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Neil Gaiman's American Gods: An Outsider's Critique of American Culture

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NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*: AN OUTSIDER'S CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN
CULTURE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
The Department of English

by

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Abstract

In 2001, Neil Gaiman published *American Gods*, a novel of American life and mythology. As a British author living in the United States, Gaiman has a powerful vantage point from which to critique American culture, landscape, and ideology. Rich with re-invented deities, legends, mythic creatures, and folk heroes cast in a decidedly American mold, *American Gods* examines the American character, evaluating the myths and beliefs of the culture from the vantage point of an outsider. By examining the character's allegiance to particular cultural legacies (Wednesday as the American con artist, Shadow as the cowboy), I intend to assess this outsider's understanding of what it means to be an American.

Introduction

Using outsiders that are placed within a culture is a common research tool to better interrogate better the workings of society, a method that has been extensively utilized in examining the United States. By examining the place of the outsider (African-American femininity in the United States, men in predominantly feminine professions, Arab-Americans after 9/11), researchers have been able to expand their understanding of the broader culture. Nabakov's *Lolita* is the most explicit example of an outsider living within the country creating a classic examination of the American character, but he is not the only foreign author to investigate what it means to be an American. In 2001, Neil Gaiman, British by birth, published *American Gods*, a *New York Times* bestseller. In this novel, Gaiman closely examines American character and ideology through his use of gods appropriated from other cultures recast in Americanized molds. Through these gods, the humans they encounter, and the depictions of the lands they travel, Gaiman gives us his own outsider's perspective on American identity through its own mythology.

At the center of any culture are its myths; they are the country's favorite children's stories, the most popular subjects in literature and film, and the well to which political speechwriters continually return. They are a map to a culture's values, morals, and ideological beliefs, the glue that binds a society together. Jerome O. Steffen says that, "myths are common and important elements in all cultures because they are essential to cohesiveness and unity. Not only do they explain the origins, the present state and the future of cultures, they also provide spiritual links to supernatural designs which often contain definitions of uniqueness and superiority" (25). Mythology, for all intents and purposes, is the soul of ideology. For American culture, the mythology of individuality is intimately tied to the principles of freedom and

democracy: “From the mythology of independence emerged the mythology of American individual freedom in general, particularly freedom of expression, which signifies for many an enduring tradition that is a foundation of American democracy” (Calabrese and Burke 62). It is through the interrogation of a nation’s myths that claims about national identity, character, and ideology can assert what lies at the heart of a culture.

Better scholars than I have attempted to define the necessary character of the American people by asking which traits make up America’s national identity. Can we even begin to define a national identity that encompasses a heterogeneous country such as the United States? Some scholars argue that America is too multicultural and pluralistic to attempt national definitions. Others say that making sweeping generalizations of the American character is an outmoded concept and has since been replaced with an emphasis on “social heterogeneity” (McClay 37). In the last decade, there have been calls for a new nationalism that attack concepts like multiculturalism and pluralism as damaging to American identity and patriotism. (Rorty E15). In response to this new nationalism, Henry A. Giroux demands that we view “national identity as a site of resistance and reinvention” which should “unravel how cultural differences have been constructed within the unequal distribution of resources, how such differences need to be understood around issues of power and struggle, and how national identity must be taken up in ways that challenge economic and cultural inequality” (par. 33). Giroux’s insistence upon the “unraveling” of cultural constructions, although important and ultimately key to the study of national identity, does not offer a model upon which to build such a study.

There is in fact little agreement on what articles are allowed to construct a national identity. If one were to read a dozen articles on American identity one would receive a dozen different lists of American traits. And while *some* items on those lists overlap with one another,

there is little consensus on what texts should be used to determine a national identity. Some scholars argue that the average American is more likely to recognize a quote from *The Wizard of Oz* than most passages of the Constitution or *Moby Dick* (Conant 21). While examining popular culture may seem exclusionary to minority elements, there is something to the argument that what is popular is an essential element of national identity. For example, there is something inherently American about watching *It's a Wonderful Life* at Christmas. Of course, this does not apply to every American household, when American households range from a new Israeli immigrant to a fifth-generation Idahoan potato farmer. Some consider using any pop cultural artifact to describe American character as marginalizing a portion of the country, yet in recent years it has become common for scholars to investigate trends, fads, popular media and discourse as examples of everyday life. Academic sessions on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Babylon 5*, and role-playing games have appeared on the call for papers lists along with nineteenth-Century romantic poetry and postmodern literature. For those examining literary texts who wish to understand what it means to be an American, it is as essential to study Stephen King as it is Edgar Allan Poe. Canonical or not, contemporary authors are as indicative of what it means to be American (or Jewish, or African-American, or female, or homosexual, or all of the above) as the literary giants, if not more so.

To this effect, it is necessary to examine the construction of national identity through the lens of contemporary media. In speaking of the mass media, Giroux argues that there is no other “precedent in American life in terms of their power both to disseminate information and to shape how national identity is configured, comprehended, and experienced as part of everyday life” (par. 14). Specifically, this power transcends boundaries of race and gender, giving a sense of cohesiveness to our pluralistic society. As James Conant argues, “to the extent that there is

some single object of American culture that a group of randomly selected educated Americans will have in common as a shared American cultural reference point, as likely as not, it will be a classic Hollywood movie” (22). Thomas Ricento takes this analysis a step farther, discussing how mass media and other culturally accepted historical texts construct our identity, across all boundaries, even that of class:

many persons living in the U.S. have a sense of American identity that is based on the narratives of U.S. history they read in school or saw enacted on television or in movies. The 'details' get lost in the generalizations and what has evolved to become the mainstream view of 'America' over time (e.g. as represented in school history texts, or the mainstream media), whether one likes what that represents or not, is a coherent (if reduced, not to say distorted) model, or construction, of national development and identity. (614)

It is only through the examination of popular culture and mass media (keeping in mind the vast literature on hegemonic discourse and power relations embedded within the mass media) that an understanding of American identity can be found.

Although critics differ in their views as to what the major tenets of the 'American' myth are, most will agree that it is through popular culture, in one form or another, that those tenets are created. By portraying the ideal forms of American identity, the media are, in essence, also defining the American viewers as they would like to see themselves – the hero fighting against injustice and tyranny, or better yet, the underdog fighting against overwhelming odds with only truth and confidence as his or her ally. Frequently, the mass media portrays the hero as an outlaw fighting against an unjust government, or a modern-day cowboy working to save the purity of the American homestead. Alone and against great odds, the cowboy spends his

existence striving for what is right and taking little to no reward for his good deeds. There is more to this legend though than the enjoyable story of the righteous, if small, soldier warring with a powerful, tyrannical enemy. Judith and Andrew Kleinfeld argue “ [that] the cowboy legend, properly understood, represents what is best about us – spiritedness, energy, courage, competence, a passion for freedom, and an idealistic drive to pursue justice” (43). If these traits are truly American, then it is no surprise that *Shane*, the quintessential cowboy story, and similar movies make up a quarter of the American Film Institute’s all time top 100 films.

In defense of the cowboy being the quintessential American figure, Judith and Andrew Kleinfeld construct a history of American popular culture, where

Americans fell in love with the cowboy as their romantic hero, not industrialists and financiers such as Jay Gould, Rockefeller, and J. P. Morgan, or even the great benefactor who created our national public library system, Andrew Carnegie. The cowboy helped to create what is now one of our largest industries, Hollywood. And the western continued to thrive for more than a half century, shaping our values, aspirations, and fantasies through the fifties and most of the sixties, as classic expressions of cowboy courage were told and retold by our national bards, the filmmakers. The essential story the filmmakers were telling was a narrative of courage and honor, not of greed or mindless violence. (49)

This sentiment of the Hollywood cowboy hero is not an artifact of the hyperidolized “innocent” era of the 50s and 60s; it extends right through contemporary cinema. Blockbuster heroes like Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* trilogy, Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, or Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* franchise (to name only a few) all transcend the violence and special effects to

embody “spiritedness, energy, courage, competence, a passion for freedom, and an idealistic drive to pursue justice” (Kleinfield and Kleinfield 43).

All of these are commendable characteristics, traits that paint Americans as idealistic and powerful champions of justice. While there can be no denying that energy and freedom are a part of the American experience, the authors seem enchanted (at least in this list) with the cowboy myth. While I do not question their description of the American character, I do question that any national narrative constructed by a citizen will lend itself to bias and must be closely examined. It is therefore beneficial when forming an American identity (or any type of identity) to examine also an outsider’s construction of American identity. It is to this purpose that authors such as Brian Boyd, Paul J. Giles, and Laura Kipnis have used Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita* as one of the defining texts of American identity. As a Russian native, Nabakov explored the American psyche, family, and countryside with his depiction of the British Humbert Humbert and his relationship with both the Haze family and New England. The outsider’s conception of America, while suffering from its own bias, complements our own creation of identity, allowing researchers to question national narratives by finding new approaches to the construction of American identity.

Neil Gaiman, a British national, moved to Minnesota in 1992 and published his own outsider's take on America, *American Gods*, in 2001. *American Gods* tackles American identity, invoking the cowboy myth of individualism and heroism, as well as the ingenuity and deviousness of the W. C. Field’s style con artist. Gaiman is not a household name, but *American Gods* has won critical acclaim, and was awarded the Bram Stoker, the Nebula, and the Hugo for Best Novel in 2002, as well as being a *New York Times* Bestseller. The author himself has won numerous best writer awards countries from around the world, including Spain, Brazil, France,

Finland, and Austria. Gaiman was also honored with the Wil Eisner award for writing in 1998, the most prestigious award given in America for achievement in comics.

The novel itself follows Shadow, an ex-con who is pulled into the conflict of the declining old gods and legends. These gods come into being when their worshippers first touch American soil, so Odin was created when the first followers of the Norse pantheon encountered North America. According to Gaiman, these gods possessed physical form and were given power by the strength of their worshippers' belief. But, as belief in them faded, so did their power, until they were little more than men who neither aged nor took sick -- only able to remember the days when they could alter history. Gaiman, however, does not simply cast his gods as strict incarnations of their historical mien; instead, they are Americanized reinventions. Odin, the All-Father, lord of the Norse pantheon, becomes Wednesday, an old, rascally con artist, while the Queen of Sheba is re-imagined as a whore in Las Vegas, tricking her johns into worshipping her. As these are *American* gods, the differences are then considered *American* differences, and thus make up part of what it means to be an American.

Anansi, Eostre of the Dawn, Johnny Appleseed and other figures of legend and myth are not the only creatures of power that exist within Gaiman's creation. Rising in opposition to the old guard are beings of technology, information, highways, and the media -- gods full of strength and arrogance given to them by the unmitigated belief of the contemporary world. These gods, as American as the rest, are portrayed in sharp contrast to Wednesday and those who fight for him. Where the old gods represent competence and ingenuity, the new gods embody petulance and crassness. This is not to say that Gaiman builds a complete, polar dichotomy between the two camps; there are certain shared traits like ruthlessness, selfishness, and a need for believers. Through these gods and their depictions, Gaiman constructs his outsider's understanding of

American character, both from a historical standpoint (Wednesday and the old guard) and a contemporary one (Media, the Technical Boy, etc.).

Gaiman also provides a guide for the reader in the form of the main character Shadow who navigates the moral morass of the war between the gods. In a personal interview conducted in July of 2004, Gaiman admitted to purposefully creating Shadow as a perpetual outsider, even to his own country. Shadow is the son of an embassy secretary and spends most of his childhood traveling around the world. Although an American, Shadow is as much an outsider as the author, and he is the vehicle by which the audience understands the gods and their conflict. By tracing the path of his loyalties, first with Wednesday, then as a mediator between the two factions, we can construct an understanding of this British author's critique of American identity.

Wednesday and the Legends of Old

“This is the only country in the world...that worries about what it is...the rest of them know what they are. No one ever needs to go searching for the heart of Norway. Or looks for the soul of Mozambique. They know what they are” (116). Wednesday begins a conversation with this declaration during a snowy drive from Chicago to the House on the Rock, lamenting about the American need for constant self-revision. Of course, he looks down upon those that struggle with identity issues; Wednesday knows exactly who he is and what he is about. Shadow accuses him earlier, “So what are you? A two-bit con artist?”/Wednesday nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I suppose I am. Among other things’” (46). Within *American Gods*, Gaiman shows no confusion about the identity of the old gods and legends. They may argue amongst themselves over their place in contemporary society, but the traits and characteristics they represent are clear – ingenuity, energy, courage, a nostalgic collection of what Judith and Andrew Kleinfeld label “*thumos*” (47).

Borrowing from Caroline P. Caswell’s “A Study of *Thumos* in Early Greek Life,” the Kleinfeld’s argue that *thumos* not only describes the Greeks but is also an important aspect of American culture, especially in the construction of identity: “In Homer, *thumos* gives intensity to life, as violent storms whip up the winds on the water. *Thumos* is the quality of the soul that makes Achilles eager to fight. *Thumos* has its negative side, as in Achilles’ violent anger or in the Heyderites’ burning down their firehouse, but it’s us. Cowboys have *thumos*” (47). It is this spiritedness, or *thumos*, which has engineered the American nostalgia for the cowboy myth. And it is the adherence to this myth, or identity, which gives flavor and style to the wild American town of Heyder, a sense of rugged *life* that is absent from Stewart, Canada.

While he is not a cowboy, riding on the open range and attempting to right the wrongs of an unjust world, Wednesday nevertheless possesses *thumos* and embodies the liveliness found in the small Alaskan town of Heyder. Although Wednesday denies his connection to America, “‘So you aren’t American?’ asked Shadow./’Nobody’s American,’ said Wednesday. ‘Not originally. That’s my point’” (105), he goes on to state that he is a creation of Americans – “‘*They* made me. *They* forgot me. Now I take a little back from them’” (314). He cannot leave the boundaries of the country; he is tied to the land and is unable to experience any other society or culture. He has stood witness to the passing of a millennium and adapted to fit a society that has gone through an incredible degree of change in a few decades. What was once a god of the gallows has been reduced to a “two-bit con artist” surviving off the fruit of the land – the gullible.

He remembers, though, what he once was and has the spirit, or the *thumos*, to risk his immortality on an ingenious con that will return him to his former glory. Wednesday excels at the confidence game, displaying the competence that is an aspect of the Kleinfeld’s essential American character. Whether it is bilking a young gas station attendant out of money, or tricking hundreds of immortals to die in his name, he plays out his required role with grace and style. If it were not for the unforeseen interference of the mad hawk-God Horus, Shadow would have died upon the World Tree and Wednesday’s plan would have come to fruition. He even has the audacity, although some spirited Americans might see it as courage (stones, cahones, brass balls), to hint continually at his true motives. Whether it is saying that all the best cons are two-men jobs or mentioning that he used to have a partner, Wednesday telegraphs his intentions to both Shadow and the reader.

In fact, Gaiman himself plays his own trick with Shadow's cellmate and former grifter, Low-Key Lyesmith, a name that should be painfully obvious but is often overlooked by the reader. He places Loki openly in the enemy camp, daring the reader to pierce through the lies and deception he has woven around Wednesday's con. As for Loki himself, he is the most enigmatic of the gods who have a major role within the text; we rarely see him outside of his roles as the merciless Mr. World or the world-wise Low-Key. As a god of chaos, deceit, and trickery, Loki is the very soul of destructive *thumos*, the violence of Achilles, the dark aspect of American spiritedness. Loki is a fiery mirror to Wednesday's cold competence; he is as skilled at the con game as his blood brother Odin, able to portray a calm, jailhouse scholar of Herodotus, when underneath his only desire is for turmoil and pandemonium.

The spirit of *thumos*, both bright and vicious, is not the only ideology informing Gaiman's depictions of these characters. When casting them, Gaiman seems to draw upon culturally historic representations of these gods and then shapes them into an American mold. Odin, the All-Father, was depicted in Icelandic sagas as a traitorous god, one that would kill his soldiers on a whim. The deceitful Loki was responsible for tricking the blind god Hod into killing Balder, one of Odin's sons, just one of the many crimes he committed among the Aesir, the Norse gods. It is no surprise, then, that the blood brothers would be willing to destroy any number of their fellow immortals to restore their former glory, as they possess the destructive spirit and competence to accomplish this task. This bloodthirsty viciousness, however, is not an assault by the author on the destructiveness of Americans. The gods may be *American* gods, but they are still infused by the echoes of their former incarnations. Odin and Loki are callous and cruel, not due to their American character, but as a result of their initial depictions by their original worshippers.

Likewise, it is not Czernobog's relish of slaughter that should be examined as an aspect of the American character. It is his fervor for justice after the murder of Wednesday and his last hour reprieve of Shadow at the end of the novel that resonate with the cowboy myth: heroic actions which are dramatic reversals for the evil Slavic god of chaos and darkness. When Shadow is imprisoned after Hinzemann's trickery, it is Mr. Nancy and Czernobog who save him from jail with a clever con of their own. It is the unlikely duo of Horus and Easter (Eostre of the Dawn) who rescue Shadow from death upon the World Tree. Angered at the death of Wednesday, Alviss son of Vindalf, the King of the Dwarves, changes his mind about Wednesday's call for action and decides to lead his kingdom to war. Where Wednesday and Loki possess enough chest or spirit for all the gods, it is outside this duo that Gaiman allies the old guard with justice and freedom, the other aspects of the cowboy myth.

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. Out of a desire to experience those times and places, or the American romanticization of them, an entire industry has developed – the heritage industry. In *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, Robert Hewison argues that the heritage industry answers a cultural need for stability in a time of ever-changing cultural values, out of a desire for what are commonly considered simpler times. In the 1950s, Michael DeCerteau wrote *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, which depicts the road trip vacation as a powerful tool of the heritage industry, a desire to take a family station wagon and reconnect to the remoteness of the past. 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:

Each town he passed through had an extra sign up beside the sign telling him that he was now entering Our Town (pop. 720). The extra sign announced that the town's under-14s team was the third runner-up in the interstate basketball tournament, or that the town was the home of the Illinois girls' under-16s wrestling semifinalist. (161-162)

While Shadow does visit Chicago and San Francisco, he spends a majority of his time in small midwestern towns. Places like Cairo (Kay-ro), Illinois, and Eagle Point, Indiana, where "Main Street...looked old-fashioned in the best sense of the word – as if, for a hundred years, people had been caring for that street and they had not been in a hurry to lose anything they liked" (252). 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.

Nowhere else in *American Gods* is this nostalgia more prevalent, or more detailed, than Lakeside, Wisconsin. It is Gaiman's equivalent to Andy Griffith's Mayberry; like the picturesque perfect town of Opie and Barney Fife, it is just as mythical. In northern Wisconsin, Lakeside is an island of prosperity and simple-hearted goodness within an area where poverty is "insidious. Logging's dead. Mining's dead. Tourists don't drive farther north than the Dells" (277). This prosperity comes at a dear cost, the life of a single child every year, sacrificed by the town's immortal Hinzemann to ensure the city's welfare. For this price, the town remains pristine and admirable: "'Heck, that's a *good* town,' said the bus driver. 'I think sometimes that if I were just going to pack it all in, I'd move to Lakeside. Prettiest town I've ever seen'" (248). It seems Shadow cannot turn around without being reminded that Lakeside is a good town, even if the reminders are hollow and cheerless, the mantra of the people who are trying to sell

themselves: “There was something empty at the bottom of all her words. It was as if he were listening to a salesman...who believed in his product...but still wanted to make sure you went home with...the full set of encyclopedias” (319). Despite the Twin Peaks-like horror that rests below the surface of the town, Lakeside is still painted as idyllic and romantic, recalling the nostalgia inherent in the heritage industry. In fact, the 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.

While Gaiman explores urban landscapes such as Chicago and Las Vegas, it is to the “boring” cities like Lakeside where he continually returns. Gaiman’s America is a prosaic visual panorama -- it is the frozen purity of Lakeside, Wisconsin, or the Virginia meadow where the World Tree rests. This is not the hard bitten streets of New York City or the glamour of Hollywood; the world of Wednesday and the old guard is the “backbone” of the country, the breadbasket, the Bible belt, the Heartland – all titles which call up images of stodgy, hardworking, yet unimaginative farmers. When Shadow and Wednesday recruit Czernobog to their side, it is not the gritty streets of a wind blown Chicago that are center stage, but the run down apartment where the retired Czernobog lives with the Zorya sisters. Gaiman invokes a magical, fantastic reality that can coexist with our own American conception of the mundane Midwest. He takes our familiar romanticized landscapes and imbues them with mythical symbols and mystical power. Through these gods and their surroundings, Gaiman constructs an idealized past of American identity – where spirited heroes can achieve what is *right* and return to their perfect homesteads.

The New Regime

In his article “Mixed Nature of American Patriotism,” Wilfred McClay leads with a well-known quote by the child psychologist Erik Erikson: “Whatever one may come to consider a truly American trait can be shown to have its equally characteristic opposite” (37). McClay then expands this basic point, by arguing that :

The tensions between individualism and conformity, internationalism and isolationism, open-mindedness and closed-mindedness, cosmopolitanism and localism, generosity and xenophobia, secularity and religiosity, Cartesian intellectuality and populist anti-intellectualism, idealism and materialism—to name but a few such examples—all such tensions have been, and continue to be, woven into the very texture of American life (37).

To complicate the matter even further, theorists like Philip Gleason, Scott Magelssen, and Tim Edensor have concluded that “what it means to be an American” is tenuous and unstable, changing and mutating over time. Melanie E. L. Bush found, in conversation with elementary school students, that the

students were unsure about whether the concepts that they subscribe to are faulty. They believe in the ideals upon which the U.S. was founded, but as quickly as they defend these values, they also recognize the contradictions. In this way, students generally seemed disconcerted by discussion and uncertain, in the end, about what they really believe. (217)

According to these theorists, not only are the traits that make up the American character ever-changing, they are vague, tenuous, and difficult to discuss – not to mention America’s inherent duality, the ability to incorporate polarized concepts into its self identity.

In Gaiman's construction of American identity, he encapsulates this dichotomy in the two warring factions – the old guard and the new. Although the new gods of technology and media do not share the same space at center stage in the novel, their presence is still strongly felt throughout the work. Although the old gods and legends come across as competent, heroic, and ingenious, the new are not painted as kindly. Technical boy, Media, and the representatives of the agency are shallow, crass, rude, and foolish. Where it takes the actual death of Wednesday to motivate the deities of the past into action, Loki seems to have no trouble infiltrating the new gods as their leader and ordering them to lead the assault against the gods of old. This is not to say that the new gods are completely reviled; there are moments where they are pitied as children (Technical boy using Shadow as a protective father figure in the Center) or display loyalty (Mr. Town's dedication to his fellow members of the Agency). Even their desire to destroy the old guard, which motivates most of the novel's action, is seen to come from Loki and Wednesday, not out of any personal malice.

Gaiman's portrayal, however, seems to concentrate more on their negative qualities rather than their positives. From his first scene, Technical boy seems arrogant, crude, and yet awkward and unsure of his own power: "I said don't fuck with me. That was fucking with me. Keep your answers short and to the point or I'll fucking kill you. Or maybe I won't kill you. Maybe I'll have the children break every bone in your fucking body. There are two hundred and six of them. So don't fuck with me" (52). In child-like glee of his newfound strength, he railroads over any opposition before him, while simultaneously needing to remind others of that strength. After the technical boy crawls into Shadow's room, insulting him and every place farther than 50 miles from a McDonald's, he returns to his room to slam himself into his wall repeatedly, crying out "It's just meat" (442). He is completely incapable of caring for himself,

outside of his limited demesne. God or no god, he crawls to the nearest father figure like a fledgling looking for comfort. Wednesday, Mr. Nancy, and the rest have discovered ways to thrive after their reign has ended, a feat unlikely for the technical boy. This is hardly the sensuality of Bast or the likeable crudeness of Mr. Nancy; the old African spider deity comes across more like a rascally old uncle rather than a foul-mouthed, rude, and pretentious child. When murdering the Queen of Sheba, The technical boy says, “[t]ell me, Bilquis, how much just to suck my cock?”...And then he sings, in a voice not made for singing, ‘*You are an immaterial girl living in a material world.*’ There is something rehearsed about his words, as if he’s practiced this exchange in front of a mirror” (376). He is incompetent, melodramatic, laughable, and unsophisticated – a child playing at a grown-up game.

The embodiment of Media comes across just as crude as her young, internet-savvy cohort. Upon first encountering Shadow, she falls back on flashing him while wearing the image of Lucille Ball, playing to his base desires. When they meet face-to-face, at the Center, she attempts to seduce him first with power, then with fear of infamy. “I offered you the world,’ she said. ‘When you’re dying in a gutter, you *remember* that’” (440). While certainly more sophisticated than the technical boy, Media is soulless and empty, caring for little outside of her own temporal power. None of the new regime is seen to possess the breadth and depth of emotions found in Whiskey Jack or the Zorya sisters.

This absence of sensitivity, or even basic humanity, is underscored by Mr. Town, the only new god whose thoughts the reader is allowed to see. The representative of the Agency is just as concerned with sleeping with Mr. Wood’s widow as he is in avenging his death – “He badly wants to fuck Mrs. Wood, but knows it’s still too soon after Woody’s death to make a move. So he is taking her out for dinner every couple of weeks, an investment in the future,

she's just grateful for the attention" (346). Mr. Town is the embodiment of lost individuality, just another noun-name in the Agency. While he possesses motivation, his character traits can be reduced to his hatred of Shadow, his desire for women, and his need for simplicity. He lacks spirit, even the destructive elements of *thumos* seen in Loki and Wednesday. When confronted with his most hated enemy lying naked before him, he cannot overcome the need to obey and leaves Shadow mostly unharmed. He rejects the very thing Shadow strives to obtain, a sense of being alive, a desire to live by one's own terms, instead of unquestioning obedience to another. Even his attraction to women is more of a rote desire for completion, or simply the stereotypical need to satiate his lust, rather than any sense of true individuality.

Not just within Mr. Town, but also in all of the major new gods, there is a preoccupation with the physical, a focus on lust and flesh. While Wednesday requires the blood of virgins and Mr. Nancy brags about his sexual prowess, their sexuality is more earthy and ritualized than the crude fascination with body imagery and blatant sexual ability found in the technical boy and the rest. It is the difference between a mature acknowledgement of sexuality and teenage awkward bluntness. This should be no surprise, however; the new gods are young, still untried and untested – and not used to having a real physical form, except for the intangibles, who are only mentioned in the novel. "It's just meat," cries the technical boy, but it is this acknowledgement that underscores their youth, their lack of wisdom, and their fear. When Shadow mentions running into the technical boy, Wednesday says, "'Little snot...I know who he is.' He sat down heavily, on the room's only chair. 'They don't' have a clue,' he said. 'They don't have a fucking clue'" (56). And like clueless children, they are easily duped into starting a war in which they have no real desire to fight.

Had the war occurred, it would not have been on familiar ground for the new gods. The location would have been Rock City at Lookout Mountain, yet another of the “crappy roadside attractions” that Media disparages. Like the author of this paper, many readers may feel the urge to align the cities with the new gods in opposition to small towns of the Midwest, but there is no textual evidence to support this claim. He only briefly describes any cityscapes and it is not new gods that are encountered in these sections. In New York City, the author tells a small vignette (one of the many immigration narratives) of a native of Oman encountering a djinn who steals all of his belongings. In San Francisco, Shadow and Wednesday recruit Eostre of the Dawn outside of Haight Street and discuss paganism and the intertwining of the Easter holiday with Eostre’s long-forgotten sacrifices and rituals. Likewise, New Orleans is the home of voodoo and Los Angeles is where Bilquis lives and dies. In fact, one never sees the new gods in their home; as far as *American Gods* is concerned, they have no connection to the land. Erik Kaufmann analyzes the historical ties that Americans have for physical space and argues that “[Americans are] infused with the power of nature, which in turn defines the entire nation” (676). To be an American is to be, in some way, tied to the earth, to physical place. Gaiman’s new gods have no sense of place and feel disconnected from the Midwestern landscape in which Gaiman centers his novel.

This is not to say that the new gods are not American, they are simply young and brash; they have not learned the lessons of wisdom that is found in the old guard. After all, the buffalo-headed man, the soul of the land itself and a guide for our narrator Shadow, claims all of the gods: “They never understood that *they* were here – and the people who worshiped them were here – because it suits us that they are here” (549). The new gods are a part of the land itself, a creation of it, even if they are not aware of their connection. Even Wednesday acknowledges the

connection they have to humanity, through the cultural cohesion of the mass media and fast food – both firmly within the purview of the new gods:

“It’s almost hard to believe that this is in the same country as Lakeside,” he said...Wednesday glared at him. Then he said, “It’s not. San Francisco isn’t in the same country as Lakeside anymore than New Orleans is in the same country as New York or Miami is in the same country as Minneapolis...They may share certain cultural signifiers – money, a federal government, entertainment – it’s the same *land*, obviously – but the only things that give it the illusion of being one country is the greenback, *The Tonight Show*, and McDonald’s.” (306)

Gaiman is not denying that the new gods are American; technology and the media have as much of a place in American cultural identity as cowboys and heroics. Instead of not being American, Gaiman questions the dangers of contemporary society forgetting their historical roots, of lust, greed, and envy supplanting decency, kindness, and forgiveness.

Shadow the Outsider

“I don’t get you, Shadow,” said Wilson, as they walked.

“What’s not to get, sir?”

”You. You’re too fucking quiet. Too polite. You wait like the old guys, but you’re what? Twenty-five? Twenty-eight?”

“Thirty-two, sir.”

“And what are you? A spic? A gypsy?”

“Not that I know of, sir. Maybe.”

“Maybe you got nigger blood in you. You got nigger blood in you, Shadow?”

“Could be, sir.”...

“Yeah? Well, all I know is that you fucking spook me.” (12)

Enigmatic, unknown, always on the outside, Shadow is Gaiman’s mysterious protagonist and mouthpiece for his critique of American society. Like the author himself, Shadow is an outsider to American society – a newcomer to picturesque Lakeside, an unknown relative to the gods, a tourist to the towns and cities through which Wednesday drags him. His background is sketchy and must be gleaned by the reader throughout the novel. Even his true name is unknown and ultimately given (still unknown) to Bast in order to learn the identity of his father during his trial on the World Tree. We learn through his conversation with Easter that his mother was a secretary for various U.S. embassies in Europe and that at some point he returned to some unknown place in the United States. Eventually, he ended up in Eagle Point, Indiana, where he finally landed in jail. Shadow is an outline of an American, the mask of the outsider that the reader may wear to navigate the pages of the story.

To explain Shadow's background further, Neil Gaiman said in an online journal that: "Shadow was a [child of the Foreign Service] because I wanted him to be American, but for America to be alien enough to him that he'd notice things that people who were born and bred in America tend to take for granted. So that seemed like a good way to keep him rootless." Gaiman desired that his protagonist be able to experience America as an outsider, but still possess the authority of critique given to a member of the American culture. Even though we know little of Shadow, the audience is intended to respect and like him. He is strong, noble and courageous, and he possesses a powerful need for justice. With nothing to gain but the satisfaction of doing right, Shadow continually behaves justly and fairly. When Wednesday cons a snide waitress out of ten dollars in San Francisco, Shadow quickly gives it back to her, pretending she dropped it, not letting her realize he was doing something out of the kindness of his heart. Even after Wednesday reveals to Shadow (and readers) all of her petty sins and questionable choices, Shadow still says, "you stiffed that girl for ten bucks, I slipped her ten bucks...it was the right thing to do" (314). He stops Hinzemann's yearly murders, he prevents Chad Mulligan's death, and he stands between two armies of gods to prevent a war all because it is the right thing to do. Even his reasons for going to jail are more akin to justice than crime, assaulting the bank robbers who did not pay him for driving them and then only taking his share. And like the cowboy Shane, he leaves the story with no reward other than the knowledge that he "done right." There can be no doubt that Shadow is heroic and brave, a warrior for justice, and (by the end of the novel) a champion of *thumos* – that essential American trait.

As the outsider American, it is through Shadow's thoughts and conflicts that the author depicts and creates his vision of America and American character. It is Shadow to whom the buffalo-headed man continually appears as an enigmatic guide; the soul of the land itself

supports the son of Odin. Throughout most of the novel, Shadow is firmly in Wednesday's camp as an enemy to modern discourse and technology -- "Anything electronic seemed fundamentally magical to Shadow, and liable to evaporate at any moment" (16). During the tension before the battle on Rock City, the audience is given a brief glimpse of the god of psychotherapy, firmly in the camp of the new gods: "She nodded, and leaned closer to it. 'So how does that make you *feel*?' she asked, in a sympathetic voice" (495). Shadow, however, would rather bottle up his emotions than talk them out, to release the pain (57). He refuses the numerous offers to switch camps or betray the man who has hired him. After refusing Media's first offer, Shadow reasons that

the reason he liked Wednesday and Mr. Nancy and the rest of them better than their opposition was pretty straightforward: they might be dirty, and cheap, and their food might taste like shit, but at least they didn't speak in clichés./And he guessed he would take a roadside attraction, no matter how cheap, how crooked, or how sad, over a shopping mall, any day. (176-177)

And this alliance lasts until his father betrays him, sets him up to die upon the World Tree in order to give Wednesday enough power to dedicate the blood sacrifice of gods in his name. While hanging upon the tree, Shadow embarks on a journey of trials and truths, sacrificing his name in order to learn about his parentage. His soul is weighed and his life judged as neither overly good nor evil; he is sent to oblivion as his just reward, at least, until Horus and Easter revive him, giving him life in order to stop the death of the immortals. After having gained the wisdom of death, Shadow comes to a final understanding of the nature of the gods and their place within the world.

People believe, thought Shadow. It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurates. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine, and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen. (536)

During this moment, Shadow loses all loyalty to Wednesday, grouping all of the gods together, old and new, as creatures dependent upon belief. When looking upon all of the gods gathered on the battlefield, "Shadow felt sorry for them all...They were afraid that unless they kept pace with a changing world, unless they remade and redrew and rebuilt the world in their imagine, their time would already be over." (537) He is freed of the con games and the half-truths that Wednesday constructed to keep him in the dark and Shadow has the position to not only judge the gods, all the gods, but fully understand them and their purpose.

Standing outside of his former alliance, Shadow is able to see these gods for what they are -- creatures dependent upon humanity. He no longer stands on one side or the other. He is neither simply *thumos* nor only arrogant, fearful youth.

"This is a bad land for gods...You've probably all learned that, in your own way. The old gods are ignored. The new gods are as quickly taken up as they are abandoned, cast aside for the next big thing. Either you've been forgotten, or you're scared you're going to be rendered obsolete, or maybe you're just getting tired of existing on the whim of people...You know...I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do." (538-539)

Finally, Shadow stands as the champion of humanity, the believers over whom gods war. Once Shadow ends the war a new spring arises throughout the country. Samantha Black Crow speaks of dreams of renewal that are sweeping the country. Czernobog and the Zorya sisters prepare and celebrate the return of Bielebog and spring. “It has been a long winter,” both Sam and Czernobog claim, a winter that has been lifted by Shadow’s heroics.

Gaiman infuses Shadow with the more positive aspects of *thumos*, the justice-driven cowboy hero, which allows his American audience to better assume Shadow’s tenuous identity, to better see America through his outsider’s perspective. It is this perspective that serves as Gaiman’s critique upon contemporary America and is the baseline for his nostalgic desires for the historical, mythical America represented by the old gods. While it is true that Shadow eventually rejects Wednesday, it is only because Wednesday betrayed Shadow’s ideals, the ideals of the cowboy myth. After Shadow ends the war, he honors his deal with Czernobog, enjoys the time he spends with the outdated but polite Zorya sisters, and spends an evening getting drunk with Mr. Nancy. He 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. Instead of this nostalgic construction of America, Shadow’s outsider gaze rejects the new regime of gods and the contemporary American identity which they represent.

Through the use of Shadow’s perspective and his descriptive mythology, Gaiman alienates his reader from their contemporary surroundings. Cell phones, psychotherapy, capitalism, and the mass media all turn from modern necessities into soulless creations, foolishly used and ultimately damaging. By evoking a fantastic story, with a heroic main character, the readers are transported out of their modern world, placed into the role of the outsider – but an

outsider with a decided agenda. This agenda includes a harsh critique of contemporary American society, where “opiates have become the religion of the masses,” (221) and where Media describes herself as “the idiot box. I’m the TV. I’m the all-seeing eye and the world of the cathode ray. I’m the boob tube. I’m the little shrine the family gathers to adore...The TV’s the altar. I’m what people are sacrificing to...their time, mostly...sometimes each other” (175). In a depiction of the roadscapes along middle-America, it is the “peep shows” and the “wreckage of thousands of yellow bulldozers, tractors, and Caterpillars” which Shadow drives past and examines dismissively (177). Shadow stands in opposition to the modern times, incapable of understanding technology, modern psychology, or strip malls. He still, however, retains the traits of the essential American cowboy and as the hero of the novel maintains the support of the reader. Even die-hard technophiles could find themselves swept away into this mythical creation of America, where the technical boy is a comical villain and technology the enemy.

Shadow is the focus for the dichotomy for the two camps and it is his empathy with the old gods that serves as Gaiman’s critique of American society. This critique is strengthened by Shadow’s outsider position, the distance he gives the reader from their own contemporary surroundings. As an outsider imbued with the cherished traits of the American mythical hero, Shadow’s persona does not chafe the modern reader, but it does allow for the separation necessary for Gaiman’s nostalgic description of what it means to be an American.

Conclusion

Through these gods, Gaiman has polarized American identity into two time periods, the romanticized past of Wednesday, Czernobog, Mr. Nancy and the rest, and the modern age of the technical boy and the intangibles. While spiritedness can be found in contemporary American society, Gaiman has aligned it only with characters of the past. Wednesday would seem more at home in the 1930s, maybe an extra in the movie "The Sting," while dapper Mr. Nancy could give Sammie Davis, Jr. a run for his money. Although the gods are infinitely adaptable, Wednesday is familiar enough with debit cards and ATM machines to fake stupidity in order to pull a fast con, Gaiman purposefully describes them with an old-fashioned feel. They are representatives of the past, in opposition to the gods of cars and airplanes, stocks and the internet.

The gods of modernity are puffed up with their own power and pride, while terrified of what the future holds for them. If the America of the past was energetic, spirited, courageous, concerned with justice and freedom, the American of the present is arrogant, petulant, crass, and concerned with money, fame, and flesh. Is this a romanticization of the past and its values? Yes. Is it unjustified? No, Gaiman is fully aware of America's own habit of romanticizing the past, changing it to fit its own ideals and desires. This can be witnessed in the nostalgic reminiscences of the heritage industry. In "Remapping American-ness: Heritage Production and the Staging of the Native American and the African American as Other in 'Historyland'," Scott Magelssen interrogates depictions of non-white Americans in a history-centered theme park that depicts Native and African Americans as either satisfied servants or barbaric savages. According to Magelssen, "In this sense, the past becomes the 'other', and historic re-enactments become the media for the presentation of the past" (166). Americans continually re-invent the past, in order to see their history in the best light possible.

Gaiman plays upon this re-invention by romanticizing the aspects of *thumos* present within Wednesday and his cohorts. As Wednesday says, “Like the newspapers used to say, if the truth isn’t big enough, you print the legend. This country needs its legends” (360). Gaiman also, however, complicates this production of legendary history with Whiskey Jack, a Native American culture hero who serves as the mouthpiece for the Native people. Whiskey Jack, or Wisakedjak, is openly disdainful of the harm caused to his people by the promises of the American government: “You people came to America, you take our sugar cane, potatoes, and corn, then you sell us potato chips and caramel popcorn, and we’re the ones who get sick” (511). Gaiman is fully aware of the presented past versus the actual past and any romanticization he indulges in is an intentional one. For similar purposes, the various immigration narratives are included to further encapsulate the American experience. No story attempting to detail our culture could forget the cycles of immigration and appropriation that have occurred since the beginning of our national narrative.

As Shadow comes to a broader understanding of the nature of gods and his duplicity in Wednesday’s plan, he also learns not to revile the new gods and the present state of American culture as a whole. Through the machinations of Loki and Wednesday, the new gods are encouraged to play these childish, aggressive roles, putting them into opposition with the spirit of *thumos*. They commit murder, violate all boundaries of justice and freedom, and are painted as villains for the reader. All of this, however, is a smoke screen created by the clever ploy of the blood brothers, and as Shadow stands facing both sides, all gods are equal in his eyes. They are all equally foolish and pitiful – but equal, nonetheless. Likewise, Gaiman is not reviling contemporary American culture as arrogant, foolish, and crude, although he does not shrink from pointing out that these traits are present. He is, however, reminding us of our roots, romanticized

or not. He is calling for Americans to remember their spiritedness, their courage, and their love of justice. There is a reason that the reader feels a connection with the old gods and a reason that the reader views the new gods as the enemy. The old gods are what Americans, we, still wish to be, and the new are what we are afraid of becoming – small-minded children, puffed up with our own importance, scrambling for belief in ourselves.

In the beginning of the novel, Gaiman describes Shadow as “not superstitious. He did not believe in anything he could not see” (6). This belief is shattered, of course, through his interaction with his father and the world of backstage. The land itself urges belief, requires it. From his first encounter with the buffalo headed man, Shadow is told to “Believe, said the rumbling voice. “If you are to survive, you must believe...*Everything*” (18). The central aspect that all of the gods share is their need for belief, the overwhelming need for attention and affirmation from the American people. A part of Gaiman’s critique of America is this ever-revolving cycle of belief – where the American culture is ever-watchful for the next thing, creature, or belief to elevate to godhood. In a personal interview, Gaiman argued that one of the biggest differences between Europeans and Americans is that Europeans, while willing to embrace change, are fearful and wary of it as well. Americans on the other hand dive headlong into change and are willing to toss aside icons that were considered eternal. Spiritedness, energy, competence, justice – these are concepts that should be eternal in the American experience, traits that Gaiman underscores as necessary to our self identity. The land, the country, and the author of *American Gods* desire that we believe in these traits and our ability to retain them.

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Vita

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