FOLKLORE AND MYTHOLOGY IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis provides a critical analysis of the use of folklore and mythology that exists in Neil Gaiman's award-winning novel, *American Gods*. I focus on the ways in which *American Gods* is situated within an intertextual corpus of mythological and mythopoeic writing. In particular, this study analyses Gaiman's writing by drawing upon Mircea Eliade's ideas about mythology and Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism to discuss the emergence of secular myth through fantasy fiction.

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For my father, who always told a good story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> "I liked myths. They weren't adult stories and they weren't children's stories. They were better than that. They just *were*."
> —Neil Gaiman, *Ocean at the End of The Lane* (2013)

Storytelling is a major part of being human. We tell stories for any number of reasons: to entertain, to instruct, to bond with others, to explain the world around us. The art of creating and re-creating cohesive narratives for a multitude of purposes is one thread that binds individuals together within the wider fabric of human experience. The popularity of various forms and modes of storytelling have changed over time. At one point in history, storytelling was far more performative than what many of us are familiar with today, as stories were shared at events at which storytellers performed their tales directly for listeners. These sorts of storytelling events still occur; however, it is less common for individuals to experience full narratives in this performative manner when one considers the number of stories that individuals now experience through the largely solitary act of reading.

In industrialized societies, the former method of storytelling—oral communication directly to an audience—occurred more frequently in the past where saga, myth, folk tale, and legend formed the bulk of the narrative corpus of the storyteller. The latter mode of storytelling— written narrative—became increasingly prominent after the advent of the printing press and the cultural progression into modernity wherein, according to some scholars, narratives tended to illustrate largely the lives of average human beings.[1] Interestingly, one finds a resurgence of the subject matter

[1] Frye and Denham (2006): 54–62.

of traditional storytelling (e.g., myth, legend, folk tale, and saga) within the writing of a number of post-modernist authors. This resurgence of the use and function of myth in literary works, and its meaning, is the focus of this thesis.

Modern storytelling, some have argued, takes place largely within the confines of a written document—an assertion which is questionable given the fact that people continue to tell stories verbally today, and a proposal that is certainly challenged when one considers the popularity of film, television, radio plays, and comics, all of which convey narrative through a combination of visual and aural mediums. However, for the purposes of study, the academic assertion about the prominence of written texts is intended to convey the importance of printed documents to the continuation and dissemination of storytelling as transformed into literature. The cultural transformation from oral to written storytelling has led some theorists to suggest that the mode of the traditional storyteller, whose narratives are rooted in the face-to-face exchanges of interwoven tales—didactic, mythological, or any other form—has had difficulty surviving into the modern era of "insular" narratives which make up a large percentage of novels.[2]

In dialogue with such assertions, this thesis offers two interventions into current commentary on narrative and the nature of mythology in the modern world. First, this project questions the common notion that mythology "no longer exists" by looking at the interplay between the subject matter of mythically-rooted oral storytelling and the manner in which similar subject matter is manipulated and deployed within modern written literature, specifically within the fantasy genre. The second focal point of this

[2] See Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2004): 370.

study suggests that the use of traditional myth within the fantasy genre acts as an active form of postmodern popular myth creation by recycling and reworking aspects of myths and legends into an intertextual, but modern narrative. To articulate my key points, I will interrogate the novel *American Gods* by British author of fantasy, Neil Gaiman. I argue that *American Gods* is not only a stand-alone fiction narrative that uses elements of myth to tell an interesting story, but that it belongs to the overarching structural complex of mythological storytelling highlighted in both Mircea Eliade's theories on myth as well as in Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, which are discussed in the chapter II.

Pivotal to my analysis is the assertion that myth is not an antiquated concept that receded into history as storytelling moved increasingly into the written word as some have suggested. I examine the ways that myth is alive, well, and actively bridging the gap between oral and written narrative. In this case, the concept of myth is conceived of as one that links oral and written forms through an intertextual dialogue between traditional subject matter and popular narrative forms, specifically, the novel. This assertion challenges the notion that modernity and the novel have resulted in the demise of traditional mythology; rather it suggests that mythology or the mythic continues to be created in the present through what Eliade calls "religiously oriented behavior."[3]

In his often-cited essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin describes the storyteller (a purveyor of myth and folk narratives) as an individual who "could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."[4] For Benjamin, the storyteller is one who aggregates into his or her own life experiences previously existing tales culled from both the storyteller's lived experience and broader cultural

[3] Eliade (1959): 210-211.
[4] Benjamin (2004): 378.

memory that is expressed within an oral performative context. Benjamin suggests that memory provides a linkage between the people (those who listen to a story) and the storyteller, who crafts and performs the story forming an orally-based intertextuality.[5] The story—in this case mythology—continues to live on in the lives of individuals through their repeated retelling in stories and novels, and change even after the culmination of a storytelling performance. In this context, intertextuality in narrative involves the repetition of elements, or motifs, found in various stories; it provides a matrix by which the individual experiencing stories is aided in understanding the relevance of that story through interrelation and quotation of story elements.[6]

The concept of "orally based intertextuality" is used here to indicate the interrelation of story elements within the body of stories which exist for oral storytellers. By contrast, reading a novel, as a solitary endeavor lacking the performative nature of storytelling, according to Benjamin, changes traditional storytelling's continued cultural relevance by creating a finite fictional world in which the narrative culminates at the closing off of the story with the termination of written text.[7] For Benjamin, this is unlike performed stories in which the audience is taking part in a storytelling experience that continues from performance to performance.[8] However, the question remains as to whether or not the development of the written stories reduces the continued cultural and

[5] Ibid.: 371.
[6] Bal (2009): 69.
[7] Ibid.: 372.
[8] For a sampling of discussions about the nature of storytelling events by folklorists and others, as well as issues concerning text, context, intertextuality, and performative events, see Georges (1969, 1980, 1986), Bauman (1975, 1992), Finnegan (1992), Mechling (1991), Briggs and Bauman (1992), Ben-Amos (1993), Kapchan (1995), Titon (1995), Gabbert (1999), Hufford (1995), Jordan-Smith (1999), and Niles (1999).

social relevance of a storytelling by providing a solitary outlet for the reader to engage with narratives.

If we accept the term *memory* in storytelling as understood as a cultural memory contained within narrative—that is, stories that are communicated with some continuity over time, from generation to generation, for example—then the novel, irrespective of its closed diegetic universe, that engages intertextually with concepts of cultural significance is, by dent of its subject matter, an example of continued storytelling and thus a continuation of the stuff of traditional storytelling. This understanding provides the rationale for selecting Neil Gaiman as a subject of inquiry. Mythology and folklore make up portions of cultural memory that are continually explored as the subjects of his various novels. It is these intertextual tools through which Gaiman's stories, as embodiments of cultural memory, are linked in the manner defined by Benjamin as a major component of the storyteller, and which are exemplified in Gaiman's tales.

Neil Gaiman was born in 1960 in the town of Portchester, England. He began writing in the mid-1980's and has since amassed a prolific curriculum vita of wide-ranging work. Over the span of his now thirty-year long career as a professional writer, he has written fairy tales, children's books, comic books, science fiction scripts for television programs, as well as big-budget Hollywood films based on legendary Anglo-Saxon heroes. In addition to the aforementioned works, he has written seven fantasy novels to date. These fantasy novels contain several folkloric and mythological figures ranging from angels to misplaced ancient deities. Gaiman, discussing his use of these folkloric and mythological figures, states, "…My interests have taken me, whether I wanted them to or not, into the realm of myth, which is not entirely the same as the realm

of imagination, although they share a common border."[9] It is this common border between fantasy fiction and myth that Gaiman notes in the above quotation which is particularly interesting within the scope of this study because it illuminates the interplay between a mode of storytelling that is rooted firmly in the past and one which draws on that past in the present as a tool for modern mythological narrative creation—a notion that expresses the second focus of this thesis, mentioned above.

Modern fantasy has become an increasingly popular genre of narrative fiction in second decade of the twenty-first century. As a commercial enterprise, fantasy narratives are now an economic trans-medial powerhouse; for example, by 2011, the first four books of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series have sold upward of fifteen million copies and the HBO program *Game of Thrones* which takes its name from the first book of the *Song of Ice and Fire* series has served to exponentially increase the books popularity and sales.[10] Fantasy narratives proliferate on television, at the cinema, as the subject of board and tabletop games, within the content of video games, and most importantly for the purpose of this study, in novels. The mythic appears in modern fantasy novels in a few ways. Perhaps two of the more prominent manifestations of mythic elements found in fantasy fiction are seen in the ways that authors either explicitly use mythological names, places, and stories within their work, or implicitly using narrative scaffolding techniques that build a story structure around a core mythological foundation while changing only the outward façade of the mythologies that form the basis of the narrative. At the core, both the explicit and implicit usages of mythology within fantasy fiction literature are inherently intertextual undertakings as the authors and

[9] Gaiman (1999): 75-84.
[10] Miller (2011): Web.

consumers of these fictions must constantly engage in interplay between source materials—the original written texts containing traditionally oral mythological narratives and their various translations—and the modern stories that are produced or re-produced from those texts.

As a genre, modern fantasy fiction expresses traditional mythological motifs despite losing the metrically—the rhythmic meter of verse—and the performativity of traditional oral communication. Elements of traditional mythology are kept current by fantasy authors who choose to make use of mythic and mythological tropes and forms from across the world. Of course, this does not mean that myth is kept as a static document, but rather implies the continued dynamism of the mythic which can change in meaning, if not structure, to suit the interpretation of symbols important to a given culture. The appropriation and consistent recycling and reworking of world mythologies within the modern fantasy genre does not deter fans from consuming the materials, but often is what attracts them. Interestingly, the mythic appears to bolster the genre by providing names and places to narratives that render them familiar to audiences. This familiarity forms the basis of a popular myth creation that will be explored in chapter II of this study.

This thesis examines why mythological tropes are commonly used by modern fantasy authors and in what ways they understand these mythic materials to correspond to or mediate between their original and literary worlds. Additionally, I investigate what is it about mythic tales that resonates so strongly among the readership that authors continue to turn to the common mythic and foundational narratives time and again to craft their stories. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I will ask how the use of mythic and

mythological materials in modern fantasy fiction form a coherent intertextual discourse between the original materials and those contained within the modern story world and thus fosters the creation of popular fantasies divorced from their original sacred or didactic intent—if they do so at all.

In addressing these issues, I focus on Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* as a case study. Gaiman is no stranger to the use of mythological features in his narratives. Several of his novels, graphic novels, and short stories, including, most prominently *Anansi Boys*, *Sandman, Monarch on the Glen* and *American Gods*, draw heavily on world mythologies in some form to drive the narrative action of the stories. In the case of *American Gods*, Gaiman interweaves several world mythologies, such as Baltic, Caribbean, Indian, African, Asiatic, and Northern European in order to create an intertextual mythological narrative, set in the present day United States of America. Indeed, the narrative of *American Gods* typifies the modern fantasy fiction trope of using mythological names, places, and stories within a modern context and setting.

Gaiman's interest in the field of folklore is evidenced not only by his use of the content of folklore, but also by his use of quotations and the integration of the ideas of various well known twentieth century folklorists including the American folklorists Richard Dorson and B.A. Botkin, among others. Gaiman actually quotes Dorson directly at the outset of *American Gods* and continues to integrate some of Dorson's ideas into the personage of his characters. In the article "Folklore, Intertextuality, and the Folkloresque in the works of Neil Gaiman," folklorist Timothy Evans points out that Gaiman's interest in the field of folkloristics is shown partially by integrating the ideas of folklorists into his characters' dialogue; in *American Gods,* Gaiman uses the character Richie

Hinzelman—though Evans goes on to cite a number of other works in which Gaiman's characters are used in a similar fashion—to tell stories about the upper Midwest which Evans points out had been collected and published by Dorson.[11] Due to Gaiman's interest in both the content and the discipline of folklore studies, *American Gods* is positioned as an excellent example that allows for a study of both modern fantasy fiction and folklore.

My analysis will initially focus on Gaiman's use of various traditional world mythologies taken from oral tradition and how these are presented in conversation with one another within the novel. I will similarly look at how specific mythologies, particularly Norse mythology, are presented in relationship to or conversation with original folkloric source materials. I argue that Gaiman uses Norse mythological figures to create a liminal fantasy world in which world mythologies beyond those of Northern Europe are at best peripheral to their Northern counterparts, and by doing so Gaiman reinvigorates traditional mythology for modern readers by providing them with a new understanding of the myths themselves. My analysis thus attempts to clarify and complicate the intertextual nature of *American Gods* and to situate the narrative in a discourse along a continuum of mythopoeic authorship that asks not only how narratives use specific mythologies within the form of the modern novel, but if these newly created mythically-based narratives provide the basis for the creation of a form of popular mythology harkening, even if only mimetically, back to a pre-modern age in which myth formed the bedrock of belief.

To contextualize this study within a larger academic conversation surrounding Neil Gaiman and his writings, it is imperative to discuss the growing body of academic literature available to those interested in interpretations of Gaiman's works and

[11] Evans (2016): 67–69, 71.

particularly *American Gods*. It is important to note that current academic research into Gaiman's works is nascent and as such the proposed categories listed below will likely change and grow as more voices are added to the academic discussion. The current state of academic research into Gaiman's novels can be broken down into a series of three main groups: the symbolic, the structural, and the political. The symbolic category, the largest grouping, deals most heavily with interpretations of a symbolic nature in regard to major elements of Gaiman's stories, such as symbolic meanings of the geographical landscape, characters, and overarching messages contained within the narrative. The structural category, the second most prevalent of interpretations of Gaiman's works, examines the literary forms that his works take; this category tends to discuss whether Gaiman's works favor a certain type of novel structure over another. The political category is, to date, the smallest of the three areas of research; it most often interprets Gaiman's work through the lens of his immigrant status in the United States to point to a discourse on what it means to be an outsider in America today while providing a critique on popularly held notions of identity. Many published academic papers on Gaiman comport to one of these three groupings, though a few expand into two of the groups, most notably, Siobhan Carroll's *Imagined Nation: Place and National Identity in Neil Gaiman's "American Gods"* which bridges the gap between both the symbolic and political subcategories discussed above by looking at both place and identity as a largely fictive construct of modernity.

In what follows I delineate and review the scholarship on Gaiman's writings, within the frameworks mentioned above. As noted, what I term the 'symbolic category' of Gaiman research tends most often to examine his works as allegorical or representative

of some allusive meaning concealed within the presentation and content of his stories, and the authors' arguments are formed to give voice to the symbolism. For most, this symbolism exists just below the level of the manifest narrative and helps to convey tone and emotional register to the narratives. Researchers have parsed out elements of the stories to illuminate the symbolic information coded into the matrix of Gaiman's narratives and vary in accordance with the researcher's readings of the work, but largely comport to overarching elements of allegory or allusion. Current academic voices that embrace this approach, as I have delineated it, include the researchers Paula Brown, Cyril Camus, Andrew Wearring, and Matti Delahay.

Paula Brown provides a deeply allegorical understanding of Gaiman's writing. Her article "Stardust as Allegorical Bildungsroman: An Apology for Platonic Idealism" focuses on Gaiman's third novel, *Stardust*. Brown provides the groundwork for arguments based on an ironic reading of Neil Gaiman's work. Her argument, which is specific to *Stardust*, situates the narrative as an introversion of the Victorian love-quest motif wherein the narrative muddies traditional notions of love and romantic idealism along a journey representative of romantic internal self-discovery.[12] In this reading of Gaiman's novel, the author relies on an allegorical model centered on the story's external journey that is deeply representative of an act of self-discovery and remembrance of the protagonist's internal nature in the face of the fantastic. For Brown, the external journey of the narrative action of *Stardust*—that of the protagonist's haphazard and often cowardly journey into the land of Faire, his subsequent discovery of his heroic nature, and his return to the mundane world from which he traveled—supplants a symbolic internal journey of self-discovery upon which the traditional narrative of

[12] Brown (2010): 216, 218.

Stardust's Victorian love-quest is converted into an ironic tale which questions both notions of love and the understanding of the self in relation to romantic expectations. Brown suggests that the novel's, "allegorical plot, like a poem, emphasizes the elements of image and symbol," thereby creating a narrative story through which the manifest level is simultaneously reified and challenged.[13] Brown ultimately concludes that *Stardust* is a self-conscious postmodern narrative of self-discovery couched in the framework if a Victorian fairytale. This fairytale produces a series of ironic commentaries, through the juxtaposition of plain speech and haute chivalric declarations in the story on both the nature of love and the traditional exposition of masculine heroism in the fantasy genre.[14]

The work of Cyril Camus provides another significant understanding of Gaiman's writing, centering largely on the reading of the narrative descriptions of place in Gaiman's work, and how he positions those descriptions as representative of an evocative tone or an intertextual discourse between the work of literature and any of several of the related mythological locales. Camus' essay, "Fantasy and Landscape: Mountain as Myth in Neil Gaiman's Stories" develops an argument that centers on place—primarily landscape and specifically, mountains—and the relationship to narrative tone in Gaiman's writing. His article suggests that these places represent an attempt to delineate emotional cues to the reader by entwining the physical descriptions of given locales with emotionally driven reactions elicited within the reader.[15] Camus' scholarship gives the reader insights into the function of symbolism in Gaiman's writing and suggests that the symbolic implications developed from place and the interplay between the mythic and

[13] Ibid.: 217.
[14] Ibid.: 229.
[15] Camus (2010): 380.

mundane worlds are Gaiman's purview as a postmodern author of fantasy.[16] Interestingly, Camus is hesitant to suggest that his readers consider Gaiman a storyteller; he points instead to Gaiman as entertainer whose writing provides entertainment in such a way that happens to *occasionally* contain elements of symbolism.[17] Camus concludes that the mountain in Gaiman's writing is both a mythical and mundane locale that provides a driving force to the emotional level of his narratives while also conveying a sense of power that sets the narrative tone through sheer size and a tenuous connection to various world mythologies, such as Tartarus, Mt. Olympus, the Black Hills, and Lookout Mountain, to name a few.[18]

In another analysis of symbolism, Andrew Wearring provides a sketch of the potential symbolic aspects of Gaiman's frequent use of various world deities in his work. One of the more interesting points that Wearring alludes to but does not fully flesh out in "Changing, Out-of-Work, Dead, and Reborn Gods in the Fiction of Neil Gaiman" (2011) is the suggestion that both the presentation and functional use of the myriad gods in Gaiman's writing builds a model of existence for these characters that is consistent with human's own life trajectories (birth, growth, decay, and death). However, Wearring's article is primarily concerned with the way that Gaiman defines 'gods' in the context of his writing. This question arises from the conflicted nature of the deities that Gaiman presents to the reader; for this reason, Wearring spends the majority of his article providing an overview of plot lines and a synopsis of events for Gaiman's writing in order to demonstrate the characteristics that the gods display throughout his works. [19] In

[16] Ibid.: 384.
[17] Ibid.: 379, 390.
[18] Ibid.: 389–390.
[19] Wearring (2011): 236, 239, 244, 246.

doing so, Wearring builds a working definition of Gaiman's 'gods' in which "the divine is neither eradicated nor eclipsed; rather, as it is no longer opposed to the profane, it is given a new lease of life."[20] Wearring concludes his argument by suggesting that Gaiman's casual construction and use of various mortal gods blurs the line between sacrality and the profane in a manner that dissolves boundaries between the mythic and the everyday in order to imbue the story worlds—worlds in which gods exist and interact with human's own everyday surroundings—with elements of the fantastic.[21]

Finally, Matti Delahay's research on symbolic meanings deals with the modern function of myth in Gaiman's novel *American Gods*. He seeks to root out whether Gaiman's *American Gods* conforms to Joseph Campbell's Monomyth theory and his four functions of mythology: mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological.[22] Delahay attempts to connect his interpretation of *American Gods* to the foundation of Campbell's *A Heroes Journey* through a reading of the mythological references found within the surface narrative of *American Gods* in order to draw out a connection to the specific function of myth in modernity. He ultimately concludes that *American Gods* qualifies as a 'modern myth' under the umbrella of Campbell's definition as it, boldly proclaiming: 1) it may serve the cosmological function of helping the reader understand the world; 2) it may generate a sociological benefit by helping the reader recognize the benefits of personal freedom; 3) it may help the reader regain a mystical sense of wonderment and reverence toward the unknown world; and 4) it may help the reader preserve psychological balance during trying times.[23] In this deeply symbolic reading of

[20] Ibid.: 246.
[21] Ibid.: 246.
[22] Delahay (2001): 57.
[23] Ibid.: 91–94.

American Gods, these four elements of the narrative serve to create an intertextual modern mythological story; however, it should be noted that, although the story demonstrates the four elements of modern myth provided by Joseph Campbell, it remains an assemblage of quotation and reference which generates an intertextual understanding of the myths within *American Gods*.

The second category mentioned above, which I identify as the 'structural' approach, tends most often to examine Gaiman's works at the level of narrative structure writ large. These researchers examine the ways in which narratives unfold in formulaic ways rather than interpret their potential symbolic or political features. For those writing from this perspective, arguments are formed in order illuminate how the structure of the tale shapes the narrative as well as the ways that these structures help to convey meaning to the reader. For most, this structural analysis exists on a macro level beyond the specifics of narrative content; these scholars often are concerned less with the story itself than they are with the importance of the intertextual narrative relationships and the methods of conveyance. Current academic voices within this category, as I have delineated it, include the researchers Sàndor Klapcsik, Adam Porter, Geert Vandermeersche, and Ronald Soetaert.

For Sàndor Klapcsik, many of Neil Gaiman's novels and short stories act as a popular expression of postmodernist attitudes toward storytelling in general and narrative form using intertextuality, liminality, and parody.[24] Klapcsik examines the ways in which Gaiman's narratives manifest in a post-modernist structural aesthetic and how that aesthetic plays into audience expectations of narrative meaning. Specifically, he looks at Gaiman's retelling of the myths in *American Gods* and fairy tales such as *Snow White.*

[24] Klapcsik (2008): 317.

With most emphasis being placed on the latter story, Klapcsik maintains that through altering the focalization of the fairy tales from the traditional protagonist Snow White, to the antagonist, the Evil Queen, traditional meaning within the story is flipped on its head and plays into a structural aesthetic of referential parody in post-modernist storytelling.[25] Klapcsik concludes that the structural form of Gaiman's stories portrays multiple simultaneous semiotic systems dealing with the story world as a series of fractured sub-texts and interlaced narrative streams, through the liminal and ironical worlds of Gaiman's post-modernist recasting of old mythologies and fairy tales.

Whereas Klapcsik offers an overview of narrative structures within several of Gaiman's stories, focusing largely on his fairy tale retellings, Adam Porter offers a focused reading on the intertextual elements within Gaiman's *Sandman.* Porter engages both Christian and Jewish conceptions of hell and suggests that Gaiman's work is a reflection of both a romanticized postmodern recasting of Lucifer as a Byronic hero, as well as a strong interaction with the presentation of Lucifer in John Milton's classic epic poem *Paradise Lost*.[26] Porter's argument hinges on the notion that Gaiman is interacting in a referential and intertextual way with both his readings of Milton as well as his own positionality based on his past religious experiences which manifests in a story structure steeped in intertextuality and irony.[27] However, Porter ultimately concludes that though *Sandman's* narrative structure and the portrayal of the character Lucifer is based on Milton's Christian world-view, the graphic novel itself is reflective of a mythology in direct conversation with Gaiman's own Jewish heritage—as seen in, among other things, the presentation of the Jewish Gehenna rather than the Christian Hell—and is thus

[25] Ibid.: 328–329.
[26] Porter (2013): 176.
[27] Ibid.: 175.

indebted to a storytelling system steeped in the tradition of re-imagining religious narratives.[28]

Unlike the previous authors situated within the 'structural' perspective to Gaiman's work, Vandermeersche and Soetaert take a different structuralist approach. Instead of examining the intertextuality of narrative, they examine the intermedial structure of narrative that is found in Gaiman's graphic novels. Intermedial—also known as transmedial—narrative is a term used by Vandermeersche and Soetaert to describe a narrative told across media platforms, such as comic book adaptations of novels. Vandermeersche and Soetaert argue that the graphic novel is an intermedial communicator of both cultural literacy and literary thinking, and, as such, should be added to the standard liberal arts curriculum.[29] Their research reaches somewhat outside of the focus of this thesis, however I have chosen to include their work as it informs a part of the structural understanding of the importance of Gaiman's work across literary studies. Vandermeersche and Soetaert generate an argument based on the notion that current cultural literacy produces a command of cross-medial experiences of the literary world (i.e., movies that are turned into videogames that are then turned into graphic novels) and they suggest that this sort of intermedial literacy generates culturally embedded ideas and references connecting a web of literary references that the graphic novel helps to illuminate for the reader. Their argument is particularly instructive when examining the transmedial manifestations of Gaiman's work in *Stardust, Coraline, Lucifer,* and most recently, *American Gods*.

[28] Ibid.: 184–185.
[29] Vandermeersche and Soetaert (2011): 2.

The third area of Gaiman-focused research, what I call the 'political category,' tends to examine Gaiman's writing within a framework of deeply rooted political readings. These researchers, much like the symbolic-oriented researchers, focus largely on a reading of Gaiman's work as allegorical or representative of some symbolic meaning; however, they differ in that they see specifically political meanings concealed within the presentation and content of his stories. For those writing from this perspective, arguments are formed based on an interpretive lens that tends to highlight Gaiman's status as an immigrant within the United States of America to draw out a discourse on what it means to be both an outsider and insider within the USA today. These readings often provide a critique on popularly held notions of identity. For most of these researchers, this political discourse is evoked from the social context and events contained within Gaiman's narratives and help to convey ideas about identity and social engagement. Current academic voices within this category include Rut Blomqvist, Siobhan Carroll, and Olesen Max.

Blomqvist argues that *American Gods* offers a politically driven commentary on the conflicting notions of what it means to be an American; he states that his commentary hinges on Gaiman status as an outsider, an Englishman, looking into the eclectic world of the modern day American melting pot.[30] He uses the concept of binary pairs—good and evil, real and fake, divine and human—against the backdrop of the characters' experiences within the mythic scaffolds of both narrative structure and the plot of *American Gods* in order to sketch a rough estimation of an outsider's interpretation of the American experience. Blomqvist presents a concept of mythical secularity in *American Gods* to explain the tenuous interplay between the deities and the protagonists presented

[30] Blomqvist (2012): 3.

therein in a way that distinguishes the ever changing and often difficult relationship that Americans have with their cultural past; the tensions that Americans feel between the notion of the ideal of an American melting pot and the real lived experiences of being an American in a mishmash cultural tapestry.[31]

Unlike Blomqvist's focus on the author as outsider in order to produce a politically rooted reading of *American Gods* and identity construction, Siobhan Carroll argues that *American Gods* uses place as a deeply entrenched rhetorical tool of the fantasy genre that has been inherited by Tolkien's use of maps to define the identities of whole peoples.[32] However, instead of reinforcing notions of identity through place, Carroll argues that Gaiman's use of the concept actually challenges Tolkien's use of maps to define the identities of people. She suggests that Gaiman's use of places on the margins of the American interstate system is conceived to combat notions of identity construction as tied to national and local geographies.[33] Carroll concludes that *American Gods* use of place points out that national identity is a fictive construct and challenges Tolkien's notion that place has any role in the construction and maintenance of personal identity whatsoever.

The political analysis offered by Max Olesen tries to situate *American Gods* in a long line of historical treaties on the nature of American attitudes toward immigration. His research seeks to align the narrative of *American Gods* with the idea that American identities are linked inexorably with the locales from which individuals immigrate. However, his research suggests at the same time that the message contained within *American Gods* points toward the idea that to truly craft an American Identity those who

[31] Ibid.: 5.
[32] Carroll (2009): 317–318.
[33] Ibid.: 319–320.

immigrate to the country must cast off their old habits (e.g., rituals, religions, spiritualties, etc.), in order to truly assimilate into the American 'melting pot.'[34] Olesen's essentially assimilationist reading of *American Gods* suggests that the novel argues—through an allegorical reading of the novel's final show down between old and new Gods—that to be truly American, one must tie oneself religiously and spiritually to the nation through a shared identity that is linked inextricably to the land and peoples of America. Olesen's research typifies the political perspective applied to Gaiman's literary output.

My own research attempts to bridge the gap between the symbolic, structural, and political readings of Gaiman's work in order to generate a new argument: that *American Gods* represents a form of an intertextual popular myth that is representative of a continuation of the concepts of mythology discussed by Northrop Frye and Mircea Eliade (although moving away from the idea that humans maintain a latent yearning for the sacred as delineated by Eliade). As mentioned above, my research attempts to contribute in two ways to the scholarship on Neil Gaiman. The first is to call into question Benjamin's idea that the storyteller no longer exists, in a counter move that looks at the interplay between the subject matter of mythically-rooted oral storytelling and this same subject matter as it is manipulated and deployed within modern written narratives specifically within the fantasy novel genre. The second motive of this study is to suggest that this specific modern storytelling mode acts as an active form of postmodern popular myth creation. To construct my argument and accomplish these goals, I examine Gaiman's *American Gods,* and his novella *Monarch on the Glen*.

[34] Max (2012): 119–120.

CHAPTER II

MYTH, NARRATIVE, AND SECULAR MYTHOLOGY

Myth is a term that can lead to a lot of confusion when one tries to pin down a precise definition. People use the term myth, and subsequently the term mythology, in several ways, and to mean many different things. Popular usages of myth run the gamut between stories that are made up, lies, and falsities, popularly held beliefs with little to no factual backing, or stories that are generated and repeated by some far off relation to explain a phenomenon, the world around us, or the cosmos. Some of these uses have been taken up by scholars and built into a network of ideas and theories about mythology.

What is a myth? Is it a story about the adventures of gods, sacred narratives, didactic tales, a prescribed set of storytelling norms featuring fantastic beings that connect to a body of stories throughout time? The answer to each of these questions is *yes*, but with the caveat that none of these answers is entirely correct without the consideration of the others. In this study, I use mythology as a term to describe a body of stories involving deities and demi-gods and their exploits both during and beyond a sacred past and a sacred future—a time immemorial—as well as all stories which are decontextualized from their sacred sources and used intertextually, or hypertextually but remain bound to the original mythological source materials through names, places, characters, and motifs. In chapter II, I will discuss a number of theories of myth before examining at narrative theory and myth, narrative intertextuality and myth, and the use of mythological stories in modern literature. These concepts will lay the foundation for the idea that ancient myths are being recycled and recreated in the modern era as a body of mythically-rooted stories striped of their original sacred context, but nonetheless

important for shaping our understanding of myth and narrative writ large; a concept which I refer to as secular myth creation and ultimately apply to the case study of Gaiman's *American Gods*.

Theories about mythology have fallen into several schools of thought since academics have taken up the subject. Anthropologists, psychologists, literary critics, and narrative theorists, among others, have all provided different although sometimes overlapping interpretive theories about the development and function of mythology. However, before moving forward to the theoretical bent from which we will examine *American Gods,* it is important to sketch out two types of conflicting thought about myth: myth as replaceable remnant of history and myth as irreplaceable continuing element of the human experience.

Some of the more well-known early scholarly theorists discussing myth and mythological function during the 19th century, including authors like Sir James George Frazer, and E.B. Tylor, viewed myth as replaceable; indeed, they viewed myth as having already been replaced by science.[35] Frazer and Tylor both based their ideas about mythology largely on notions of cultural evolution and the link between nature, magic, ritual, myth, and religion. Where Tylor viewed myth as an explanation of natural phenomena, Frazer takes this notion a step further and suggests that myth develops as an allegory to explain and justify literal beliefs in magic. Known as the myth-ritual theory, this school of thought suggested that bodies of myth were generated by human beings universally during a "primitive" stage of cultural and religious evolution in order to explain for these groups of people some of the more perplexing elements of the world

[35] Segal (1999): 2.

around them as well as to provide a perception that humans maintained a modicum of control over the natural world through ritual and magic.[36] This school of thought argued that ecological and seasonal events which science had yet to explain lead cultures to develop mythological stories that explained the unexplainable events of the natural world—which magic could not control—in which these cultures existed. For Frazer, and this school of thought, myth acted as an explanatory stage between the literal belief in magic and ritualized practices, which became enshrined in formal stories and behaviors during a period of worship before science would, according to the myth-ritual theory, render magical beliefs obsolete. Frazer describes this in the following way:

> In magic man depends on his own strength to meet the difficulties and dangers that beset him on every side. He believes in a certain established order of nature on which he can surely count, and which he can manipulate for his own ends. When he discovers his mistake, when he recognizes sadly that both the order of nature which he had assumed and the control which he believed himself to exercise over it were purely imaginary, he ceases to rely on his own intelligence and his own unaided efforts, and throws himself humbly on the mercy of certain great invisible beings behind the veil of nature, to whom he now ascribes all those far-reaching powers which he once arrogated to himself. Thus, in the acuter minds, magic is gradually superseded by religion, which explains the succession of natural phenomena as regulated by the will, the passion, or the caprice of spiritual beings like man in kind, though vastly superior to him in power.[37]

For Frazer, magic gave way to ritual and myth which in turn developed into organized religion before subsequently becoming subordinated to science.[38] Myth was generated during a specific moment in cultural evolution and was passed down as a cultural remnant in the form of stories that had lost their magical and religious significance.

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[36] Segal (1999): 48-50, 68-70.
[37] Frazer (1922): 711.
[38] Frazer (1993): 711-14.

Later theorists viewed myth as an irreplaceable part of the human experience which could be retold and reinvented in the modern era; these theorists turned away from literal explanations of natural processes and allegory, and toward symbol and psychology to explain the development of mythology. The analytical psychologist and Freudian disciple turned critic, Carl Jung, argued that myth was the symbolic result of the mind generating archetypes (personifications of universal themes) of the collective unconscious mind as an expression of human experience. This archetypical explanation of myth rejects the external explanation generated by the myth-ritual theory discussed above, and instead turns the impetus for mythology inward; focusing on the symbolic elements of human experience which are intrinsic to the collective psychological understanding of life. Jungian theories of myth place an emphasis on analyzing the archetypes which make up myths. Theorist of myth Robert Segal quotes Jung as writing that, "Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes."[39] This statement illustrates the basic tenets of Jung's mythological theories.

The twentieth century popularist of mythology, Joseph Campbell, comports to some of the explanations of the Jungian school of thought, including the identification of archetypes broadly defined, and the internal explanation of myth, but provides a simplification for the development and function of myth through his postulation of the monomyth, a theory which suggests that all myths are essentially variations of one mythological narrative which Campbell refers to as the heroes' journey.[40] The function of

[39] Segal (1999): 67.
[40] Campbell (2008): 210–215.

this monomyth, in contrast to the emphasis on analyzing archetypes in Jungian theories on myth, is four fold:

> to instill and maintain a sense of awe and mystery before the world; to provide a symbolic image for the world such as that of the Great Chain of Being; to maintain the social order by giving divine justification to social practices like the Indian caste system; and above all to harmonize human beings with the cosmos, society, and the parts of themselves.[41]

Myths, for Campbell, therefore developed to serve a metaphysical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical function beyond the Jungian archetypically focused mythological theory. By moving away from an historically rooted explanatory function of myth, these theories, though providing somewhat different rationales from one another for the existence and function of myth, imply that myth not only cannot be replaced by shifting ideas like religion and science, but also that myth continues to play a role in the psychological lives of humanity in the modern era. This latter implication is of particular importance for our purposes in examining the connection between literature and myth. If myth continues to play a role in our lives, what are these roles and how might they manifest? To provide some answers to these questions, we will now turn to the major theoretical ideas from which this study is based: Mircea Eliade concepts about myth creation and the sacred, and Northrop Frye's critical interpretation of literature and a return to mythic subject matter.

Mircea Eliade was a twentieth century historian of religion. He was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1906 and passed away in the United States in 1986. He was widely considered one of the most prolific writers about myth and symbolism during his lifetime and remains influential today. Eliade spent much of his career teaching at the

[41] Segal (1999): 120.

University of Chicago.[42] He is perhaps most well known for his theory of the eternal return which states that, through recitation of a hierophany—a manifestation of the sacred which here can be contained within any mythological story, or indeed most experiences in life[43]—human beings, both archaic and modern, abolish *historical* time and in so doing enter into an interaction with a primordial *ahistorical* time outside of time wherein the sacred is experienced. For Eliade, myth therefore engages in an act of reproducing symbolically the moment of creation. That is, it produces a sacred experience for the individual or group taking part in myth.[44] Eliade's eternal return provides a bridge between the two modes of thought discussed above—myth as explanatory and myth as symbolic—by allowing for both an explanatory function of mythology rooted in specific cultural histories, while also suggesting that myth provides mankind with an intrinsic, that is, symbolic, meaning that is not lost to time, but rather made stronger through continued recitation, and interpretation. As Eliade writes in *Images and Symbols:*

> The hearer of myth, regardless of his level of culture, when he is listening to a myth, forgets, as it were, his particular situation and is projected into another world, into another universe which is no longer his poor little universe of every day … The myths are true because they are sacred, because they tell him about sacred beings and events. Consequently, in reciting or listening to a myth, one resumes contact with the sacred and with reality, and in so doing one transcends the profane condition, the "historical situation." In other words, one goes beyond the temporal condition and the dull self-sufficiency which is the lot of every human being simply because every human being is "ignorant"—in the sense that he is identifying himself, and Reality, with his own particular situation. And ignorance is, first of all, this false identification of Reality with what each one of us appears to be or to possess.[45]

[42] Allen (1998): xi.
[43] Ibid.: 77.
[44] Ibid.: 250.
[45] Quoted in Rennie (1996): 74.

By engaging with myths from any period and any culture, the listener, reader, or reciter transcends his own identity and interacts with a sacred time, a mythological time, and by so doing continues to reproduce the importance and vitality of myth through its symbols, although these symbols may change in meaning depending upon when and where they are interpreted, even if those symbols are stripped of their original esoteric meaning.[46] Eliade's theories about the importance of myth in the modern context are elucidated through his statement that

> A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. The cinema, that "dream factory," takes over and employs countless mythical motifs—the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisal landscape, hell, and so on). Even reading includes a mythological function … because, through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an "escape from time" comparable to the "emergence from time" effected by myths. Whether modern man "kills" time with detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another "history."[47]

It is from this quote that this thesis takes one of its theoretical positions: that myth, although often stripped of its original sacrality in the modern era, continues to be produced, or reproduced, through fantasy fiction and the processes of intertextuality and hypertextuality.

Before discussing important and related narratological concepts, it must be noted that although Eliade's theories are widely cited by individuals discussing myth and symbol, there are problems with his methodology. Over the course of his life, Eliade had many critics who claimed that his works were "methodically uncritical, subjective, and

[46] Eliade (1991): 172–175.
[47] Quoted in Segal (1999): 22–23.

unscientific."[48] This criticism was spurred largely by claims that Eliade made universal assumptions about the function and purpose of myth without providing rigorous scholarly inquiry into his subjects; these claims are likely fair, however, for the purposes of this thesis, Eliade's work nonetheless provides a basic framework from which to begin to understand the continued prevalence of myth and mythopoeic writing in general, and Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* in particular.

In order to apply Eliade's idea that elements of myth, in part or in full, as well as the notion that mythological tropes are masked, or couched within modern culture—literature, film, graphic novels, comic books, video games (though not explicitly stated)—it is important to demonstrate that there is an existing and important concept for the appearance of one text contained within another. The Bulgarian literary critic Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in her work *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* as "a textual mosaic to argue against the radical originality of any text and to locate common cultural experience in the sharing of text rather than any shared intersubjective state, for we always take up individual subject positions."[49] Kristeva developed the term by combining French structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure's notions of diachrony and synchrony in reading a given piece of literature — the interplay between the historical process of language with its ahistorical and ephemeral form—with philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic principle through which language and meaning can be recognized and understood through an overarching understanding and recognition of linguistic and literary interrelation.[50] Narratologist Mieke Bal describes intertextuality as "quotations [that] are cleverly dramatized,

[48] Allen (1998): xi.
[49] Bazerman (2004): 54.
[50] Ibid.: 54–56.

reversed, and ridiculed passages from sources one can actually trace."[51] The term provides the reader with that language necessary to understand that texts, a term which can indicate not only the written word, but also cultural artefacts, film, art, and myriad other forms of human expression that are not formed in a vacuum, but rather rely on one another to provide shared meaning. The term intertextuality is applied to myth and literature to demonstrate that there is a shared connection, not always explicit and sometimes through allusion, within structure, or through pastiche, between works of literature and mythology through a shared vocabulary of stories, gods, and traditions. For instance, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides an example of an intertextual work as it alludes to the Greek myth Prometheus in its secondary title: *or, the Modern Prometheus.*

Intertextuality often intersects with another form of transtextuality which is of particular importance to the study of the interplay between myth and literature as it describes a direct link between works by subordinating the very existence of one work to that of another; this form of transtextuality is called hypertextuality. The term was coined by Gärard Genette in the book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* in order to explain the intentional and specific connections between literary works of various genres. Genette describes hypertextuality as "any relationship uniting text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext),* upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary;" he goes on to reiterate that "…hypertext then is any text derived from a previous text either through simple transformation… or through indirect transformation, which I shall label *imitation*."[52] In hypertextual works, the later text exists in a form that is wholly dependent on the

[51] Bal (2009): 69.
[52] Genette (1997): 5, 7.

original, unlike intertextual works where elements of the text are linked with other works through a wider network of understanding. Genette further describes hypertextuality as "a category of works, [that] is in itself a generic or, more precisely, transgeneric architecture … a category of texts which wholly encompasses certain canonical (though minor) genres such as pastiche, parody, travesty, and which also touches on other genres—probably all genres"[53] Hypertextual texts then could encompass a number of genres ranging from a satirical retelling of a story, to reimagining's of fairy tales, to, for our purposes and interests, the reworking of mythologies into new and interesting narratives that appeal to individuals within the specific moment in which they are written. A prime example of a hypertextual piece is Neil Gaiman's 1994 short story *Snow, Glass, Apples,* which offers a reversed perspective and narrative inversion of *Snow White* in which the title character is portrayed as a vampire, ravaging the countryside in her bloodlust, and the antagonist of the original story, the wicked stepmother, is written as the reluctant hero who must slay her stepchild, Snow White, and save her kingdom.[54] Though the perspective of the original story is altered to suit the ironic conventions of the post-modernist milieu, it remains firmly rooted in the fairy tale source material. In other words, if *Snow White* had never been written, *Snow, Glass, Apples* would never have been conceived.

Having discussed some of the literary ideas associated with Eliade's theories that myth, or the latent urge toward the sacred, as a proposed underpinning for human activities regarding the mythic, and connected to a more literary interpretation of fantasy fiction's use of myth, we must now turn to Northrop Frye, whose critical ideas about

[53] Ibid.: 8.
[54] Gaiman (1999): 32.

myth and literature will help to bridge the gap between Eliade's conception that the use of modern myth stems from a latent desire toward the sacred and my own interpretation that myth is recycled and reborn in the present, irrespective of its sacred context through intertextuality and hypertextuality.

Northrop Frye was a Canadian literary critic and theorist whose career spanned more than fifty years; he taught at Harvard University and died in 1991. Frye's works were enormously popular within literary criticism in the twentieth century and continue to have an impact on the field today. His first book, *Fearful Symmetry*, is considered by some to be one of the most methodical and important books on the poet William Blake.[55] However, for the understanding of myth, our concerns lie elsewhere with Frye's most famous work *Anatomy of Criticism*, which provides a critical interpretation of literature as well as an examination of the role of myth in literary works. Frye proposes an evolutionary model of literature which moves from one stage to another cyclically through five steps of literary convention only to return to the first. The cycle which Frye proposes begins with myth, in which narratives about gods and heroes of a divine nature make up the body of this mode. The cycle then moves through a category of legend or folk tale, where heroes, most often knights or kings, are elevated above the environment and deeds of normal men. The cycle continues by moving into a mode referred to as to the high memetic mode, in which the protagonist is superior to those around him, but yet who is subject to the criticism and evaluation of normal individuals. After the high memetic mode, Fyre identifies the low memetic mode; while it is similar in scope to the high memetic mode, the protagonist is seen on the same level as those around him in this mode. The final movement in the literary cycle proposed by Frye is the ironic mode,

[55] Donaldson and Mendelson (2014).

where the protagonist is uninformed and not only inferior to those around him, but also is judged and determined by his peers as someone to be pitied. We presently see the ironic mode in literature, however through this mode we return to myth as a narrative convention, but with elements of the other stages mixed into the narrative structure.[56] Frye writes of this return to myth that

> In this process of breaking down barriers I think archetypal criticism has a central role, I have given it a prominent place. One element in our cultural tradition which is usually regarded as fantastic nonsense is the allegorical explanations of myths which bulk so large in the medieval and Renaissance criticism and continue sporadically to our own time. The allegoriztion of myth is hampered by the assumption that the explanation "is" what the myth "means." A myth being a centripetal structure of meaning, it can be made to mean an indefinite number of things, and it is more fruitful to study what in fact myths have been made to mean. The term myth may have, and obviously does have, different meanings in different subjects. These meanings are doubtless reconcilable in the long run…[57]

For Frye, myth lends itself to a number of interpretive modes. He also provides one answer to the allegoric interpretation of myth in modern literature as an ironic one, and he states that

> the ironic resolution is the negative pole of the allegorical one. Irony presents a human conflict which, unlike a comedy, a romance, or even a tragedy, is unsatisfactory and incomplete unless we see in it a significance beyond itself, something typical of the human situation as a whole. What that significances is, irony does not say: it leaves that question up to the reader or audience. Irony preserves the seriousness of literature by demanding an expanded perspective on the action it presents, but it preserves the integrity of literature by not limiting or prescribing that perspective.[58]

While myth makes up a large part of literary tradition and form and can manifest or be interpreted in several ways, we see that each mode provides its own interpretive

[56] Frye (1990): 33–35.
[57] Ibid.: 341.
[58] Frye and Knights (1963): 14.

lens. Irony provides a means to employ and examine myth without concern for its original sacred context. This move might make Eliade uncomfortable, however for Frye, although myth formed the basis of all literature, it is the job of those interested in the field of narrative study to seek out and interpret precisely how literature uses and manipulates mythic types of narratives in fiction. As Frye puts it, "it is part of the critic's business to show how all literary genres are derived from the quest-myth."[59] By applying Frye's ideas about the ironic mode and a return to mythic structures discussed above to fantasy novels like Gaiman's *American Gods*, we can see how irony and myth can be used simultaneously to generate a mythopoeic post-modernist narrative.

Chapter III of this thesis examines Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* as a case study in order to apply the theoretical ideas discussed above. I discuss the ways in which Gaiman employs mythological structures, names, and motifs to generate a new and largely modernized use of the subject matter and structures of myth that resonates with readers because it offers ironic commentary on contemporary social issues and provides insights into the nature of the mythic as manifested in the modern world.

[59] Frye (1951): 105.

CHAPTER III

THE MYTHIC AND NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS*

Neil Gaiman is one of the most widely known fantasy authors writing today. Much of Gaiman's oeuvre takes place within worlds populated by the fantastic and mythical. Gaiman weaves together stories and personalities from disparate world mythologies into the fabric of his fantasy tales; he stitches into his narratives both mundane and fantastic elements against the backdrop of a mythical worldview to create new stories that appeal to a postmodern audience. Gaiman explicitly says that the use of traditional mythic elements in fantasy "is important. The act of inspecting them is important. It is not a matter of holding a myth up as a dead thing, desiccated and empty, nor is it a matter of creating new age self-help tomes, instead we have to understand that even lost and forgotten myths are compost, in which stories grow."[60] The recycling of mythical themes is a mainstay in Gaiman's works, however the structural purposes of his use of these materials are debated. Chapter III discusses Gaiman's integration of the mythic and fantastic reflects a modern concern for generating a new sense of authenticity in mythological materials that is wholly American despite its use of world myth. Chapter III focuses on the novel *American Gods* and the novella sequel *Monarch of the Glen* as an extended two-part pilgrimage toward secular mythological construction as it exists alongside and against a backdrop of place and mythology.

Various scholars have taken up the problem of myth, intertextuality, and the relation between the two in Gaiman's writing. However, there is little consensus as to the function of these benchmark subjects. After a reading of the available secondary

[60] Gaiman (1999): 75-84.

literature pertaining to Gaiman's writing (reviewed in the introduction of this thesis), it is apparent that there is a pronounced divide between three types of academic interpretations, as noted: in the first, symbol and myth are taken up as separate, though related, literary devices indicative of a post-modernist thrust within Gaiman's works. In this model, the symbol and myth exist independently to develop an intertextual mood within his writing. That is, symbol and myth act as a patchwork canvas upon which Gaiman's protagonists develop. It is important to note that they do not provide an extra-literary critique of culture. Cyril Camus argues that in the presentation of the fantastic in Gaiman's mountain landscapes, and more broadly in his writings dealing with the mythological, the mythic is, "meant to set appropriate mood for the fantasy plot, or less importantly, as part of the intertextual dialogue that Gaiman creates as often as possible between the world of religious mythologies and his modern, secular, daily life set narratives."[61] This quotation encapsulates the thrust of the first school of thought on Gaiman's work.

The second category mentioned above, which I call the 'structural category,' focuses primarily on the form that Gaiman's narratives take and tends most often to examine Gaiman's works at the level of the over-arching narrative structure of his stories. These researchers examine the ways in which the narratives unfold rather than their potential symbolic or political value. For those writing with this perspective, arguments are most often generated in order to illuminate how the structure of Gaiman's tale helps to shape the narrative direction as well as the ways that these structures help to convey meaning to the reader. For most of these authors, structural analysis exists on a macro level beyond the specifics of narrative content. Although content is often touched upon,

[61] Camus (2010): 380.

these researchers appear less concerned with the story itself than they are the importance of the intertextual narrative relationships and the methods of conveying each of the stories. And structural elements are indeed of particular importance to our mythically-rooted intertextual reading of *American Gods.*

The third, perhaps least prevalent, interpretation of Gaiman's use of politics and myth expresses the notion that the two are complimentary literary devices offering a critique of the real-world cultures from which they are culled. Max F.R. Olesen suggests that Gaiman's writing, "has demonstrated an abiding fascination with mythology and its effect on national character, whether that is of his native country Britain or that of his adopted home, America."[62] More specifically, the use of mythology is employed either explicitly or implicitly in Gaiman's writing as a commentary on the maintenance of culturally specific beliefs about politics and myth—a deeply entrenched question of 'who are we?' buried in his narratives. These critiques are tied up in the locales, and mythic personalities that populate Gaiman's stories. Gaiman deals with these subjects in *American Gods* and in the novella follow-up *The Monarch of the Glen.* However, issues of politics and myth, primarily the restructuring of identities ascribed to the protagonists and remarked upon by auxiliary characters as the focalization of the given story shifts from one locale to another and the narratives progress are also prevalent in Gaiman's graphic novel series *Sandman,* the novel *Ocean at the End of the Lane,* as well as his 1999 novel *Stardust.* However, in this thesis, the analysis focuses on *American Gods* and *Monarch on the Glen* as exemplary texts in this regard.

By combining elements from all three of these divergent, yet overlapping, interpretations of Gaiman's work, I aspire to generate a rounded and nuanced discussion

[62] Max (2012): 119.

about ways in which *American Gods* provides a glimpse into the how fantasy fiction shapes and generates a modern understanding of myth, in a way that decontextualizes, yet reifies world mythology in the mind of the reader. This decontextualization does not hinder the production and reception of myth, but rather guides the reader—with a slight modification away from Eliade's ideas about reproducing an experience of the sacred—to take place in a long held tradition of reproducing myth through engagement with the subject matter.[63]

Mythologist Robert Segal, referencing Northrop Frye suggests that "…Frye boldly asserts that all literature stems from myth"[64] I argue that *American Gods* not only stems from myth in an intertextual sense, but that it confronts the concept of myth, place, and the perception of authenticity head on. The story follows an enigmatic protagonist named Shadow, who turns out to be an utterly unaware Norse deity Balder, and whose complete mythic and personal history are, as the murky images conjured by his name would suggest, initially obscured to both the reader and the character. As the narrative begins, Shadow is easily swayed by the will of others. Shadow's malleability of character and lack of a concrete identity is focused upon in his willingness to follow the orders of those around him without question or concern for *why* he is doing so. Thus, Shadow may easily be read as a bland character, lacking any qualities beyond being a narrative center for the tale. However, if one reads closely, Shadow's lack of identity changes as the narrative progresses; he slowly begins to inhabit the positive characteristics of the god Balder as the narrative progresses, however he retains the shadow of Balder's naiveté throughout the narrative—remember, the Norse god Balder is brought down in an

[63] Allen (1998): 250.
[64] Segal (1999): 48.

assassination plot hatched by the god Loki after allowing the god Höðr to shoot him with an arrow covered in mistletoe.[65] Shadow's character is filled in by his experiences with the mythic and fantastic with which he becomes increasingly embroiled. As noted, Shadow begins as an unobjectionable character whose identity, both his personality and his ethnicity, are repeatedly alluded to, yet simultaneously played down in Gaiman's prose. Despite this early indistinctiveness of personality in the protagonist of *American Gods*, Shadow finds himself on a fantastical journey across the American heartland in search of the physical manifestations of gods from a plethora of world religions and mythologies.

In the world of *American Gods*, the physical manifestations of mythological deities from around the world have been relocated to America. They arrived within the hearts and minds of the immigrants who worshiped them. That is, their spirits traveled along with believers as they relocated to the United States and were literally made flesh through prayer and devotion. Having reached American soil and 'becoming American' as successive generations of worshipers are born away from their original homelands, many immigrants began to shed their beliefs and abandoned their traditional deities, which, in the context of the narrative, leads to the deities literally losing their longevity and power. Interestingly, the dying off of deities as their stories are forgotten in the universe of *American Gods* is reminiscent of the evolutionary myth-ritual thesis presented in chapter II; in the same way that belief in magic gives way to myth and religion before being

[65] Larrington (2014): 8.

overtaken by science according to Frazer and Tylor; the gods of Gaiman's narrative can be forgotten and replaced as cultures transform.[66]

However the purpose of Gaiman's narrative seems to be the opposite—the old gods seek to renew interest in themselves by taking action to prevent their decline and disappearance by waging a war with the new gods of modernity. For example, in chapter 18, Shadow is manipulated into sacrificing himself on the American version of Yggdrasil in a ploy by Odin and Loki after the two fake Odin's death at the hands of the new gods; by doing so, the two hope to instigate the war between the new gods and old. Their goal is to create enough chaos and bloodshed—a sort of sustaining worship for Loki and Odin—among the gods, both old and new, to uphold themselves while other means of worship for the two deities continues to decline in the new world.[67] In this particular scene, Loki and Odin are used in ways that, although they comport with some of the broader character traits derived from Norse mythology (warlike, tricky, manipulative), create for the reader an understanding of the gods outside of traditional mythology and folklore, one which suits the diegesis of the novel.

Gaiman's works, especially *American Gods,* have been referred to as an example of the *folkloresque*, a term that folklorist Michael Dylan Foster characterizes as:

> …a process of *bricolage* by which commercial interests cannibalize folklore, extracting component parts and reassembling them in a product that retains a *connection* to folklore, or *seems* folkloric, or has the *style* of folklore—and, most important*, sells* because of this perceived relationship. This relationship works through a metonymic process, whereby the folkloric element generates meaning by its connection to a broader tradition.[68]

[66] Segal (1999): 20–21.
[67] Gaiman (2011): 474–475.
[68] Foster (2016): 16.

By applying the concept of the folkloresque to the Gaiman's works, we can understand some of the interplay between folklore, mythology, and popular culture as they pertain to the dissemination and reception of fantasy fiction. Gaiman, although interested in preserving some of the essence and 'heart' of the folklore and mythology he uses in his narratives, manipulates and decontextualizes the stories in order to present them to his readers in an intriguing way and in doing so he generates a new intertextual understanding of the original folklore or mythological form. As Timothy Evans explains, this creation of the folkloresque is "a complex interweaving of folklore, invented 'folklore,' popular culture, fine arts, and other sources in an attempt to create a new, invented folklore for the digital age."[69] Such new folkloresque forms contain elements of the traditional folklore from which they are derived, and in some cases have a basis in folkloristics.

As mentioned previously, Gaiman's interest in the field of folklore and generating a body of work from folklore and mythology is apparent throughout a number of his works; for instance, in *Sandman,* his characters are culled from world mythology, just as they are in *American Gods.* Gaiman's interests in folklore and myth are evidenced not only by his use of the content of folklore, but also by his use of the ideas of well-known folklorists such as Richard Dorson who he quotes at the outset of *American Gods* in order to set both the mood and tone of his narrative. As mentioned above, Gaiman then continues to integrate some of Dorson's ideas into the personage of his characters. As Evans points out, Gaiman's interests in the field of folkloristics is clearly indicated by his integrating the ideas of folklorists into his character's dialogue, which Evans says is "…

[69] Evans (2016): 73.

central in [Gaiman's] creation of the folkloresque: the citing of texts to create the impression of authenticity."[70]

The citing of folklorists like Dorson give Gaiman's work the veneer of authenticity that is needed to appear both intertextual and authoritative. In *American Gods,* Gaiman uses the character Richie Hinzelman to tell stories about the upper Midwest, which Evans points out had been collected and published by Dorson during the 1950's.[71] Gaiman own understanding of myths reinforces his folkloresque use of them when he writes that

> Myths are compost. They begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, or as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow. And then, as the religions fall into disuse, or the stories cease to be seen as the literal truth, they become myths. And the myths compost down to dirt, and become fertile ground for other stories and tales which blossom like wildflowers. Cupid and psyche is retold and half-forgotten and remembered again and becomes Beauty and the Beast. Anansi the African Spider God becomes bre'r Rabbit, whaling away at the tar baby. New flowers grow from the compost: bright blossoms, and alive.[72]

Although the folkloresque plays a role in Gaiman's narratives, he also seems to embrace the view that his writing serves to create new myths for the modern world, or at least provides a commentary on the loss and emergence of a semblance of the mythic in the twenty-first century.

Rather than fading away entirely, the old gods in *American Gods* survive in the new land by working menial jobs and rely, other than the events mentioned above, on small pockets of prayer to sustain them. They have been rendered untenable in the American mythos and are thus subject to death in the same manner that old philosophies,

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[70] Ibid.: 74.
[71] Ibid.: 67–69, 71.
[72] Gaiman (1999): 3–4.

having been tossed aside, disappear to the sands of time. The narrative suggests that the old gods have been cast off by their former believers as a result of the urge to merge with an American ethos and a drive toward capitalism and technological advancement; an idea that pervades in notions of American exceptionalism. The mythological detritus, the disenfranchised deities of the tale, are treated as a lost waste product of the ever-increasing American secularism and self-interest after the industrial revolution. So, the question arises: what do the gods have to do with identity? Each god is representative of the ethnic past of those peoples by whom they had once been venerated; they represent the distinct and cohesive groups of immigrants that, at the time of the story, have become an indistinct element in the 'melting pot' that is American cultural identity. The character Shadow embraces the task of helping to bring these elements, the lost gods, together to combat the new gods of America.

To locate the gods, Shadow travels the roadways of America with his boss, the ever-impenetrable Mr. Wednesday, an American personification of the Norse pantheon's chief god, Odin. The two travel throughout an eclectic mix of back roads, roadside attractions, and national treasures meeting gods from several world religions. The roadside attractions and national treasures at which they meet play the role of religious hotspots. These hotspots provide a focal point of American secular worship that is accentuated by the credo of manifest destiny. That is, roadside attractions act as hubs of secular worship along the path (highways) to becoming an American (self-possessed); they pierce the veil between the spiritual world and the 'real' world and provide visitors a feeling of connectedness that they cannot explain.

In the story, these roadside attractions are places to which the populace was drawn to upon reaching America and casting off their old gods. These roadside attractions as hotspots of worship, act as a substitute to fill the religious void created within the hearts of Americans having abandoned their traditional gods. The gods that Shadow and his mysterious employer Mr. Wednesday attempt to unite throughout the story have experienced the above-mentioned disenfranchisement through the loss of their followers. Odin, AKA Mr. Wednesday as he is known to Shadow, seeks to bring about a conflict between the old gods and America's new gods of technology and progress in a cosmic battle for the hearts and minds of American believers. It is upon this mythic backdrop that Shadow's identity is constructed in *American Gods*.

On a structural level, *American Gods* appears to adhere to the traditional portal/quest fantasy type set out by Tolkien. The portal/quest type narrative is one in which the protagonist is first confronted by the fantastic, and he or she is pulled, at times, unwillingly, away from the mundane and into a new world of heroes and gods. As the story unfolds, the reader experiences the awe of this new world along with the protagonist. In the portal/quest fantasy, the protagonist's position in the tale is ultimately one of salvation. For the portal/quest model to work, the protagonist must either personally save the day or play a key role in the success of the story's quest in a glorious final conflict. Afterward, the protagonist finally returns home, metaphorically, or literally, at the end of the tale as a changed and more experienced being.[73]

American Gods begins in confirmation of the portal/quest interpretation: Shadow leaves prison, he is hired on as Mr. Wednesday's assistant, and proceeds to enter a fantastic world described above. However, if Shadow's status as a prisoner is interpreted

[73] Klapcsik (2008): 331, note 1.

as a liminal position within an uncertain landscape, the narrative begins outside of mundane reality and the portal/quest interpretation begins to crumble from the novel's opening chapter. Starting from this liminal position in Shadow's life, the novel immediately places him into the fantastic with the introduction of Mr. Wednesday.[74] On closer examination, however, the structure of *American Gods* is not simply a portal-quest affair; it mimics the structure of the poem *Völuspá* which delineates the events of Norse creation to eschatological destruction, followed by rebirth of Balder after the death of the gods.[75] In *American Gods'* epilogue, Shadow even finds himself laying on a field in Iceland on a picturesque day,[76] in much the same state as he is in the stanzas 61 and 62 of the Poetic Edda's *Völuspá,*

> 61 There afterwards will be found in the grass
> The wonderful golden chequers,
> those which they possessed in the ancient times.
> 62 Without sowing the fields will grow,
> all ills will be healed, baldr will come back;
> hod and baldr, the gods of slaughter, will live happily together
> In the sage's palaces – do you understand yet or what
> more?[77]

Elements like this demonstrate that the novel engages with the structure of birth, death, and rebirth found in many myths from beginning to end.

Unlike protagonists in the portal/quest model, Shadow fails to adequately react to the fantastic elements around him. This failure to react is illustrated in dramatic fashion in an early scene in which the new gods of Progress and the Internet abduct Shadow. They seek to interrogate him about Mr. Wednesday's plans, and failing that, threaten his life:

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[74] Gaiman (2009): 16.
[75] Larrington (2014): 3–12.
[76] Gaiman (2001): 520–522.
[77] Larrington (2014): 12.

> ‘You tell Wednesday this, man. You tell him he’s history. He’s forgotten. He’s old. Tell him that we are the future and we don’t give a fuck about him or anyone like him. He has been consigned to the Dumpster of history while people like me ride out limos down the superhighway of tomorrow.’
>
> ‘I’ll tell him,’ said Shadow. He was beginning to feel lightheaded. He hoped that he was not going to be sick.
>
> 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. Tell him that or I’ll fucking kill you,’ said the young man mildly, from the smoke.
>
> ‘Got it,’ said Shadow. ‘You can let me out here. I can walk the rest of the way.’
>
> …The door closed, and the stretch limo drove off, quietly. Shadow was a couple of hundred yards away from his motel, and he walked there, breathing the cold air, past red and yellow and blue lights advertising every kind of fast food a man could imagine, as long as it was a hamburger; and he reached the motel America without incident.[78]

Shadow seems utterly unaffected by the threats made to him by the small ‘fat young man,’ who is actually the physical manifestation of the new god, the Internet -- known in *American Gods* as the Technical Boy. This quotation points toward Shadow’s reaction to all the fantastic events and creatures that he meets throughout the novel. Shadow does not appear fazed by the world into which he has been thrust. Rather, he hardly reacts, as if nothing here is out of the ordinary; myth and the fantastic simply *are* in Shadow’s world.

This scene also points us to the notion of *American Gods* fitting the structural model of the liminal fantasy; a structural model in which the narrative is, “marked by the lack of narrator’s and/or protagonist’s surprise. The fantastic element becomes an essential but apparently ordinary element in these stories.”[79] This liminal structure complicates the narrative and appears to negate the portal/quest interpretation of the narrative of *American Gods* from the outset. However, the interpretation of the story possessing a liminal quality is transgressed by the structure of *The Monarch of the* Glen;

[78] Ibid.: 32.
[79] Klapcsik (2008): 319.

when the two separate stories are drawn together, they complete the mythic structure of return alluded to in Campbell's heroes' journey.[80] This connection reconnects the overall arch of Shadow's narrative to that of portal/quest fantasy in *structure,* though perhaps not entirely in *form*. Shadow's journey ultimately proves circular in confirmation of the portal/quest structure despite the liminal deviation of *American Gods.*

Monarch of the Glen completes Shadow's pilgrimage to discover his own mythologically rooted identity—a pilgrimage that had begun in *American Gods*. Shadow, whose real name is revealed to be 'Balder Moon,' finds himself in another fantastic situation against which his personal identity is defined. The novella takes place two years after the events of *American Gods.* In it, Shadow is hired as security guard for a gathering that is to be held at a mansion by the character Mr. Smith (perhaps a nod to Gaiman's previous antagonist, Lowkey Lyesmith of *American Gods*). Once at the party, Shadow discovers that those gathered there are participating in a blood sport between heroes and monsters—the 'monster' of this novella is a Scottish personification Grendel. Shadow, it turns out, had been hired by Mr. Smith not as a security guard, but rather to trick him into fighting Grendel; the success of which would result in continued wealth and prosperity for those gathered at the mansion. The novella ultimately reintegrates Shadow into American society after a trip of self-discovery in Scotland. Like *American Gods, Monarch of the Glen* begins by conforming to the liminal fantasy structure discussed above. However, at the tale's conclusion, we find that Shadow has returned to America in order reintegrate into the culture that he had left some time before. This conclusion brings the overarching storyline into accordance with the typical portal/quest fantasy structure

[80] Campbell (2008): 210.

and ends Shadow's journey having finally filled in the characters understanding, and thus the readers understanding as well, of his identity.

Having discussed the overarching fantasy structure of *American Gods* and *Monarch of the Glen* individually, as well as its cohesive narrative, we must now turn our attention to how these stories deal with the construction of myth and identity against a backdrop of the fantastic and mythological for main protagonist. Shadow begins as a mystery in the narrative; who is he? From where does he come? What are his proclivities? And most importantly, at least in *American Gods,* just *what* is Shadow? Max Olesen quite correctly suggests, "readers gain entry to the story through Shadow's individual struggle with his identity."[81] Olesen goes on to argue that, "this personal history is, however, crucial to a full understanding of the novel's themes and politics."[82] Shadow's function within the novel hinges on his role as an intermediary between the old gods and the new deities. However, his struggle to determine his own lineage—that is, whether he is man or god—takes a central role as Shadow begins to question his position throughout the novel. He is asked about his ethnicity and his familial heritage on multiple occasions throughout the narrative. One noteworthy instance comes when the character Samantha Black Crow, herself a character of mixed racial heritage, asks, "are you sure you aren't part Indian?" to which Shadow replies, "Not that I know of. It's possible. I don't know much about my father. I guess my ma would have told me if he was Native American, though. Maybe."[83] This shows an early reluctance on the part of Shadow to engage with his potential heritage. As the narrative progresses, Mr. Wednesday is, or at least he appears to be, killed by the new gods and Shadow holds his vigil by sacrificing

[81] Max (2012): 121.
[82] Ibid.: 121.
[83] Gaiman (2001): 169.

himself against the world tree as a symbolic act of worship in a fashion mimicking Odin's self-sacrifice on Yggdrasil.[84]

Later in the story, after Shadow's own death, the Egyptian God Anubis confronts Shadow in the afterlife with the entirety of his life's choices: "the examination did not stop. Every lie he had ever told, every object he had stolen, every hurt he had inflicted on another person, all the little crimes and the tiny murders that make up the day, each of these things and more were extracted and held up to the light by the jackal headed judge of the dead."[85] Shadow's past is illuminated and the character becomes more decisive and complete for having examined his prior emptiness. Before his resurrection in this same scene, Shadow finally decides his own fate, and subsequently his personal identity:

> "So now I get to choose where I go next?"
> "Choose," said Thoth. "Or we can choose for you."
> No," said Shadow. "It's okay. It's my choice."
> "Well?" roared Anubis.
> "I want to rest now," said Shadow. That's what I want. I want nothing. No heaven, no hello, no anything. Just let it end."
> "You're certain?" asked Thoth.
> "Yes," said Shadow.
> Mr. Jacquel opened the last door for Shadow, and behind that door there was nothing. Not darkness. Not even oblivion. Only nothing.
> Shadow accepted it, completely and without reservation, and he walked through the door into nothing with a strange fierce joy.[86]

This scene would not be so pertinent if not for the revelation to follow: at the climax of *American Gods*, Shadow discovers that he is in fact the son of the American Personification of Odin, Mr. Wednesday.[87] Gaiman, following the cyclic structure of Norse cosmology found in the Poetic Edda, seems to be using this scene to indicate Shadow's rebirth as the Norse god Baldur. Shadow is confronted with his status as a

[84] Ibid.: 256.
[85] Gaiman (2001): 237.
[86] Ibid.: 238.
[87] Gaiman (2001): 475.

demi-god. After spending the majority of his time doing as he is told by other gods, Shadow refuses to partake in Mr. Wednesday and Lowkey Lyesmith's machinations. Instead, he chooses to ignore his heritage and be who he wishes to be; he and the other gods "loosen their grip on the strict adherence to ancestral ethnicity and religion and begin instead to transform into Americans."[88] Shadow's revelation of who he was allows him to fill in his character with who he wishes to be. The narrative of *American Gods* ends with the suggestion that Shadow "walked away and kept on walking."[89] Shadow was free to decide who he was now that he knew *what* he was.

As we have seen, *American Gods* asks *what* Shadow was—whether he is god or man. *Monarch of the Glen* asks *who* Shadow is—is he a hero or a monster? The novella's plot has been discussed above, however the question of what Shadow has made of himself and how his identity was shaped subsequent to the encounters with mythological beings during *American Gods* is a central theme of *Monarch of the Glen.* The story begins with this central question:

> "If you ask me," said the little man to Shadow, "you're something of a monster. *Am I right?" (*Emphasis added)
>
> They were the only two people, apart from the barmaid, in the bar of a hotel in a town on the north coast of Scotland. Shadow had been sitting there on his own, drinking a lager, when the man came over and sat at his table. It was late summer, and it seemed to Shadow that everything was cold and small and damp. He had a small book of pleasant local walks in front of him, and was studying the walk he planned to do tomorrow, along the coast, toward Cape Wrath.
>
> He closed the book.
>
> "I'm American," said Shadow, "if that's what you mean."[90]

Shadow is confronted with his basest nature from the outset of the tale. Being accused of having possessed monstrous qualities sets in motion the second part of Shadow's journey

[88] Max (2012): 139.
[89] Gaiman (2009): 290.
[90] Gaiman (2006): 301.

to self-discovery. Shadow must confront his own demons after he is asked by the antagonist, who himself turns out to be a duplicitous and evil character, if he is a monster.

Mr. Smith, the aforementioned antagonist of the novella, and his employer Mr. Alice convince Shadow to engage in a blood sport against monsters the two have collected in order to prove himself to be a hero, while simultaneously securing future wealth for the rich and powerful onlookers.[91] The novella positions Shadow in a place from which he is able to maneuver away from the negative implications of the novellas central question. However, Shadow earns his status as a hero not through slaying the monster, rather he does so by showing leniency and a refusal to continue to be manipulated by forces outside himself. The realization of Shadows heroic nature occurs ultimately through his refusal to kill the Scottish personification of Grendel.[92] Shadow learns from his encounter that no matter who is doing the manipulating, or where he is located geographically, he has agency to be what he chooses himself to allow. His identity his fully realized. With this realization, Shadow's pilgrimage is complete and he decides to return to the cradle from which he was born, America:

> "I think," said Shadow, "That I'll spend a couple of weeks looking around the U.K. And you'll just have to pray that I look the right way when I cross your roads."
>
> "And then?"
>
> Shadow knew it, then. Perhaps he had known it all along.
>
> "Chicago," he said to Smith, as the train gave a jerk, and began to move away from the station. He felt older, as he said it. But he could not put if off forever.
>
> And then he said, so quietly that only he could have heard it, "I guess I'm going home."[93]

[91] Ibid.: 345.
[92] Ibid.: 348–349.
[93] Ibid.: 354–355.

With this declaration, the both the narrative and the character are brought to completion. Shadow's identity has been fleshed out and the novella brings closure to the structure of *American Gods.*

We have seen the ways in which Gaiman's novel *American Gods* and the subsequent novella sequel *Monarch of the Glen* utilize a liminal fantasy structure rooted in mythological tropes individually, as well as the ways in which the two narratives together revert to the form of a cohesive portal/quest fantasy and close the cycle. This type of circular cohesion, also known as epanalepsis has been described playfully as "presenting analepsis proleptically."[94] That is, the story structure looks back to the beginning to conclude. Gaiman uses this structure masterfully in both *American Gods* and *Monarch of the Glen*. We also have seen the ways in which Shadow's identity as an ironic mythological protagonist is filled in throughout an inward pilgrimage that takes place during the stories narrative. Shadow begins as his name suggests—murky, without form—and concludes with knowing concretely that he has chosen both *what* and *who* he is against a backdrop of myth and monsters. Gaiman's novel and novella provides a glimpse at modern myth construction in the fantastic mode; building a character from nothing into a fully realized protagonist. Shadow may be Baldur, but he is Baldur selectively and through his own agency, not because of the will of those with whom he interacts.

[94] McGillis (2008): 14.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to bridge the gap between the symbolic, structural, and political readings of Neil Gaiman's work which were introduced in chapter I by integrating that scholarship with the ideas of Mircea Eliade and Northrop Frye discussed in chapter II. My analysis of *American Gods* thus suggests a larger mythically-rooted intertextual narrative interpretation wherein each of the three forms of interpretation play a role in a more complete understanding of the creation of secular myth which was introduced in chapter II. By combining the three approaches into one mythopoeic reading of Gaiman's *American Gods,* I have attempted to reassert Eliade's idea that

> A whole volume could be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. The cinema, that "dream factory," takes over and employs countless mythical motifs—the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisal landscape, hell, and so on). Even reading includes a mythological function… because, through reading modern man succeeds in obtaining an "escape from time" comparable to the "emergence from time" effected by myths. Whether modern man "kills" time with a detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another "history."[95]

Additionally, I have embraced Northrop Frye's suggestion that literature is based in myth through a cycle of literary conventions, the recycling of tropes, and intertextuality.[96] In so doing, I have generated an argument that shows that *American Gods*—and by extension, to some degree, fantasy fiction that uses myth as a tool —represents a form of intertextual secular myth creation, which, though made up of the constituent parts of

[95] Quoted in Segal (1999): 22–23.
[96] Frye (1990): 33–35, 341–354.

ancient mythology, is not necessarily bound entirely to the conventions and confines of the original stories, but rather forms a new understanding of myth and folklore that appears authentic despite having been created quite recently for popular consumption. This interpretation attempts to demonstrate that myth in *American Gods* is representative of both the continuation of the mythology as discussed in Eliade and Frye; however, my own thoughts push away from these authors' beliefs that modern mythic tropes represent a latent yearning within modern human beings for the sacred, and instead fall closer to the explanations of the folkloresque discussed in chapter III.

My research has attempted to serve two purposes: the first has been to call into question the idea that mythology is no longer created as a dynamic narrative form. I have addressed this by looking at the interplay between traditional mythological stories and the way the content of these stories has been manipulated and deployed within modern narratives, specifically within the fantasy novel genre, as exemplified by our case study: Neil Gaiman's *American Gods.* The second purpose of this study has been to suggest that the modern storytelling mode of mythopoeic narrative acts as a form of postmodern popular myth creation by reusing and recycling the content of traditional mythology. This latter task, of course, is a large and difficult undertaking, and is certainly impossible to achieve with a single case study, irrespective of the amount of evidence presented within this thesis about *American Gods* and *Monarch on the Glen.* As such, the goal has not been to declare a definitive theory of myth which unifies modern mythopoeic narrative and the study of myth and folklore, but rather to provide a framework from which other fantasy fiction novels containing mythopoeic subject matter may be interrogated in future research projects. Looking ahead in the field of folkloristics, it is my hope that this study

will be of interest in the burgeoning field of the analysis of the folkloresque, and I hope it offers a contribution to an understanding of the intertextual aspects of Gaiman's popular works of fiction as these relate to narrative theory, mythology, and folklore.

To sum up, the introduction of this thesis discussed storytelling, the novel, and how the two have shaped our mode of understanding with respect to mythology. I then provided some background on Neil Gaiman as a writer and discussed his love of myth and folklore. Chapter I then enumerated the three predominant themes in the scholarly literature on Gaiman's works—symbolic, structural, and political—and his use of folkloric and mythic motifs, characters, and settings before suggesting a need to combine the three perspectives using theories of myth and narrative criticism. I offer the claim that *American Gods* is a mythic based fantasy novel which exists as one of many narratives along a continuum of mythopoeic authorship that uses myth in a way that results in a new understanding of mythology; an understanding that is only loosely grounded in the source materials but is equally important to the study of myth and folklore.

Chapter II of this thesis illuminates some of the more important theories of myth, specifically focusing on the myth-ritual school of thought, Joseph Campbell understanding of archetypes, and Mircea Eliade's ideas about myth in modernity. There are, of course, myriad theories of myth which might be discussed, however, for the purposes of this project, Eliade provides an entry into the discussion of myth as a set of dynamic tools which are recycled and reused in modern narratives. In addition, Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism provides a useful framework to examine myth through the lens of narrative theory as it pertains to the origin and function of myth in narrative, myth and intertextuality, and the use of mythological stories in modern literature. These

concepts were elucidated as a means to lay the foundation for the central theme of this thesis: that myth is continually recycled and recreated in the modern era as a body of mythically sourced stories that are stripped of their original sacred context. This discussion in particular introduces the concept of secular myth and attempts to understand the ways in which secular myth impacts the reader's understanding of myth. My use of secular myth in this regard is meant to refer to any modern popular texts foregrounding elements of myth without concern for their original ritual or religious significance.

In chapter III of this thesis, Gaiman's *American Gods* and *Monarch on the Glen* are examined as a singular case study on mythopoeic writing and fantasy fiction. It is in chapter III that the theoretical foundations provided by Eliade and Frye in chapter II are applied to an intertextual modern narrative steeped in myth. Explored within chapter III are the various ways in which Gaiman's works use mythological structures, names, and motifs to generate a new and modernized version of the subject and structures of world myth in general and Norse myth in particular, which I refer to as intertextual secular myths. Notions of authenticity in these new secular myths are discussed through the lens of the folkloresque and the ways in which this too contributes to a modern understanding of mythology. Additionally, chapter III examines the structure of *American Gods* and the sequel *Monarch of the Glen* in order to point out that the liminal fantasy structure of these two linked works revert to the form of a cohesive portal/quest structure that closes the mythic cycle; a mythic structure from which Frye suggests all literature is derived when he states, "it is part of the critic's business to show how all literary genres are derived from the quest-myth."[97] Hopefully, chapter III provides inroads into understanding the

[97] Quoted in Segal (1999): 48.

combination of literary criticism and myth, theories of myth, and how they can be applied to mythopoeic writing and secular myth creation through fantasy literature.

Finally, I would like to suggest that while this thesis has attempted to provide as many answers as possible to questions about secular myth, the role of myth in modernity, the ways in which fantasy fiction uses myth, how narrative theory and literary criticism sees myth functioning in the post-modern era, and how the folkloresque manifests in Gaiman's work, there are still questions to answer in the future. For example, by surveying choices of fantasy literature, mythology is a prevalent topic, yet one type of world myth seems to appear more often than others: why is Norse myth put at the foreground of such a large proportion of fantasy fiction novels? Why are some mythologies privileged over others in fantasy fiction? How will transmediality shape the ways in which mythic elements and secular myth are disseminated beyond the literary sphere through television, radio, videogames, and comic books? As *American Gods* now has made its way to a popular television series, how will this impact our understanding of the narrative as a mythically rooted television program? These are all questions which I hope to continue to ask, and with other theorists, hopefully will be addressed in the future.

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