tricks to the young boy Leon he believes it was true magic, he even says that when he is older, he will learn to do magic as Shadow. The faith, the trust Leon has is arguably not different from the faith the gods live from and Gaiman might be portraying that with the coin tricks.

6.2. The Ash Stick and imagination

The world of the novel is driven and shaped by faith. Both groups of gods live by faith, they need it to survive, and faith can be also seen as the building block of many stories and plots the novel contains. One of such examples demonstrated in this thesis are the coins, which could be also described as a symbol connected to faith. However, another symbol portrayed in the novel is the ash stick.

As opposed to the coins, the ash stick is not so commonly portrayed in the novel. Nevertheless, it is one of the symbols that probably best depicts the whole theme of the story. For people, who do not know anything about gods and their presence among them might this stick seem like a basic tree branch that can be found scattered everywhere over any forest they go to. Undoubtedly, the stick looks, feels, and even is an ordinary stick to a certain degree. It was taken down from a tree, it is made from wood and serves no purpose at first glance. However, just as with anything in this story, the point of view and how people perceive it can change the shape and the essence itself. One of the examples from the story might be when Town climbs on the Ash Tree where Shadow is hanging and cuts a tree branch from it. He then proceeds to show the importance of faith and imagination by imagining that the stick is actually a spear.

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.¹⁷⁰

Despite the fact that Town is unaware of the power of imagination, he is still able to truly stab Shadow and Shadow then begins to bleed. Another example can be seen in the next

¹⁷⁰ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 381.

part of the book where Mr. World himself explains the importance of imagination and faith. He says: “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.’”¹⁷¹ Therefore the stick itself serves as a symbol of the faith, imagination, and the view that all the gods and ordinary people from the story have.

Imagination is very important in the world of American gods. Mr. Nancy comments on faith and imagination with: “This isn’t about what is. It’s about what people think is. It’s all imaginary anyway. That’s why it’s important. People only fight over imaginary things.”¹⁷² A similar approach can be applied to almost anything in the novel. Places and their depiction in the novel, for instance, are great examples of imagination. As it was stated earlier, the Ash tree or Yggdrasil in Norse mythology is the largest tree of all trees. However, in *American Gods* the tree does look a little different, but still not like the tree from myths. Shadow describes the tree as: “It was silver-gray, and it was higher than the farmhouse. It was the most beautiful tree Shadow had ever seen: spectral and yet utterly real and almost perfectly symmetrical.”¹⁷³ The key part of this description is that the tree was “spectral and yet utterly real” since the same words could be used to describe other places, things, figures, and almost anything in the novel.

But how the reader knows that the tree in Virginia is truly the tree that represents Yggdrasil? At the end of the day, *American Gods* is only about believing in something and having faith. Therefore, with the same logic applied, it might be possible that the Old Gods also only believe that the tree is a real representation of Yggdrasil. In other words, the reader does not have almost any evidence that the coins truly represent the moon and sun, the carousel is a portal to the other world, and the tree in Virginia is Yggdrasil. That can be also seen when Town cuts the stick from the World Tree. He says to himself that “he could have cut a stick from any tree. It didn’t have to be this tree. Who the fuck would have known?”¹⁷⁴

In addition, the power of imagination can also be seen in the final battle. Even though the battle is going to be real for the Gods, it will not actually happen in any real place. Mr. Nancy and Czernobog describe this to Shadow by saying: “” Most of this battle will be fought

¹⁷¹ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 388.

¹⁷² Gaiman, *American Gods*, 330.

¹⁷³ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 350.

¹⁷⁴ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 382.

in a place you cannot go, and you cannot touch.’ ‘In the hearts and the minds of the people,’ said Czernobog. ‘Like at the big roundabout.’”¹⁷⁵

6.3. Names

In addition to the previously mentioned symbols, there is another part of the book that could be analyzed from the point of view of symbolism. Gaiman throughout the book uses many different names for the Gods, folklore characters, and others. Each nickname essentially describes the character itself and can also serve as a reference or metaphor for individual stories from mythology and folklore.

To start with, Low-Key LyeSmith is a character who is introduced at the very beginning of the book. However, the interesting detail about his character is that he does not appear in most of the book except for the last chapters. Firstly, Shadow knows him as his former prison mate. Then, towards the end of the book Shadow finds out that Low-Key Lyesmith is actually also Loki, who is the Norse trickster God.¹⁷⁶ In addition, towards the end of the story, it is revealed that Loki is also Mr. World, the leader of the New Gods. He therefore together with Mr. Wednesday creates this plot to mislead both of the groups of Gods. As the nickname Low-Key Lyesmith itself suggests the reader has a chance to see through the metaphor and know from the start that this is actually Loki all along.

Loki with his tricks deceives Shadow in the story. However, Gaiman uses Loki to literally trick the reader as well. If the reader of the book does not reveal the truth behind this character, then he is also tricked by Loki almost as if he was one of the book’s characters. This claim is also confirmed by Siobhan Carroll who states Gaiman is ‘playing’ with the reader’s mind as well. As Carroll states, Shadow is asking the question of what he should believe throughout the whole book and the answer he receives is ‘everything.’ And as Corral adds:

American Gods thus manipulates readers’ expectations of the fantasy genre, challenging readers to recognize the problems inherent in easy acquiescence to the premises of the fiction in which they wish to participate, whether the fiction in question is that of a novel or that of a nation.¹⁷⁷

That might be also the reason why Gaiman uses Loki rather carefully, not to draw too much attention to him and all of his versions. This fact, of course, comes from the name itself since the word low-key represents events or characters that are being quiet and not bringing

¹⁷⁵ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 347.

¹⁷⁶ Gaiman, *Norse Mythology*, 14-15.

¹⁷⁷ Carroll, “Imagined Nation,” 318.

attention to them. Additionally, the surname Lyesmith hides the word lie which might be the best word to describe the whole character of Loki with.

In addition to names, when Mr. Wednesday introduces himself for the first time as Odin. Interestingly enough, Odin does not use his most known name, but instead, he calls himself by several other names. Odin says: “I am called Glad-of-War, Grim, Raider, and Third. I am One-Eyed. I am called Highest, and True-Guesser. I am Grimnir, and I am the Hooded One. I am All-Father, and I am Gondlir Wand-Bearer.”¹⁷⁸ Each of the names can reveal a different story from Norse mythology. For instance, even though Odin was the most powerful and supreme among other gods, that’s why he is also called All-Father, he still sought more wisdom and knowledge. As Edith Hamilton states, Odin “went down to the Well of Wisdom guarded by Mimir the wise, to beg for a draught from it, and when Mimir answered that he must pay for it with one of his eyes, he consented to lose the eye.”¹⁷⁹

However, Odin does not use any other name besides Mr. Wednesday. The first time Odin uses this name is at the beginning of the book where Odin says: “Let’s see. Well, seeing that today certainly is my day—why don’t you call me Wednesday? Mister Wednesday. Although given the weather, it might as well be Thursday, eh?”¹⁸⁰ The choice of such a name is pretty distinct. As Edith Hamilton mentions, Wednesday is Odin’s day, and “the Southern form of his name was Woden.”¹⁸¹ It is also possible to find out another reference hidden in this Odin’s statement. There was a storm happening at the time of Shadow’s and Odin’s first interaction and therefore Odin mentions that it might as well be Thursday as a reference to Thor, the Norse god of thunder, and his day.¹⁸²

Also, according to Benedicta Windt-Val people tend to behave based on the name they are given, or they choose themselves. He states that “the way we use our name constitutes an important part of the impression we want other people to form of ourselves.”¹⁸³ Almost all of the characters are clear examples of Windt-Val’s claim. Odin does not use any other of the names he has, he only uses Mr. Wednesday. The reason might be simple and that he uses this name as a protection. However, other names seem to always resemble their character. Loki, as it was mentioned before, is lying and hiding secrets throughout the whole story and therefore

¹⁷⁸ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 115.

¹⁷⁹ Hamilton, *Mythology timeless*, 309.

¹⁸⁰ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 33.

¹⁸¹ Hamilton, *Mythology timeless*, 309.

¹⁸² Hamilton, *Mythology timeless*, 311.

¹⁸³ Benedicta Windt-Val, “Personal Names and Identity in Literary Contexts,” *Oslo Studies in Language* 4, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.5617/osla.324>, 275.

he also hides the reference to his real name in his nickname. Mad Sweeney most of the time behaves like a junkie or a crazy person and therefore his name is yet again a perfect example of how he might portray himself.

Also, the main character Shadow is not an exception, and his name also carries a hidden meaning and message to the reader. As it was mentioned earlier, the reader does not know a lot of information about who Shadow actually is. It is true that upon reading other novels by Gaiman one might find more information about Shadow and who he really is. However, in *American gods* the reader does not receive such information.

However, Shadow goes through the story almost as if he was not alive or a human. He starts to follow Mr. Wednesday even though he does not know him. He goes from one place to another almost without showing any emotion. Additionally, Laura almost seems to be the only connection Shadow has to his past life before he went to prison. Therefore, his newly acquired name might suggest that he is traveling through the world mindlessly and sometimes even without any aim, goal, or destination to go to. In addition, according to Siobhan Carroll the nickname Shadow “paints him as a figure whose identity is intangible and relational is too neat a conflation of character and country to be ignored.”¹⁸⁴ Carroll also adds that “Shadow tells Wednesday that he always considered the town to be his wife’s home, but not his.”¹⁸⁵ He says: “I didn’t really ever have a life here. I was never in one place too long as a kid, and I didn’t get here until I was in my twenties. So this town is Laura’s.”¹⁸⁶

The name might also be seen as some kind of metaphor for the character he portrays. In other words, he usually blindly follows Mr. Wednesday wherever he goes, executes the commands given to him, and throws himself into various dangers even though it may cost him his life. He is always behind Mr. Wednesday, always sticking with him no matter the consequences, and therefore he could be described as Mr. Wednesday’s shadow.

Also, Shadow might be another metaphor for Shadow’s criminal past. The only thing reader knows is that Shadow was thrown in jail for assaulting a man who robbed him. Even though Shadow seems to regret his actions, he cannot simply get rid of his past. He was a criminal, he attacked someone. Mr. Wednesday also expects Shadow to attack other people for

¹⁸⁴ Carroll, “Imagined Nation,” 318.

¹⁸⁵ Carroll, “Imagined Nation,” 319.

¹⁸⁶ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 70.

him. Therefore, no matter what is going on, Shadow is followed by his past, just not in the exact way.

Another interpretation of the nickname can be seen as an archetype depicted by Vogler. Vogler states that “the archetype known as the Shadow represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something. Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves.”¹⁸⁷ Vogler also further states that “Shadows need not be totally evil or wicked. In fact, it's better if they are humanized by a touch of goodness, or by some admirable quality.”¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, one might argue that the difference between the archetype Shadow and the main character of the novel is that the archetype tends to usually be evil, to be the antagonist. However, as Vogler adds, “Like the other archetypes, Shadows can express positive as well as negative aspects. The Shadow in a person's psyche may be anything that has been suppressed, neglected, or forgotten.”¹⁸⁹ The nickname Shadow of the character could be, therefore, perceived as the suppressed truth that he is actually the son of Mr. Wednesday, the son of Odin. Thus, Gaiman might be portraying this nickname as the archetype by Vogler.

In addition to nicknames, Shadow's wife Laura keeps calling him Puppy. The reason behind that in the novel is that the landlord did not allow him and Laura to have a dog in their apartment. However, in the tv series, the nickname carries more meaning. It can be seen that the nickname portrays the obedience Shadow has toward his wife. He does everything Laura wants, follows her everywhere, and listens to her every command. Despite the fact that this is not portrayed directly in the novel, some parts of Shadow's behavior could be still compared to this nickname and the meaning it has in the tv show. He does follow Mr. Wednesday everywhere, he fulfills each of his wishes and commands and he even mourns for his death, just like a dog, pet would do. Therefore, as with any name in the book, Puppy could be another nickname that represents and portrays the owner's character, in this case, Shadow.¹⁹⁰

6.4. Weather and winter

One of the symbols that is reoccurring in the novel quite frequently is the winter. Even one of the first words Mr. Wednesday says to Shadow is describing the weather and the upcoming winter. The symbol of winter plays an important role in Norse mythology. The so-called

¹⁸⁷ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 84.

¹⁸⁸ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 67.

¹⁸⁹ Vogler, *The Writer's journey*, 68.

¹⁹⁰ “Laura Moon is American Gods' cautionary tale of American apathy,” Nerdlist, last modified May 22, 2017, <https://nerdist.com/article/laura-moon-is-american-gods-cautionary-tale-of-american-apathy/>

Fimbulwinter is a winter that lasts three years, three successive winters, and precedes Ragnarok, the end of the world. Just like many stories in Norse mythology, the Fimbulwinter is also described in the Poetic Edda. In the second poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, Odin asks *Vafþrúðnir*, a wise *jötunn*, who is the one who survives the Fimbulwinter. The poem states:

Much have I journeyed, much experienced, mighty ones many proved. What mortals will live, when the great "Fimbulwinter" shall from men have passed? Lif and Lifthrasir; but they will be concealed in Hoddmimir's holt. The morning dews they will have for food. From them shall men be born.¹⁹¹

The winter in American gods, however, serves a slightly different purpose. The winter, without a doubt, marks the end of the world of Gods, the final battle between the Old and New Gods. Therefore, the winter in the novel serves a similar purpose and carries a similar meaning as in Norse mythology to a certain extent. However, it also shows to the reader another aspect of the season.

Throughout the novel, most of the deities state that the upcoming winter is going to be one of the worst. Even Shadow at one point in the story nearly dies because of the cold and rough conditions he ends up in. However, the gods speak not only of winter as weather but also as a season of power. Winter in the novel symbolizes the time when the god's power is the lowest. Even Mr. Wednesday tells Shadow that during this time the New Gods will not attack them. He says: "I think they'll hold off until spring. Nothing big can happen until then. These are the dead months. A victory in these months is a dead victory."¹⁹² So what Gaiman might be portraying is that the Gods gain power not only from faith but also from other conditions. The reason behind it might be that people, at least in the past, saw winter as the part of the year which was the most challenging and life-threatening to them. Therefore, their faith even in themselves and their lives was the weakest during winter.

Also, the winter might portray the whole clash between the Gods. Shadow joins the Gods in late fall and starts to fight on their side during the winter. However, after he sees through the con and stops the war, the spring comes symbolizing victory and the arrival of better days for the Gods. Czernobog is a nice example of such a transition. Once he turns into his brother Bielebog, he says: "It has been a long winter, boy. A very long winter. But the winter is ending, now."¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Thorpe, *The Poetic Edda*, 26.

¹⁹² Gaiman, *American Gods*, 221.

¹⁹³ Gaiman, *American Gods*, 444.

To conclude, probably the biggest literary approach shown in the novel is symbolism. Gaiman uses many symbols in the novel for many different reasons. One of the reasons is to portray the aspect of imagination and faith in the novel. One of such examples might be the stick that New Gods want to use in the final battle. It can be seen as almost anything if the holder believes in it. A similar idea is the key concept of the novel itself, having the stick nicely describing the overall idea of the novel. Also, Gaiman uses the names and nicknames of some of the characters as hints for the reader about upcoming events in the novel. Some symbols can be also seen not only in the novel itself but also in mythology. Winter, for instance, is a major symbol portrayed in mythology known as Fimbulwinter. *American gods* does not portray it in a similar way, nevertheless, it still symbolizes an end to a certain extent.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to show how mythology and folklore are portrayed in the novel *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. The novel itself is a well-written piece of literature that nicely depicts how mythology, folklore, and various stories from the distant past can still be relevant and enjoyed by readers even in recent years. Neil Gaiman has taken two seemingly disparate worlds and woven them into an exciting story about faith, religion, and most importantly, the power of the imagination. The diploma thesis is, therefore, divided into various parts each of which focuses on a different aspect of the depiction made by Neil Gaiman.

The first part of the diploma thesis is dedicated to introducing the novel and also its tv show adaptation. It briefly describes what the story is about, what kind of characters are portrayed in the novel, and also what kind of novel *American gods* is. The author of the diploma thesis also tried to point out the distinction between myths and stories of folklore. Despite the fact that there are several different views and definitions of what myth and folklore are, the results seem to be in agreement to a certain degree. As of today, there is not a single suitable definition that would depict what stories of myth and folklore are. It is also rather difficult to distinguish between one and another. There are, however, certain aspects that can be pointed out. For instance, one of the concepts of myths and folklore is that myths are believed to be true by the author whereas folk tales are purely fictional.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, as many authors agreed, the distinction between such literary genres is rather thin and is, in some cases, nearly impossible to distinguish. While taking into account *American gods*, one could state that it is a novel of myths since most characters are Gods and other deities. There are, however, also characters, for instance, Mad Sweeney or Laura, who could be considered characters of a folktale and therefore making the novel a piece of folklore as well.

The following part focuses on depicting how Gaiman works with the traditional concept of certain mythological and folklore figures, namely their physical appearance. In terms of Mr. Wednesday who is portraying Odin, Gaiman decided to use a white suit. As the thesis states, colors in Norse mythology do not seem to be a matter of importance. There is, however, a god Balder, who is also known as 'The White God'.¹⁹⁵ Since it is confirmed later in the novel that Shadow is Odin's son, Balder, Gaiman might be with the suit hinting at who Shadow really is. Another possible interpretation of the color might be to simply depict the magic abilities Mr.

¹⁹⁴ Róheim, "MYTH AND FOLK-TALE," 266.

¹⁹⁵ Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 143.

Wednesday has or just to illustrate that he is the ruler not only of Norse mythology but also of the Old Gods.

The next part of the paper is focused on the concept of place in the novel. Gaiman seems to work with places and space from two different points of view. One view of looking at the places is from the perspective of myths themselves since a lot of the places, including for example Yggdrasil, were directly taken from mythology and placed in a real location in the real world. Another approach to viewing places in the novel is by looking at them for the real purpose they serve in the real world. By doing so, one can see how Gaiman connected these two worlds. He took places from myth, put them in the real world, and gave them a purpose for people. He also took real places and gave them a mythical purpose, a purpose for the Gods.

The diploma thesis continues with a chapter dedicated to dual realities. The chapter starts by stating how a dual reality can be viewed using, for instance, the theory of Doppelgänger. Despite the fact that such a theory is usually dedicated to one character and its own different sides, the author of the paper decided to apply such theory to the novel and characters as well. Gaiman, in fact, works with dual realities in a slightly different way. The characters that portray their mythic origins are depicting two sides of their characters but not the other way around. In other words, their mythic origins do not portray the characters from the novel, they are not a mirror image of one another. In addition, the main character, Shadow, can be seen from different perspectives. For example, he can be seen as a shamanic figure. Another interpretation of his character is that he is a demigod. The author of the paper also applied the framework of Hero's Journey by Campbell and Vogler and found out that such a framework is also applicable to his character as well.

The next part of the diploma thesis focuses on the topic of binary oppositions. Gaiman works, yet again, with this approach rather differently. The concept of binary oppositions in the novel could be rather described as a matter of subversions. One of the characters that nicely portrays such a topic is Shadow who seems to be always in the middle of conflict and events. Another example could be Laura who also portrays a sort of in-between state since she is neither dead nor alive.

The final chapter of the diploma thesis focuses on the topic of symbolism. Such a topic seems to play the most significant role in the novel since the number of symbols occurring in the novel is fairly extensive. Names, for instance, serve the reader as hints about who the characters really are. However, if the reader does not know much about mythology and the

gods, then the names may serve the same purpose as for a reader with mythological knowledge. Additionally, some of the symbols nicely portray the whole concept of the novel, namely the purpose of imagination, faith, and overall religion.

Resumé

Vyprávění příběhů, legend a různých pověstí je součástí lidstva již od těch nejuvdálenějších let. Jedny z takových nejstarších příběhů jsou jednoznačně příběhy z různých mytologií a folklórů. Tato diplomová práce se tedy zabývá tématem mytologie a folklóru v úspěšném díle Neil Gaiman s názvem *Američtí bohové*. Cílem této diplomové práce je přiblížit, jakým způsobem Neil Gaiman pracuje s jednotlivými mýty a folklóry, jak je vyobrazuje v samotném díle a také jaký mají vliv na čtenáře a příběh tohoto díla. Většina samotných mýtů a příběhů vychází z básnické sbírky *Poetic Edda*, která mapuje jednotlivé důležité události Severské mytologie.

Diplomová práce nejprve přibližuje příběh samotného díla a také jeho prostředí. V první kapitole této práce se čtenář seznámí se základními postavami této knihy a také vysvětlí podstatu celé příběhové zápletky. Součástí diplomové práce je také stručné představení seriálové adaptace tohoto díla. Původním záměrem autora diplomové práce bylo zahrnout literární analýzu i této adaptace. Nicméně jelikož ji autor neshledal zajímavou a také se, dle jeho názoru, nedrželá standartu samotné knihy, rozhodl se tedy samotnou adaptaci jen párkrát v diplomové práci zmínit a více ji nerozebírat. Tato kapitola se dále zabývá tématem samotného mýtu a folklóru, respektive jejich definic a možných rozdílů. Samotné definice mýtu a folklóru není zcela tak jednoduché sdělit. Některé zdroje se sice shodují v určitých aspektech definic mýtů a folklórů, ale i přesto je jednoznačná a správná definice prakticky nemožná vytvořit. Autor této diplomové práce si tedy kladl otázku, zdali je kniha spíše dílem mytologickým či folklórním. Jelikož se v knize objevuje velké množství bohů a bytostí z různých mytologií, lze očekávat, že se jedná o knihu mytologickou. Nicméně jelikož se v některých částech knihy objevují i bytosti z různých folklórů, jednoznačné označení knihy není tedy možné. Ale vzhledem k tomu, že podstatná část samotného díla vypráví příběh o bozích z různých mytologií, rozhodl se autor pohlížet na samotné dílo jako na dílo z mytologie.

Další kapitola diplomové práce je zaměřená na analýzu fyzického vyobrazení jednotlivých postav. Pro zobrazení Pana Středy, který vyobrazuje severského boha Odina, zvolil Neil Gaiman bílý oblek. Je nutné říci, že barva v severské mytologie nemá příliš velký vliv. Nicméně lze podotknout, že například bůh Baldur je také známý jakožto „Bílý Bůh“. Jelikož v příběhu později odhaleno, že hlavní postava Stín je ve skutečnosti syn Odina Balder, dá se předpokládat, že jedním z důvodů použití takového obleku je reference na samotnou postavu Baldera či náповěda pro čtenáře. Další z možných předpokladů je, že samotný oblek zobrazuje magickou moc, kterou Pan Středa má. V jednom z hrobů v dánských vykopávkách

bylo totiž u těla údajné čarodějnice nalezeno bílé olovo. Gaiman tedy může oblekem poukazovat na magickou podstatu samotné postavy. Zajímavé je také vyobrazení postavy lepríkóna Mák Sweeneyho. Toho totiž Gaiman vyobrazil sice s určitými podobnostmi se samotnou mytologickou postavou, nicméně na rozdíl od její pozitivní podstaty ho vyobrazil jakožto ztroskotaného narkomana.

Dále se práce zaobírá vyobrazením jednotlivých míst v knize. Místo a prostor lze chápat z několika možných úhlů pohledu. Nicméně se zdá, že Gaiman pracuje s místem dvěma způsoby. Místa, která jsou známá z mýtů zasadí do prostředí reálného světa a dá mu smysl pro lidské obyvatele. Ostatní místa, která lze i nalézt v reálném světě propojí se světem mýtů, a naopak jim dá účel z pohledu bohů. Jedním takovým místem je například kolotoč, který lze nalézt v Americe jakožto běžnou atrakci, ale také slouží bohům jako brána. Dalším příkladem může být například Strom Světů Yggdrasil, který v Norské mytologii propojuje všech devět mýtických světů. V knize sice nepropojuje v tomto smyslu žádné světy, nicméně díky jeho vyobrazení propojil Gaiman opět svět mýtický se světem reálným.

Další kapitolou této diplomové práce je téma duálních realit. Gaiman pracuje s tímto tématem poněkud netradičně, jelikož většina jednotlivých postav nedisponuje takzvaným ‚zrcadlovým obrazem‘ jejich mýtické předlohy, kterou vyobrazují. Například při pohledu na postavu Pana Středy lze konstatovat, že Pan Středa sice vyobrazuje Odina se všemi jeho vlastnostmi a vzpomínkami, ale nicméně samotný Odin není obrazem Pana Středy. Podobným příkladem je i samotný Stín, kterého jako postavu lze chápat z několika různých úhlů pohledu. Lze na něj například pohlížet jako na postavu šamana, poloboha či také jako na běžného Američana. Stín se navíc pokaždé ocitá uprostřed jednotlivých situací i samotného konfliktu, a i na samotném konci knihy nelze s jistotou říci, zdali se jedná o běžného smrtelníka či syna boha.

V další kapitole se diplomová práce zaobírá tématem binárních opozicí. I zde zvolil Gaiman spíše netradiční pojetí a postup tohoto tématu a v jeho díle se spíše jedná o použití takzvaných subverzí. Jednotlivé subverze lze například vidět u některých postav jako je Hinzelmann, který představuje postavu Kobolda. Samotné subverze lze také vidět u některých symbolů, které se v knize vyskytují. Například zlatá mince, kterou Stín nosí u sebe podstatnou část příběhu lze chápat a pojmut i z pohledu „života a smrti“. Samotná mince totiž přinese Stínovi život ve formě oživení jeho mrtvé ženy Laury. Stejná mince ale také přinese smrt pro postavu Máka Sweeneyho, který kvůli ní zemře.

Poslední a pravděpodobně i nejobsáhlejší kapitola této práce se zabývá tématem symbolismu. *Američtí bohové* opravdu disponují značným počtem symbolů, které toto dílo provází. Klacek, který je klíčem samotné závěrečné bitvy také krásně popisuje a vystihuje celou myšlenku samotného díla. V tomto symbolu je krásně zachycena celá podstata imaginárnosti, která je ve světě bohů velmi důležitá. Mezi další symboly patří také samotná jména, které Gaiman využívá opět několika způsoby. Například u některých jmen a přezdívek, které Gaiman postavám přidělil, lze vidět určitou předzvěst budoucích událostí. Jedním z takových příkladů je postava Lowkey Lyesmitha, která ve svém jménu skrývá řadu indicií. V prvé řadě může být zřejmé, že křestní jméno Lowkey skrývá referenci na boha, kterou tato postava představuje a to Loki. Jelikož je Loki v Severské mytologii považován za boha lsti lze očekávat, že i samotná postava se tak bude projevovat v *Amerických bozích* a je tomu skutečně tak. Nicméně pokud čtenář nezná Severskou mytologii, tak mu může celá tato indicie uniknout. Dále samotné jméno Lowkey znázorňuje anglická slůvka „low key“, což lze v překladu chápat jako „nenápadný“. To také vystihuje samotnou postavu, jelikož její zápletky je odhalena prakticky až ke konci díla. V neposlední řadě příjmení této postavy skrývá slůvko „lie“, což je v překladu „lež“. I zde si lze všimnout přímé spojitosti k samotné podstatě a chování této postavy, jelikož celé dílo lže a spřádá své plány.

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