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POP-CULTURE ARTIFACTS: VICE, VIRTUE AND VALUES IN *AMERICAN GODS*

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POP-CULTURE ARTIFACTS: VICE, VIRTUE AND VALUES IN *AMERICAN GODS*

ELLYN M. STEPANEK

**ABSTRACT**

In dealing with literary work such as Neil Gaiman's, fiction that both inhabits and defies conventions of genre and medium and thus easy definition, it is clear that an examination of such work benefits from as eclectic a style as Gaiman's own approach to story-telling. While this essay attempts no summary of the author's entire literary corpus, an analysis of the underlying influences of the novel *American Gods* is necessary to map the details of its territory. A survey of the convergence of the various genres and allusions within this one text, and the ways in which Gaiman measures Old World belief systems with New World contemporary values offers an entrance into *American Gods'* narrative center.

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## CHAPTER I

### MAPPING THE TERRITORY, IMAGINARY AND REAL

A trademark characteristic of Neil Gaiman's 2001 novel *American Gods* and much of his work in general is a fusion of the old and new. An accompanying sense of nostalgic mourning for a lost past pervades *American Gods*, along with a joyous pleasure in recalling and recasting certain traditional values and archetypes into modern, contemporary settings. The convergence of these two elements is what makes this particular narrative a work worthy of scholarly inquiry, as the novel surveys the growing pains of a cultural landscape under constant revision and expansion, and explores the consequences of such progress. The question the novel poses is: "What if the gods of antiquity lived today, in the 20th century?" As these older gods of classic myth and global folklore struggle for supremacy over the newer, "American" gods of modern convenience, the novel's symbolic battle and unresolved conclusion create a compelling trajectory of American and global culture on the cusp of the 21st century.

In *American Gods*, the primary struggle between old and new gods at its basic level represents a clash between the values of an Old World past and the advances of a modern and increasingly technological present and future. Gaiman constructs the landscape of America within these sprawling, unstable dimensions; the country in *American Gods* welcomes

a wide scope of beliefs but simultaneously resists any lasting impressions. Rather than neatly explaining why this occurs, *American Gods* raises more questions about modern society: What is the cultural significance of the war between the gods of old and the “new gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon” (137-138)? In what ways have Americans transferred their devotion from the spiritual to the material, technological gods? What are the consequences of such a shift? Using the form of popular fiction, Gaiman explores the postmodern preoccupation with the effects of scientific and technological advances on communication and culture, although instead of presenting a pastiche of discordant, individual voices and worlds, the novel describes an America with an almost coherent center. Many of the key metaphors of the novel such as identity, heritage, and modernity are common themes explored broadly in many postmodern works. Gaiman’s at times playful characterization of a plethora of gods and the idiosyncrasies of America belies an often almost cynical ambivalence in the novel about the integrity of American culture. The core tension in the novel arises from this narrative refusal to privilege either a cherished, idealized past or a volatile, constantly shifting present and future.

In the novel’s postscript, the journey of main characters Shadow and Odin ends with a beginning—or perhaps *the* beginning, for Odin. As a tourist in Reykjavik, Iceland, Shadow observes that the language “had changed little in a thousand years. The natives here could read the ancient sagas as easily as they could read a newspaper. There was a sense of continuity on this island that scared him, and that he found desperately reassuring” (584). Suggesting that both the language and the people of Iceland have remained homogeneous for a millennium, this episode noticeably contrasts Shadow’s recent trek through America. Despite the strangeness of the geographically isolated island, as a lone traveler Shadow finds

an uncanny comfort in Europe's foreign yet tangible history. No such permanence seems to exist in America, at least to any visible, easily detectable extent. Shadow in fact experiences quite the opposite in his homeland: a familiar landscape revealed slowly as a place with multiple unknown boundaries and inhabitants.

Superficially, the novel follows Wednesday and Shadow, traveling across the continental United States on a mission to enlist the support of the old gods in Wednesday's war against the new gods. The symbolic mission, however, is a quest to find the center of America. At one point, Wednesday remarks to Shadow: "[America] is the only country in the world ...that worries about what it is ...The rest of them know what they are. No one ever needs to go searching for the heart of Norway. Or looks for the soul of Mozambique. They know what they are" (116). This statement takes the anxiety over American identity for granted, or more precisely, asserts unquestionably that most other countries have no such ambiguity. The continental United States as a strange, amorphous geographic space emerges in the text in several ways both obvious and implicit. The sheer size of America contributes its sense of the indefinable: "Driving south was like driving forward in time... Shadow began to wonder if there was some kind of equation to explain it—perhaps every fifty miles he drove south he was driving a day into the future" (424). The diverse geography and time zones of the U.S. logically render a natural nationwide unity difficult. Wednesday tells Shadow at one point that "San Francisco isn't in the same country as Lakeside anymore than New Orleans is in the same country as New York or Miami is in the same country as Minneapolis...They may share certain cultural signifiers—money, a federal government, entertainment—it's the same *land*, obviously—but the only things that give it the illusion of being one country are the greenback, *The Tonight Show*, and McDonald's" (306). Wednesday asserts all of these cities are part of the same land mass, unified only



loosely through these markers, but that these cities are not necessarily of one homogeneous country, a very subtle distinction that explains, in part, why America is no place for gods. Shadow's tour of America and the shorter Coming to America sections demonstrate the disparity of culture throughout the land; in casting each location as its own specific spiritual realm, Gaiman uses conventions of fantasy to further draw out and sharpen these peculiarities. In an examination of the difference between literary fantasy and fairy tales, Maria Nikolajeva in "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern" writes, "In myth and fairy tale, the hero appears and acts within the magical chronotope. In fantasy, the main premise is the protagonist's transition between chronotopes..." (141-42). Invoking Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the literary construction of time-space units called chronotopes, Nikolajeva sees fantasy as closely aligned with the postmodern break from traditional narrative structure. *American Gods* certainly deviates from straightforward storytelling, in that the novel can almost be divided into a series of nearly discrete short stories. (Gaiman follows up this novel with a book, 2005's *Anansi Boys*, and a short story "The Monarch of the Glen" from 2006's *Fragile Things* that continue the travels of Anansi/Mr. Nancy and Shadow. The author reuses characters within his novels, short stories, and comic books with a frequency similar to the way he recasts characters from myth, literature, and popular imagination into his works.) Gaiman includes over 100 gods and figures from global mythology. The people and deities within *American Gods* seem separated only by time and space, two somewhat flimsy barriers in the world of the novel. This again aligns with Nikolajeva's idea of postmodern fantasy as comprised of multiple chronotopes, and describes the genre's landscape thus: "Heterotopia, or a multitude of discordant universes, denotes the ambivalent and unstable spatial and temporal conditions in fiction" (143). Gaiman, however, strives to

create a harmony between his fictional worlds, manipulating both spatial and temporal conventions to establish their underlying unity.

The search for the symbolic center of America becomes at one point the search for its actual physical center, a quest presented as imprecise but possible, as the chronicler Mr. Ibis writes, “Determining the exact center of anything can be problematic at best. With living things—people for example, or continents—the problem becomes one of intangibles: What is the center of man? What is the center of a dream?” (426). Gaiman as author seems, along with his characters, to focus on these vagaries; instead of neat solutions, what often arises are multiple, overlapping truths. The “exact” center of the United States is found by balancing a pin on a map and while the site, “several miles from Lebanon, Kansas” (426) on a hog farm, but is turned into a monument and tourist attraction, “Nobody came” (427). The West African story-teller and trickster god Anansi/Mr. Nancy tells Shadow that although “the exact center of America is a tiny run-down park, an empty church, a pile of stones, and a derelict motel...This isn’t about what is...It’s about what people *think* is. It’s all imaginary anyway. That’s why it’s important. People only fight over imaginary things” (427). This sentiment emerges several times in the novel, and increasingly applies to the gods as well, even as they strive for dominance.

After staging and televising the shooting of Wednesday, the opposition forces of the newer gods agree to relinquish the Norse god’s body to his compatriots at America’s center. The episode of the recovery of Wednesday’s body occurs late in the text, as does one explanation for America’s hostility to the uprooted gods. It is explained that the new gods will not provoke violence during the exchange of the body on such neutral ground, and Czernobog looks for the right word to describe the center of America:

“The opposite of sacred?” “Profane,” Shadow said without thinking. “No,” said Czernobog. “I mean, when a place is less sacred than any other place. Of negative

sacredness. Places where they can build no temples.. Places where people will not come, and will leave as soon as they can. Places where gods only walk if they are forced to...All of America has it, a little,' said Czernobog. 'That is why we are not welcome here...' (430)

The newer gods are as wary of the center as the older deities; the core of the United States epitomizes the spiritual vacuum of the land, with nothing tethered to old values in land essentially resistant to any new systems. Wednesday's scheme of a war between the gods, with blood quenching the land in a sacrifice to him and revitalizing him, ultimately fails; this failure to effect deeper change becomes a structural phenomenon of the novel itself. As the superficial, surface quality becomes all there is and premise of the novel, i.e. nothing really deep or lasting sticks, becomes the form of the novel.

Throughout the course of the novel, British author Gaiman explores the phenomena of myriad diverse American people: natives, early settlers, slaves, immigrants, and born-and-bred citizens. Paralleling to some degree the struggle between old and new gods, the America of *American Gods* seems a place characterized by the jostling of disparate ethnicities, languages, and ideologies. By circling around these issues of old ways against new ways and national purity versus cultural diversity, Gaiman explores what seems to be America's inherent *lack*: of a center, of history, and of unity, characteristics that apparently are more readily felt in Iceland. Finding the "heart of the land" is one of the novel's primary concerns; once Shadow leaves the US, he discovers what feels like the heart of Iceland almost immediately, finding the sensation both comforting and frightening. This simultaneous fear and embrace of continuity pervades *American Gods* in several ways. Just as the language of Northern Europe's countries maintains integrity throughout the ages, so too do their gods. Wednesday has died and reappears in the postscript near his homeland as Odin, "Bor's son" (586), "god of the gallows" (586), and "Lord of Asgard" (588). Gone are Wednesday's familiar charm, cleverness, and expensive taste; in their place is "an aging

hippie ...Or a long-retired gunfighter” (586), images that ironically call up specifically American archetypes. Meeting his father’s “double,” Shadow marvels at the god’s survival. The old man states: “[Wednesday] was me, yes. But I am not him” (587). In some sense, gods are clearly altered by time, location, and death. Wednesday seems a singularly American incarnation of Odin, adapting to the land and its people. The Icelandic Odin represents a purer form of the god, yet he retains some substance of his Wednesday “incarnation,” if only in his memory of the experience. Through this final episode, Gaiman almost seems to suggest that going forward somehow requires going back, and the frequent interruptions of Mr. Ibis’s immigration narratives seem to assert this as well. The postscript raises other questions that lie at the heart of the novel: In a world where gods cannot truly die in any mortal or permanent sense, what is truly at stake in a war between the old and new gods? How does America affect the gods? And (the refrain of the novel) if America is not a place for gods, old or new, what, then, is it a good place for?

The idea of traceable continuity versus sprawling unpredictability surfaces in the novel’s formal structure, as it resists a clear generic classification and even at times, narrative stability. As the central plot branches off into many side excursions, dream sequences, and historical digressions, Gaiman attempts to guide these diverse elements into a unified whole, with mixed results. Roughly the first half of *American Gods* recounts the meeting of Shadow and Wednesday and their travels to rally support for Wednesday’s war against the new gods. Wednesday introduces Shadow and the reader not to a different America, but to a different way of experiencing an excruciatingly stereotypical America. Wednesday’s defamiliarization of America reveals a shallow place, with the land, its people, and its gods, both native and imported, available for anyone’s own personal ends. Shadow, Gaiman’s metaphorical everyman, willingly accepts Wednesday as his boss and follows him, more out of a seeming

lack of direction than any other ambition or desire. Before Shadow even sees Wednesday, he experiences the god's influence as he misses a plane and is directed to a different flight, and Gaiman uses an apt metaphor for Shadow's predicament: "Shadow felt like a pea being flicked between three cups, or a card being shuffled through a deck" (20). In this example of interreferentiality, the imagery of con-games and gambling obliquely casts Shadow's role and challenge for the remainder of the novel. After initially declining Wednesday's proposition, Shadow tosses a coin to decide whether or not to accept; Shadow fixes it to turn the offer down. Wednesday wins the toss and exposes his cunning early on: "‘Rigged games are the easiest to beat’" (35). Shadow knows instinctively not to trust Wednesday, an intuition later confirmed. Chapter Sixteen's epigraph, "I know it's crooked. But it's the only game in town" (469), seems to apply to the god himself, and Wednesday echoes this sentiment to describe his role in America. The old gods get little worship in modern America, and so indirectly seek power from their own. And while Wednesday sees American culture as a place barren of any reverence but ripe for profit, Shadow, when the two characters part ways, seeks a truer kind of value in both America's people and gods. Ursula Le Guin, in "The Child and the Shadow" from *The Language of Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, states, "In the fairy tale, though there is no 'right' and 'wrong,' there is a different standard, which is perhaps best called 'appropriateness.'...The hero or heroine is the one who sees what is appropriate to be done, because he or she sees the *whole*, which is greater than good or evil" (66). This schema applies to Shadow throughout *American Gods*; although the whole of what he takes part in reveals itself slowly to him and to the reader, Shadow inherently senses what responses and behavior are appropriate to his encounters. His loyalty pledged to Wednesday, Shadow obediently follows orders, and despite his incredulity and mounting questions, he believes. Nikolajeva remarks that the "ambiguity of character [in fantasy] is

based on the postmodern concept of indeterminacy, of the relativity of good and evil” (148). Gaiman creates a fantasy that seems to allow for the idea of good and evil, however, no character fits easily into either category. Wednesday, though never presented as wholly *good*, appears for most of the novel as Shadow’s protective guide and a force against the newer gods and their agents. The “evilness” of the new tech gods seems less so when it is revealed that Odin and Loki control them, and likewise, the two Norse gods become betrayers to a cause Shadow once believed just. Le Guin convincingly argues that “fantasy is the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul” (68). In one sense, *American Gods* relates the struggle in the soul of Shadow; in a more total assessment, the novel represents the conflict for the *American* soul, using the language of fantasy to reveal the fissures within American culture.

## CHAPTER II

### POWER AND SYMBOLISM IN FAIRY TALE AND MYTH

In the novel's Part Two, "My Ainsel," Wednesday deposits Shadow into Lakeside, Wisconsin, to keep him "out of sight" and safe from the "black hats" (280); though he returns for Shadow several times, Wednesday disappears from the remainder of the central plot, no longer a presence in the foreground. The travelogue of America continues, but much more erratically. Wednesday no longer solely guides Shadow, and while the old god's deceit slowly becomes inevitable, Shadow learns more about the nature of America's other various transplanted gods. Wednesday shows Shadow his jovial but cynical side as the old god tricks the system to win small victories. As Shadow's path diverges from Wednesday's, Shadow more fully embodies all the connotations of his name, almost an immigrant himself within his homeland. He no longer trails Wednesday as constant companion, but "shadows" the life of someone grasping for meaning within the junk culture that Wednesday has revealed by taking on the identity of Mike Ainsel in Lakeside.

The novel's main story line rarely leaves the perspective of its protagonist, the carefully named Shadow Moon. Shadow's name and characterization reflect the idea of dichotomy that Gaiman explores throughout *American Gods*. The presence of a shadow

indicates the existence of some real object (his father, Odin?) that casts a shade, and Shadow inhabits much of the novel in the figurative dark. His surname “Moon” also seems intentionally chosen for its symbolism: the moon is associated with night, water and a mutable, cyclical existence. The events of the main plot take place roughly over one year, and Wednesday explains that although the newer gods “... may babble on about micromillisecons and virtual worlds and paradigm shifts and what-have-you, but they still inhabit this planet and are still bound by the cycle of the year. These are the dead months. A victory in these months is a dead victory” (280). It seems fitting that the journey Shadow undertakes begins in winter, the dark “dead months” of the year and culminates in the springtime, as the novel tracks his shift from ignorance to knowledge. In one of the novel’s many parallels to the conventions of fairy tales, the chronological winter represents a shadow time, in which supernatural forces at work in America’s past and present emerge. Le Guin explains how the reader’s experience parallels the hero’s journey in works of fantasy: “Even in merely reading a fairy tale, we must let go our daylight convictions and trust ourselves to be guided by dark figures, in silence; and when we come back, it may be very hard to describe where we have been” (67). Shadow, something of an unknown, “dark” figure himself meets several shadowy guides along his way. If the daylight of modernity and progress dawns in *American Gods*, it is with Shadow’s realization of his true identity as Odin’s son and resolution of other unsolved mysteries in the narrative, although Gaiman’s conclusion stills leaves certain questions unanswered.

The coins used for Shadow’s tricks also become various types of currency; as flat orbs they also come to correspond to heavenly bodies. During Shadow and Wednesday’s visit to Chicago, Zorya Polnochnaya gives Shadow the “moon” in the form of a Liberty dollar coin and tells him, “You were given the sun itself,” (90)—the golden coin he won



from the leprechaun Mad Sweeney. He gives the sun coin to his dead wife, Laura, who wears it to follow and protect Shadow on his journey; he keeps the moon coin until he meets Zorya Polunochnaya again when he dies holding vigil for Odin. At Shadow's death, the sky is moonless, and returning the coin is his first act in restoring himself to life: "It brought you your liberty twice,' [Zorya Polunochnaya] said, 'And now it will light your way in dark places'" (470). While this coin literally helps to free Shadow from death and illuminate his path, Shadow throughout the narrative, including his time in prison, his capture by the opposition and his stay in Lakeside, uses his coin tricks as intellectual liberation, to occupy his hands and stave off anxiety and doubt. The moon, to earthly observers, waxes and wanes like the eminence of the various gods in the novel, and the moon also contains the dichotomy of brightness within night as well as represents the hidden dark against the sun's daylight clarity.

Shadow also expresses these contradictory aspects of light and dark within himself: as a son of Odin, he exhibits a close affinity with Balder, one of the brightest gods of the Norse myths, and both Shadow and Balder are inextricably connected to death. The death of Shadow's wife, Laura, precipitates his journey and he himself dies during the course of it. In myth, Balder is protected against all weapons except mistletoe, eventually killed by a branch of it (*Larousse* 286). Mr. Town seeks a branch from the ash tree of Shadow's vigil, and after Laura kills Town and takes the bough to the scene of the gods' war, she meets the god Loki, appearing previously in the novel as Shadow's prison-mate Low Key Lyesmith and as Mr. World, the partner in Odin's two-man con. Loki tells her: "When this is done with, I guess I'll sharpen a stick of mistletoe and go down to the ash tree, and ram it through [Shadow's] eye. Now. My stick please... It symbolizes a spear, and in this sorry world, the symbol is the thing" (525-26). Symbolic death recurs throughout the novel, and the idea is explored

by many characters. Shadow's own death seems inevitable, though like Odin and his wife, physical death is not permanent. In Gaiman's American myth, gods cannot die and men, too, are able to come back from death. Compared to another character from a seminal work of science fiction, other facets of Shadow's first name will be explored later in this essay, but the idea of sacrifice, specifically through bloodshed, is attached to many of the gods in the novel and in the worship they require.

The deities in *American Gods* emerge from various cultures and mythologies, and Gaiman constructs sub-chapter narratives as short biographical portraits of people who travel to the continent and the gods they carry with them. Woven into the larger fabric of Shadow's journey, these tales all depict the struggle and hardship of the voyage to the New World, and the suffering of each new transplant to America seems to cling to the attendant gods. In Cairo, Illinois, Shadow meets two gods of Egypt, Mr. Ibis/Thoth and Mr. Jacquell/Anubis, in a funeral parlor. Shadow notices that "Mr. Ibis spoke in explanations: a gentle, earnest lecturing that put Shadow in the mind of a college professor..." (193). Shadow recognizes intuitively the role of this new guide on his journey. Ibis tells Shadow: "The Lord gave my business partner dominion over the dead, just as he gave me skill with words. Fine things, words. I write a book of tales, you know. Nothing literary. Just for my own amusement. Accounts of lives..." (194). Perhaps a refraction of Gaiman as author, Ibis provides the novel with the fragments of a body of work that betrays his modesty. These accounts, though perhaps containing no permanent artistic value, create the fabric that underpins the diminishment of the modern gods as unwilling transplants to the foreign and possibly soil. Interrupting Shadow's journey as the Coming to America sections, these episodes recount the voyages of immigrants and their attendant gods to America, track the worship that once made them great, and survey the consequences of the displaced tradition.

Mr. Ibis is not the first appearance of an old god as protector of old ways: in Chicago, Wednesday and Shadow visit a Russian family, and the patriarch, Czernobog, tells Shadow of the loss of tradition in his adopted livelihood:

“... I get a job in the meat business. On the kill floor. When the steer comes up the ramp, I was a knocker. You know why we are called knockers? Is because we take the sledgehammer and we *knock* the cow down with it. *Bam!* It takes strength in the arms ...We were the strongest, the knockers ...There was an art to it. To the blow. Otherwise the cow is just stunned, or angry. Then, in the fifties, they give us the bolt gun. You put it to the forehead, bam! bam! Now you think, anybody can kill. Not so.” He mimed putting a metal bolt through a cow’s head. “It takes skill.” He smiled at the memory, displaying an iron-colored tooth... (77)

This detailed description of the mechanics of slaughter reflects the nature of the worship that most of the older gods in the novel have required for centuries: violent sacrifice. The introduction of the bolt gun, a technology that removes the bulk of the physical human effort, eliminates the need for strength, art or skill to Czernobog’s ritual butchery. This shift seems analogous both to the rise of the new tech gods and to the modern lack of true, blood sacrifice worship for the old gods in America. This lack diminishes Czernobog in America and implies a similar decline in American culture. Later in the novel, a visit to a rural place where blood was spilt in worship of the god strengthens him. The Russian Chicagoans represent a Slavonic folklore characterized by “rustic mythology [and] primitive dualism” (*Larousse* 282-83). Their existence in one of America’s largest cities seems to contribute to the erosion of their base of power: worship by rustic people. Like two sides of a coin, or the phases of the moon, Bielobog is light to Czernobog’s dark and Czernobog tells Shadow and Wednesday that he has not seen his brother in some time, despite their now closer affinity:

“They say, you put us together, we are like one person, you know? When we were young, his hair, it is very blond, very light, his eyes are blue, and people say, he is the good one. And my hair it is very dark...people say I am the rogue, you know? I am the bad one. And now time passes, and my hair is gray. His hair, too, I think, is gray. And you look at us, you would not know who was light, who was dark.” (79)

Both sides of the dualistic god have become gray, loss of faith resulting Czernobog's aged decrepitude, another description that seems a comment on the modern American landscape. Although two halves of a whole and now indistinguishable, the brothers' separation leaves Czernobog weakened; notably the dark "rogue" brother has survived in the new land. Czernobog offers one explanation for his brother's departure: "I dreamed a strange dream...that I am truly Bielebog. That forever the world imagines that there are two of us, the light god and the dark, but that now we are both old, I find that it was only me all the time, giving them gifts, taking them away" (424). Within the dual god lies the potential for both "good" and "evil," and Czernobog struggles with this view, "imagined" by a world equally capable of both.

Gaiman includes the three Zorya sisters in their roles of keepers of the day, ushering in morning, evening and midnight. Zorya Vechernyaya tells Shadow he has a "good name. When the shadows are long, that is my time. And you are the long shadow" (73), referring not only to her place as guardian of the dusk, but the shorter days of wintertime and the apparent twilight of the world as well. Presaging Anasi's judgment, Zorya Vechernyaya explains to Shadow the key to her success in fortunetelling: "Truth is not what people want to hear" (74), a principle Odin benefits from as well. Even with electricity dictating the rhythm of society's daily schedule, the sisters' place in the functioning of the world seems still necessary and the natural cycle of the sun, moon, and the seasons of the year do in fact play a large role in the planning of the war from both sides.

### CHAPTER III

#### TRICKSTER GODS AND SHIFTING BELIEF

In the first Coming to America account, dated A.D. 813, Northmen who worship Odin sail to North America. When they find a “scraeling” native, they entertain him and then sacrifice him to their god: “...they carried him at the head of a procession to an ash tree on the hill overlooking the bay, where they put a rope around his neck and hung him high in the wind, their tribute to the All-Father, the gallows lord...” (68). A native war party slaughters these early Vikings in retribution, but the Norsemen have nonetheless transplanted their deities to American soil in their own act of sacrifice; this bloodshed, both at the core of the Norsemen’s worship and in the resistance to their settlement, strengthens Odin’s tie to the new land. On Shadow’s way to Cairo, he picks up hitchhiker Samantha Black Crow, and the two discuss the existence of gods. Samantha shares her “favorite” mythological god story about Odin:

There was some Viking king on a Viking ship—this is Viking times, obviously—and they were becalmed, so he says he’ll sacrifice one of his men to Odin if Odin will send them a wind to get them to land ...they draw lots to figure out who gets sacrificed—and it’s the king himself ...they figure out they can hang him in effigy and not hurt him. They take a calf’s intestines and loop them loosely around the guy’s neck, and they tie the other end to a thin branch, and they take a reed instead of a spear and poke him with it ...As soon as they say Odin’s name, the reed transforms into a spear and stabs the guy in the side, the calf intestines become a thick rope, the branch becomes the bough of a tree, and the tree pulls up, and the ground drops

away, and the king is left hanging there to die with a wound in his side and his face going black. . . White people have some fucked-up gods, Mister Shadow. (171)

Contrary to Loki's statement of the symbol's dominance in the modern "sorry world," mere symbol is not enough for the early settler worshipers, or more accurately, for the god that they worship. Gaiman's Wednesday/Odin, like many of the gods both old and new, becomes cunning in America; perhaps from their close alliance in America, Odin also takes on some of Loki's malice. But the legend Samantha tells resonates with the deceptive nature associated with the gods, and demonstrates a basic impulse of Gaiman's Odin. When Shadow and Wednesday visit the Slavic gods in Chicago, Shadow and Czernobog play checkers; at stake is Shadow's life, given in sacrifice to Czernobog if Shadow loses. Czernobog agrees to join Wednesday's cause if Shadow wins. They eventually draw, but Shadow wins one round by observing that after the first match that "Czernobog was going to play the same game again, the one that he had just one, that this would be his limitation" (83). This, too, despite his insistence that "[r]igged games are the easiest to beat" (35) and his advantage in this knowledge, is Wednesday's limitation. In the article "Divining Neil Gaiman: An Exegesis of *American Gods*," Brian Hollerbach sees the appearance of the multiple identities of the gods within the text from the following perspective, as he analyzes Wednesday: "...Norse god variously known as Odin, Votan, and the All-Father (deities seemingly being as fond of aliases as the average petty criminal)" ("Divining"). The gods as petty charlatans, and their struggle to sustain the past, or bits of it, diminishes them; their loss of heritage and scramble for scraps of belief causes them to adapt to the ways of the land, and worship as a game demands high stakes.

In the course of their journey in Part One, Wednesday explains to Shadow that America's idiosyncratic, quaint roadside attractions hold more power than uniformly bland suburban churches. The novel's symbolic equivalent is the old gods as roadside attractions,

created by men out of some inexplicable spiritual necessity. As they approach the House on the Rock for the first meeting of the old gods, Wednesday expounds on the draw of such odd tourist spots:

“...it is a place of power... In other countries, over the years, people recognized the places of power. Sometimes it would be a natural formation, sometimes it would be a place that was, somehow, special. They knew that something important was happening there, that there was some focusing point, some channel, some window to the Immanent. And so they would build temples or cathedrals, or erect stone circles...” “There are churches all across the States, though,” said Shadow. “In every town. Sometimes on every block. And about as significant, in this context, as dentists’ offices... [In America] people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize a part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that.” (117-18)

This description of roadside attraction very closely mirrors the positions of the old and new gods within America. Removed from their original lands, the displaced deities use what remains of their divinity or power to survive. The new gods inhabit the realm of the mundane, the “insignificant dentists’ offices.” Although Wednesday presents them as a threat, their pervasiveness seems to give them a different kind of power; they require no blood sacrifice, no conscious commitment from their worshipers. These holy places, places where humankind taps into the transcendent, exist in America, but with their full spiritual significance unrecognized, they leave seekers “profoundly dissatisfied.” Here again, the landscape of America is defined by its lack: lack of appropriate altars and a lack of a people to distinguish its holy places in a constructive way.

At the crux of the novel’s main plot lies Odin’s betrayal of gods and men alike. This aura of duplicity echoes in both old and new gods, in spirituality and the supernatural, and in America itself. Wednesday himself is often described as an old fraud. In an early and portentous scene, Mad Sweeney affirms Shadow’s suspicion of his boss as Wednesday outlines the terms of Shadow’s contract: “You protect me. You transport me from place to

place. You run errands. In an emergency, but only in an emergency, you hurt people who need to be hurt. In the unlikely event of my death, you will hold my vigil. And in return, I shall make sure that your needs are adequately taken care of.' 'He's hustling you,' said Mad Sweeney... 'He's a hustler'" (37). Shadow's very assignment seems to imitate worship of the god, especially in the novel's context, his transferring Wednesday from "place to place." During a scene in which Wednesday scams a gas station cashier, Shadow observes one advantage of his boss's unique charisma: "Shadow watched as Wednesday became increasingly flustered and apologetic. He seemed very old, suddenly. . . Wednesday was obviously on the verge of tears, an old man made helpless by the implacable plastic march of the modern world... 'So what are you? A two-bit con artist?'" (45-46), Shadow asks. These early episodes show Wednesday, in his disguise and intent, for what is possibly his truest self: ancient conman. Wednesday carries out an ATM robbery with the help of Shadow and nostalgically recounts his favorite two-man heists. After shortchanging a waitress at a San Francisco coffeehouse, Wednesday explains himself to Shadow, telling him that people no longer "sacrifice rams or bulls to me. They don't send me the souls of killers and slaves, gallows-hung and raven-picked. *They* made me. *They* forgot me. Now I take a little back from them. Isn't that fair?" (314). Highlighting the parasitic relationship between gods and their worshippers, Wednesday also points out that his offerings were animals, slaves and criminals, betraying perhaps his own judgment of their parity. Whether or not the blood of thieves somehow influences a god's disposition, this theme of worship as transaction recurs throughout the novel. That "legal" transactions of belief in the gods are no longer attainable honestly is one more characteristic of America: lack of belief.

A Coming to America section, dated 1721 and appearing early in the novel, begins: "The important thing to understand about American history, *wrote Mr. Ibis in his leather-bound*



*journal*, is that it is fictional... In truth, the American colonies were as much a dumping ground as an escape, a forgetting place... the Americas became a symbol of clemency, of a second chance” (92). The idea of America as a “forgetting place” seems more significant for Gaiman’s gods than America’s new settlers, as the protective spirits suffer from their worshippers transgressions. The rest of this chapter relates the tale of Essie Tregowan, a thief from Cornwall who travels to London, is imprisoned and sent to America, and eventually marries a wealthy plantation owner in Virginia (possibly chosen not only for the land’s namesake but for the name’s connotation of seeming purity, something Essie renews in the new world). With her, she brings the “piskies and spriggans...the black dogs of the moors and the sealwomen of the Channel” (93). America is a transported jail sentence and ultimately a new life for Essie as her reputation as a criminal fades. In her old age, “Cousin Jack” accompanies her to her death and tells her, “it was you that brought me here, you and a few like you, into this land with no time for magic and no place for piskies and such folk” (101). Essie, a faithful if secretive servant of her heritage throughout her life in America, thanks the spirit for her good fortune. Although Jack describes the New World as “no place” for her belief, the Cornish tradition survives through the prayers of the pickpocket, however altered.

In another Coming to America narrative, Mr. Ibis tells the story of “a girl, [whose] uncle sold her” (321). The account begins in 1778, in Africa, and follows Wututu, named for a “messenger bird” (323) and her twin brother Agasu, “the name of a dead king” (323) and both come to take up the characteristics of their respective names. The children sail by a Dutch slave ship to Bridgeport, Barbados, where Wututu is sold to plantation owners in America and Agasu remains in slavery on the island. Wututu is called Mary by her owners in the Carolinas and later Daisy as she moves from field-hand to house-slave status. The family

she is sold to in New Orleans calls her Sukey, which becomes Mama Zouzou as she ages and becomes known as a “voodoo queen,” (334), providing “cures and love charms and little fetishes” (333) for those who seek them, and passing down the knowledge of her gods to those who wish to learn her trade. Wututu/Mama Zouzou worships the gods she brings with her from Africa and teaches her apprentice about them: “Elegba, the trickiest of gods” (327), “of Mawu, of Aido-Hwedo the voudon serpent, and the rest” (336). Her brother, Agasu, called Inky Jack in Barbados and then Hyacinth in St. Domingue, worships the gods from their homeland as well. Agasu eventually lives up to the meaning of his given name when he leads the 1791 slave rebellion on St. Domingue that precipitates the Haitian Revolution. Stephen Greenblatt, in “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*,” discusses Thomas Hariot’s account of the first English colony in America, and how his reckoning of the native peoples of the New World parallels themes in Shakespeare’s plays. Greenblatt’s assessment of order and subversion in those and other texts relate to the presentation of the gods and Old-World religion *American Gods* and he describes the “very core of the Machiavellian anthropology”: “Machiavellianism implied that all religion was a sophisticated confidence trick...” (438). In Gaiman’s novel, however, the confidence trick is perpetrated not by the emissaries, but by the gods themselves.

Another reference to the place of criminals occurs later in the narrative, in one of the very few mentions of Judeo-Christian belief. Gaiman notes the relationship between divinity and wickedness at Wednesday’s wake, a significant meeting of gods from both camps. Mr. Town confronts Shadow, telling him he should be in prison again for the death of Town’s colleagues. Shadow, innocent of the crime committed by his wife, counters: ““There was only one guy in the Bible Jesus ever personally promised a place with him in Paradise. Not Peter, not Paul, not any of those guys. He was a convicted thief, being executed. So don’t knock

the guys on death row. Maybe they know something you don't" (439). This description easily reflects on Shadow, a convict himself and soon to hang from a tree in vigil for Odin. The only dissemination of which Shadow seems capable are the coin tricks that he performs in prison and throughout the novel, using light, shadow and diversion to trick his audiences. Hollerbach comments on "[Gaiman's] skill at misdirection" and relates this to Shadow: "In an interview not too long ago, Darrell Schweitzer noticed *en passant* that Gaiman, like his protagonist here, has a talent for sleight-of-hand" ("Divining"). This is apparent in Wednesday's own methods, and Shadow comes to realize, "It's a two-man con . . . It's not a war at all, is it?" (514), realizing his own role as pawn in the god's scheme.

While much of the main plot of the novel takes place in the Midwest, almost all of the immigration narratives, by necessity, occur on coastal cities, although both areas together plot an historic and geographic space in which the vastness of the land disguises its truly fallow state. In William Gibson's 1986 novel *Count Zero*, the setting is the global landscape of a chronologically indeterminate future in which societal progress is marked by the union of corporate and technological forces. Each of the three protagonists in Gibson's narrative move between the blurred spheres of their professional lives, the physical world, and the realm of cyberspace; Gibson interweaves each plot, successfully bringing the main characters together in several scenes and creating an environment truly elastic in its boundaries. Bobby Newmark, the novel's eponymous hero/newbie, seeks an existence greater than his physical reality by "jacking in" to computer decks and he somewhat uncharitably scorns his mother for the same impulse, enacted though her addiction to soap serials:

Marsha's jack-dreams were bleeding into his head ...the plot a multi-headed tapeworm that coiled back in to devour itself every few months, then sprouted new heads hungry for tension and thrust. He could see it writhing in its totality, the way Marsha never could see it, an elongated spiral of Sense/Net DNA, cheap brittle ectoplasm spun out to the uncounted hungry dreamers ...(51)

The episode occurs after Bobby's initial disastrous run into cyberspace, clouding his subconscious mind with mundane images from his mother's favorite programs, all experienced from a first-person perspective. Bobby wants a similar escape from his vaguely lower-middle-class surroundings in New Jersey, and instead of vicariously living through others' lives, he creates for himself the heightened online persona of "Count Zero." His new moniker suggests his aspiration to computer savvy and a sense of an aristocratic, perhaps "Gothick" status, and most importantly, the quality of zero itself. Zero is at once a cipher, a symbol for nothingness, yet numerically is also a graphic center point and the beginning of all positive integers; Bobby's eagerness and naivete mark him as the perfect near-blank slate for initiation into the realm of cyberspace spirituality.

A similar quality of absence suffuses Shadow and his own emblematic name. Shadows lack light and substance and so obscure any area upon which they are cast, while even a full moon at its brightest illuminates little (and even less in the haze of electrically lit urban environments). Shadow Moon as a character begins the novel confined in prison, living a kind of shadow existence with his previous married life reflected only in his memories. While his background and lineage remain clouded for most of the novel, Shadow never quite fully evolves as a well-rounded character, instead serving as errand-boy to Wednesday, merely reacting for the most part passively to the events surrounding him. When the goddess Easter meets him in San Francisco, she asks about his name:

"Why do they call you Shadow?"... "When I was a kid," he said. "We lived, my mother and I...at a bunch of US embassies, we went from city to city all over northern Europe... I never knew what to say to the other kids, so I'd just find adults and follow them around, not saying anything. I just needed the company, I guess. I don't know. I was a small kid." (308)

Shadow without irony recalls an unremarkable youth as quite a literal shadow, trailing his mother and others aimlessly. Even with the revelation of his true parentage, he still remains

in the shadow of his father Wednesday/Wotan. His role as champion of the old gods provides him the chance to become more than mere shadow, although it aligns him still with forces that function on the periphery, out of the bright day of electronic media and well-mapped urban, suburban centers, and orthodox human belief systems.

*American Gods* deals with the effects of the growing influence of technology on society and the novel parallels *Count Zero* in a number of structural and thematic ways. The characters of both novels travel across North America (though *Count Zero* explores Europe and outer space, as well) and in addition to the vast amount of geographical territory covered, both novels project their characters into less stable nonphysical realms. Shadow and Wednesday take back roads and eat at greasy spoon diners, and Wednesday specifically sends him to the small town of Lakeside, sticking to all places that are less accessible to the new gods' detection and therefore in a sense "off the map." Wednesday tells Shadow, "You can keep out of sight in Lakeside. I pulled in a big favor to keep you here, safe and sound. If you were in a city they'd get your scent in minutes" (291), and though Wednesday controls each side of the war, the static haven of Lakeside is protected by its own patron saint, Hinzemann, a literal relic of a frontier past that maintains the small-town idyll with yearly sacrifices of the community's children. In order to keep modernity, and all its complications at bay, Lakeside devours its own future generation.

The corporate-computer age of *Count Zero* has not fully come to pass in *American Gods*, though various forces are seemingly at work to bring this about. The cyberspace "jack-dreams" of Gibson's vision function in much the same way as several devices in Gaiman's fable: the "backstage" episodes, Shadow's dreams, and the realm of the underworld. Wednesday brings Shadow into an altered reality, in order to witness the meeting of the gods at the World's Largest Carousel and later to dodge the opposition, and like human brain

waves transposed onto silicon in Gibson's cyberspace, human travel in the domain of the gods is not always safe. Disoriented at the shift in reality as they walk across the starry plains of a "between-dimension," Shadow vomits as he adjusts and Wednesday explains, "It's not good for the audience to find themselves backstage. That's why you're feeling sick. We need to hurry to get you out of here" (349), and time itself expands there, as less than three days on foot stretches to nearly a month in real-world time (360). Like Bobby Newmark, Shadow is initiated into a world that exists alongside the mundane reality of the physical, known landscape and both Bobby and the mercenary Turner also experience physical sickness from their contact with computer networks and files. As Turner reviews a dossier he reflects that "[m]achine dreams hold a special vertigo" (23), and reveals in a later scene that he has suffered nausea from his work for years and when this finally and casually erupts in an airport, Turner scarcely breaks stride (94). Shadow likewise adapts to the increasingly distorted realities of both his sleeping and waking existence; his first dream vision occurs during an airplane flight, one of the most modern of travel methods, and here he is first contacted by the tribal, unnamed "buffalo man," one of Shadow's many guides along his journey into physical and metaphysical territory.

Bobby finds similar guides in *Count Zero* in the experienced group of computer jockeys who come to his aid and worship divine entities that inhabit cyberspace. Just as the gods and spirits, old and modern alike, in *American Gods* are physical manifestations of both belief and function, so too do *Count Zero's* spirits cross the boundaries between their metaphysical identity and human necessity. Beauvoir explains to Bobby "'...you are the chosen of Legba ...[the] master of roads and communications, the loa of communication...'" (58) and further elaborates in a passage worthy of examination for its philosophical parallels to Gaiman's recasting of the gods' place and function:

...you [don't] have to worry about it, is all, whether it's a religion or not. It's just a structure...[Vodou] isn't concerned with notions of salvation or transcendence. What it's about is getting things done. You follow me? In our system, there are many gods, spirits ...Vodou says there's God, sure, Gran Met, but He's big, too big and too far away to worry Himself if your ass is poor, or you can't get laid. Come on, man, you know how this works, it's street religion, came out of a dirt-poor place a million years ago. Vodou's like the street. Some duster chops out your sister, you don't go camp on the Yakuza's doorstep, do you? No way. You go to somebody, though who can get the thing done. (76-77)

Much of Beauvoir's description of Vodou almost seems a direct influence on some of the characterization and style of *American Gods*. Both narratives use regional slang and pop culture sensibilities and the perspective on spirituality within Gibson's work reverberates throughout the later novel. The gods in Gaiman's narrative rely on a system based on necessity and function; the very fact of the old gods' perceived waning power demonstrates this. The majority of the spirits inhabit a physical body, some work human jobs, and many are preoccupied with their sole purpose for being: human belief. Legba and the Vodou spirits appear twice in *American Gods* during the tale of the African twins and as part of the old gods' forces during the battle, and they are just one more area on the spiritual geographic map of the U.S. The significant difference between the gods of each novel is that the loa of *Count Zero* are worshiped by believers and respected by most nonbelievers, both of whom embrace the new paradigm of technology, whereas the displaced old gods in America need to scramble for the scraps of belief left over from their few true followers in a landscape dominated by the new gods of commerce and technology. Though the term religion appears infrequently throughout Gaiman's novel, we are told late in the text that "[r]eligions are, by definition, metaphors ...religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world..."(508). Although not nearly as practical and straightforward as Beauvoir's characterization of Vodou, this assertion likewise frames religion as something

separate from spirituality or even gods themselves, as a malleable system or “structure” that is open to a variety of interpretation.

Both novels contain their skeptics, too. *Count Zero*’s Finn, an experienced jockey, tells Bobby and Lucas that ““there’s been funny stuff out there, out on the console cowboy circuit. The new jockeys, they make deal with things, don’t they...it’s just a tailored hallucination we all agreed to have, cyberspace, but anybody who jacks in knows, fucking knows it’s a whole universe. And every year it gets a little more crowded...” (118-19). He recalls the days before mysterious spiritual entities existed in cyberspace, the “things” that provide certain services to the new generation of jockeys. Just as the landscape of cyberspace attracts more users, *American Gods*’ spiritual realm of the United States gets crowded with the younger gods of a post-modern society, and here the gods jockey for human attention.

Mr. Town, one of the agents of the new god collective, gives his own prosaic appraisal of the gods: ““they’re mutations. Evolutionary experiments. A little hypnotic ability, a little hocus-pocus, and they can make people believe anything ...They die like men, after all”” (439). This statement seems to resonate particularly with Wednesday. The god uses his personal charm and charisma and the runic charms which he recites, trance-like to Shadow, in lieu of the true belief that evidently creates and best sustains Gaiman’s fictional deities. Town’s assessment further hints at the true conflict of the novel: gods as reflections of human traits and human fears, bound by the same trivial desires and faults as all of humankind. The “hocus-pocus” that Odin employs in his con-games deserves all the pejorative suspicion of Town’s judgment, at least to Shadow. Their dying may be similar to humans’ (especially if Shadow as at least half-human and capable of rebirth is any indication of the nature of human death) but, if we are to take religion as metaphor, the death of a god



gives life anew to the same divine force in an altered state. The death of a god in Gaiman's fictional universe corresponds to the death of outmoded systems and ways of living, despite the novel's pervasive ambiguity on the value of progress.

## CHAPTER IV

### DETOUR TO DYSTOPIA

The question of the true value of progress becomes central to Shadow's detour in small-town Wisconsin. For much of the novel's Part Two, Shadow resides in Lakeside, a community that halts modernization and its perceived ill effects by annually surrendering one of the town's children. Frozen (very much like the town's advancement into the 21<sup>st</sup> century) in the town's lake, these sacrifices are an unequivocal condemnation of grasping too rigidly onto the past. This intermission from the main plot departs from one of the novel's main themes as well: the traditions of the past as superior to the innovations of the present and future. As if in answer to the question, are things truly better in the past?, Lakeside provides the clearest practical demonstration of this issue in the narrative. On its surface, Lakeside exemplifies American small-town life at its most quaint and picturesque. Arriving on Christmas, Shadow finds the town a Rockwellian portrait of wintry charm: "Main Street...looked old-fashioned in the best sense of the word—as if, for a hundred years, people had been caring for that street and they had not been in a hurry to lose anything they liked" (252). Though several people assure him spring and summer are the most beautiful seasons in Lakeside, Shadow finds a peculiar draw in the frozen landscape's starkness, finding the village in winter "colorless, beautiful in a skeletal way" (265), a "black-and-white

town in the ice and the snow” (384)—notably an accurate appraisal of the town’s stasis as well.

Hinzelmann, the first person in Lakeside that Shadow meets, is a particularly enthusiastic champion of the town’s good name. A kindly older gentleman at first sight, Hinzelmann serves as the town’s protector and gatekeeper in many ways. He introduces Shadow to the layout of the town in his roadster, “Tessie,” serving as literal “welcome wagon,” and tells Shadow stories of the Midwest’s harsh winters. Shadow, as a loner and newcomer, enjoys “Hinzelmann’s company—the reminiscences, the tall tales, the goblin grin of the old man” (293), a characterization that evokes Hinzelmann’s true spirit. The old man describes the toll of winter in ages past to Shadow, and explains how many staved off “winter madness”: “‘Storybooks were like gold dust—anything you could read was treasured...When my grampaw got sent a storybook from his brother in Bavaria, all the Germans in town met up in the town hall to hear him read it, and the Finns and the Irish and the rest of them, they’d make the Germans tell them the stories’” (293). Like Lakeside’s early settlers, Shadow is drawn to Hinzelmann’s tales; Hinzelmann continues his storyteller tradition, volunteering most of his knowledge and lore readily. When Shadow remarks that “‘Lakeside seems kind of prosperous’” (277), despite the encroaching economic depression of the surrounding areas, Hinzelmann replies in both warning and boast, “‘believe me, it takes a lot of work...’” (277).

Not all of Lakeside’s citizens seem as content as the town’s façade suggests, however. Hinzelmann tells Shadow about the town librarian’s mission to update the library: “‘Miriam Shultz wants to tear the insides out and modernize, but it’s on some register of historic places, and there’s not a damn thing she can do’” (252-53), and Hinzelmann here again treats the history of Lakeside as a point of pride. Shadow meets one of his neighbors,

Marguerite Olsen, and she agrees with the librarian in her appeal for modernization: “It’s a beautiful building. But the city needs something more efficient and less beautiful” (296). Nearly everyone Shadow encounters in Lakeside assures him it is a “good town,” an observation not made by Olsen and Shultz, and a few others, a statement significant for its omission. After the disappearance of 14-year-old Alison McGovern, Callie Knopf reiterates to Shadow that Lakeside is a “good town,” but he realizes, “There was something empty at the bottom of all her words. It was as if he were listening to a salesman, a good salesman, who believed in his product, but still wanted to make sure you went home with all the brushes or the full set of encyclopedias” (319). The persona of a salesman here seems a short distance away from the recurrent imagery of the confidence man or fraud; the emptiness Shadow senses, despite the citizens’ belief in the “product” of the town’s integrity, aligns more closely with the new gods, such as Media. After he first encounters this deity whose primary domain is television, Shadow realizes “...the reason he liked Wednesday and Mr. Nancy and the rest of them better than their opposition was pretty straightforward: they might be dirty, and cheap...but at least they didn’t speak in clichés...he guessed he would take a roadside attraction, no matter how cheap, how crooked, or how sad, over a shopping mall, any day” (177). Ignoring the fact that the old gods, Wednesday in particular, often use clichés, Shadow’s preference for them and their “old ways” explains the comfort he finds in Lakeside. The emptiness he senses underneath the town, a quality reminiscent of the new gods of appearances, industry, speed, shows that even the idyll of an Everytown, U.S.A. is not completely exempt from the inevitability of modernization; this unease spurs Shadow to discover what lies underneath the town’s tranquil surface.

As Shadow gradually uncovers the reason for the yearly disappearance of one of the town’s adolescents, the question of whether or not the entire town is fully complicit in the

sacrifices remains unanswered. But the actual kidnapper, Hinzelmann, offers Shadow his theory on the “winter runaways,” indirectly condemning the new gods: “‘it ain’t unique to Lakeside—we’re a good town, better than most...I blame the television, showing all the kids things they’ll never have...’” (276). Hinzelmann defends the goodness of the town against encroaching modernity, and when Shadow discovers the old man’s true identity, the kobold tells him, “‘I love this town...I really like being a cranky old man, and telling my stories and driving Tessie and ice-fishing...’” (566). Describing his deep ties to the town and his status within it, Hinzelmann reveals that the gods and spirits of Gaiman’s narrative subject to the same weaknesses as mortals.

Like Hinzelmann, Shadow enjoys his adopted identity in Lakeside: it provides him with a respite to Wednesday’s campaign, and he settles into it easily as he first meets the town’s chief of police, Chad Mulligan. He describes his job to Mulligan and finds the lie effortless as he embraces his new persona’s lack of history: “‘It was coming out of him with conviction, smooth as a snake...[Shadow] liked Mike Ainsel. Mike Ainsel had none of the problems that Shadow had. Ainsel had never been married...Television did not speak to Mike Ainsel...Mike Ainsel didn’t have bad dreams, or believe that there was a storm coming’” (270). Shadow, in a reversal of the role of Lakeside’s sacrificial children, finds relief in the Wisconsin town in its apparent stability, and in his own false identity, Mike Ainsel.

The title of Part Two, “My Ainsel,” refers to both Shadow’s pseudonym, and the meaning within the sound of the name. “My ainsel,” contracted, becomes “m’ainse,” the mainsail of a boat, an indication of Shadow’s integral role in Wednesday’s scheme and a nod to Odin’s role as weather god. The alias also phonetically resembles “my own self,” recalling a fairy tale of Northumbrian origin. In the cautionary fable, a young boy who lives with his widowed mother stays up past his bedtime, and upon meeting a fairy called “Ownself,” he

wisely responds in kind to her request for his name, telling her he is called “My Ownself,” too. The boy accidentally sings the fairy with a stray ember from the hearth, and when a disembodied voice calls to the screeching fairy to ask who burned her, she replies, “My Ownself,” and the young boy escapes harm, learning the value of going to bed on time and perhaps the power and protection of words. Shadow similarly escapes serious harm in Lakeside with his alias, though the fairy-creature of his story knows his true identity and eventually uses it against him. Shadow’s pseudonym is at once anonymous, yet descriptive of his essence and like a shadow and his own homeland, Shadow as a character is defined by that he lacks: lack of a true identity or voice of his own, lack of a definite history, lack of any direction separate from Wednesday’s for much of the novel. When Shadow’s wife Laura finds him in Lakeside, she reveals to him she senses this unsettling quality in him: ““You’re not dead...But I’m not sure that you’re really alive...You’re like this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world...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 reading, not watching TV, not doing anything...”” (370-71). Shadow, a man defined by his simplicity and malleability, is the perfect champion for a land characterized at once by its lack and abundance.

When Shadow begins to attract “too much attention” (565) in the small community, Hinzemann orchestrates the arrival of both Samantha Black Crow and Audrey Burton to Lakeside, two people who knew Shadow before he moved to the city. The confrontation puts Shadow in jail, but affords him the opportunity to learn more about the town’s history and secret protector. When Shadow previously visits the town’s library book sale, and buys the *Minutes of the Lakeside City Council 1872-1884*, to “liberate the book...least likely to be bought” (297), he finds within the tome important clues to the town’s origins and secrets: “It

had never occurred to Shadow that the lake was manmade. Why call a town Lakeside, when the lake had begun as a damn mill-pond? He read on, to discover that a Mr. Hinzelmann, originally Hüdemuhlen in Bavaria, was in charge of the lake-building project” (387). The appearance of a Hinzelmann seems enough to arouse some suspicion in Shadow. He reads on to find the first winter disappearance of a child from Lakeside: “Lemmi Hautala was twelve years old and had, ‘it was feared, wandered away in a fit of delirium’ on December 13, 1876” (402). In the winter of 1877, “Jessie Lovat, age not given, ‘a Negro child,’ had vanished on the night of December 28. It was believed that she might have been ‘abducted by traveling so-called pedlars’” (403). That Lakeside, both in name and in its “good reputation,” is a fraud seems inevitable, when considered alongside the portrait of the gods and their world presented throughout the novel. Both Odin and Hinzelmann are part of Teutonic mythology, and Hinzelmann is the “favor” that Wednesday calls in to keep Shadow out of sight. As an agent of Odin, Hinzelmann accepts Shadow as Mike Ainsel into the town, but once Shadow begins to doubt Lakeside’s tranquility, Hinzelmann works to remove the perceived threat. When Shadow returns, he finds the body of Alison McGovern in the trunk of the car, one of the long line of old cars sacrificed to the lake every winter in a charity raffle. Bets are taken the exact time when it will break the ice and sink in the spring; the ice, like Lakeside’s veneer, cracks and Hinzelmann rescues Shadow from drowning. The old man confesses to Shadow that the prosperity of the town guaranteed his own: “‘I made the lake. They were calling it a lake when I got here, but it weren’t nothing more than a spring and a mill pond and a creek...I figured that this country is hell on my kind of folk. It eats us. I didn’t want to be eaten. So I made a deal. I gave them a lake, and I gave them prosperity...’” (564) and Shadow responds, “‘And all it cost them was one child per winter’” (564). Although Hinzelmann refuses to reveal with whom he made a deal or whether or not

the current population of Lakeside knows of his true role, he admits here that he is as dependent on the sacrifice as the town itself. Without their worship, he would fade away as surely as some of the other gods throughout the novel fear themselves.

A short story by Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” contains themes that resonate with the method of Hinzelmänn’s control of Lakeside, and with Gaiman’s presentation of the figure of Hinzelmänn, both in his active torture and murder of innocents, and his own original fate as a tortured and murdered innocent. In “Omelas,” Le Guin creates a landscape much more broadly defined than Lakeside. The reader is encouraged to imagine the fine details of the place, but the two fictional towns share the quality of inherent, deceptive “goodness.” The narrator of Le Guin’s story admits that “Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time...how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are a happy people” (237). Happiness requires no advanced transportation technology in Omelas; though Lakeside is not exempt from modern innovation, both towns embrace simplicity. As Hinzelmänn takes the life of one of Lakeside’s children each winter, Omelas keeps one of its own in captivity, seemingly from birth. The sacrificial child of Omelas is kept in a locked, windowless basement, given just enough food and water to live. The narrator reveals that the captive child sustains the utopia of Omelas and that the people of the city are complicit in its suffering:

They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weather of their skies, depend wholly on the child’s abominable misery. (239)



Although how exactly this knowledge has been obtained is not the focus of Le Guin's narrative, most citizens of Omelas are aware that their prosperity inevitably results from the child's suffering. Some of the people choose to leave when they are informed of the town's secret, but many others realize the unhappiness of one is the price for "the happiness of thousands" (239) and accept the arrangement. The residents of Lakeside are given no such choice.

While the people of Lakeside are unaware of the price for their contentment, they still unknowingly provide the means for the town's existence. Hinzelmann tells Shadow, "'They were giving their children to me before the Romans came to the Black Forest,' he said. 'I was a god before ever I was a kobold'" (566). In one sense, the sequestered child of Omelas is much like Hinzelmann himself, as he reveals his origins to Shadow in vivid imagery:

Where Hinzelmann had been standing stood a male child, no more than five years old...He was pierced with two swords, one of them going through his chest, the other entering at his shoulder, with the point coming out beneath the rib-cage. Blood flowed through the wounds without stopping and ran down the child's body to pool and puddle on the floor. The swords looked unimaginably old...You take a baby and bring it up in darkness, letting it see no one, touch no one, and you feed it well as the years pass...five winters on, when the night is at its longest, you drag the terrified child out of its hut and into the circle of bonfires, and you pierce it with blades of iron and of bronze. Then you smoke the small body over charcoal fires until it is properly dried, and you wrap it in furs and carry it with you from encampment to encampment, deep in the Black Forest, sacrificing animals and children to it, making it the luck of the tribe. When, eventually, the thing falls apart from age, you place its fragile bones in a box; until one day the bones are scattered and forgotten, and the tribes who worshipped the child-god of the box are long gone; and the child-god, the luck of the village, will be barely remembered save as a ghost or a brownie: a kobold. (568)

Like the child of Omelas, Hinzelmann is chosen from a young age to be "the luck of the tribe," although instead of a miserable existence in captivity, he is prepared for slaughter, his body used as a relic in death. In his native Germanic land, this child is elevated to the status of spiritual protector; his own people have forgotten him before they make the trek to the

New World. In his similarity to the imprisoned child of Omelas, Hinzelmann demonstrates the unwillingness of the gods in their role, totems adopted and abandoned with detached necessity. In this way, Hinzelmann appears as one of the savviest conmen of the novel, a god who realizes his decline and executes a plan to ensure his own survival. When Shadow finds him out, Hinzelmann even dictates the circumstances of his death; Hinzelmann uses what mystical influence he has to cause Chad Mulligan to set fire to the kobold's home, ultimately releasing him from his imprisonment in one final act of worship: a pyre.

## CHAPTER IV

### GODS IN DECLINE

A Coming to America passage dated 14,000 B.C. recounts the origins of the first people to bring their gods to America and follows the “nomads of the Northern Plains” (412). Coming from the tundra of ancient Siberian Russia, the tribe travel to the east at the behest of their god, Nunyunnnini. Represented by a mammoth skull, Nunyunnnini communicates through the tribal leaders during ceremonial rites involving hallucinogenic mushrooms. During the ceremony, the mammoth-god speaks through Atsula, the clan’s holy woman: “...Atsula shall die before the rest of you enter the new land...But for Atsula’s faithlessness [in not believing the god that they will all survive the trip], you would have kept it forever” (415). Atsula does not make it to the new land, but before she dies, the priestess tells her people: “Gods are great...But the heart is greater. For it is from our hearts they come, and to our hearts they shall return” (417). Later, as Atsula’s tribe dies out, so too does Nunyunnnini: “the raven tribes, and the fox tribes grew more powerful in the land, and soon Nunyunnnini was entirely forgot” (418). Though not completely forgotten, if Ibis recounts the god’s story in his record, Nunyunnnini regardless fades away because his tribe’s spiritual leader does not live to maintain his worship in the new land.

Other late 20th-century authors before Gaiman have deposited classic myth and its figures into contemporary settings, and comparisons between *American Gods* and one of these works reveal similarities in construction and the repetition of several key metaphors. Kelly Link's short story, "Flying Lessons," provides an analog to Gaiman's *American Gods*; both share a sense of invitation to puzzle out the parallels between classic mythology and contemporary revision and each narrative features a human character entering the ritual plot of a fairly well-known myth. Link's concise prose, filled with recurrent imagery in an adroit cultural recasting of mythic Greek gods and goddesses into 20th-century Scotland, offers a nuanced, intimate study into character and tradition. Link molds the bleak though quaint background of Edinburgh into the most logical locale for down-at-heel, Mediterranean goddesses, though Rose Read hints that their exile is Hera-imposed (95) and that some deities "have managed better than others" (94) to adapt to modern life. Similarly, in *American Gods* as Wednesday addresses the meeting of the gods in an attempt to win their support in a war against the new modern gods, he reviews their own "exile": "When the people came to America, they brought us with them ...Soon enough, our people abandoned us, remembered us only as creatures of the old land ...we were left, lost and scared and dispossessed, with only what little smidgens of belief we could find. And to get by as best we could..." (137). Both narrative's deities seem to wield a certain amount of power, but where questions of belief and worship are absent in Link's fable, such issues are among the higher stakes in Gaiman's story. The gods of Europe and Asia, Africa and South America witness the rising dominance of the new gods of modernity and convenience, and Wednesday uses their fear to fuel a war that he orchestrates for a blood sacrifice; essentially, both his trick and the true intent aim at the spiritual territory of America.

In the fall of 2004, two critical articles appeared in academic journals discussing Neil Gaiman's comic book series *Sandman*. In the science-fiction and fantasy journal *Extrapolation*, Joe Sanders deals exclusively with one issue of the series in his essay "Of Storytellers and Stories in Gaiman and Vess's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,'" while Annalisa Castaldo connects the presentation of Shakespeare, both man and works, to the themes of authorship, genius, and imagination that recur throughout the series in her *College Literature* article "'No more yielding than a dream': The Construction of Shakespeare in *The Sandman*." Written over fifteen years after the first issues of the comic book revival were published, the articles seem carefully constructed to demonstrate the ways in which Gaiman and his collaborating artists elevate the medium of graphic art narrative, although both essays fall somewhat short of placing *Sandman* within a fuller and more accurate comic book context. However, the focus in each analysis on, in Castaldo's phrase, the "incidental intertextuality" (110) of Gaiman's prose through material from a plethora of sources and inspiration establishes his ability as an author to create texts that draw on an audience's awareness of both a literary and (popular) cultural aesthetic. The circuitous, sprawling nature of *Sandman*, with its intermingling of genres and character types creates a space with seemingly boundless creative opportunities. Throughout his still active career as a comic book scribe, Gaiman continually revives classic, forgotten, or obscure comic book characters to redirect the course of their mythology or simply reimagine them (Badham), and this kind of updating continues throughout Gaiman's prose fiction.

Using the label "postmodern" for *American Gods* opens up a discussion on the ways in which the novel is and is not postmodern, and what these conclusions mean for the larger theme of the book. Although Gaiman as a postmodern author may seem appealing, considered from most formal criteria, *American Gods* is not strictly postmodern. Many of the

dominant themes of *American Gods* such as identity, heritage, and modernity are common subjects explored broadly in many postmodern works. Attempts at tidy categorization of literary artists and works, however, are usually tricky at best; these efforts confine, both artistically and commercially, by applying labels like “postmodern,” “fantastic,” or “science fiction” that may or may not have significance for the specific work in question. Although yielding much in certain directions, an impulse to classify texts in a rigid order can also stifle the possibilities of more encompassing interpretations. Calling the novel “popular fiction” provides perhaps the best arena for literary study. The novel’s defiance of any singular form by paying homage to several genres partially informs its central message.

“One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless. The tale is the map that is the territory. You must remember this. —from the Notebooks of Mr. Ibis” (545)

—Neil Gaiman, opening Chapter Nineteen of *American Gods*. Preceding a tale of an emperor of China, as “The Mapmaker” in the Introduction to *Fragile Things* (xivv).

“In a certain sense, every novelist is a philosopher, because one cannot present a picture of human existence without a philosophical framework; the novelist’s only choice is whether that framework is present in his story explicitly or implicitly, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he holds his philosophical convictions consciously or subconsciously” (vii).

—Ayn Rand, from the Preface to *For the New Intellectual*

In one of the most vividly rendered scenes in *American Gods*, the older gods display their true identities to Shadow on the World’s Largest Carousel at Spring Green, Wisconsin’s The House on the Rock, a real roadside attraction that Gaiman incorporates into his novel. To Shadow, the sight is “like seeing the world through the multifaceted jeweled eyes of a dragonfly” (131), with each image overlapping though distinct. Mr. Nancy is at once an enormous glittering spider, a six-armed man in ceremonial regalia, a young sickly boy, “a tiny brown spider” (131), and an old man. A cloaked Wednesday flanked by two ravens rides a

wolf and reveals his many names to Shadow: “I am called Glad-of-War, Grim, Raider, and Third...One-Eyed...Highest...True Guesses...Grimnir...the Hooded One...I am All-Father...Gondlir Wand-Bearer” (132). Showing the grandeur of the gods, this early scene presents the multiple manifestations of their divinity simultaneously. When Shadow wonders to himself, “*What should I believe?*” (133), his answer comes from “somewhere deep beneath the world...*Believe everything*” (133). Following the internal logic of the fairy tale, Shadow accepts all that he sees. Nikolajeva describes fantasy as “an eclectic genre, since it borrows traits not just from fairy tales, but from myth, romance, the novel of chivalry, the picaresque, the gothic novel, mysteries, science fiction, and other genres, blending seemingly incompatible elements within one and the same narrative, for instance pagan and Christian images, magic wands and laser guns” (139). Gaiman samples elements from most of these genres, inserting them into each mythology and locale he uses in the novel. The core tension of the narrative comes not just from Shadow’s hesitation and eventual embrace of the fantastic events surrounding him, but also from the novel’s refusal to choose between one distinct form, or one clear judgment on American values. Although the novel seems at times caught between a conformity to traditional forms and the values attached to them, there exists also a parody or mocking of such conventions, and it is in this complexity that Gaiman ultimately finds the clearest center of the expanse of the U.S.

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