

Aalborg Universitet

American Gods:
An Examination of the American Identity

Lisa Kjærsgaard Nielsen

Master's thesis

Mia Rendix

3 June 2019

Abstract

It has long been known that America is essentially a melting pot of cultures. A country comprised of immigrants, it is a place with roots all over the world and an incredibly diverse culture. Additionally, it is a country famous for its American Dream, the belief that everyone - no matter who they are and where their social standing has left them - has the exact same opportunity to improve upon their life if only they are willing to put in the effort.

These are the things I am exploring and examining in this master's thesis. I am discussing the way many different cultures and mythologies has morphed and adapted and assimilated into the American culture. And I am discussing how the American Dream not only came to be, but how it is about more than financial success and how it, at its root, is also about the opportunity for second chances and for far more personal improvements and successes.

I am discussing all of this through the lens of Neil Gaiman's novel, *American Gods*, which was originally published back in 2001. It is a novel written with a lot of topics and questions in mind, according to Gaiman himself, focusing on things like the immigrant's experience of America, as well as what happened to the gods and myths - and, by extension, the cultures, values, and beliefs - of the people who have come to America for far longer than the United States of America has been an independent country.

In this thesis, I am discussing how the gods serve as representations of values and of cultures, and how they are perfect examples of how culture emerges and thrives where we as humans put in the effort to cultivate it. I am also arguing that the old gods may seem old fashioned and like they represent the ancient and the forgotten, but they have a much easier time adapting to the changing world because humans will always need and desire the same kinds of things, whereas technology is inevitably going to be left in the dust.

I also make the claim that Shadow's journey is, in a way, an example of the American Dream. He does not have major financial success, and he is only just starting to figure himself out at the end of the novel. But, like the Puritans who first set sail to America where they hoped for a fresh start, a clean slate can be a great achievement on its own. Something that is arguably very in line with the idea of the American Dream, where everyone gets an equal shot at personal success and improvement upon one's life - at least in theory, even if it does not necessarily unfold like that in real life.

Finally, I discuss how America is a country full of contradictions and diversity. It is a place so vast and wide that it allows many different kinds of people to find a place for themselves where they can be happy. America, according to Gaiman, seems perfectly happy not to be tamed and, like the American Dream suggests, is a place where individuality certainly thrives.

Table of contents

Abstract	1
1. Introduction	4
2. Method and reflection	5
3. Theory	6
3.1 Why we need religion and mythology	7
3.2 Environment, symbols, and cultural values – what shapes a mythology?	11
3.2.1 Examples from Norse mythology	14
3.2.2 Examples from classical mythology	15
3.2.3 Examples from Celtic mythology	16
3.2.4 Examples from North American mythology	18
3.2.5 Examples from Mesoamerican and South American mythology	19
3.2.6 Examples from Egyptian and Mesopotamian mythology	20
3.3 Coming to America: The Puritans	20
3.4 The American Dream	23
4. Analysis	25
4.1 The use of myths in <i>American Gods</i>	26
4.2 A place for dreams and second chances	36
4.3 The American identity	44
4.3.1 Race and ethnicity	44
4.3.2 Geography	45
4.3.3 A bad land for gods	47
4.3.4 Gaiman's definition	49
5. Conclusion	52
Works cited	53

American Gods:

An Examination of the American Identity

1. Introduction

The United States of America is comparatively not what anyone would consider a particularly old country. Full of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, it is famously a big melting pot of cultures. Many traditions, beliefs, and values were brought to this country since before the signing of the Declaration of Independence solidified the existence of the US. Part of this country's whole image is that it is a place of diversity - people with diverse roots, from diverse places, with diverse identities. And that is inevitably going to be a factor if one decides to attempt to boil down the American identity in such a way that it can be easily and concisely defined.

This means that there is plenty of room to ask questions about what it then means to be American, and what kind of place America is. One might wish to consider what has happened to the many cultures that have been brought to this country, with immigrants coming to America in search of a better life for centuries. One could be tempted to wonder about how all these cultures have adapted themselves accordingly - not just in order to fit into our current world with its modern values, but also to fit in with each other.

And, if one were to be wondering about the definition of the American identity anyway, the concept of the American Dream is very likely to invite itself into your thoughts while you are at it. Because while thinking about what kind of place America is, one would be hard pressed to ignore the infamous American Dream, the widely known myth of opportunity for success for all. Where does this myth come from, one might wonder, what does it really mean, and why is it considered so American.

Neil Gaiman once asked himself questions like these (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 654-655), wondering about the American identity - thinking especially about the way this country was formed by immigrants, and what happened to the cultures and beliefs they brought with them once they all had to assimilate and adapt into this new country. The result of these questions turned out to be his 2001 novel, *American Gods*. And in reading this, one can attempt to piece together the American identity.

That is exactly what I intend to do in this thesis, which you are about to read. I will delve into this novel and examine what it has to say about America as a melting pot of cultures, and how these cultures - and the by-product of those cultures - have adapted. I intend to ask if this novel has anything to say about the American Dream - and if so, what would that be and how would this novel define the concept. And I will do my best to figure out what constitutes the American identity, according to Neil Gaiman. In short: what kind of commentary does *American Gods* make about the American identity?

2. Method and reflection

In this thesis, I intend to employ a historical-cultural approach with a dose of literary analysis mixed in. In the first part of the analysis, I intend to take a closer look at everything the gods - both old and new - of *American Gods* represent, and what their presence as characters and symbols have to say about the culture and identity of America. In doing so, I must first establish in the theory section what sort of point and purpose religion and mythology serves, and what they have to say about the people, culture, and society to whom they belong.

Once I have shed a light on that, I will be using my findings to then discover what the many gods and myths that are represented in the story can tell us about the American identity. I will be taking a closer look at the way they represent different cultures, and how they have adapted to the lifestyle and culture of modern America. What does the war between the gods say about the country's identity and culture at the time the novel was published? What kind of commentary does this war make about old values versus new?

The second part of my analysis will be focused more on the American Dream - arguably one of the biggest parts of the reputation, culture, and identity of the United States. To illuminate this topic, I will be bringing up some American history and philosophy to get to the root of the concept of the American Dream, its conception, how it has been embedded so unshakably into the American culture, as well as what it means to really live up to and achieve this ideal.

In the analysis, I will then be taking a closer look at Shadow as a character. Once I know where the American Dream really came from and what it is truly all about, I will be better equipped to properly examine Shadow's journey in this light and thus I will be better equipped to determine how his story lines up with the idea of the American Dream - as well as how it does not.

A purely literary analysis could of course have been an option. But I do not believe that would do this novel and the purpose of this thesis justice - at least not in terms of the questions I am posing. Since the matter of mythology and the American identity are such big parts of the novel, as well as the main focus of the answers I am seeking, taking the history and culture of America into account, right alongside some theory about the uses and points of myths and religion, seems to me to be absolutely imperative.

Additionally, I chose to work with the author's preferred text, which was not released until years after the initial publication of the novel. According to Gaiman himself in the introduction to this novel (*American Gods*, i-iii), he was not entirely happy with the version that was originally published. So when his books were being reissued, he decided that he would replace the text that had originally been published with his preferred version - a version which is 12,000 words longer, give or take. Since that is the version the author himself prefers and a 12,000 word difference is not completely insignificant, I personally believe that it was in my best interest to use that version. It is the edition that the author himself prefers, and thus it must inevitably be the version that is the closest representation of the author's intentions and of what he wanted to say when he wrote this story. On top of that, this particular version contains some bonus material relating to the novel, including the novella "The Monarch of the Glen", which will be relevant to my analysis of the novel.

That being said, I do not believe the reader of this should despair if they are only familiar with the originally published version of the text. Since the story is still more or less the same, I do believe it is possible to make do with that version in mind, and they will be unlikely to have any trouble understanding my arguments and analysis on the basis of this decision.

Finally, I intend to write a third section of the analysis, in which I bring up anything I find in the novel that could be relevant to my research question, but which does not strictly relate to Shadow's journey through the novel, or to the gods and their war. It will act as a collection of miscellaneous points and arguments to strengthen the overall conclusions that will be drawn in the end.

3. Theory

As previously mentioned, my analysis will be split into two main topics - the myths, the gods, and the war in one section, and Shadow and the American Dream in the other - as well as a third section for miscellaneous points. Each of the two main sections will require their own theory and background knowledge. For the purposes of the first main section of my analysis, I will seek to explain the purpose of religion, and what kind of societal factors will influence myths - and how myths will shape the society to which they belong in turn.

For the purposes of the second main part of my analysis, I will be taking a closer look at American history, exploring how the puritans came to America to build a new life and how they in the process created the concept of the American Dream. While I am at it, I will use some of Ralph Waldo Emerson's works to explore the further meaning of this dream and what it might mean for a man to pursue it and gain success.

3.1 Why we need religion and mythology

When taking on such a task as examining a novel like *American Gods*, in which mythology and religion play such an important role, one simply cannot avoid examining the existence of mythology and religion itself. What is their purpose in the first place? Ancient as they may be, why do we have them at all?

Mircea Eliade, considered not only a prolific writer but an incredibly influential historian in the field of religion is then a very useful scholar and writer to look to for answers. And in his work, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, he does attempt to answer exactly these kinds of questions. In doing so, he has a very specific approach - he does not believe religion should be reduced to psychology or a matter of sociology. The sacred is nothing less than sacred, and trying to pick apart religion as anything other than a matter of religion will entirely miss the point of the matter (Allen).

That being said, Eliade does not refrain from analyzing the matter of religion at all. As has been already been mentioned, his work does seek to answer the questions posed just now. One of the main answers he finds is that it all comes down to meaning. This existence of myths and legends and the stories that make up various religions "betrays at least the desire to find meaning" (Eliade, 147). This is something that is evident throughout the many aspects of religion and the examples of its practice that is examined throughout his book. And some of the ways in which religion grants meaning will be discussed more in depth here (Eliade, 147).

Religion is a thing of repetition. What is in this book referred to as the primitive and archaic man will live his whole life performing actions he knows he is not the first to perform. Not by far. "His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others" (Eliade, 5). His actions are a part of something greater, a reality that extends beyond the human one. And thus his actions will be seen as real, too (Eliade, 5).

By and large, the primitive man seeks to repeat the actions of the gods. Whatever they do, it is modeled upon their myths. Right down to the building of their societies, as it were. Arriving upon new land and cultivating it could be considered an echo of the act of creation itself. It can even require a ritualistic claiming of the land to really drive the point home - otherwise, the event could potentially be considered not real. It would not truly count. This was, for instance,

the case, when settlers came to Iceland. Similarly, lands have been taken in the name of Jesus, just to mention two different examples. Eliade explains “through the effect of ritual it is given a “form” which makes it become real” (Eliade, 11). Once more, the religious meaning of the action, the mythology behind it, that is what makes it real. This extends to the creation of the cities they live in. Take for example this: “all the Indian royal cities, even the modern ones, are built after the mythical model of the celestial city where, in the age of gold (in illo tempore), the Universal Sovereign dwelt” (Eliade 9) (Eliade, 9-11).

Even the simplest of actions may seek to somehow repeat the actions of the gods. What the gods did, men will do. The gods set an example, and the primitive man keeps following it. He does this because his ancestors told him to, a tradition taking shape and the ritual being passed on from generation to generation. Christianity is a good example of this, as Jesus outright says in the bible that he is providing an example for men to follow. By doing as your gods told you to, and doing it in their names, your actions will become religious and “a means of salvation” (Eliade, 23) (Eliade, 21+23).

Myths also provide the basis for rituals. Yet again, man does what he does because gods and heroes of legend once did it. According to Iranian tradition, their gods rested for five days after creating everything, and thus they hold festivals in honor of this. On the seventh day of creation, god rested, and so the sabbath was born. The rituals of weddings and marriages find themselves with roots in myths and religion. Religion and myth is found in everything: “every act which has a definite meaning ... in some way participates in the sacred” (Eliade, 27-28) (Eliade, 21-23).

Even in the most natural of phenomenon, divinity is found. For instance, “the assimilation of the sexual act to agricultural work is frequent in numerous cultures” (Eliade, 26). Some cultures even engage in orgies during “certain critical periods of the year” (Eliade, 26) related to the earth’s fertility - like the Ewe tribe, where they engage in an orgy when it is time for the barley to start sprouting. This way, they offer young women to their python god, the understanding being that this will help their harvest be bountiful (Eliade, 26). In Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, according to Rachel Storm (66), the cyclical pattern of the blooming and wilting of nature, inspired stories and myths in which people could seek comfort and know that things would always turn around. “Dying and rising gods were associated with vegetation, fertility and the harvest: their devotees worshipped them because they needed reassurance that when the summer drought came and food crops died away, they could rely on the resurgence of the next season’s growth” (Storm, 66).

It is, however, not just a matter of assigning meaning to actions, rituals, and what humans create - what humans put out into the world. It is not just about the repetition of actions that ensures humans are not living in a meaningless world without reality (Eliade, 34). Or how humans will not lose themselves to the meaninglessness that history and existence can make anyone feel if it is thought too closely about (Eliade, 92). It is not just about the fact that myth holds more meaning than any real stories could (Eliade, 46). It is also about meaning and validation in everything humans cannot control, in what they experience - what humans receive from the world.

Suffering, for instance, is something religion and mythology is capable of helping humans cope with - something, it is worth noting, the world had endured aplenty when Eliade's book was published in the 1950s, right there in the aftermath of World War II and smack dab in the middle of the Cold War. Because, once more, this type of living grants man meaning. "In the frame of such an existence [where man lives his life according to extrahuman models], what could suffering and pain signify? Certainly not a meaningless experience that man can only [tolerate]. Whatever its nature and whatever its apparent cause, his suffering had a meaning" (Eliade, 96).

This can happen in different ways, according to Eliade (96-98). With a religion like Christianity, the suffering itself is granted value, and pain is turned from "a negative condition to an experience with a positive spiritual content" (Eliade, 96). But suffering and pain is not meaningless in other cultures and religions, even if they do not do the same thing. Because these things do not happen at random. Should bad luck befall you, this is easily blamed upon demons, magic, or higher powers. In Japanese myths, for instance, demons called oni were the cause of a lot of bad luck (Storm, 238). And these things can be dealt with, if you seek out appropriate assistance. You may then ask for help, maybe from a sorcerer. This will either fix the problem, or remind you of the god or gods that you may have forgotten to worship as you should. Then you can take the next step and pray or offer sacrifices to better your predicament. And even if you cannot find a reason that this should be happening to you - no enemies, no demons or magic, no broken rules or actions that would justify your god(s) anger, well then. It must simply be the will and wrath of your deities. And even this makes the suffering easier to bear:

In each case, the suffering becomes intelligible and hence tolerable. Against this suffering, the primitive struggles ... but he tolerates it morally because it is not absurd. The ... suffering is perturbing only insofar as its cause remains undiscovered. As soon as the sorcerer or the priest discovers what is causing children or animals

to die, drought to continue, rain to increase, game to disappear, the suffering begins to become tolerable; it has a meaning and a cause, hence it can be fitted into a system and explained. (Eliade, 98).

This is a most convenient way to deal with what could be considered a sort of debt. Like the concept of karma. Every bit of suffering you endure pays off some of that debt. There is no such thing as being wronged, for you have done something at some point in the existence of your being that warrants whatever is happening to you now, that means you deserve it. It becomes easier to tolerate, because it is part of a greater equation that is, in the end, once you are done, meant to equate to zero. Through the power of religion, belief, and myths, everything you find yourself going through can be explained or justified. Even the characters, the gods and heroes, from the myths suffered without necessarily carrying any guilt - so you, too, can do it. And that makes it tolerable. (Eliade, 98-101)(Storm, 238).

Even suffering on a grander scale might be more easily tolerated and lived with, as long as you can make myths and religion justify or explain it - even if the explanation and justification amounts to your god(s) being irrational (Eliade, 110) - and thus make it a little less meaningless. It is, after all, much easier to blame a ritual gone wrong or a wrathful god, since this may potentially be fixed through, say, a sacrifice, according to Eliade (108).

Eliade is, however, not the only writer and scholar out there who has sought to answer what the point of myths and religion is. In his book, *The Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Arthur Cotterell (10-11) points to the fact that myths are fictional stories designed to illustrate the truth, and he mentions that we get the word itself from Plato, who sought to “distinguish between imaginative accounts of divine actions and factual descriptions of events, supernatural or otherwise” (Cotterell, 10). Additionally, David M. Jones and Brian L. Molyneaux repeatedly bring up the needs and uses for mythology as well in their book, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of American Indian Mythology: Legends, Gods and Spirits of North, Central, and South America*. They discuss the need to explain how vast and powerful and wonderful nature and the entirety of the universe is. The way the human mind works with everything that frightens and entices it. How it is capable of both good and bad. The need for answers to big questions about things like the beginning and ending of the world. And how people - alone and in groups - fit into it the grand scheme of things (6-7). They do it again later (91-92) (171-172), mentioning the compulsion to explain the world around ourselves and how ancient civilizations came up with various myths to do just that:

These accounts, which we refer to here as “myths”, did for [these] ancient peoples ... what science and/or the Christian religion does for Western society today, or indeed any other religion or belief structure does elsewhere in the world: they provided people with a conceptual framework for living and for the comprehension of, and relation to, the mysteries of their observable universe. ... Religion permeated virtually every aspect of ... life[.] (Jones and Molyneaux, 91-92)

When all of this is then taken into account, something is then made glaringly obvious. The purposes of religion, what religion and myths have to offer, are not confined to just one place or culture. With all these examples from all over the world, it is easy to see that the concept of religion fulfills the same needs and provides the same types of framework for people all over the world. The myths may be wildly different, the answers to the questions asked may not be the same. But everywhere you go, humans desire a framework for their lives and existences. They desire explanations and answers to the big questions. They perform rituals for the same reasons and hope for the same things and desire the same types of goals. No matter how different two cultures and two peoples may be, the bones that shape their religion and myths will share some similarities.

3.2 Environment, symbols, and cultural values - what shapes a mythology?

Having established why humans possess the need to invent vast mythologies and lean on their religion, the next step is to understand what myths and beliefs can say about a people and their culture. There is much to be understood about a people by analyzing their myths, and there is much to be understood when diving into the factors that have shaped a mythology. What kind of factors will shape a mythology, why are some gods and goddesses more important than others, and what values are their myths teaching?

The concept of values is one of the things that have shaped mythologies - and have been shaped by mythology in return. A social psychologist, Milton Rokeach, set out to define what exactly values are. He figured that any given human's total number of values is fairly limited, although everyone holds the same values to a different extent. He believed values could be ranked and organized, and that any given person's values would be shaped by not just their personality, but also by the society and culture this person is surrounded by. Based on this, he defined values as a stable belief that one way of acting or one way of existing is better and preferable - both to the individual and to society - than another, opposite way of acting or existing (Varming and Zøllner, 16) (“Value Theory and Research”, 2223).

Essentially, this means that “values are cognitive representations of human needs” (“Value Theory and Research”; 2222) and that “values indicate preferences people share for certain types of outcomes in their lives and for certain types of conduct” (“Value Theory and Research”, 2222). These values are held because there is a belief that this particular outcome or behaviour will provide the best possible result for both the society or community as a whole, as well as for the individual person, as these values are a way to combine the needs of the group with the needs of the individual. Values are then shaped by beliefs, and they dictate how a person behaves, (“Value Theory and Research”, 2222-2223).

Since values are all held at the same time, and they thus exist in relation to each other, values can be ranked and sorted into a kind of hierarchy. If you choose to value one a little more, you will have to value another a little less. In theory you might claim that you hold two values equally high, but in reality you will have to weigh one value against another. A good example of this is having to choose between honesty and politeness. (“Value Theory and Research, 2224).

There are two types of values. There are terminal values, concerning what goals we may have. And then there are instrumental values, concerning the behaviour and actions we may employ to reach those goals. Each person might not hold the same amount of terminal and instrumental values, but they still depend on each other (“Value Theory and Research”; 2224) (Varming and Zøllner, 16-17).

There are eighteen of each kind of values. The terminal values are as follows: A beautiful world, world peace, a sense of accomplishment, a joyful life, a comfortable life, an exciting life, freedom, salvation, love, equality, happiness, an inner sense of balance, self respect, national security, social recognition, friendship, wisdom, and safety for and within your family. The instrumental values are: capability, responsibility, the ability to love, a lack of prejudice, intelligence, politeness, cheerfulness, helpfulness, ambition, logic, honesty, independence, self discipline, decency, readiness to forgive, obedience, bravery, imagination, and decency. These lists are, however, not considered “exhaustive” (“Value Theory and Research”, 2224) and other things could conceivably be added to the list. Everyone lives by some kind of value system, though. It would, for instance, be easy to dismiss hardcore gang members as holding nothing sacred and caring about nothing. But however brutal and criminal they may be, they do still hold values, and might for instance value loyalty quite highly (Varming and Zøllner, 16-17+49) (“Value Theory and Research”, 2224).

There is a relationship between what values we hold and a lot of varying factors:

Value priorities have been shown to be logically related to a now-extensive array of attitudinal and behavioral patterns exhibited by individuals, groups, organizations, and social institutions, including indicators of racism, sexism, life-style, life cycle, religiosity, environmentalism, media dependency relations, addictions, socioeconomic status, occupational choice and success, political orientation, and organizational and institutional priorities. ("Value Theory and Research", 2225)

Values are then affected by a large number of factors. These factors can also include culture, tradition, and generational influences, and it can be shaped by "beliefs that [serve] to answer existential questions about the nature of the universe" ("Value Theory and Research", 2223). But they in turn influence us. It is believed that they do so in seven different areas. They can influence us when we form our opinions on social issues, when we choose which religion or political party to identify with, when we present ourselves to others, when we evaluate and judge or place blame on ourselves or others, when we compare ourselves to others, when we try to influence others - or decide if it is even worth trying - and finally when we attempt to explain and analyze that which we do not agree with. In short, values provide us with a set of guidelines, and they allow us to compare ourselves and others in an attempt to figure out if they - and we ourselves - are moral and competent and capable of living up to our chosen standards. Simply summarized, values define our experience of the world ("Value Theory and Research", 2224-2226) (Varming and Zøllner, 16-18+22+49).

This, of course, means that conflict may arise on the basis of values. And this can happen in different ways. Naturally, when two values cannot be adhered to at the same time they are impossible to unite. An example of this is the matter of duty. If a priest is told about a crime, the priest cannot both keep the secret and tell the police about it. Said priest cannot both be bound by duty to keep conversations confidential while also being bound by duty to tell the police what they may know. Yet it is also possible that a conflict may arise between two people despite them sharing the same values and ranking them equally highly - their values might just point in different directions. Two individuals may both believe that responsibility is an incredibly important value - but one feels a responsibility towards the rules and the law, while another feels a responsibility towards other people. These may not necessarily be compatible, despite both parties believing they are being responsible people, and that they are the ones in the right. As a final example, religion is often a source of conflict when it comes to values. Not

just between entirely different religions, but even between different variations of the same faith (Varming and Zøllner, 20-21).

So values are a big part of mythology and religion. It has already been mentioned above how values influence beliefs and beliefs influence values. “Myths express the beliefs and values ... held by a certain culture” (Mark). It is then no surprise that values is one of the most important thing you can discern about a culture through their myths. Myths are not necessarily meant to be taken literally - they are there to be interpreted by the audience and understood within the given set of values held by their culture. It is fiction illustrating truth (Cotterell, 11) (Mark).

Mythology is, however, not solely shaped by values. “People of all cultures define the world as they experience it, so their mythologies must account for what they see” (Jones and Molyneaux, 10). It is worth understanding that while values are a big part of mythology, this is not all that these stories are about. Simply put, myths are generally a summary of a culture’s worldview. Myths provide us with “an image of the cosmos that is our environmental habitat [and an understanding of t]he social context or matrix that scripts and encodes the roles we perform amidst others” (Mahaffey). To put it briefly, “myths are worldviews - ways of seeing the world - and mythology is a method of seeing how we see or understand what we see. Understanding myth is a means of seeing through the stories that [shape] our experience of ourselves and others” (Mahaffey). This means that humans will generally try to understand the world as they know it and see it - and that means that it makes a difference what they see. It matters what society they live in, what sort of environment and climate they live in. Everything surrounding a people will be important to the making of its myths - because myths are meant to explain what people see, and people will aspire to model their lives after myths (Mahaffey)(Jones and Molyneaux, 10) (Mark).

3.2.1 Examples from Norse mythology

There are numerous examples of how myths are an extension of the values belonging to a culture and a people, values and myths informing each other in a never ending circle, as well as examples of myths being influenced by the immediate world surrounding the people to whom the myths belonged. Take for instance the vikings with their brutal reputation. Some of the most important deities in the Norse pantheon were Thor - who was not particularly smart, but who was honest and a mighty warrior and even had a ring that was symbolic of “fair play and good faith” (Cotterell, 236) - and Odin - who was a god admired especially by the hardest of warriors and toughest of raiders, as he was a battle god and could instill the rage of the berserkers in men, so that they could fight without fear and without feeling pain. It comes as no great surprise,

then, that these gods would be important to a people famous for their raids and warfare (Cotterell, 7+175-176+214+236).

Indeed the vikings are well known “for their fighting spirit” (Cotterell, 204). Traits that they valued were courageousness and facing death and doom without ever letting it crush or lower their spirit. The climate has been cited as a reason these vikings had to toughen up, with “electric skies, icy wastes and seething springs [that were] easily peopled with nature spirits ... personifying the mysterious and menacing forces of nature” (Cotterell, 186). But their myths greatly inspired these values as well. Fame was everything. If you could make a name for yourself and make your inevitable death a brave and honorable one, you would live on in the halls of Valhalla, and your death would be worth it - something worth aspiring to. Even Thor was not immortal, nor was he impervious to injury. Yet still he fought fearlessly and with great fury. Other examples of Norse heroes include Sigmund the Volsung, who “[drew] forth a magical sword thrust into the Branstock oak by Odin” (Cotterell, 205), which made his brother-in-law envious. Said brother-in-law vowed to kill all the Volsungs, and Sigurd was the only one who survived and could seek vengeance. And then there is of course Sigurd, one of the most famous Norse heroes, known especially for slaying the dragon Fafnir (Cotterell, 204-205).

Additionally, one can glean some information about the vikings and their lives, values, and society through their tragic love stories. Some tales put the poor lovers through their trials as a test of their “honour and courage” (Cotterell, 228), which then again is a display of what the vikings valued. In one story, a man named Frithiof “faithfully [guarded] his sleeping rival, Sigurd Ring” (Cotterell, 228). With ample opportunity to do away with his true love’s husband, Frithiof chose the honorable option, letting the listener of the tale know that this is the way one should aspire to behave. It has also been argued that these tales are symbolic of the “battles of nature” (Cotterell, 228) and the changes brought on by the shifting seasons. “Sigurd, for instance, might be seen as a sun lord who, armed with a sunbeam, dispels darkness; while his lover, Brynhild, symbolizes the dawn-maiden whose path he crosses only at the start and close of his shining career” (Cotterell, 228). Other examples include Njord whose warm and sunny affections for his wife, the much colder Skadi, will only keep her with him for a mere three months out of the whole year. Or Freyr, a god who is associated with the summery months, who causes the ice cold heart of his beloved to melt (Cotterell, 228-229).

3.2.2 Examples from classical mythology

In the Greek myths, you will also find a range of heroes “who express ideal traits and talents” (Cotterell, 30). Oedipus has his wits, Achilles is courageous, Heracles is mighty, and Oedipus has his endurance. Arthur Cotterell describes the ideal Greek hero like this: “A classic hero is

a champion in every sense, overcoming trials, ridding the world of troublemakers, blazing trails and winning through despite all odds. Yet he is neither invulnerable nor immortal, though often helped, and sometimes hindered, by the gods” (30). Additionally, different types of heroes exist. Some are for war and some are for peace. Some are cheerful and extroverted, while others are heroes or heroines because of their attitudes and not because of their actions (Cotterell, 30-31).

Monsters are also quite interesting to look at in this context. Because these creatures “generally symbolize the dark and unresolved forces in life and in human nature” (Cotterell, 58). And creatures, like centaurs or satyrs, who are both animal as well as human in composition, are even more so interesting. These represent the “unruly, instinctive nature” (Cotterell, 58) of humans. Fighting monsters is then less about literally slaying grand creatures - and it speaks to the fact that monsters can be found within (Cotterell, 58-59). Arguably, however, one could say some gods, too, serve the purpose of showcasing the darker sides of humans. They possess human traits, but often to a more extreme degree. It is all a fictionalized mirror of reality.

Finally, Greek cities are a great representation of the hero worship that the Greeks would engage in. Because the ancient Greeks would attribute the founding and creation of their major cities to legendary heroes or even heroines, “such as Cadmus of Thebes and Dido of Carthage” (Cotterell, 84). Thus, each big city had its own hero to honour and pay their respects to. Examples include Perseus of Mycenae. These heroes reached almost godly status and were credited with “[creating] a fresh, vibrant culture” (Cotterell, 84) and often with having “developed helpful new ways and customs” (Cotterell, 84). An example of this is Cadmus of Thebes, who is credited with introducing an alphabet (Cotterell, 84-85).

3.2.3 Examples from Celtic mythology

In Celtic mythology, the hero Cuchulainn represents the ideal hero (Cotterell, 92). He is even compared to Achilles. He was described as a “larger-than-life fighter” (Cotterell, 118), and he was prophesied to become a mighty hero although death would claim him while he was still young. He was not particularly old when he learned to be a warrior, and he proved just how mighty he was when he killed a big hound without a single weapon on hand. Said hound was a guard dog belonging to a smith, Culann, and Cuchulainn offered to be his guard until the dog could be replaced - which arguably teaches the listener of the story to take responsibility for their actions. He was turned down, but the offer still earned him his name, which means “the Hound of Cullann” (Cotterell, 118).

Cuchulainn fought his first battle upon a day “that anyone going to battle for the first time ... was destined for a short life” (Cotterell, 118), but his impatience and eagerness to fight his enemies sent him to battle all the same, prioritizing his country over his own life. He fought fiercely, became the champion of his country, and he was adored by women. In his final battle, he fought with his arm cursed into withering, and he did so despite being the only man on the field representing his side for five days and five nights, due to yet another curse. This is the battle where he died, but only after several days of battle, long enough that the rest of the army could shake off their curse, and towards his end, he even wound up tying himself to a rock so that he could fight until the very second he died (Cotterell, 118-119). Looking at all that, it is evident that myths were used to teach lessons and encourage the “right” sorts of values and traits. And it is evident that these figures of myth were highly revered. But, as will be evident in the analysis, these heroes do not hold that kind of status anymore.

The idea of relying on champions, like Cuchulainn, is an example of how the Celtic myths had been shaped in response to the society to which they belonged. Because there were simply not enough men for big armies and grand wars. Granted, big wars were still fought. But instead of risking large groups of men, chosen champions would fight each other to settle things. This even happened in “large-scale epic war” (Cotterell, 148), where a fight between two champions might occur daily. This is also evident in Arthurian legends, where the knights would joust (Cotterell, 148-149).

And finally, like in Norse mythology, the romances are worth looking at, too. As was the case in the Norse stories, it can be argued that these tales, often love triangles, are a symbol of natural phenomenon: “This recurrent rivalry probably symbolizes a seasonal battle between a Lord of Summer and Lord of Winter for the Spring Maiden” (Cotterell, 140). Often we are meant to root for one and despise the other. Not unlikely is it that the competition is between a young and lovely hero and “an oppressive guardian” (Cotterell, 140). Other times, they are mere rivals on equal footing though one is still meant to be liked while the other is not. The heroes are typically flawed, though, while the women are “strong and independent, expressing warmth and wisdom” (Cotterell, 140), leaving even the women an ideal to which they can aspire (Cotterell, 140-141).

It is arguably important to note the part about the heroes being flawed, though. Gods and heroes, and any characters found in any mythology, are not perfect, nor perfectly saintly. They have flaws and negative traits, which is arguably how they become believable, and why stories about them catch our attention. Without these flaws, no conflicts would ever arise, and so we would have no stories.

3.2.4 Examples from North American Indian mythology

In the culture of the North American Indians, individuality was always a big deal: “They have been free to listen to their own heritage and speak with voices that reflect individual vision and the wisdom of the ages. Personal insight, sought through dreams, vision quests and other forms of inspiration, is a critical aspect of spirituality in most North American aboriginal cultures” (Jones and Molyneaux, 10). And this spirituality did not extend to encompass only humans - all things have the potential for spirituality. Even the tiniest of stones or the tallest of trees (Jones and Molyneaux, 10). According to the North American Indians and their mythology, everything holds potential for spirituality, divinity, and a little bit of magic.

The land that surrounded them is also heavily featured in their stories, and has thus arguably been a big influence of the shaping of North American Indian mythology. Their myths and stories do not solely rely on memory, then, because they are embedded in the surroundings of the peoples to whom they belong. “Every towering rock or twist in a river records the acts of the culture heroes who changed the earth as they lived on it” (Jones and Molyneaux, 36). One tribe may look upon a mountain and know that this is where they came from. Another “can speak of a time when Gluskap killed a moose at Moose-tchick, for the bones and entrails of this giant creature are still visible around Bar Harbor, Maine” (Jones and Molyneaux, 36). All the territories have their own specific places that are significant to the people living there, and which are featured heavily in the local myths and stories. This was also helpful in terms of creating a “mental map” (Jones and Molyneaux, 36). It helped them picture their environment and the lands in detail, which was highly useful “for people who often had to travel great distances over vast, trackless environments during the seasonal rounds” (Jones and Molyneaux, 36). They combined their myths with their geography - effectively ensuring that if they had their stories, they could find their way. And if they had their lands, they could hold onto their stories (Jones and Molyneaux, 36-37+42).

It would, of course, be remiss not to acknowledge the impact the Europeans had on the North American Indian mythology when they arrived in America. “Events that shake up the world are preserved in oral tradition” (Jones and Molyneaux, 70), and nobody is likely to argue that the Europeans coming to America did not qualify as exactly such an event. And so the Europeans started appearing in North American Indian stories. There were stories describing their arrival and explaining the things they brought - like guns, wool blankets, and kettles of iron and copper. The more Europeans that arrived, the more they showed up in local stories, sometimes involved in “the antics of Coyote and other tricksters” (Jones and Molyneaux, 70), while other stories were about the disastrous effect they had on the Native Americans, spreading disease and killing

millions of people whose immune systems could not withstand these strange illnesses. Something that speaks greatly to the adaptability of culture and the way it is ever changing and ready to morph into something new (Jones and Molyneaux, 70-71).

3.2.5 Examples from Mesoamerican and South American mythology

Mesoamerican and South American mythology is a great example of how the environment and the world surrounding people as they tell stories will affect those stories. Especially because Mesoamerica and South America are so different to the places where the mythologies most well known in Western society stem from - like Greece, Scandinavia, and the British. For instance:

[V]irtually all Mesoamericans perceived the earth as the back of a huge reptilian being, a crocodile or cayman, lying in the water [while] Maya sources also describe a second concept, in which the earth is a huge iguana house, a reptilian structure whose sides (walls), roof (sky), and floor (earth) were formed by the bodies of iguanas. (Jones and Molyneaux, 104)

Additionally, sun worship was a big thing in South American cultures. Which is something one cannot imagine would be nearly as successful in Scandinavia, given how little they would even see it in the coldest parts of the year. The way these myths and stories are constructed are the same - they build on the world as the speaker or writer and the listener or reader knows it. But because these worlds are so different, the myths inevitably become different too (Jones and Molyneaux, 104+240).

This is also seen in South American myths and stories. Some peoples were greatly fascinated with jaguars, as they were seen as powerful and even influential. "A prominent theme is that jaguars were the masters of the earth before humans, and that the jaguars' powers were acquired by humans after they had been adopted by jaguars and had betrayed them" (Jones and Molyneaux, 186). Before that, jaguars were believed to have mastered fire and they knew how to hunt with weapons. This is also used to explain why jaguars, despite being considered so powerful and full of knowledge, hunt with their claws and eat raw meat (Jones and Molyneaux, 172+186-187+216).

The Incas, however, also manipulated their myths to their own advantage. A pre-Incan ruler called Nayamlap conspired with his priests to, once Nayamlap has passed, deceive and convince his people to believe that he was a divine being. The Incas were known to believe that their emperor was "the divine sun's representative on earth" (Jones and Molyneaux, 222) while his first, or main, wife represented the moon. Evidence has been found in other cultures, based on burials, that they too believed in a divine king. This once again shows us just how easily culture

is manipulated. It takes one person, one little push, and it will change into a new direction (Jones and Molyneaux, 222+240).

3.2.6 Examples from Egyptian and Mesopotamian mythology

Much like the previous mythologies, the Egyptians and Mesopotamians were inspired by their surroundings and societies in the shaping of their myths. For instance, the people of Mesopotamia lived their lives under “precarious” (Storm, 11) circumstances. The rivers could be unpredictable and flooding could happen without much warning. And “the people were also under constant threat from marauding tribes and foreign invaders” (Storm, 11). As a result, their stories and myths spoke of “life as a constant battle” (Storm, 11) because that is how they experienced it - as chaotic and unpredictable and easily falling victim to one thing or ending up in a fight with another (Storm, 11).

For the Egyptians, one of the ways their myths was inspired by their experience of the world was in the animal influences upon their gods. The earth surrounding the Nile was fertile and good where the desert surrounding them was otherwise not particularly hospitable. But the humans were not the only ones who sought out the water and fertility of the river. They had to share with the animals of the desert - some of them “dangerous, powerful creatures such as lions, crocodiles, hippopotamuses and snakes” (Storm, 20). These animals were demanding to be both feared and respected, and their proximity to the “life-giving force of the river” (Storm, 20) inevitably caused some degree of association between the two. These animals and, in particular, traits and qualities they were believed and perceived to possess, were then often associated with certain gods. Some animals were even thought of as forms of specific gods. Bastet, for instance, was “a fierce and vengeful goddess” (Storm, 20) who was associated with lions, although later she would become more peaceful and be associated with cats. In turn, cats were then revered and loved in her name (Storm, 20-21).

3.3 Coming to America: The Puritans

One of the major influences on the way America has been shaped can undoubtedly be traced back to the Puritans. So to better understand who they are and how they came to be such a big influence on the future of America, it is necessary to go back in time to examine the history of the Puritans. To do this, we must go all the way back to the time of King Henry VIII, who sought to break ties between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Something that would leave a space for Protestantism to rise and spread while Edward VI was king between 1547 and 1553. But despite his best efforts, the country would proceed to fall back into old patterns when Queen Mary (who reigned between 1553 and 1558) was on the throne. This meant Protestants were at risk of being sent into exile, and to avoid persecution,

many went to Geneva, where they found themselves influenced by a Calvinist way of thinking, which helped shape the idea that a “disciplined church” (“Puritanism”) was needed. They would later come to be known as the Puritans (“Puritanism”).

As a result, these Puritans were initially very pleased when Queen Elizabeth (who reigned between 1558 and 1603) took over the reign of England and she was “reestablishing Protestantism” (“Puritanism”). But they would also very quickly find themselves let down. They had hoped for far more change than that which they were getting. But their efforts to push for more of this change were not well received, and the Puritans were “repressed by the establishment” (“Puritanism”) (“Puritanism”).

King James I (who reigned between 1603 and 1625) would go on to replace Queen Elizabeth - and he was, in fact, Calvinist. This, once more, gave the Puritans hope. And yet again, those hopes were dashed. He refused to provide the Puritans with the support they needed, citing that without a bishop there would be no king. The “Puritans remained under pressure” (“Puritanism”), and for some, conditions were bad enough that they even then found themselves fleeing from England (“Puritanism”).

“The pressure for conformity increased under Charles I (1625-49) and his archbishop, William Laud” (“Puritanism”), but that did not stop the Puritans from fighting for their cause. And during a civil war in the 1640s, fought between the king and the Parliament, “Puritans seized the opportunity to urge Parliament and the nation to renew its covenant with God” (“Puritanism”). This did not really work out, but as the parliament’s forces won, power was “turned over to ... Oliver Cromwell. The religious settlement under Cromwell's Commonwealth allowed for a limited pluralism that favoured the Puritans" (“Puritanism”). Once Cromwell died in 1658, however, “Laud’s strict ... pattern” (“Puritanism”) was put back in place, which then led to the Great Persecution (“Puritanism”).

In 1689, it was finally decided that the government would tolerate those who did not agree with the official church and religion of England, but at that point many had already fled - including those, who fled to America. In 1630, some of the Puritans would go on to make their way to what we now know as New England. They believed themselves to be chosen and saved by God himself and they would be the ones to build a new Commonwealth, according to the will of God. With a vision in mind to build a city upon a hill where they could worship God freely and without fear of persecution, the Puritans preached a great deal of doom and gloom, claiming that only those selected and saved by God would not be eternally damned - and even then, they had to live strictly by his rules or be punished. Indeed, the Puritans considered America their promised land: “America, they explained, had been foreshadowed in Scripture

as the site of New Jerusalem, and it was their “special commission” to lead the way, as God’s new chosen people in this new promised land” (Bercovitch, xiii). America had been prophesied and the Puritans intended to make it come true (“Puritanism”) (“People and Ideas: The Puritans”) (Bercovitch, xiii+3).

This effort on the Puritans’ behalf to make a new life for themselves would in time become a big part of what America was founded upon:

For in fact the quasi-theocratic Puritan society was a modern mercantile venture, funded by the Massachusetts Bay Company, Inc., offering what they advertised as unparalleled opportunities for economic advancement. Other colonists came for similar reasons, of course; the New Amsterdam Dutch and the Pennsylvania Quakers may actually have contributed more directly than did New England to the secular tenets of free enterprise and the open market. But the Puritans gave a special supernatural legitimacy to the Protestant work ethic in the New World. They raised the success story to the status of visible sainthood and their community compact to the heights of a national covenant, the calling of a New Israel. In short, they merged the economic venture within a larger spiritual narrative. (Bercovitch, xiii)

Meaning, in this new world the Puritans were creating for themselves, working hard was not only a way to get rich and make a better life for yourself. It was also in line with what the Puritan faith would consider good conduct and an honorable endeavour. You could even argue that it was considered a divine purpose, that to do so was to strive for saintliness (Bercovitch, xiii).

This is particularly interesting when compared with what Europe was like at the time. Because, at that time, social climbers were mocked in Europe. People were expected to know their place and stick to it. Class division was very much a thing and the lines should never be blurred, let alone crossed. But in this new world, the ability to rise up was an important part of this community’s identity - and it would go on to be an important part of the whole country’s identity down the line. It did not matter to whom you were born or what rung you currently occupied on the social ladder - and, later on, race and gender would be added to the list of things that should not restrict you from pursuing wealth and personal success. The “self-made man [became a] symbol” (Bercovitch, xiv) of this new world, where the idea that everyone should have the same shot at success was emerging. It is a mentality that has lasted, and is embedded within “The Declaration of Independence” where the quote “we hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal” embodies the intended spirit of the United States of America.

3.4 The American Dream

Having established the roots of the American Dream and understanding where it comes from, it is then only sensible that one should attempt to map out what this dream embodies. Especially in terms of how one should ideally act and be in order to achieve it. Of course the idea is mainly wealth and success - especially these days - but there is more to it than those particular goals, like the search for a new chance at life like the Puritans originally strived for. And Ralph Waldo Emerson, a famous philosopher who wrote many an essay in his time, had some interesting thoughts related to this matter.

In his essay, "Self-Reliance", Ralph Waldo Emerson argues that the best possible thing one can do, is simply that they be true to themselves. While this sentiment is one people will by and large agree with today, it was, in fact, not always the way of things. Just take one look at the previous section, where the history of the Puritans reminds us that, once upon a time, one could be persecuted for a lack of conformity. Yet Emerson strongly believed that there was little point in behaving according to the wishes of society and of the church if it went against your true nature.

This was not a halfhearted sentiment on Emerson's part:

I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested, — "But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. ("Self-Reliance").

Meaning, even if he were the spawn of the Devil, even if he had been the most evil person on this planet, the only thing he could do then would be to adhere to his nature. He also explains that "[a] man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver" (Emerson, "Self-Reliance"). According to Emerson's argument, there is no point in doing anything if your heart is not in it. You can live a most pious life, you can act in accordance with all the expectations of the church and of polite society. But if you do not truly mean it, this will grant you no salvation. If you are the Devil's own child, and you are full of all the Devil's evils, no action you can take will erase that. According to Emerson, we must be honest about

who we are. We need to be true to our own nature or our actions will mean next to nothing (“Self-Reliance”).

Emerson also discusses the importance of relying on yourself to succeed and live the best possible version of your life. “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance”) is a claim of Emerson’s. He urges the reader of the essay to really be self-reliant in a number of ways. He argues that you follow your path and trust your own instincts rather than blindly adhere to what society and the church wants for you. He wants the reader to think for themselves, to be individuals. Additionally, he argues the importance of focusing on bettering yourself and upon your own development, rather than turning all your attention to society’s state and progress. In the end, if everyone is true to themselves and rely on themselves, it makes for the best possible society as a whole (“Self-Reliance”).

This desire for individuality is echoed in “The American Scholar”, where Emerson argues that America should not be so dependent on European culture and America should instead make something of its own. He also echoes the sentiments of his “Self-Reliance” essay, in which he argues the importance of the individual. Emerson thinks of this as uniquely American - which is perhaps not entirely untrue. One only needs to think of the European desire to keep everyone confined to their class, as mentioned earlier, where instead the Puritans encouraged everyone to pursue personal success. Emerson himself declared that America was synonymous with opportunity (qtd. in Geldard, *Emerson and the Dream of America*, 12). And others have discussed how America is a place which, unlike any other, seems to require its citizens to live up to this dream and which must stand as an example to the world of what good may come if the individual is free and unrestrained (Geldard, *Emerson and the Dream of America*, 16)

Arguably, this is all part of the American Dream. If asked, many would probably try to define it and explain it by talking about every man’s right to and possibility of pursuing success, the rags to riches tale of someone who has nothing yet manages to build a life and a fortune for themselves. As long as you trust in yourself, work for it and put in the necessary effort, you too can achieve it. And those are the people that, as mentioned earlier, achieved that saintlike status in the Puritan society back in the day. Some have even referred to this concept of relying on yourself and having the freedom and independence to do whatever you want as “The Great American Idea” (Geldard, “Emerson and the Dream of America”) (Geldard, “Emerson and the Dream of America”).

In “Representative Men”, Emerson proceeds to discuss some of these great men and what use they have for the average man. Here, he discusses how they help pave the way for others and are there to open the eyes of the common man. And Emerson makes an interesting comment when he says “Our religion is the love and cherishing of these patrons. The gods of fable are the shining moments of great men” (“Representative Men”). Especially when paired with the earlier Bercovitch quote that claimed the success story was practically a saintly thing to the Puritans. Work hard, rely on yourself, and you can become divine, too.

Because the United States of America may not have a mythology in the traditional way, full of stories that must not be taken too literally but will still convey a sense of values and a lesson. But considering what Emerson and Bercovitch has said, it turns the success story and the American Dream into a sort of American mythology. Instead of gods and heroic legends and fictions meant to illustrate truth, the American identity is then - at least in part - built upon a sort of worship of real people. God and Christianity are not to be dismissed out of hand, and those are certainly a big part of the American identity, both in terms of foundation and the current religious climate. But where other cultures find themselves with myths and legends, gods and fictitious heroes as part of their culture, the American culture is much more based in stories of real people who achieved real things - be it George Washington, Steve Jobs, or Hemingway.

4. Analysis

The analysis will be split into two major components and a minor one. In the first section, I intend to dive into the myths used in *American Gods* as well as the war between the old gods and the new. My intent is to figure out what kind of commentary this makes on the American identity and culture, and I am curious to look at what has changed to bring the US from the old gods to the new.

In the second part, I will focus more on Shadow and on his journey through the novel. In the beginning of the novel, he starts out as a convict, just about to be released from prison, just about to lose his wife and the life he was meant to return to. I am interested in exploring the way Shadow’s journey changes him, in what ways his character arc is and is not like the American Dream, and what his journey has to say about America as a place where you reinvent yourself, as well as pursue a different life and leave your old one behind.

Finally, I will look at the more general commentary that Gaiman makes on the American identity and the American culture throughout his novel. I want to bring up some of the things that might not strictly fall into either of the first two sections of my analysis, but might still hold some kind of significance, and I will attempt to get closer to an overall definition of what it means to be American.

4.1 The use of myths in *American Gods*

In Neil Gaiman's novel, *American Gods*, the gods and creatures of the old myths and legends of the world are far more real than anyone might have anticipated - and they are going to war. A war the main character, Shadow, gets unwittingly involved in after the loss of his wife and his release from prison leaves him adrift and without any of his old life untouched. And this war is particularly interesting when one attempts to decide what this novel may have to say about the American identity and culture.

When looking to draw the use of the gods of the novel into consideration, as we search for answers to the questions posed in the beginning of this paper, there are several angles one can - and should - approach it from. And first and foremost, we will be looking at the old gods. Because as has previously been discussed, the gods and myths from around the world are more than just gods and myths. They are symbols. They are representations of something else - of the cultures and the people that came to America, carrying these beliefs, of the values and traditions held by these people.

If you take a closer look at the gods that appear in *American Gods*, it quickly becomes apparent that they stem from all across the world - and that most of the divine and mythological characters Shadow and the reader encounter together did not originate in America. Mad Sweeney, for instance, is a leprechaun, originally from Ireland (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 39), with a name most likely taken from an Irish king who appeared in Celtic myths and was driven mad by a curse (Cotterell, 168) (Griffiths, "Mad Sweeney"). We meet the Zoryas, sisters from Slavic folklore who watch the sky for the escape of "the doomsday hound, Simargl" (Klimczak) and "let the sunshine in and out, marking the dawn and dusk" (Thomas), the sisters each representing a star and a time of day (Thomas) (Klimczak) (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 98-99). A good handful of Egyptian deities are either introduced, or at least discussed. This includes Thoth - though he goes by Mr. Ibis - and Horus (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 505+525) - with Thoth being god of the moon, of knowledge, and of writing, as well as the god who passed judgment on the dead, while Horus was a ruler and god of the sky (Storm, 38+79). Finally, Mama-ji is worth mentioning (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 151), a likely reference to the Indian

Kali, a goddess personifying destruction and death, although she is also often considered to be a loving goddess as well as a mother goddess (Storm, 130).

These are just a few examples of the gods, goddesses, and creatures that Gaiman introduces us to in the novel. Many others from many other cultures make an appearance or are referred to throughout the novel. And this is hardly surprising. The United States of America is a country particularly famous for its melting pot of cultures. People from all across the world, through hundreds of years, have migrated to America. And of course these people all brought their cultures with them. Their gods and legends, their rituals and traditions and values and beliefs. And all of that is represented in the vast variety of divine characters that make up part of the cast of this novel.

Not only does he introduce us to a plethora of gods and goddesses throughout the novel - he also makes an effort to show us specific instances of how certain gods or creatures were brought to the country, as well as ways these gods still affect people's lives, or how they are making do now that they are lacking in worshippers. And this is highly interesting - not just because it perfectly illustrates the melting pot culture of the United States, but because we get to see how these cultures start out strong and then fade, some disappearing entirely while others are morphed into something new. We get to see how the aspects of other cultures that either line up with Western culture or is adapted into it will survive. And how everything else struggles to make do and then fades.

A good example of this is Easter. Easter is more than doing okay, life is treating her well as people still celebrate and perform the typical Easter rituals in her name. But as a general rule, people no longer know the true origin of these celebrations anymore. When Wednesday asks a woman working in a café if she knows the origin of the word 'Easter', she dismisses him, saying she is not into that because she is pagan - clearly, like so many others, under the impression that Easter is a Christian tradition. So when people engage in Easter festivities, Easter is worshipped, yes. But the worshippers do not know that that is what they are doing. It has transformed and changed and become something else as part of a new culture (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 329-334).

Another example is one of the "Coming to America" chapters, in which a pair of twins from an unspecified country in Africa are sold into slavery by their uncle. One is a girl called Wututu, the other a boy named Agasu. Since they are twins, they are considered magic, and, as a result, people have told them things about magic and the gods. Things they have held onto. We get to see how they survive the long voyage from their home across the sea, how they hold onto the stories and gods they grew up with, and how that enables them to survive. We see how a god

called Elegba possesses Wututu, and saves her from being raped. And later, once the twins have been split up, we see how Elegba possesses Agasu - which winds up making Agasu important to the revolution that turned Saint-Domingue into the independent state of Haiti. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 348-356)

But, more interestingly within this particular context, we get to follow what happens to Wututu. She works as a slave a few different places, until she finally winds up in New Orleans. Here, she quickly gains a reputation: "In New Orleans, the women came to her, and the men also, to buy cures and love charms and little fetishes, black folks, yes, of course, but white folks too" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 357). As previously mentioned, she has learned things about the gods of her culture and about magic, and she has brought that knowledge and those beliefs with her to New Orleans. And it spreads - not just to those who are likely to already hold these beliefs because they are from the same area and the same kinds of cultures. But to the white people whose beliefs are likely much more Western (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 356-357).

Not only does Wututu - though at this point in the story she will come to be known as Mama Zouzou - continue to practice the old rituals and worship the gods she has always known. She agrees to teach someone else her ways - that someone being a woman called Marie Laveau, a famous name undeniably associated with voodoo (Dimuro). But this is also where we see how culture is not only spreading, but also fading: "[Marie Laveau] learned everything that Mama Zouzou told her. She had no real interest in the gods, though. Not really. Her interest were in the practicalities" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 359). Wututu complains to her friend about her student's lack of interest in the gods and the truths she is trying to show her, claiming she simply wants glass when Wututu attempts to give her diamonds. Laveau is only interested in what she can receive from the rituals - not in what she in turn is giving back. Her approach to this culture is entirely selfish. In a way, this leaves these gods with a similar fate to that of Easter. The rituals are still practiced, but the participants do not know why. The culture still exists and has been assimilated into the grand American melting pot, but people are becoming increasingly less aware of its roots (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 357-363).

The final example of culture spreading, morphing, and fading that will be discussed for now is the "Coming to America" chapter that follows Essie Tregowan - a Cornish girl who survives on con-tricks and adherence to old tales of piskies and how to appease them. She makes a point of leaving milk for the piskies, and in turn she is kept in good health and continuously has good luck, even when she is caught and condemned for her crimes. She brings them with her to America, where they continue to bring her good luck and her family and farm are allowed to flourish - for the most part. We see how she holds onto the beliefs she brought with her, and

how she tells others how to be mindful of creatures like the piskies - and these people either believe these things simply because Essie does, or they indulge her with the same result. But that is as far as that really goes. Her grandchildren are not interested in those stories and care little for listening to them. And once the stories die, so does the memory of this creature and the rituals meant to appease it. Once Essie passes away at the end of that chapter, it is unlikely that anyone kept up the many little offerings she insisted upon - and thus the worship dies out (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 104-113).

But where all these are examples that tell us how the old gods are evidently struggling to remain recognized or get the same kind of worship and energy they usually feed on, the new gods are clearly doing just fine. Technical Boy, the personification and god of things like computers and the internet - which were admittedly not nearly as advanced when the book was published, yet were increasing in popularity still - have this to say on the matter:

You tell Wednesday this, man. You tell him he's history. He's forgotten. He's old. And he better accept it. Tell him that we are the future and we don't give a fuck about him or anyone like him. His time is over. Yes? You fucking tell him that, man. He has been consigned to the dumpster of history while people like me ride our limos down the superhighway of tomorrow. ... Tell him that we have fucking reprogrammed reality. Tell him that language is a virus and that religion is an operating system and that prayers are just so much fucking spam. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 59).

Of course Shadow does not understand what this means at this point, as this is still fairly early on in his journey and he has yet to learn much of use about the world he is entering into. But, keeping the entirety of the novel in mind to provide some context, it is not hard to guess what he is getting at. Technical Boy understands that religion and belief are what is allowing them - gods both old and new - to exist. But that religion, in this context, is not necessarily what it used to be, and that Wednesday's efforts are for naught - or so that is what Technical Boy would want us to believe. This is a war between old and new. And arguably, it is not just about the gods, but about the current versus the ancient world, modern values versus traditional (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 59).

Additionally, the new gods are excellent examples of culture existing where we pour our energy and effort into it - and the old gods an example of how it wastes away if we do not maintain it. Humans no longer want to pray for what they want. We live in a society of convenience and of doing it yourself, where we get our groceries in a supermarket rather than an old fashioned merchant's who will find or order whatever you ask for for

you. Why should we pray and hope for things from fickle gods when we can serve ourselves? Even if we inadvertently create new gods in the process, because of the aforementioned concept of culture emerging where we create it. And this is a concept that holds true in real life too - although, as far as we commonly know, no literal gods emerge from it. Culture, however, does. Culture in all its meanings; the kind we consume and the kind we live and act out. We stopped giving our time, attention, energy, or sacrifices to the old gods, so they and the culture they represent fade. We give it to the new and modern gods, so they and the culture they represent rise.

We see a few examples of new gods having risen because of the rising lifestyle of the modern Western human. And some of those are more obvious than others. One of the less obvious instances is found fairly early in the book where Wednesday pulls a con while he is meant to pay for something, confusing the poor cashier to the point that she winds up accidentally giving him money rather than taking the money Wednesday owes. Granted, Wednesday is a con artist. This is the kind of thing he does. But, arguably, one could speculate that he wants to avoid paying tribute to any kind of god of money or finances, since the ritual of handing over cash or using a credit or debit card seems like it would be ripe and fertile ground for a new god to emerge. Just consider how many times a day this kind of exchanges takes place every day in any kind of store, any kind of city, any kind of state, let alone in all of the states combined. Billions exchange hands in the name of finances and economy all the time (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 50-51).

We also see how freeways are assumed to belong to the new pantheon of modern gods. Once, Mr. Wednesday expresses that he does not feel certain about whose side the roads are on. And once, Mr. Nancy says that he thinks the freeways either belong to the new gods, or are a god on their own (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 251+458). This does not seem like it would be impossible. They could presumably be strengthened by the many people and cars that make use of them each day, dedicating hours of their time and energy to travelling those roads. We also meet some men in black types, made famous through conspiracy theories and urban legends about men from secret branches of the government, or potentially aliens themselves, looking to make sure people keep their mouths closed when they see things they should not have (Radford). Easter at one point says about them that "they exist because everyone knows they must exist" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 331).

A final example is the television. At one point, Shadow watches TV late at night, when the TV starts talking to him, taking the shape of Lucy from *I Love Lucy* (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 188-190). Following that, this exchange takes place:

‘Who are you?’ asked Shadow. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Good question. I’m the idiot box. I’m the TV. ... I’m the little shrine the family gathers to adore.’
‘You’re the television? Or someone in the television?’ ‘The TV’s the altar. I’m what people are sacrificing to.’ ‘What do they sacrifice?’ asked Shadow.
‘Their time, mostly,’ said Lucy. ‘Sometimes each other.’ (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 189).

What Lucy describes is unlikely to be an unfamiliar feeling to anyone. Have most families not at one point or another - up to several times a week, even - gathered in front of the TV, watching a movie or a TV series or some kind of prime time entertainment show aimed at people of all ages, where people compete to win a million dollars by singing a song, showcasing a talent, or answering some questions? Their time in exchange for a sense of togetherness, community, entertainment, and bonding? And while it may be a bit extreme to say that it will end in an outright sacrifice of ‘each other’, how many couples have not been in a fight because one dared to watch the next episode of *Game of Thrones* without them? It is perhaps one of the best examples in the book of a god that has arisen because culture lives and thrives where we pour effort into making it live and thrive; of how things become sacred because we consider them so. Not unlike the way the Native Americans, as previously mentioned, included landmarks in their myths - making them important because they treated them as important.

Lucy says something interesting after that, however, allowing us to segue nicely into the next point this part of the analysis intends to make:

Look at it like this, Shadow: we are the coming thing. We’re shopping malls - your friends are crappy roadside attractions. Hell, we’re online malls, while your friends are sitting by the side of the highway selling homegrown produce from a garden cart. ... We are now and tomorrow. Your friends aren’t even yesterday anymore. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 189-190).

And this may be true. But this TV god in the disguise of Lucy, she seems to miss something important as she says this: America contains both. America is more than capable of containing both at the same time, and the two different sides serve different purposes. It is entirely possible to be visiting a shopping mall one week, and then take a roadtrip with deliberate detours to roadside attractions the next. Some people even make a hobby of that - the worse the attraction, the better. Consider, for instance, that The World's Largest Catsup Bottle has a festival and a fan club, and people visit it every day according to its website (*The World's Largest Catsup Bottle Official Website and Fan Club*).

And this speaks to the multitudes of the American identity, as well as to the way this vast mix of different cultures from all across the globe have come together to form one single but incredibly diverse and multifaceted culture. (It can most definitely be argued that this is only in theory though, and that there is room for more inclusivity. I intend to discuss this further later on). There are all these incredibly different facets to it, because so many cultures have merged together over time. The old and new gods may fight, the old and new gods may act like they cannot co-exist. But they can, and they do. This clash of cultures and values that takes up so much space throughout the book is completely unnecessary, if only everyone could take on an accepting attitude and leave a space for everyone. Even the war itself is not necessary. Once Shadow learns it is a con, he reveals that secret to all the other gods in an effort to stop the war. And as he does, we - the reader, the narrator, Shadow, and the gods - all get to the root of the conflict. It was engineered, yes, but it was based on real uncertainty and insecurity. The gods claim they are fighting for survival, to which Shadow replies "This is a bad land for gods ... 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" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 582) (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 582-584).

This means that they are all equally welcome and able to carve out a space for themselves. And it means that they all struggle more or less equally to make their lives work - at the very least in the long run. America is a bad place for gods and myths, but it is a place that can allow anyone a place. Old values and new, people and gods of all kinds. There is no need to fight in the end, because this town is big enough for all of them. And, in the end, they will undoubtedly share the same fate.

Because it is also an argument that points to how fast America moves. Just consider how Mama-ji talks about the rise and fall of new gods, how she specifically mentions the worship of the railroads and how that has already faded (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 151-152). America is a land of change and invention and discovery.

It is, however, worth noting, that the old gods are old for a reason, while the new gods rise and fall, like Mama-ji says (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 151-152). Because the old gods represent enduring needs and values and behaviours. Love and sex, war and trickery, that never goes out of style. Technology is going to make itself indispensable to us until the next new things comes along. The old gods continue to make do because basic human nature will never become obsolete.

This is likely a strong reason why the old gods have made it so long, and why the new gods are not so cocky as they appear. Yes, humans have abandoned their old gods and myths in favour of making things happen on their own. Humans do not depend anymore on divine creatures to make them happy and give them what they need. You can, in a way, say humans have become self-reliant. Yet it would arguably still create some kind of energy for the gods to feed on. A war dedicated to a war god is the best possible thing for said god to consume, but wars exist in the name of a million non-divine reasons. It would have been so easy for Loki to dedicate the war to Odin. It was so was so easy for Bilquis to make her clients worship her. A little bit of creativity, manipulation, and willingness to settle for less. And that is likely enough for them to scrape by on (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 31+549).

Technology is not so fortunate as to be able to rely on the fact that humans will always need and desire the same base things. They cannot survive on scraps, because no scraps are left. If there ever existed such a thing as a god of telegraphy, what would he or she feed on now? The old gods can make do on whatever practices humans partake in to meet their basic needs and desires. The new gods are at great risk of being left in the dust, because the need for whatever they are gods of will diminish and potentially vanish entirely.

Finally, building on the argument that gods represent values and beliefs held by cultures, and the point that there is a space for all of them, I would like to discuss how values have and have not changed. Because it is easy to look at the old gods and the new and think that it is a fight between old and new values and traditions. And this is not entirely untrue. But there is also room to argue that it is less about the values and wants themselves, and more about the vessels that allow us to pursue these wants and uphold these values. Loki even says at one point that it is not about old and new, despite what he and Wednesday have tricked the gods into believing. It is about patterns (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 569-570).

Consider the vikings, for instance. At that time and in that place, sailing out to raid and plunder was the done thing. It is easy to surmise that this was what would give a viking status, it was a job and a source of income, it would make women want to marry you, and - despite the violent nature of such a lifestyle - it could perhaps even be considered a source of stability. These days, nowhere in the Western, civilized world could you do that and be considered husband or wife material or particularly cool and great by the general public, nor is it likely to be offering you a wealthy and stable lifestyle.

Vikings worshipped war because it was a way to achieve the things they thought were ideal, it was a way to become honorable and great, and your reputation meant more than your life. But soldiers and war in this day and age are not even close to holding that kind of status in the Western world. The vikings would be shocked to hear about the protests the Vietnam war garnered.

But as a general rule, we still want to be rich, to live stable lives, to be attractive and desirable to others, to gain status and social climb. These are by no means uncommon desires. Yet living like a viking, that is a lot less desirable. The things we want as humans have not changed, our needs have not changed, the kinds of values we hold have not changed. But just like it was explained in the theory section, values can point in different directions. Which is why the ways we achieve what we want have changed. These days, living like a viking is not the answer. Becoming a doctor, a lawyer, or a businessman is much more likely to get you the kind of results just described.

And that is exactly why so many of the gods manage to still live on. They may not be worshipped the way they once were, but it is entirely possible for them to get creative and still get what they need. Bilquis, a goddess of love, for instance, is a prime example of this. Because people do not worship her anymore, but they still seek the things she stands for - sex and love. As a result, she works as a hooker, and she persuades her customers to worship her and dedicate themselves to her during the act, allowing her to devour them with her body and turn them into

sacrifices as she does (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 29-33) (Griffiths, “Bilquis”). One could decide to read Bilquis and her fate in a feminist light, but as that is somewhat far from the questions I am asking about the American identity, this is not something I intend to examine any further here.

Another example of this is Czernobog. At one point, Zorya Polunochnaya tells Shadow “In the old days, they would take people up to the top of the mountains. To the high places. They would smash the back of their skulls with a rock. For Czernobog” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 100). As times have moved on, people clearly do not smash each other’s skulls in anymore. At least not as a general rule of polite society. And especially not in the name of a mostly forgotten god. But Czernobog still needs that kind of energy to survive. So he gets a job on a killing floor, killing the cows with a hammer - and later with a bolt gun. This allows him to engage in something that could be considered its own kind of ritualistic killing with rules and patterns for how it must be done, to ensure the best possible result (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 86-87).

As a final example of the fact that the worship of gods may have disappeared, but whatever they were gods of have not, we have Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jaquel - or Thoth and Anubis as they are otherwise known in Egyptian mythology. Anubis was thought to have invented the Egyptian funeral rites, and he helped judge people once they died, showing the honest the way to the throne of Osiris once they passed. Thoth was believed to be the one who wrote down whatever verdict was passed upon a person once they died. So it makes sense that the two would join forces and open a funeral parlor. Here, they are free to do what could be considered their godly duties, the things they are good at, and make a life for themselves. At one point, while examining a dead body as part of his job, Jaquel - or Anubis - even cuts out tiny slices of the body’s organs. Some he preserve in formaldehyde, some he eat. Arguably, this could be considered a sacrifice as well (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 176-177+194+207-208+213-217 (Storm, 19+79).

So while the world looks very different to when these gods were first conceived by prayers and sacrifice and imagination and brought into the world through sheer belief, some things do stay the same. People still desire love and people still die. People still want for the same things. But they no longer appeal to the gods to give them these things - they go to other sources. In a lot of ways, this is what causes the old gods to fade and the new to rise; humans want the same things, but we are more likely to rely on ourselves or make things happen ourselves, than we are to pray for what we want. And the fact that these gods are able to make do by going where people direct these wants, values, requests, and energy, that makes it all the more evident that perhaps we as people have not changed as much as Odin and Mr. World would like us and the

gods to believe - it is simply the world around us that has moved forward, and we as humans - and they as gods - have had to move with it.

As a final sidenote, it is worth paying attention to the fact that not all the gods are equally upset by the way their worship is fading, nor are they equally eager to enter into the war that Odin and Loki are orchestrating. Neither Zorya Vechernyaya or Czernobog even want to see Mr. Wednesday when he shows up (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 82-84). Easter initially claims trying to make her join the war would be futile (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 330). Mama-ji, far more ancient than most of the gods, calls it nonsense when Mr. Wednesday tries to rally the gods, arguing that she has seen lots of gods rise and fall, yet they have always managed to live in peace (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 151-152). But it makes sense that Odin and Loki are the ones pulling this con. Not only do they feed on war and chaos, not only would they directly benefit from the war. But there are other gods of chaos and war. These two are born from a culture that, as has been previously mentioned, holds fame and reputation above all else. Death is inevitable, but as long as your name is still known, you have done well. The old gods once had entire cities dedicated to them, and now they are surviving on scraps. Of course the two of them would be extra upset with being forgotten. Granted, honor was also highly valued by the vikings - but this is perhaps not a trait anyone thought to cultivate in the personifications of chaos and war.

4.2 A place for dreams and second chances

America - land of the free and home of the brave. A country with a reputation for being the place where everyone can make something of themselves and achieve all of their dreams. There is a reason the American Dream is called just that. But how does Shadow fit into this dream? Does he achieve something like it? What does his journey say about America as a country?

In the beginning of the novel, Shadow loses everything. Not unlike the Puritans, who left for America to pursue a new life with a clean slate. He has been three years in prison (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 3), but he has a wife, Laura, to come home to, and his best friend, Robbie, owns a gym where Shadow used to work and where his job is waiting for him. He is going to get a second chance - which is arguably a very American concept, considering the amount of people who have travelled there during the years for exactly that, fleeing from war, famine, poverty, or being sent there for their crimes (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 8-9).

Only, it does not go as simply and as smoothly as that. First, he is told his wife is dead and immediately after that he is released from prison (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 14). Then, he learns that the car crash that killed his wife also killed Robbie - and the promise of a job presumably died with him (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 37). And then, just to make matters even worse,

Shadow finds out that his best friend and his wife were having an affair, their deaths crashing down upon them in the middle of one of their illicit meetings (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 54). Granted, getting released from prison is not the worst thing that could happen to Shadow, or to anyone who has done their time and is ready to go back into the world as newly reformed people. But it does represent a big change and shift in his life. He is robbed of the opportunity to go back to the bed he is so used to, to take comfort in life going on in the routines he is familiar with. And that leaves Shadow completely adrift, with no fixed and firm point in his life he can hold onto. Not a single thing in his life is the same as it was that morning once he goes to sleep that night. Everything has changed.

Every single way he would previously have defined himself, everything he would previously have held onto, that is all gone. But of course, no man can function in modern society without any humans being involved whatsoever. As the saying goes, no man is an island. So because he needs a job and because he feels like he has nothing else to do, no reason not to do it, no reason to even really value his own life that highly anymore, he decides to accept the job that Mr. Wednesday offers him. And that winds up sending Shadow on quite a journey throughout all of America. A journey that will change everything - not just for the gods, but also for Shadow himself (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 41-42).

The thing about Shadow is that prior to the novel, and for part of the novel itself, he is not really his own person. At one point, he and Laura have a conversation exactly about that:

‘It must be hard,’ said Laura, ‘not being alive.’ ... ‘I’m alive,’ said Shadow. ‘I’m not dead. Remember?’ ‘You’re not dead,’ she said. ‘But I’m not sure that you’re alive either. Not really. ... I love you,’ she said, dispassionately. ‘You’re my puppy. But when you’re really dead you get to see things clearer. It’s like there isn’t anyone there. You know? You’re like this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world. ... Even when we were together. I loved being with you because you adored me, and you would do anything for me. But sometimes I’d go into a room and I wouldn’t think there was anybody in there. And I’d turn the light on, or I’d turn the light off, and I’d realize that you were in there, sitting on your own ... not doing anything. ... The best thing about Robbie was that he was *somebody*. He could be a jerk sometimes, and he could be a joke, ...but he was alive, puppy. He wanted things. He filled the space.’ ... [Shadow] said ‘I’m not dead.’ ‘Maybe not,’ she said. ‘But are you sure you’re alive?’ (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 396-397).

This kind of thing is not something anyone ever wants to hear. But this is nonetheless true for Shadow. Throughout the novel, we get glimpses of different ways in which he is defined by others and not by himself, how he is at worst an empty shell. We see this, for instance, in the way he is never addressed by any proper, given name. Laura calls him Puppy because he was like a puppy, latching onto her like she is his master and whole world, doing everything for her and not for himself. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 396-397). Or how he came to be called Shadow as a child, because he would just follow adults around rather than make friends with other children or go out playing (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 330). These names tell us something about how much he was defined by others.

But this actually makes a lot of sense. Because a lot of Shadow's journey is about becoming his own person, achieving some kind of independence - self-reliance, if you will. Because from the moment he was conceived, he was intended as a sacrifice, which is revealed when Shadow watches the entirety of his life unfold after he was hung up on the tree, and he sees Mr. Wednesday seducing his mother (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 517). Something that is only further confirmed when Shadow later arrives upon the scene of the battle and confronts Mr. World/Loki and Mr. Wednesday, and they explain that Mr. Wednesday needed to truly die, and, for that reason, they needed a special sacrifice to ensure his revival (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 577-578). There are hints of it even in the very beginning of the novel, when Shadow and Mr. Wednesday first agree to the terms of Shadow's employment and Mr. Wednesday demands that Shadow be the one to hold his vigil in the case of his death (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 40).

We even learn that his true name is Balder Moon in the novella, "The Monarch of the Glen" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 517) - a name that matches that of a very well-liked and bright, shining god from Norse mythology, a son of Odin, who was murdered when Loki arranged for a blind god to throw sharpened mistletoe at him, the only thing in the world that had not promised to never hurt him (Sturluson, 33+65-66). It seems doubtful that Shadow is a reincarnation of Balder, however, and more likely that his life simply mirrors certain parts of the mythological character.

For instance, Shadow is rather likable. Even some of the more surly characters like him. Even Czernobog likes him, despite describing himself as a bad one and a bad memory. He also describes himself as dark and Shadow as light - granted, this is in reference to the game they are playing at the time, but as has already been mentioned, Czernobog is a dark god, and Balder is a light one, so there is undeniably some symbolism to be found in this (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 86+89+92-93). And at one point, Loki says:

Patterns and distractions ... When this is all done with, I guess I'll sharpen a stick of mistletoe and go down to the ash tree [where Shadow is hanging, holding his vigil for Wednesday], and ram it through his eye. That's what those morons fighting out there have never been able to grasp. It's never a matter of old and new. It's only about patterns. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 569-570).

Additionally, it could be argued that Shadow serves as Mr. Wednesday's champion in a lot of ways. He agrees to protect him and fight with people on Wednesday's behalf if necessary (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 40). He plays checkers with Czernobog, risking his own life so that Czernobog will have to join the war (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 90-91). And he is the one who has to hold the vigil when Wednesday dies (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 40). So it is easy to see that Shadow's entire existence is tied up in that sacrifice. He was only ever created to be a part of a pattern, a piece of a puzzle, his worth and use defined by this long con. No wonder he lacks an independent identity.

But that changes during the novel. And more specifically, it changes when Shadow is hanging on that ash tree. At first, nobody can accuse him of enjoying the experience of that vigil. It is uncomfortable and it turns painful and it is even kind of boring at first. But as time passes and life leeches out of him, he actually finds himself coming alive:

A strange joy rose within Shadow then, and he started laughing as the rain washed his naked skin and the lightning flashed and thunder rumbled so loudly that he could barely hear himself. He laughed and exulted. He was alive. He had never felt like this. Ever. If he died, he thought. If he died right now, here on the tree, it would be worth it to have had this one, perfect, mad moment. 'Hey!' he shouted, at the storm. 'Hey! It's me! I'm here!' (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 499).

And later, when Laura arrives, this exchange takes place: "'You're dying up there[' Laura said]. 'Maybe,' [Shadow] said. 'But I'm alive.' 'Yes,' she said, after a moment. 'I guess you are.'" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 507-508). This is a clear reference to the conversation they had earlier, in which Laura accused Shadow of not being alive and not really wanting anything for himself, of not really being anyone. And this can be taken in a few different ways. You could choose to believe that he is finally doing what he was always meant to do, he is finally fulfilling the purpose with which he was created. But it could also be argued that it is because he is shedding that burden and getting a chance to be a person on his own (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 495-509).

To support this, one can look at his journey after the vigil. He meets Zorya Polunochnaya, and in exchange for truths and for answers to his questions, he gives her his name - his real name (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 512-513). Which, as has been already established, is Balder, son of Odin. As has previously been argued, that name sums up his entire identity up until this point. He is now letting go of it, and thus he is letting go of his previous identity. He has let go of his name and fulfilled his promises, and he is now free to be his own, self-relying man. He is his own man, and he is no longer so tied up in being his father's son. A sentiment that is echoed in the short story, "Black Dog", which appears in Gaiman's short story collection *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions & Disturbances*, right as Shadow is facing the villain of the story: "I will not be my father's dog" (300).

Additionally, Shadow also seems to gain his own agency. Earlier, he did exactly as he was told. At one point, when asked why he was headed to Cairo (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 176), he responds "Where else have I got to go? It's where Wednesday wants me to go" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 177). And initially, he chooses to die and enter into nothing (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 526). Which, granted, is not actually gaining agency, so much as it is just opting out. But this is arguably just the last part of the journey. He has already given up his name and identity. And we learned early on that, because he felt he had nothing to live for, he was not scared of dying (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 91). What remains is that Shadow stops being scared of living.

And that is what happens after Shadow enters into nothing, and is then subsequently pulled back out of it. That he gains agency and stops being so afraid to keep going. After having been pulled from the nothingness by Whiskey Jack (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 553), Whiskey Jack asks him if he would jump from a cliff just because all his friends jumped. And Shadow says that maybe he would (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 557). Which is interesting in the light of his earlier behaviour of just doing as told. This is not a definitive 'no', but perhaps a 'maybe' is better. Perhaps 'maybe' means 'I intend to think about it and consider the situation for myself, rather than simply relying on everyone else's judgment or rejecting anything without a second thought.' Perhaps 'maybe' is a very good step towards self-reliance, independence, and your own sense of agency. Maybe this is exactly what Gaiman intended to show us. In America, you do not quit - if you simply pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you can keep moving simply by relying on yourself.

This is also when Shadow finally sees clearly, right before he is brought back to life, that this is not a matter of war - it is a con. And this is when he finally reaches the point where he has to make decisions for himself. Easter is the one who wakes him, she is there when he opens his eyes. Shadow is less than pleased with this and complains about being brought back to life, refusing to go fight in the war - as he assumes was the purpose of resurrecting him. But Easter denies that that is what she wants from him: "I brought you back because that was what I had to do ... It's what I can do. It's what I'm best at. What you do now is whatever you have to do. Your call. I did my part" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 561). For the first time, Shadow's life is his to do with as he pleases, completely and entirely. What comes next is entirely up to him. Finally, he gets to make a choice of his own (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 557+560-561).

And Shadow makes the choice, voluntarily, to go to the fight and stop it (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 573), confronting Loki and his father on the way (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 574-579). Even though he thought on the tree that there was nothing to do but ride out the storm, now that it is really upon them (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 498), he makes the conscious decision of his own free will to go and stop it. He steps into the Backstage where it is all happening, and he convinces the gods to lay down their weapons and to not engage in this war, because all parties will inevitably wind up losing (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 580-584). He did not have to do that, nobody told him or made him do it. If anything, certain someones would clearly have preferred it if he had not. It was Shadow's own choice.

And finally, he stops being afraid of living. He had, as mentioned, already lost his fear of death, had willingly chosen nothingness. But now he chooses to go on. He outright tells the gods "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" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 584). He actively lumps himself in with 'man', says that 'we' go on. It is perfectly reasonable to interpret that as him saying he is ready to keep moving, even if he does not necessarily know where. That he has finally learned how to face life unafraid. He is, perhaps, even at peace with himself - or he is getting there, at least.

This leaves us with a different Shadow than when we started. We even begin to see the major change take place during his journey after the vigil on the tree: "He was not afraid. Not any more. Fear had died on the tree, as Shadow had died. There was no fear left, no hatred, no pain. Nothing left but essence" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 520). And in a sense, this leaves him both more and less defined at the end of the book than he was at

the beginning. He has been stripped down to the essentials, in a way, the most important parts of him. But he still needs to put the puzzle pieces of himself together in order to figure what the picture looks like. And this does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. Because, previously, he was arguably not the one in charge of defining himself. That was done by the people around him. As has been pointed out already, Laura even said he was a man-shaped hole in the world. And as was mentioned then, she does not think that anymore once he is on the tree.

He does not achieve the American Dream in the rags-to-riches, lots-of-money-in-the-bank kind of way that is so often associated with the concept these days. Not that this is really the point of Shadow's journey. We even learn that he has a penchant for simply coming across money or a way to make them when he needs it in "The Monarch of the Glen" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 664). But that does not mean that Shadow's journey cannot in some way speak to something very American, that he does not achieve something else.

What Shadow instead achieves is a second chance. Not the second chance he thought he was getting in the beginning of the novel, in which he would be returning to his old life (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 9), but a real second chance. Without his father's plans for him weighing him down, he is free to be his own man. And is that not fundamentally very American? For some, it is not about wealth. For some, like Shadow, like the puritans, like Essie Tregowan from one of the "Coming to America" chapters, America is not about wealth. It is about second chances. For some, it is about finding a place where even ex-convicts and criminals and those in exile can make a new life and reinvent themselves.

So maybe Shadow is less defined, less certain of who he is. But his future is bright and open, and he has all the opportunity in the world to figure it out. He left some things behind, but as Mr. Nancy says (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 590-591) when Shadow voices that he feels he has lost a lot since his release from prison: "Maybe ... you kept more than you think" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 591). And perhaps that too is very American. That not everything is so easily defined - and that you get your chance to define yourself, on your own. And he takes that chances, uses it to travel and to work his way from one place to another. He relies only on himself as he makes this journey, takes jobs and meets people and goes places (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 664-666). Maybe this is the true essence of the American self-reliance. Emerson would probably have approved.

And Shadow does eventually go back to the states: “‘I think’, said Shadow, ‘that I’ll spend a couple of weeks looking around the UK.[‘] ... ‘And then?’” Shadow knew it then. Perhaps he had known it all along. ‘Chicago,’ he said[.] And then he said, so quietly that only he could have heard it, ‘I guess I’m going home.’” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 719-720). He ends the novel itself at a loss, but with a second chance. And with that second chance, he manages to find himself and to find himself to the point that he can recognize where home is - and he identifies it as Chicago, the place his mother was born and where she later died (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 11). It is not the rags-to-riches version of the American Dream. But perhaps, to Shadow, this is much better.

It is, however, important to note that while this is true in theory, the real life application is perhaps not as inclusive as one might like it to be. In the animated movie *An American Tail*, a family of mice are moving from Russia to America, the rumors they have heard about it making it sound like it is heaven on Earth. A whole song is dedicated to it, a large group of mice passengers on a ship all singing a song while they are on their way there, describing America as a country in which the streets are made of cheese. And, most importantly, how the country has no cats.

Unfortunately for the mice in *An American Tail*, the streets are paved like those anywhere else, and there are in fact plenty of cats. But it does illustrate the experience a lot of people may have with this country. For decades, centuries even, people have come to America because they want to find a gold mine or make it big in Hollywood. For decades, centuries even, people have come to America and found themselves disappointed. It is a land of potential, yes. But sometimes, potential goes unfulfilled.

It is also, unfortunately, worth noting that success is disproportionately not in the favour of minorities of any kind. Race, for instance, is a factor likely to affect your chances of succeeding. Urban Institute has a whole collection of articles on institutional and structural racism in the United States. About this, they have this to say:

Racial and ethnic inequalities loom large in American society. People of color face structural barriers when it comes to securing quality housing, healthcare, employment, and education. Racial disparities also permeate the criminal justice system in the United States and undermine its effectiveness. (“Structural Racism in America”).

And this is just one example. Arguments could be made for many other factors preventing or impacting your success. Consider for instance that the US has never had a female president - and studies show that if and when they get one, she is likely to be held to higher, stricter standards than her male predecessors (Horseman).

The inequality that America still suffers from today is not a topic I will be doing a deep dive into at this time. It is not the focus of this thesis, and for that reason I will not be spending page upon page, discussing this matter. But it would be ignorant of me not to realize and acknowledge that, yes, in theory, America is a place where anything can happen and anyone has the same shot at success. But, in reality, this potential that America may pride itself upon is not distributed quite as evenly as it should be.

4.3 The American identity

This last section of the analysis will have a somewhat broader focus. Where the first focused on the gods and the second focused on Shadow's journey, this will have much more of a general focus. Because the novel does contain more that could be used to comment on what the American identity could be without it being directly related to the use of mythology or to the question of how Shadow's journey relates to the American Dream. This section, then, will act as a kind of catch-all section, in which I intend to bring up whatever else I might find interesting in relation to my questions about the American identity, and discuss how they relate to the American identity.

4.3.1 Race and ethnicity

The first interesting thing that will be discussed is Shadow's race and ethnicity. We already know that Wednesday is his father, as this has already been readily established at this point. And it is revealed fairly early on that Wednesday is really Odin - hints are lefts throughout the novel, but it is outright confirmed too by the man himself (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 146). And since Odin is a significant god in Germanic mythology (Storm, 214), he is presumably white. Additionally, Shadow was born in Oslo, Norway (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 666).

But Shadow is by no means of purely Scandinavian descent. He is described as having "cream-and-coffee skin" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 515), leaving us to conclude that his mother was a woman of color, presumably of African-American descent. On top of that, we know that Shadow and his mother would travel and move a lot because of her work as a US embassy secretary (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 330).

This leaves us with the knowledge that Shadow is of mixed race, and his childhood has been spread out across a list of cities. It is hard to find a more mixed, varied, and diverse background than that. And that is arguably very American. Because it is, as already mentioned, a whole melting pot of not just cultures but also of people. People with roots all over the world live in that country and at this point in time, it will not be an easy task to find someone whose family have lived in the states for more than a few generations and whose genetics are solely from one specific place. It will be full of people of mixed race, who are 1/16 Cherokee and 1/4 Irish, a dash of this or that, a European mother and an Asian father, grandparents from Australia, Poland, South Africa, and Scotland.

America is a very mixed place. In the short story, "Black Dog", Shadow is having a conversation with a couple about dogs, when this exchange takes place:

'Ask me, all mongrels are better than pedigree anything,' said the woman. 'It's why America is such an interesting country. Filled with mongrels.' ... 'Actually, darling,' said the man ... in his gentle voice, 'I think you'll find that the Americans are keener on pedigree dogs than the British. I met a woman from the American Kennel Club, and honestly, she scared me. I was scared.' 'I wasn't talking about dogs, Ollie,' said the woman. 'I was talking about... Oh, never mind.' (Gaiman, 265-266).

And that is a pretty good point. That America is, in a sense, filled with mongrels. So many ethnicities, cultures, traditions, roots, religions. Unlike so many European countries, it is an incredibly diverse country across the board. And that adds to the sense that America is one big mixture of a whole lot of different things, leaving it hard to clearly define.

4.3.2 Geography

Something else that is worth noting is the way most of this novel takes place in lesser known places around the states. When most people think of the United States of America, they will have certain iconic places in mind. Certain landmarks - like Times Square, the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, Golden Gate Bridge, the Las Vegas or Hollywood sign - or certain cities - like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, or New York. A lot of people, if told to pick some quintessentially American places, would mention these.

But by not focusing on these things, Gaiman manages to show us a different side of America and to highlight once again just how diverse a country it is. We meet Shadow in prison (*American Gods*, 3), and we see him meet up with Wednesday in a themed bar called Jack's Crocodile Bar (*American Gods*, 26+28). They stay in motels (*American Gods*, 61), and we see them visiting a variety of roadside attractions - like House on the Rock (*American Gods*, 129)

with the world's largest carousel (*American Gods*, 139), or Rock City which rests at the top of Lookout Mountain (*American Gods*, 526-528). We even get to see a perfectly lovely and seemingly entirely unremarkably town called Lakeside, which is hailed as a nice and quiet place by those who live there (*American Gods*, 261+289-290).

This is both interesting and very telling. Because America, like any other country, may have its more popular spots and its more well known sights. But *American Gods* takes care to remind us that the country as a whole cannot be summed up like that. And instead, we are introduced to all these lesser known, quirky places. Quirky places that are even deemed places of power, because of the amount of people visiting them - once more reminding us that power is found where we place it, leading our thoughts once more back to the Native Americans including landmarks in their myths. It is a reminder of how truly diverse a country it is, and how this diversity extends beyond its people.

Not that these places do not have anything to say about the people who inhabit this country. Take a place like the House on the Rock, for instance. That is a real place, and this is what the website has to say about it:

For over 60 years, the House on the Rock has been a majestic work in progress. 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. ("About").

It clearly takes a special kind of person to come up with a place like this, and it does not seem farfetched to brand Alex Jordan an eccentric - he even had his ashes spread all over The House of the Rock with the assistance of a low flying plane. The House on the Rock itself has been described as a place you cannot expect to accurately describe, as your description will inevitably fall short. Additionally, Alex Jordan was known for throwing wild parties in this house-museum-oddity-space which was "built to confound rather than inform" (Gabler). It was a creation that continued to develop until Jordan died, and it is full of bizarre displays, speaking to the character of the man who devoted much of his life to making this place (Gabler).

But if America is exactly the kind of place where you can get away with being an eccentric and not only build a place like The House on the Rock, but also make a lot of money on it (Gabler), it is also the kind of place that allows for quiet but good places like Lakeside, with similarly quiet but good people inhabiting them. And those people contrast with the Alex Jordan

types. Which is exactly the thing about America. It is so big and so diverse, that there is plenty of space for them both.

On this matter, Neil Gaiman himself has said this:

I think the biggest difference between England and America is that England has history, and America has geography. In England, you can find whatever you need as long as you're willing to go back far enough, or go and find out when it happened. In America you can find whatever you need just as long as you're prepared to drive far enough. (*American Gods*, 645).

And somehow, he manages to make that come across in his novel. America is a big place, but because it has geography rather than history, like Gaiman puts it, there is not as much tradition to tell people 'this is how we always did it' or 'this is the path we have always walked, do not stray from this'. Instead, there is a lot of space for everyone to walk their own path, like the Alex Jordans of the world, who just want to build big and weird places and leave their own little mark on the world. History is perhaps less likely to limit them, and the geography more likely to allow them to find a place for themselves in this world. The lack of a firm stick-to-the-status-quo tradition opens up for more opportunities to explore and do something new.

Which is perhaps exactly why the myth of the American Dream has survived. And maybe that seems a little contradictory - a myth that has historically always been a part of the American identity, surviving because there is no history to hold it back. And maybe it is. But if this country has been priding itself on this dream since the beginning, if it has since day one considered it a self-evident truth that all men are created equal, it makes sense ("The Declaration of Independence"). It may not be an ancient country with millennia of history behind it. But a large part of the history it does have is the belief that makes up the American Dream.

4.3.3 A bad land for gods

Another interesting thing is the 'bad place for gods' conversation. At one point, while Shadow is backstage after his death on the tree, Whiskey Jack tells him this:

Look ... This is not a good country for gods. My people figured that out early on. There are creator spirits who found the earth or made it or shit it out, but you think about it: who's going to worship Coyote? He made love to the Porcupine Woman and got his dick shot through with more needles than a pincushion. He'd argue with rocks and the rocks would win[.]So, yeah, my people figured that maybe there's something at the back of it all, a creator, a great spirit, and so we say thank you to it, because it's always good to say thank you. But we never built churches. We

didn't need to. The land was the church. The land was the religion. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 556).

But why exactly is it that America is so bad for gods? Whiskey Jack argues that, like some fruits and vegetables just cannot grow equally well all across the globe, so is the American soil not good for gods. A South American sun god would not have much luck with the Vikings in the olden days of Scandinavia, and some of the Egyptian gods were created specifically for the environment around the Nile. Some gods are created explicitly for the time and place they are in, and perhaps that makes them incompatible with modern day America. Perhaps America is a country that allows for a creator but is not good for worship of individual gods - which is perhaps even supported by the fact that the US is a mostly Christian country these days, with 70,6% being Christian in one way or another, and more than half of adults reporting that they find religion to be very important. A number that is even higher among specific Christian groups, with 79% of adult Evangelical Protestants and 84% of Mormons giving that answer ("Religious Landscape Study")("Importance of religion in one's life") (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 556).

So it is clearly not a country without religion whatsoever. And religion is by no means without influence in the culture and politics of America. Just look at the Alabama abortion law, a huge topic during May 2019, as this is being written. A law that has been referred to as "Christian Sharia Law" (Harris and Tarchak) (Harris and Tarchak). But it is still a fairly new country without a long, long history of worshipping one specific religion, and that religion only. For much of the existence of the United States of America, it has been one big mixture of immigrants, leaving it almost impossible to point to one specific religion or belief system and say "this is what has always been worshipped here." Even though you could arguably claim it is a Christian country and always has been, that does not ring entirely true. Doing so overlooks the many other beliefs that have been brought to the country, and the other religions people live by even now. And it completely ignores the many different Native American tribes and their many different beliefs from before the Christians came. It is a highly Christian country, but it is not only a Christian country. Many other religions exist alongside it, and many other beliefs came before.

America is a country that has been built on the individual's right to seek their fortune and happiness, much like the Puritans once did when they left England and set sail for America. So while it is a country of plurality and diversity, it is most certainly also a country of individuality. And if we take Emerson's call for people to be more self-reliant into consideration, does that not also mean one should rely less on gods? It perhaps even means that in America, gods are

not so divine, while humans are arguably elevated to something more than simply human. In America, they arguably take their destinies and fates out of the hands of any gods and hold onto these themselves.

At one point in the very first chapter, during a dream, this exchange takes place between Shadow and a character we come to know as the buffalo man: “‘Believe,’ said the rumbling voice. ‘If you are to survive, you must believe.’ ‘Believe what?’ asked Shadow. ‘What should I believe?’ ... ‘Everything,’” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 19). And while this is not only sound advice when you are about to be thrown into the kind of ordeal Shadow is - even if Shadow himself has no clue what is about to happen let alone what kind of people he will meet yet - it is also quite a telling statement in another way. Because all these gods are real. Even outside the novel, in real life, they have a sort of life of their own. Because the belief in these gods were, at least at one point, real. The people and cultures that thought them up were real, the things they symbolize are real.

But, perhaps more importantly, it speaks to the multitudes of America. This is not a country where one thing only is sacred - there are plenty of sacred things, to many different peoples and religions and lifestyles. And it speaks to America being a land of opportunity, where possibility itself is perhaps even thought of as sacred. In America, perhaps it is wise to believe. In your god or gods, in yourself, in the people around you, in possibilities. Because this is a country where everything has the possibility to be real, anything can happen. This is where you go to achieve your dreams, to reach some kind of success. This is where anything and everything can happen. Or so this is how many people at the very least think of this place in theory, even if it has already been acknowledged that this is perhaps not necessarily the case in reality.

4.3.4 Gaiman’s definition

Finally, it is worth noting that Gaiman does not actively sit down and tell us ‘this is what the meaning of America is, I have worked out the quintessential definition of everything that encompasses this country.’ And it seems like leaving this open ended - despite the comments you can choose to interpret that he makes through this novel - is entirely on purpose. But in something similar to an afterword - titled “How Dare You?” - he does in fact address his views on America:

Slowly - and it took a while - I realized both that the America I’d been writing [previously] was wholly fictional, and that the real America, the one underneath the what-you-see-is-what-you-get surface, was much more interesting than the fictions. The immigrant experience is, I suspect, a universal one (even if you’re the kind of immigrant, like me, who holds on tightly, almost superstitiously, to his UK

Citizenship, long after his accent has become rather dodgy). On the one hand, there's you, and on the other hand, there's America. It's bigger than you are. So you try and make sense of it. You try to figure it out - something which it resists. It's big enough, and contains enough contradictions, that it is perfectly happy not to be figured out, and somewhere in there you realise that the very best you can hope for is to be like one of the blind men in the fable who each grasped the elephant by its trunk, its leg, its side, its tail, and who each decided that an elephant was like a snake, a tree, a wall, a rope. As a writer all I could do was to describe a small part of the whole. And it was too big to see. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 654)

Gaiman continues to describe how he then later got the idea for *American Gods* when he was in the midst of a short stay in Reykjavik in Iceland, and how he wanted the book - among other things - to be about the immigrant experience. And so he wrote a book like that, discussing not just the gods that were brought to the country, but also the many people who carried their faith and beliefs with them. The people who gave the gods life in a new land, and the fates these people met. Whether that be thousands of years ago (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 446) or in this day and age, like Salim who meets a jinn (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 195+202) (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 655).

So we know that Gaiman entered into the writing process of this novel, knowing that he did not feel like America could be easily defined as one thing - and certainly not by one author alone. And yet he felt, perhaps because of the distance between him and America at the time, that he had enough of an idea of it to write a novel about it (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 654-655).

And it seems like it works. Maybe it is because Gaiman acknowledges that it is too big and too vast and too full of diversity and contradictions to be easily defined. Perhaps it is because he wanted the story to be complex and full of many different facets, saying

It would be a thriller, and a murder mystery, and a romance, and a road trip. It would be about the immigrant experience, about what people believed in when they came to America. And about what happened to the things that they believed. ... I'd lived in the US for for almost nine years. Long enough to know that everything I'd learned about it from the movies was wrong. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 655).

Maybe it is because Gaiman, almost contradicting himself, seems to believe that America defies a single, locked down definition, while at the same time believing he knows enough about it to at least talk about parts of the American experience and identity (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 654-655).

This should not make sense. An author claiming something cannot be defined and then trying to define it - even if just in part? But it does. It does make sense. Because as Gaiman himself has already said, this is a country of contradictions. Perhaps it makes sense that in trying to define it, or even just discussing the how-tos and possibilities of defining it, you will meet some contradictions. Granted, if you zoom in closely enough on any country, it is going to hold true that it contains contradictions. But as a country built on immigrants from all over the world rather than by a somewhat more homogenous group of people, it is more so the case in America than many other places.

And aside from that, Neil Gaiman never outright offers any definitions, never says 'this is the purest truth about America, if you wish to summarize the identity of this country, this is it, this is how, this is where you should look'. On the contrary, he includes in the novel an exchange about how very hard and impossible it is to figure out what America really is:

'This is the only country in the world,' said Wednesday, into the stillness, 'that worries about what it is.' 'What?' [asked Shadow]. '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.' (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 128).

And perhaps, Mr. Wednesday - and, by extension, Neil Gaiman himself - has a point. While there could be some debate about what would constitute the soul of America, and some people will go on a journey to look for the heart and essence of it, that is not something you hear about being done in other countries. And yet, somehow, we still do not have a definitive answer that tells us that this, this is what America is, this is how we sum up the identity of the United States of America.

That is not to say that the country is completely impossible to define. Perhaps, part of the charm of this country is that you cannot boil it down in such a way. It will willfully fight you on the matter and resist you putting it into a box. And anyone who makes the attempt is at the risk of getting into a wrestling match with an unruly concept that cares little for any limitations we may wish to impose upon it. But the essence of the country can be found in something that has already been discussed - the American Dream.

5. Conclusion

So after all this, what kind of commentary can one arguably claim that Neil Gaiman's 2001 novel, *American Gods*, is making about the American identity? Well, first of all, it is a country of immigrants, the ever famous melting pot. It is perhaps one of the most diverse countries in the world. It is a country in possession of a culture that has been shaped by countless inputs from all over the world. All of which has, in turned, been shaped into a unique culture of its own.

It is also a country full of opportunity and possibility and second chances. Even people like Shadow - by all accounts an immigrant and an ex-convict, a man whose entire life has gone up in smoke more or less overnight and left him with nothing - can reinvent themselves, find themselves, and thrive in America. A country where success is theoretically possible for all. Even though it is worth noting a few things on that account. 1) While the American Dream is often thought of as being equivalent to financial success, and the Puritans were seeking that too, there are other ways to be successful - clean slates and second chances included. And 2) while everyone should in theory be afforded the same, equal chances as anyone else, this is not really how it necessarily plays out in real life.

And finally, it is a country that defies easy definition. It is simply too big and vast, too diverse and full of contradictions. It is big cities and open roads, quiet small town people and eccentrics with big dreams. It is conmen and people ready to save the day, white people and people of color, it is downtrodden gods and people with a touch of magic inside. It is a little bit of everything. America stretches far and wide, both in terms of geography and a more metaphorical kind of space. And perhaps, as long as one does not try to tame it, there is a place for everyone there.

Works Cited

“About.” *The House on the Rock*, www.thehouseontherock.com/about/. Accessed 19 April 2018.

Allen, Douglas. “Mircea Eliade.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15 Apr. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Mircea-Eliade. Accessed 14 Feb. 2019.

An American Tail. Directed by Don Bluth, Universal Pictures, 1986.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012.

Cotterell, Arthur. *The Encyclopedia of Mythology*. Leicestershire, Lorenz Books, 2011.

“The Declaration of Independence.” *USHistory.org*, www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/. Accessed 21 Feb. 2019.

Dimuro, Gina, “The Real Story of Marie Laveau, New Orleans’ Witchy Voodoo Queen.” *All That’s Interesting*, 28 March 2018, allthatsinteresting.com/marie-laveau. Accessed 7 April 2019.

Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1959.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The American Scholar.” *Emerson Central*, emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/addresses/the-american-scholar/. Accessed 1 March 2019.

---. “Representative Men: Seven Lectures.” *Project Gutenberg*, www.gutenberg.org/files/6312/6312-h/6312-h.htm#link2H_4_0002. Accessed 7 March 2019.

---. “Self-Reliance.” *Emerson Central*, emersoncentral.com/texts/essays-first-series/self-reliance/. Accessed 1 March 2019.

Gabler, Jay. “The trashiest enigma: Alex Jordan and the House on the Rock.” *The Tangential*, 30 Nov. 2014, <http://thetangential.com/2014/11/30/the-trashiest-enigma-alex-jordan-and-the-house-on-the-rock/>. Accessed 19 April 2019.

Gaiman, Neal. *American Gods: The Author’s Preferred Text*. London, Headline, 2013.

---. “Black Dog.” *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions & Disturbances*, London, Headline, 2015, pp. 264-307.

Geldard, Richard. “Emerson and the Dream of America.” *Huffington Post*, 19 Oct. 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-geldard/emerson-and-the-dream-of-_b_1988143.html. Accessed 7 March 2019.

Geldard, Richard G. *Emerson and the Dream of America: Finding Our Way to a New and Exceptional Age*. New York, Larson Publications, 2010.

Griffiths, Bley Eleanor. "American Gods mythology guide: Who is Bilquis, Queen of Sheba and goddess of love?" *RadioTimes*. Immediate Media Company, 2017, www.radiotimes.com/news/2019-04-05/american-gods-mythology-guide-who-is-bilquis-queen-of-sheba-and-goddess-of-love/. Accessed 11 April 2019.

---. "American gods mythology guide: Who is Irish leprechaun Mad Sweeney?" *RadioTimes*. Immediate Media Company, 2017, www.radiotimes.com/news/2019-04-01/american-gods-mythology-guide-who-is-irish-leprechaun-mad-sweeney/. Accessed 1 April 2019.

Harris, Rachel L., and Lisa Tarchak. "'I Don't Even Know How to Talk to the Other Side About This.'" *The New York Times*, 17 May 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/opinion/alabama-abortion-law.html. Accessed 18 May 2019.

Horseman, Jeff. "Female presidential candidates likely to face bias based on gender, study shows." *The Press-Enterprise*, 22 Feb 2019, www.pe.com/2019/02/22/study-indicates-female-presidential-candidates-likely-to-face-bias-based-on-leadership-looks-more/. Accessed 18 May 2019.

"Importance of religion in one's life." Pew Research Center, www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/importance-of-religion-in-ones-life/. Accessed 18 April 2019.

Jones, David M. and Brian Molyneaux. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of American Indian Mythology: Legends, Gods and Spirits of North, Central, and South America*. Leicestershire, Lorenz Books, 2011.

Klimczak, Natalia. "The Slavic Star Goddess Zorya, Guardian of the Doomsday Hound and Servant of the Sun God." *Ancient Origins*, 19 July 2016, www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends/slavic-star-goddess-zorya-guardian-doomsday-hound-and-servant-sun-god-006303. Accessed 1 April 2019.

Mahaffey, Dr. Patrick. "The World is Made of Stories: The Power of Myth and the Study of Mythology". *Pacifica Post*. Pacifica Graduate Institute, 11 Oct. 2017, www.pacificapost.com/the-world-is-made-of-stories-the-power-of-myth-and-the-study-of-mythology. Accessed 14 March 2019.

Mark, Joshua J. "Mythology." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 31 Oct. 2018, www.ancient.eu/mythology/. Accessed 2 March 2019.

"People and Ideas: The Puritans." *God in America*. PBS, www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/puritans.html. Accessed 21 Feb. 2019.

“Puritanism.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 20 July 1998, www.britannica.com/topic/Puritanism. Accessed 21 Feb. 2019.

Radford, Benjamin. “Men in Black: The UFO Buff’s Bogeymen.” *Live Science*, 15 Nov. 2012, www.livescience.com/24822-men-in-black.html. Accessed 10 April 2019.

“Religious Landscape Study.” Pew Research Center, www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/. Accessed 18 April 2019.

Storm, Rachel. *Myths and Legends of India, Egypt, China and Japan*. London, Lorenz Books, 2011.

“Structural Racism in America.” Urban. Urban Institute, www.urban.org/features/structural-racism-america. Accessed 18 May 2019.

Sturluson, Snorri. *The Prose Edda*. Translated by Jesse L. Byock, London, Penguin Classics, 2005.

Thomas, Leah Marilla. “What God is Zorya Polnochnaya Based On? This ‘American Gods’ Stargazer Is Celestial Herself.” *Bustle*, 14 May 2017, www.bustle.com/p/what-god-is-zorya-polnochnaya-based-on-this-american-gods-stargazer-is-celestial-herself-57462.

Accessed 1 April 2019.

“Value Theory and Research.” *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by Borgatta, Edgar F. and Marie L. Borgatta, 1992.

Varming, Ole and Lilian Zøllner. *Værdier og Værdiudvikling*. København, Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2002.

The World’s Largest Catsup Bottle Official Website and Fan Club. World’s Largest Catsup Bottle, 6 Sept. 1998, <http://www.catsupbottle.com/>. Accessed 10 April 2019.