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Adaptace mytologických postav v románu Neila Gaimana *Američtí bohové*

Appropriations of mythological figures in Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods*

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ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

Předmětem práce je komparace mytologických postav zdrojových textů s jejich ztvárněním v díle Neila Gaimana. Cílem práce je identifikovat a analyzovat formy adaptace a apropriace těchto mytologických postav, tj. především aktualizace a individualizace.

The topic of this work is comparison of mythological beings from source texts with their portrayal in Neil Gaiman's work. The goal of this work is to identify and analyse the forms of adaptation and appropriation of these mythological figures, i.e. especially actualization and individualization.

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Introduction

This bachelor thesis deals with adaptation of mythological beings in the road novel *American Gods*, written by Neil Gaiman, which was first published in the year 2001. Having won the 2002 Hugo, Nebula, Bram Stoker, SFX Magazine and Locus awards for the best novel, the book cemented its author's place amongst the most important post-modern fantasy writers of our times. As author himself stated, he wanted to avoid being put into a bracket and widen the scope of his work. Having previously published *Neverwhere* that takes place in London and *Stardust* taking place in England-like world, we might say that he saved his non-bracketedness in the very last moment.

There is a fairly large number of academic works concerned with the *Sandman* series and Gaiman's impact on modern comics. Others focus on his fairy tales like *The Graveyard Book*, *Coralina* or *Stardust*. But it has been fifteen years since *American Gods* were first published and yet the academic world still lacks work that would focus solely on what is Gaiman's most important and largest novel up to this date

The aim is to analyse supernatural characters presented in the book. They are divided into Old Gods, who come from folk tales and original mythologies, and New Gods who came to existence, according to the novel, with the modern times. In the matter of Old Gods I will attempt to draw the line between the original mythological influence and author's input.

The task of this thesis was originally to take every mythological character, analyse them and compare them with their original. It turns out that in the novel there are simply too many characters that make such a brief appearance and function more as a background character that I realized the amount of painstaking work would not be worth the outcome and would bring almost nothing to the academic world. I will therefore take into account only those that take significant actions and those that influence the protagonist in any way worth mentioning.

The first part of this thesis will present a brief biography of Neil Gaiman and summary of his work. The second part will present a summary of the novel's plot, as it is important for understanding the thesis, how the first idea developed into more than six hundred pages long book and it will also ponder on the topic of human belief.

The third part will focus on the Old Gods and the following one on the New Gods. The desirable outcome of this work will be a well-arranged catalogue of characters that would make further academic work concerned with this particular novel much easier.

1.NEIL GAIMAN

1.1 Biography and work overview

The *Forbes* magazine described Neil Gaiman as “the most famous author you’ve never heard of” and they truly hit the nail on the head.¹

He was born in November 1960 in Hampshire, UK and grew up in Sussex. Gaiman’s connection to the written word was apparent since his early childhood. When he was four years old he learned how to read and he ‘devoured’ books since then. He was ‘kid with the book.’ The authors that had the biggest influence on him in early age were for example James Branch Cabell, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. During his teenage years he fell for science fiction and works of Michael Moorcock, Ursula K. Le Guin, Roger Zelazny, Gene Wolfe, Douglas Adams or H. P. Lovecraft.²

Defining Neil Gaiman’s writing style is quite hard, because he truly mixes fairy tales with historical facts, science-fiction with fantasy, he puts together several different mythologies. Bethany Alexander says that “there’s no need to choose between religion and science, reality and fiction. What might seem jarring or contradictory becomes a harmonious fusion in Gaiman’s work.”³

When he worked as a journalist and critic he learned how the literature world functions. His first short story was published in a short-lived Dungeons and Dragons magazine *Imagine* and his very first book published in 1984 was about the popular group Duran Duran. After that he worked on *Ghastly Beyond Belief* – a collection of absurd dialogue and passages from science fiction, fantasy and horror literature and movies.⁴

Gaiman’s very first book that got published simultaneously in the United Kingdom and in the United States was *Don’t Panic: The Official Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy Companion* (1988). In the end it got 4 editions, the final one having been printed in 2003. This book was Gaiman’s biggest and latest nonfiction project.⁵

Since his childhood, Gaiman wanted to make his mark in the world of comics and he set off on this path in 1986 when his first comic strip was printed. It is worth mentioning that his comic-related

¹ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 1.

² Neil Gaiman Biography, accessed April 5, 2016, http://www.neilgaiman.com/About_Neil/Biography.

³ Bethany Alexander, *No Need to Choose: A Magnificent Anarchy of Belief* in *The Neil Gaiman Reader*, 136.

⁴ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 11.

⁵ Haley Campbell, *The Art of Neil Gaiman*, 60.

work would not be the same if it were not for his long-time friendship with Alan Moore, author of famous comics like *V for Vendetta*, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Watchmen* and *From Hell*. It was Moore who taught him how to write comic book scripts.⁶

The Sandman series is a memorable comic that changed how people approach the whole industry. Having been published from 1988 to 1996 in total number of seventy five issues and later in collection of ten books, it was truly The Nineties in the world of comic books. In the preface of *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* (1999) Gaiman writes: “The king of dreams learns one must change or die and then makes his decision.” Except for the ‘king of dreams’ part he managed to summarise the spirit of the last decade of the Twentieth century. He made a significant mark in the comic books’ world and suddenly he was being approached as ‘the guy who writes comics,’ but he managed to break the imaginary wall between authors of comics and ‘the real literature.’

Everything changed in 1990 with publication of *Good Omens*, novel that Neil Gaiman wrote together with Terry Pratchett, author of extraordinarily large fantasy series *Discworld*. Gaiman took their collaboration as important lesson, even apprenticeship, since Pratchett already published several *Discworld* novels at the time. Combination of unique styles of both authors gave birth to a truly apocalyptic tale full of brilliant humour and for Gaiman it opened the door to world of novels.

Urban fantasy *Neverwhere* (1997) is a novelization of a BBC TV series Gaiman wrote, but at the time it was finished he already felt that the outcome wasn’t exactly what he was hoping for. The series was made of six thirty-minute episodes and starred several actors that moved to higher spheres of acting than ‘not good.’ For example Peter Capaldi who starred in *Neverwhere* is nowadays known in the role of the Doctor in fifty years old and still running BBC show *DoctorWho*.⁷

Almost twenty years later the novel became so popular that people often forget about the TV series completely. In 2013 BBC Radio broadcasted its six-part radio drama adaptation of the book. The cast contained famous actors like James McAvoy, Natalie Dormer, Sir Christopher Lee or Benedict Cumberbatch and Neil Gaiman himself had a small cameo in it.

⁶ Neil Gaiman and Comics, accessed April 30, 2016, http://www.neilgaiman.com/Cool_Stuff/Essays/Essays_About_Neil/Neil_Gaiman_and_Comics.

⁷ Haley Campbell, *The Art of Neil Gaiman*, 210-214.

In the story of *Neverwhere*, the author starts to explore themes that reappear in his later books – folkloric elements, hero’s journey, classic fairy tales influences and world-behind-the-world concept.⁸

Fairy tales’ influence is very apparent in *Stardust* (1997), a short novel originally written in hand. This way Gaiman was able to write in a slower style and rhythm of past times. The book is a fairy tale for children and adults, somewhat signature aspect of Gaiman’s stories. But the author himself claims *American Gods* to be the first novel of his writing career. The book spent two whole weeks on New York Times’ bestseller list and won several prestigious awards. After such success, Gaiman’s position as a major author in the fantasy field could no longer be questioned.⁹

A mere year after this major success, *Coraline* was published and won the Nebula, the Bram Stoker and the Hugo awards. The book was adapted into animated movie in 2009. *Anansi Boys* (2005), novel we could call a spin-off to *American Gods* as it follows story of one of its characters, Mr Nancy’s, family, debuted as number one on New York Times’ bestseller list. Many people wonder what is it that makes readers love Gaiman’s work so much. In *Prince of Stories* the author presents an idea that it is the ability to draw inspiration from pre-Tolkien fantasy, infuse these elements into original ideas and present it to modern readership in a modern and unique voice.¹⁰

Bethany Alexander in her essay *No Need to Choose* has similar opinion. According to her what Gaiman does is that he “borrows rituals, deities, tricksters and fairy tales from under every stone, roof or teacup. He dusts them off and picks out the bits he likes, splashes in his own stories, then offers them up to us. And they’re fun, and we like them, and they inspire us to believe in everything.”¹¹

In 2007 Gaiman worked on another collaboration, this time with Michael Reaves, and published the first book of *InterWorld*, a science fiction series followed by two sequels, one published in 2013 and the last one in 2015.

Another novel that follows story of a young protagonist, concept first introduced in *Coralina*, was the *Graveyard book* (2008). The book has won the Hugo Awards in 2009. Next of this group

⁸ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 310.

⁹ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 321.

¹⁰ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 297.

¹¹ Bethany Alexander, *No Need to Choose: A Magnificent Anarchy of Belief* in *The Neil Gaiman Reader*, 139.

of Gaiman's books is his also his latest novel, *Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) that has won National Book and Locus Awards.

Latest Gaiman's published work is a collection of short stories called *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances* (2015).

Gaiman's first collection of fiction and non-fiction called *Angels and Visitations* was published in 1993 and it contains many reprints from magazines and anthologies.

In 1998, Gaiman published *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions*. The book is a compilation of author's short stories and poems, ten of which were also included in *Angels and Visitations*. There is also a short story included in the introduction, a small secret gift to readers who do not skip these parts of books.

Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders (2006) won the Locus Award for Best Collection in 2007 and "How to Talk to Girls at Parties" won for Best Short Story and it was nominated for Hugo Award. The collection contains several stories that won the Locus Award before, "Study in Emerald," a Sherlock Holmes story, being among them.

As for children's literature, the author first entered these waters in 1997 with the book *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish*. Up to this date he wrote thirteen children's books, the most successful of them being *The Wolves in the Walls* (2003), *Odd and the Frost Giants* (2008), *Chu's Day* (2013), *Fortunately, the Milk* (2013) and *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014).

Gaiman also worked on several screenplays, both for movies and television, he also adapted the translation of script of Hayao Miyazaki's *Mononoke hime* (1997) for English-language production.

2. AMERICAN GODS

2.1 Origin of the novel

Neil Gaiman had lived in the United States for some time already, but he was not an American. As he said himself: “If you’re a goldfish in the water, you don’t go, ‘This water tastes odd.’ You go, ‘This is what water tastes like.’”¹²

The novel is an exploration of how America tends to consume and digest other cultures and turns them into something different. The matter had to be approached by someone who is not American, but knows America well enough.¹³

The book began its life in Iceland. Gaiman spent twenty-four hour stopover there and because of time shift and the fact that it was during summer, hence the sun didn’t set, he stayed awake for some thirty six hours. Wandering around Reykjavik, he came across a diorama describing the voyages of Leif Ericson to Iceland and North America together with the timeline. Gaiman’s thought was: ‘I wonder if they left their gods behind.’¹⁴

Later that day he went back to his hotel room and wrote a letter to his editor in which he said he had a new book, described the plot and gave it the name American Gods until he’d come up with something better.

Within a few months he got one cover back from his publisher and it was the cover that was later used in the original edition of American Gods. The author simply accepted that that was the book he was writing.¹⁵

2.2 Plot summary

The novel sets off in a prison. The main protagonist Shadow, a big man who does not talk much and does coin tricks for a hobby, has a few weeks left of his sentence, but he is released early due to his wife’s death.

On his way home, he meets a mysterious older man who calls himself Wednesday. The man offers Shadow a job, but he refuses for the first time and gets away from the man. But Wednesday is waiting for Shadow in a roadside bar where he stops and tells Shadow why he has nowhere

¹² Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 493.

¹³ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 330.

¹⁴ Haley Campbell, *The Art of Neil Gaiman*, 225.

¹⁵ Hank Wagner, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, 492.

to return. His wife died in a car accident whilst having an affair with Shadow's best friend who also promised him a job when he gets out of prison.

Wednesday explains that Shadow would be an errand boy, he would take Wednesday from place to place, ask question and in an emergency he would hurt people. The most important part of Shadow's work description is that in case Wednesday would die, he would hold the old man's vigil.

The bargain is sealed by three glasses of mead and Shadow's ability to protect Wednesday is put into test by Mad Sweeney, a leprechaun who doesn't like Irish stereotypes and who looks like typical nineties junkie. Shadow is given a golden coin Sweeney picks from the air. And so Shadow's road trip across America started.

At Laura's funeral Shadow put the leprechaun coin in the casket. With this action he brought Laura back from the dead. She is not alive, but not a zombie either and she helps Shadow several times.

On his way from the funeral Shadow is kidnapped by the Technical boy and that is when he learns about the dispute between Old Gods and the New.

During the novel, Shadow encounters the Buffalo Man in his dreams several times. He shows Shadow chambers full of forgotten gods and gives him the most important advice – believe everything.

Wednesday is preparing for the last war and he is trying to persuade other Old Gods to fight with him. As the modern times do not favour the old religions the first immigrants brought with them, most of the Old Gods do not lead happy lives and some of them are on the verge of poverty. When gods die, a new version of them appears. But when they are forgotten, they disappear forever.

Some of the Old Gods find a way to live a slightly better life, some hang on the verge of poverty. In Chicago the Shadow loses his life in a game of checkers to Slavic god Czernobog who promises him to crush his skull with his sledgehammer one day.

After a bigger-scale meeting with the Old Gods at the House on the Rock, the deities are attacked by hitmen send by the enemy side and Shadow himself is kidnapped once again. His not-so-dead wife helps him escape and Shadow spends some time working with two Egyptian gods in a funeral parlor. There is also a cat, who reveals herself to be goddess Bast.

Gaiman has soft spot for three women in his stories. With Bast's appearance it is complete in the case of American Gods. Laura, Czernoog's dreamy sister Zorya Polunochnaya and now Bast, these three women appear throughout the story and influence Shadow's actions.

During the time spent in the city of Cairo, Mad Sweeney makes another appearance and tells Shadow he gave him the wrong coin. This is when Shadow realizes that what is keeping Laura in her undead, but not alive state is the piece of metal. When Sweeney realizes that he will not get the precious coin back, he drinks himself to death. During the night at the funeral parlour they hold Sweeney's vigil and Mr Ibis tells the story of his life as he writes down the stories of all living beings. Mad Sweeney spends the night with Shadow, Ibis and Jacquell, drinking and talking and in the morning he is back in the morgue, dead for good this time. In the morning Shadow is picked up by Wednesday and they leave the city.

Between their trips to different deities, Shadow spends his time in a small town called Lakeside. It is a place where he is hidden from all supernatural powers and the enemy side cannot find him. The town seems to be too good to be true, not unlike other former mining towns, all citizens have a job. Other cities of this kind slowly decay, but not Lakeside. Shadow does not think much of it, but at one point he uncovers the horrifying truth behind the town's character. Laura has one wish, to be alive again, so Shadow has two what we could call side quests next to his main job for Wednesday.

Shadow does not really realize the existence of his quest in Lakeside until the very end of the book. Every year a child disappears during the winter and he learns that they are being put into trunks of old cars that spend the whole winter on the ice of the lake and in the spring they sink. As for Laura, Shadow asks several gods about bringing someone back from the dead, but nobody seems to have the right answer. Several times he dreams about thunderbirds and thus he believes that they might be the right answer.

When Wednesday and Shadow pass a signpost for Mount Rushmore on their way to another deity, they are followed by men in black, the foot soldiers of the leader of the New Gods, Mister World. They escape by entering the Backstage, a place that is true to its name. All the creatures appear in their true form, so Shadow really sees Wednesday as Odin All-father. They make their way to Lakota reservation where they meet two Native Americans. Their true identity is not clear, but they are not gods. They confirm Shadow that finding thunderbirds might help him bring Laura back.

Some of the New Gods are trying to persuade Shadow to join 'the winning side,' but he always refuses. Deity called Media is the most persistent and she talks to him several times through the television.

One evening, Shadow is at the Lakeside's bar and he is arrested for violating his parole. As he is waiting for transport at the local police station, Media streams him a meeting of Mister World and Wednesday, who gets shot and killed on spot. Shadow is picked up by Czernobog and Mr Nancy and they go to a meeting on neutral ground, the centre of America, where they are given Wednesday's body. There, Shadow meets Loki, his old cell-mate, who works as a driver for the New Gods.

Wednesday's body is to be put to rest beneath a tree in Virginia, a World Tree or Yggdrasil. Somebody is to hold a vigil, truly Odin-like, and Shadow offers himself. It is his sense of duty towards Wednesday and even though the other gods tell him their bargain does not matter once Wednesday died and that Shadow will most probably die during the vigil, he is still determined to do it.

The vigil is basically human sacrifice, a perfect imitation of the sacrifice Odin did himself once. Other three women appear in the story, the Norns, and they prepare Shadow for the ordeal. He spends nine days and nights tied to the World Tree and he suffers many visions and hallucinations, in one of which he even talks to Jesus who stays out of the whole conflict as he is doing very well.

Shadow is visited by his wife whom he sends to the Norns as she says that she is thirsty. They give her the water that feeds the roots of Yggdrasil itself and she is brought back to life. He dies at one point and learns many things from Bast and Zorya Polunochnaya that he meets on his way to final judgement. One of those secrets is that Shadow is Wednesday's son. Even though it is nearly impossible for gods to have children with humans, it happened.

Shadow's soul is examined by Anubis himself and he gets to choose his own destiny. Shadow, being tired with everything, chooses nothingness.

One of the men in black, Mr Town, is sent to the World Tree to bring back a branch. When he sees Shadow's body hanging there, he pokes his side with the branch and thus completes Shadow's vigil, as Odin had his side pierced too. Mr Town picks up Laura on his way, as he has a long way ahead of himself and would welcome some company.

Meanwhile all the New and Old Gods gather on the Lookout Mountain for the final battle. Laura kills Mr Town when they arrive there and with the branch she goes to seek Mr World. She learns the truth. Everything was part of Wednesday's plan, even his death, and he is slowly returning. Mr World is in reality Loki Liesmith himself and the two Norse gods planned the whole battle so that they could feed from the chaos and bloodshed.

Laura runs the branch from the World Tree through herself and Loki and dedicates the death to her husband.

Shadow is brought back to life by Easter and Horus and he flies to the battle site on the back of thunderbird that Horus, who can transform into a hawk, brought with himself. Shadow gets to the Lookout Mountain at the very last moment as the gods are already beginning their battle. He stops them and explains that it was Wednesday's plan all along and that they were only part of it. With the truth all their reasons to fight disappeared and the gods slowly left the Backstage of the Lookout Mountain where the battle was taking place.

Shadow finds dying Loki and Wednesday, who is at the time only a ghost in shadows. Laura is on the verge of death, but neither of the married couple sees the fact as a tragedy. Shadow takes the leprechaun golden coin from her and she finally dies. He returns the coin to the place where it belonged, to the leprechaun horde.

After that Shadow returned to Lakeside as he finally realized who is behind all the lost children. It was old man named Hinzelmann who was actually a kobold, creature from the Germanic folklore. The old man had been protecting the town since its establishment, but every winter since the lake was created he was taking a human sacrifice in the form of children. Even though it was early spring and the ice on the lake was no longer safe, Shadow went to the old car and managed to open the trunk. His theory was confirmed, there was a body of a young girl. At the same time the ice broke and Shadow almost died, but he was saved by Hinzelmann himself. The old man realizes that the town would soon change and he would publicly become a murderer as the body of the young girl would be found in the lake and he accepts his end. Hinzelmann is killed by Lakeside's police officer and Shadow leaves the city for the last time.

The protagonist goes to Chicago to fulfil his promise to Czernobog, but he is not killed by the man. Spring came and the old god is transforming into his brother, Bielobog, who is described as the good one of the two.

In the postscript, we find Shadow in Iceland where he meets the original Odin and gives him Wednesday's glass eye.

2.3 Human belief

In *Sandman*, Neil Gaiman presented the idea that god-like beings, the Endless in that case, came to life together with first humans. The power of human thought brought them to existence. The same concept is presented in *American Gods*. The deities are not all-present, but they are brought to America in the minds of people who travel there. The fact that without human belief they wither and slowly disappear and that in the case of death they are replaced by another version of themselves is also similar.

Even though civilizations fell in religious wars, I believe that all religions share certain similar aspects. This thesis is not going to present arguments in favour and against religion of any form and its goal is not to prove any religion wrong.

The reason why humans believe in supernatural beings is their way of coping with the terrors of present and also history. If people could not assign certain importance for the future to historical events like wars and genocides, faith in humanity would be certainly lost.¹⁶

Faith is not something of past times, as many people today would argue, it is something that we carry deep inside of us. As Gaiman showed in *American Gods*, belief in gods of war, thunder and good crop only shifted to belief in gods of highways and technology.

Iranian cosmology suggests that every terrestrial phenomenon corresponds to a celestial one and thus everything in human existence that carries any meaning has been already done by the gods. All rituals have divine models and they are human repetition of actions of gods.¹⁷ Gaiman followed this thought in Wednesday's vigil. Shadow repeated the actions of Odin himself as he willingly went to hang on the tree for nine days and nights and even got his side pierced in the end.

A branch from the Ygdrasil from which Odin hanged becomes a magical spear that, when thrown across battlefield, secures the outcome of the battle. It is just an ordinary branch, but because a supernatural act like Shadow's sacrifice, that was itself a repetition of an act of god, took place on the tree, the wood suddenly inherited unearthly features. Sacredness of objects is encoded in their nature. The fact that, unlike human beings, they resist time makes them something more, something worth worshipping.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 106.

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 6-9.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 4.

Importance of 'the centre' is present in *American Gods* in one moment and that is during the handover of Wednesday's body. But it doesn't correspond to belief found in several cultures, because according to Gaiman, the Centre of America is a place of negative energy for gods and they lose their powers there, which makes it the only neutral ground found on the whole continent. Centre is the point where heaven, earth and hell meet¹⁹ and that makes it the place of sacredness where gods can descend to Earth.

Why did Gaiman chose a mountain for the gods' battlefield in *American Gods* we might ask. Why not a field, or the skies themselves? In many mythologies mountains are understood as the connection of territories.²⁰ For example in Japanese belief, mountains are territory of kami and before entering such territory one has to ask for permission and has to go through a gate that can be found at the beginning of every mountain road.

Natural sacredness of mountains might be the reason why Gaiman chose the Overlook Mountain to be the place of the final battle between the deities. In the book it is said that the New Gods were positioned on the top of the mountain, which might also suggest that they had the upper hand in terms of amount of human belief and it was supposed to further deepen hopelessness of the situation of the Old Gods.

As for Shadows sacrifice, in *The Myth of Eternal Return* it is suggested that the sacrificers abandon the secular world and they enter the divine world of immortals.²¹

During the vigil, Shadow experienced supernatural visions and when he returned back from the dead he had obtained knowledge hidden to mere mortals. Powers or knowledge unknown to humans had been acquired through death and resurrection by many deities in various mythologies. Jesus of Nazareth or Odin are a good examples.

The main protagonist of *American Gods* seems to be a randomly chosen human that happened to fit the needs of Mr Wednesday. The reader accepts this, because Shadow as an ordinary human being functions as the perfect observer through whose eyes we can truly appreciate the world full of gods in which the protagonist finds himself. But by the end of the novel Shadow learns that he is not as much of an outsider as he thought himself to be, because he is Wednesday's son.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 15.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 13.

²¹ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 36.

In some religions the first child was regarded as the child of god. Unmarried girls in Archaic East used to spend a night in the temple to ‘conceive by god.’²²

It was believed that sacrifice of the first child would increase the power of exhausted god as the child contained power that belonged to the god and what belonged to him had to be returned.²³ Wednesday knew that Shadow is his son, which suggests that he also knew that him holding the vigil would be enough to bring him back from the dead and he would not be replaced by another version of himself or even forgotten for good.

Humans believe in many things – gods, holy objects, sacred places, power of music. They also believe in heroes. *American Gods* is a classic heroic tale. Shadow does not think himself to be ‘the good guy’ and yet in the end he saves the day. He loses his beloved one and until the end many of his actions are motivated by his want to save his wife. He does save her in the end even though in different way than he originally planned. Laura became immoral and unhuman in certain way, she had no problem with killing people, even though they were ‘the bad guys.’ And Shadow saved her in the only right way he could, he ended her existence.

Neil Gaiman successfully creates character of classic heroes - Sandman’s Dream, Neverwhere’s Richard Mayhew and finally, Shadow. They all undergo a journey that changes them and they can become better, bigger, even, for the sake of the cosmic tale.

²² Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 109.

²³ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 110.

3. OLD GODS

3.1 Anansi/Mr Nancy

Anansi is an African folk hero, a trickster character. He is considered to be spirit of all knowledge and stories. A term ‘ananseseur’ or ‘spider-stories’ is even applied to all kinds of fables. A large number of them was recorded in the middle of twentieth century by Martha W. Beckwith and published in *Jamaica Anansi Stories*. They were passed on verbally among the slaves in Caribbean, especially Jamaica as the area had the largest number of slaves coming from the Ashanti people of Ghana from which Anansi’s character originates.²⁴

In Caribbean he is seen as the symbol of resistance and during slave riots he was held in high regard because of his ability to win in a seemingly lost fight against stronger opponent through trickery.

Spider Anansi became the god of stories through tricking a python, a leopard and a swarm of hornets and exchanging them with the sky god Nyame for all the tales in the world.

Mr Nancy in *American Gods* reminds me of stand-up comedians of the times when television was only in its beginnings. He wears bright suits, yellow gloves and he smokes cigars. He likes talk radio and dance music and his home is in a small house in Florida.

Whether Mr Nancy is the first copy of the original Ghana-based god is unclear, but he never mentions any version of him living nearby. As it is fairly close from Florida to Caribbean, I can only assume that he is the Spider god born with the coming of the first slaves to the isles.

The deity has many visual versions, more than other of the gods. We can see that during a scene when Shadow, Wednesday, Czernobog and Nancy ride a carousel in the House on the Rock. He appears as enormous jewelled spider the size of a horse, tall man with six arms wearing a headdress with his face painted with red stripes and also as a dying young boy with his foot swollen. This quick peek at all of his forms that Shadow has ends with a small brown spider.²⁵

From this I assume that Gaiman’s idea of Anansi’s evolution as a god starts with the small spider. Many gods start as mortals and gain their supernatural powers with coming back from the dead. We can see this pattern in Odin who underwent a self-sacrifice. We might say that the same is the case of Jesus of Nazareth as well, because the Christian God is a trinity. Jesus’ crucifixion can be looked upon as a sacrifice of God to God himself then.

²⁴ Martha Warren Backwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, VII.

²⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 138.

I understand Anansi's appearances as a story of his birth backwards. A small poisonous spider bit a boy who then died, but came back from the dead. The man with painted face wearing a headdress is either Anansi's human form from which he grew old with time and fading faith, or it is a picture from worshipping dance in Anansi's name. The first form Shadow sees on the carousel is the deity's true spider form, horrifying and powerful.

Mr Nancy acts as a father figure to Shadow. He even tells him that Shadow reminds him of his son.²⁶ Wednesday tells Shadow that gods having children is very rare and almost impossible. As Shadow learns he is one of such rare children, but he seems to be the only one in a long time. Mr Nancy on the other hand has two sons.

When Wednesday becomes unapproachable and lost in his war against the New Gods, it is Nancy who tries to make the atmosphere lighter.

He does not seem concerned about the possibility of losing the war, which might be given by his sole nature. Anansi's stories are all about the spider winning unwinnable situations.

3.2 Bilquis

According to Jewish and Islamic traditions she was the ruler of Sheba kingdom in the southwestern Arabia. She visited the court of king Solomon as her kingdom was a rich one that sold spices, gems and scented woods to other countries. According to the Bible, she wanted to test his wisdom by asking him to solve number of riddles.²⁷ Solomon heard that she had a hairy leg and he tricked her into sliding up her dress. She had one goat foot.

Ethiopian holy book Kebra Nagast says that Bilquis has a son with Solomon and that after the visit she returned back to her country.²⁸

She was never a goddess, but she used to be worshipped as one by many men for her beauty and power.

Gaiman describes her as half demon, witch and a wise woman. Some sources believe Bilquis was half djinn, but it is not confirmed.

²⁶ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 138.

²⁷ *The Queen of Sheba*, accessed on April 18, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Queen-of-Sheba>.

²⁸ Michael Wood, *The Queen of Sheba*, accessed on April 18, 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/cultures/sheba_01.shtml.

Her room is a sanctuary of its own. It is dark red, there is a bed with white-satin styled sheets and oxblood bedspread.

She has ‘a wooden table with small stone statue of a woman with enormous hips and a candleholder’ in her room.²⁹ I believe this point to her being the goddess of fertility. As she is a sex worker, her room is her shrine and the act of sex is the worshipping ritual. She has the ability to make men fall in love with her, crave her and she can even drive men mad.³⁰

She does not take any part in the war between gods herself, but her task in the novel is to show the reader a different side of the gods’ lives. She gains belief from men involuntarily, she walks them through the offering until they cannot go back. Other gods are better equipped to survive in America without having to work as Bilquis does. In one part of the novel Shadow meets a Welsh mage who works in a supermarket and I already mentioned the family of Slavic gods who live with minimal income, but Bilquis sells her body. Nowadays the perception of sex workers changes, even though very slowly, but at the time *American Gods* were published, prostitutes were by majority perceived as somehow less human than the rest of society.

Egyptian pantheon

It is worth mentioning that the Egyptian gods were one of the very first to have come to America. Mr Ibis says that they arrived to the continent some 3530 years ago.³¹ He points out that there used to be more of the Egyptian deities, so we can safely assume that the majority of the pantheon that got reborn in the New World disappeared as they got forgotten.

It is an interesting example of survival of the fittest among gods. Ironically even though Thoth and Anubis are ‘mere’ psychopomp figures, they have the best qualities to adapt and survive. People die all the time and funeral home is a business that will never run out of customers.

Interesting custom these deities keep is that they brew their own beer. Ancient Egypt belongs among countries that started brewing this beverage as the first in human history.

²⁹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 29.

³⁰ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 402.

³¹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 211.

3.3 Bast

In Egyptian mythology she was a wild goddess of the sun, moon, cats, women and secrets. She used to be depicted as a woman with cat head. Her blessing had a big importance, because she did not favour everyone, just as cats.³²

In *American Gods* she takes on human form only in Shadow's dreams and visions. When she does so she keeps a very cat-like feature – her eyes' pupils are vertical slits.

Bast completes the trio of women that affect Shadow throughout the novel together with Zorya Polunochnyaya and Shadow's dead wife Laura.

As other deities, Bast also comments on human faith and gods. She tells Shadow that gods are only symbols with which humans make sense of the shadows on the cave wall.³³

Her saying is a clear reference to Plato's cave – a philosophical analogy of the world we see and understand to what are mere shadows of the real objects on a wall of a cave.

3.4 Horus

In Egyptian mythology deity of the sky, war and justice, depicted as a man with the head of a falcon, lion with the head of a falcon or as a sphinx. He also appeared as a falcon sitting on pharaoh's arm, guiding his reign.³⁴

In *American Gods*, Horus spends most of his time in the form of a hawk, feeding on roadkill. It is unclear why he does not live with the rest of the pantheon.³⁵

He plays important part in resurrection of Shadow. Firstly, he watches Shadow hanging on the World Tree for some time and it is him who brings Easter to help. But she alone is not powerful enough and needs Horus' help. He is thought to be the son of Osiris, god of dead, sometimes son of Ra, the first one being the god of the dead, the latter the god of the sun. The figures of Ra and Horus merged at some point, but in *American Gods* they are two different characters.

Easter breathes a new life into Shadow, but the first spark, that she makes stronger, casts the Sun with its rays and it is Horus who flies towards it in his hawk form to make it so.³⁶

³² Richard A. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 215.

³³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 519.

³⁴ Richard A. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 200.

³⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 217.

³⁶ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 559.

3.5 Ibis/Thoth

The god Thoth is the inventor of writing, teacher of man, creator of magic and divine record keeper. He is the one who questions souls of dead about their deeds in life before their heart is weighted against the feather of Maat. His origin is unclear, but sometimes he is believed to have created himself from the power of language. He is depicted as a man with the head of ibis.³⁷

In *American Gods* Mr Ibis visually resembles the bird ibis. His love for language is very apparent as he speaks in explanations. He spends his days by writing tales about all people, in which way he is very true to his original. He even keeps records about the gods, which is apparent when Mad Sweeney dies and Mr Ibis reads the record he has about him.³⁸

Thoth is also called the messenger of the gods. When Shadow get arrested at one point and needs to contact Wednesday, he calls to Mr Ibis who promises to send the message forward and thus he does his original responsibility.

When Shadow dies and comes to a mass of water, it is Mr Ibis who comes to take him over in a boat to his final judgement, another action true to the original deity, because Thoth had the role of psychopomp.³⁹

Mr Ibis also points out a very important thought of the whole *American Gods* and that is that it doesn't matter if Shadow believed in the gods, because they believed in him.⁴⁰

3.6 Jacquiel/Anubis

Anubis is the god of the dead who leads their way through the underworld. He is depicted as a man with the head of a jackal and sometimes as a full jackal with no human features.

He belongs among the oldest Egyptian gods. He was eventually replaced in his role of the god of the dead as Osiris replaced him and Anubis became a psychopomp figure. He tests the knowledge of the dead about faith and he feeds the souls that are too heavy with sins to the soul eater Ammet.⁴¹

Mr Jacquiel can freely change his form between human and that of a black dog, whereas Mr Ibis is never mentioned to have changed from his human form.

³⁷ Richard A. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 215.

³⁸ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 242.

³⁹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 522.

⁴⁰ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 523.

⁴¹ Richard A. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 187.

Both of the gods work as undertakers and Jacquiel takes the energy he needs from pieces of organs he consumes raw during autopsies. What is interesting is that apart from other organs he eats pieces of human heart. This organ was believed to have contained the soul and was left in the body while other organs were put in canopic jars when a body was mummified.

When Shadow dies and is brought across a mass of water by Mr Ibis, it is Jacquiel who awaits him and examines Shadow's soul. When he wants to compare Shadow's soul with the weight of a feather on scales though, he asks for his heart. That had the cat goddess Bast in her possession at the time as Shadow gave it to her as he gave his name to Zorya Polunochnyaya on his way through the underworld. Bast gives it to Anubis, but it brings up the question where the soul is actually – did the god only go through Shadow's memories and feelings, but the heart of human is the one organ that gains weights with the sins?⁴² As was said before, when a body was mummified,

the heart was left in the body and not put in a separate jar.

3.7 Easter/Eostre of the Dawn

First mention about a goddess of Easter appears in eighth century work *De Temporum Ratione* written by English monk Saint Bede. It is unclear whether she was ever worshipped or if she is only a construct of said monk.⁴³

Easter in *American Gods* is originally a pagan goddess, but as well as the holiday itself, her character also combines the Christian faith with older customs. She does not want to accept that people would forget about her entirely and lies herself into believing that the faith they put into contemporary Easter celebrations are in her name.⁴⁴

She spends her time in San Francisco where she blends in perfectly, because of its history of hippie communes and New Age movement. She has appearance of cheerful hippie and has a tattoo of blue forget-me-nots on her wrist that is constant reminder of the spring.

When Wednesday and Shadow make their journey to San Francisco to meet Easter, Shadow notices a peculiar looking girl with a dog on the street. Her hair are dyed green, orange and pink.

⁴² Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 524.

⁴³ John Allen Giles, *The Complete Works of the Venerable Bede*, 179.

⁴⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 331.

Those familiar with Gaiman's *Sandman* series will recognize one of the Endless in the girl, Delirium.⁴⁵

Easter has the power to make things grow, she can awaken a spark that further grows into something stronger. I would say that her power is that of first day of spring, the one warm day that awakens the nature.⁴⁶

She awakens something human in Horus who spends so much time as a bird that he goes mad. More importantly, she brings Shadow back from the dead. It is not the first time she had done so and I think this is a reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ that is celebrated on Easter.⁴⁷

3.8 Forgettable God

Shadow is unable to hold this deity in his memory. He forgets what he looked like, what he said and did, he even forgets his name every time Wednesday repeats it. It is unclear why it is so. I believe that the explanation is in the bottle of Soma the deity wants in exchange for helping Wednesday.

Soma comes from Hindu mythology and it is a name of a flower from which a potent liquor was made. Soma was also a name used for the god of Moon.⁴⁸

Why would be this particular god the only one who would want a bottle of potion that is concentrated belief when all the Old Gods are losing their worshippers? I believe that it is either because this god is Soma himself, or because he has gotten so forgotten that he is on the verge of disappearance.

His origin in Hindu mythology would also explain his presence in the same car riding from the House on the Rock as Wednesday, Elvis and Mama-ji. As the first two belong to the same pantheon, it would make sense that Mama-ji has someone from her own pantheon riding with her.

My other theory is that this god is an old deity of wealth and money. He is visited by Wednesday and Shadow in Las Vegas where he can feel the movement of money and it gives him power.⁴⁹

When the three men go for a drink, he orders a single malt Scottish whiskey named Laphroaig. This may point to his origin in Scottish myths. The whiskey is made in area called 'Hollow

⁴⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 328.

⁴⁶ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 543.

⁴⁷ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 566.

⁴⁸ W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Puranic*, 69-74.

⁴⁹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 305.

of Broadway.’ With a good portion of imagination we can see a connection with the word Broadway, which is a place of success and a great amount of money.

3.9 Hinzelmännchen/Kobold

Kobolds come from Germanic myth, they are thought to be spirits or dwarfs that are drawn to humans. It is unclear whether their intentions are good or evil. They appear everywhere people are, at their homes, in mines, they are even believed to accompany them on the sea.⁵⁰

The name Hinzelmännchen connected to a kobold appears in a story from Northern Germany. He was a spirit that started haunting a castle at the end of sixteenth century after being cast from a Bohemian forest. He promised to cast evil luck if he was cast away from the castle. Hinzelmännchen showed his physical form to one of the maids and he appeared to be a small child stabbed and slashed with two swords.⁵¹

There is no doubt that Gaiman’s Hinzelmännchen is this particular child spirit. He shows himself to Shadow in his child form, pierced with swords. What is different is that he says he came to existence long before the sixteenth century. He dates his origin to the time when soldiers of Roman Empire came to the Black Forest, which was at the beginning of the first century. Several times during the final part of *American Gods* Hinzelmännchen is described to have almost goblin-like features which get more apparent as he loses control over himself.

Because Shadow deals with Hinzelmännchen at the very end of the novel, he already met many gods and thus this origin story does not even surprise him. “That’s as good a way as any other of making a tribal god. He did not have to be told. He knew.”⁵²

The deity’s nature is hard to define. He does take child sacrifices, probably because he himself became a god as a child, but at the same time he truly brings good fortune to the city of Lakeside. Hinzelmännchen is a good god, probably the best of all that Shadow encountered during his journey. He fulfills gods’ purpose and that is to take care of those who believe in him. He is beloved by all citizens of his city and he is looked upon as an elder that is to be respected.

⁵⁰ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *European Myth and Legend*, 139.

⁵¹ Ludwig Bechstein, *Hinzelmännchen*, accessed on April 25, 2016, <http://www.sagen.at/texte/sagen/deutschland/niedersachsen/div/hinzelmännchen.html>.

⁵² Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 613.

But it is because of him being unable to change the way he accepts sacrifices that he has to die and disappear. Shadow stops a bloodshed that is unnecessary, but when dealing with Hinzelmann, he realizes that there is no other way than the god's death.

3.11 Jesus

When Shadow is on the brink of death he has a dream or a vision in which he finds himself to be in a Spanish-style house in which he meets a man with a gentle empathetic smile. He treats Shadow to a glass of wine and it is mentioned that his hands have old chisel scars.

I believe it is clear that this character is Jesus of Nazareth as he was a carpenter and he is known for being able to change water into wine. The man comments on how hard it is to make better than average wine.⁵³

This meeting is fairly important, in my opinion, because Christianity is the one religion that rules America. The Christian God belongs with the Old Gods, but he never makes appearance and none of the other deities mention him, except for Mr Jacquel. He points out that faith in the gods really depends on where they are and that Jesus in Afghanistan is doing as bad as some of the gods in America.⁵⁴

American Jesus says something very important in the question of religious freedom – that he welcomes new gods, because they take a lot off his shoulders.⁵⁵

The meeting does not carry a big importance for the plot itself, but Gaiman saved himself from having a huge plot hole as the question ‘But what about the most worshipped god?’ would have to arise very soon after the publication of the story.

3.12 John Chapman/Apple Johnny

American folk hero whose true story is shrouded in fables. What we know is that during the first half of nineteenth century he travelled to the frontier and planted apple nurseries. He was also a missionary and with the word of bible he spread apple seeds that he sold and gave to the frontier men. He is said to have walked barefoot and wore raggedy clothes, which is exactly how Gaiman described him.⁵⁶

⁵³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 504.

⁵⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 223.

⁵⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 504.

⁵⁶ John Chapman, accessed on April 29, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Chapman>.

One version of his story says that he is a man responsible for bringing alcohol to the frontier, because his apples were not good for anything else than cider.

Gaiman's John Chapman is found together with Whiskey Jack. Historical Chapman was known to have good relations with Native Americans, probably because of his approach to nature. He does walk barefoot and favours cider, so he is very true to his original.⁵⁷

Chapman's value is, in my opinion, to show that not only gods and magical beings exist in America, but that folk heroes as well exist on the same level as them and they have some supernatural powers.

3.13 Kali/Mama-ji

Goddess of time, doomsday and death, a demon slayer and a wife of the god Shiva. She keeps her looks very resembling of her true form, but at the same time she seems like a respectable Indian woman. She wears a red sari which, I believe, is supposed to remind people of the blood she used to be covered in when she was battling demons. She also wears a necklace of skulls and a charm bracelet with small hands and heads and on her forehead is a blue jewel.⁵⁸

Depicted in the Hindu mythology she wears a necklace of decapitated heads and she is naked except for a waistband of hands of giants. Kali has a third eye and in her human form in *American Gods* I believe the jewel on her forehead is its manifestation. She has four hands, one of them holds a weapon, the other a decapitated head of her enemy and the last two are free and bless her worshippers.⁵⁹

When Shadow sees Kali in her true form she seems less loving as she does not bless anyone and her multiple hands are holding weapons. We see her motherly side right before the battle at Overlook Mountain when she accepts the Rakshasas, demons, as her own children, even though these were the same demons she used to slay in the old times.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 376.

⁵⁸ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 151.

⁵⁹ Donald A. Mackenzie, *Indian Myth and Legend*, 150.

⁶⁰ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 530.

3.14 Mad Sweeney

He says about himself that he is a leprechaun and he certainly has abilities of one as he can pull coins out of thin air, or as he says, from the pile.⁶¹

Leprechauns are said to be solitary creatures and according to W. B. Yeats' *Folk Tales* there are three kinds of them. Leprecanns make shoes and they are fairly rich as all forgotten treasures belong to them. Cluricanns drink in gentlemen's cellars and some believe they are simply Leprecanns when they are not working. The third kind is Far Darrig, literally 'The Red Man.' He wears red cape and coat and he plays jokes on people.⁶²

The name Mad Sweeney points to other identity than a leprechaun. It point to Irish hero of the name Suibhne, Sweeney in translation. He was the king of Dál nAirdi, kingdom in north-eastern Ireland. Battle of Mag Rath, which took place in 637AD, marked the end of the kingdom's independence and arrival of Christianity.

Suibhne went mad after the battle, some believe he was cursed by St Rónan, some say it was the result of the chaos and bloodshed. The man spent several years wandering around the land. He is said to have grown bird feathers and levitate or fly from tree to tree. One day he came to rest at a monastery of St Moling. A woman who lived there left him a bowl of milk each evening which is a custom commonly connected to faeries. Another woman from the monastery spent a night with Suibhne and when her husband learned about it, he killed the madman out of jealousy. Suibhne was buried next to the St Moling's monastery, which is very ironic as he despised Christianity his whole life.⁶³

In *American Gods*, Mad Sweeney is incredibly tall, has a short ginger beard and wears clothes that are very nineties-looking – a denim jacket covered in patches, stained T-shirt and a cap with somehow cynical prints. As much as every Irishman he hates Irish stereotypes. 'There's a lot more to Ireland than Guinness,' he says to Shadow during their first meeting. He does not drink this one particular beer everyone connects with his homeland, nor does he have Irish accent. As he explains it, he has been in America for too long.⁶⁴

He does have access to the mythical pile of gold though. Shadow has great interest in coin tricks and he is truly mesmerized by Mad Sweeney's abilities. The leprechaun even shows him how

⁶¹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 44.

⁶² W. B. Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, 80.

⁶³ *The Story of Mad Sweeney*, accessed on April 20, 2016, <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/history-heritage/folklore-of-ireland/carlow-folklore/the-story-of-mad-sweeney/>

Buile Suibhne, accessed on March 30, 2016, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T302018.html>.

⁶⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 39.

to take a golden coin from the magical pile and he gives Shadow one of the coins. He does not realize it is a very special coin and it leads to his doom. The piece of gold probably belonged to one of four legendary treasures of Ireland.

The leprechaun's role in the novel is quite important as he is the one who, involuntarily, has a big share in bringing Laura, Shadow's wife, back from the dead.

Mad Sweeney stays true to some Irish stereotypes. Even though gods are hard to kill, as Wednesday claims, the leprechaun drinks himself unconscious with a bottle of Jameson's whiskey and thus commits suicide. He freezes to death and ends up as a John Doe – corpse with no identity.⁶⁵

Native American myth

3.15 Buffalo Man

It is only fitting that the personification of America is a man with a buffalo head as these animals used to be the most important source of many materials to plain tribes of Native Americans. Buffalo was considered a sacred animal and religious symbol. The disappearance of the large herds of these animals is also the symbol of coming of modern age to the continent.

Gaiman made this character into a passive judge that closely watches Shadow's journey. He is the one who speaks to Shadow in his dreams and visions the most, but he is seen together with condor-headed woman and Iktomi, so I assume that these three characters have the task of looking after the American continent.

They are the spirits of America, they do not need sacrifices or churches to accept the faith of their worshippers, because the land is their church and they will be present as long as the land exists.⁶⁶

The Buffalo Man teaches Shadow through dreams. He walks him through different kinds of beliefs and even shows him a hall full of statues in various kinds of decay that belong to gods once worshipped in America, but now long forgotten.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 239.

⁶⁶ Baba Singh, *Catharsis and the American God: Neil Gaiman in The Neil Gaiman Reader*, 158.

⁶⁷ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 64.

3.16 Thunderbirds

In Native American myths they are believed to be the personification of thunder. Gaiman enhanced this by adding a story about coming-of-age test for young men. As Shadow learns in a dream, boys have to bring their feather from a tower of skulls where they dwell to prove they are men.⁶⁸

Lakotas believe that those who dream about the Thunderbirds become the *heyoka*, clown figures. Their role is to create disorder, mock rituals and ceremonies and do the forbidden to test boundaries of society. Their task is to make people laugh and make them think about the world in a new way.⁶⁹

Shadow does dreams about the Thunderbirds on several occasions, but even though Gaiman mentions the coming-of-age test, Shadow does not need to prove his manhood. He does fit the definition of *heyoka* though. After he comes back from the dead he stops the war between gods and makes them look at their situation from a new angle –it is not actually a war about faith and survival, but only a trick played on the deities by two of their own.

3.17 Whiskey Jack/Iktomi

Iktomi in Native American myth is a trickster figure, according to Assiniboine tribe he created the Earth, according to Lakotas he is a shapeshifting spider man who can speak to all living things.⁷⁰

Wisakedjac is another of his names, he may be different character than Iktomi, but they share the role of creator of the world after a legendary flood.⁷¹

Iktomi's role is not clear until Shadow's death. Before that he and Wednesday visit Whiskey Jack and his friend Apple Johnny to ask them to join the war, which Iktomi refuses. Just before Shadow is brought back to life by Easter and Horus, he visits the Native American in his mind and thanks to him he realizes that the whole war was just Wednesday's plan.⁷²

We might say that Iktomi is the most important of the three characters who appear as the personification of America as it is him who finally pushes Shadow to do what needs to be done.

⁶⁸ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 325.

⁶⁹ Patricia Ann Lynch, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 24.

⁷⁰ Patricia Ann Lynch, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 53.

⁷¹ Patricia Ann Lynch, *Native American Mythology A to Z*, 122.

⁷² Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 557.

Norse Pantheon

3.18 Alvis Vindalfson/ Elvis

Alvis in Norse mythology is a dwarf that Thor's daughter was promised to. But the god of thunder did not want him to marry her and in a part of Edda called 'Alvismal' their encounter is described. Thor holds Alvis in a dialogue for the whole night and asks him complicated questions about earth, heaven, moon, sun, clouds, wind, sea, fire, wood, night, seed and ale. When he asks the last question the sun rises and Alvis, because he is a dwarf, turns into stone.⁷³

Because Thor is only briefly mentioned in *American Gods* and he is said to commit suicide, we don't know if anything resembling the original story happened in America.

According to Gaiman he is the king of dwarfs, which does not correspond to the original. When he is first introduced, Shadow thinks his name is Elvis. He has a very dwarf-like body proportions – he is barrel chested, has legs like tree trunks and hands the shape of ham-hocks.⁷⁴

The mishearing of his name and the fact that he has a very strong voice would suggest that Alvis was actually Elvis Presley. As showbusiness is not uncommon field of work for Gaiman's gods, it seems very possible. One of the Old Gods at Overlook Mountain is described as a 'once famous comedian believed to have died in 1920s' and he turns out to be a faun.⁷⁵

3.19 Low Key Lyesmith/Loki Liesmith/ Mr World

The Norse trickster makes appearance throughout the whole book. He is introduced as Shadow's cellmate named Low Key Lyesmith. His name reveals to the reader his real identity very quickly. If the name was not enough, he is described to have 'a scarred smile' which is a familiar feature of the Norse deity. In Poetic Edda it is said that he lost a bet and was supposed to lose his head. He talked his way out of the deal, as is iconic for Loki, but in the end he had his mouth sewn shut.⁷⁶

Throughout the book Loki throws in a very dark gallows humour, a feature he shares with Wednesday and that is very common in Norse mythology in general.

As Loki starts working for 'the winning side' of New Gods, he does not feel guilty at all. In the original mythology, Loki is a character that creates chaos and does mischief to the Asgard gods, but who makes things right in the end, in many cases to save his own life.

⁷³ *The Elder or Poetic Edda*, trans. Olive Bray, 25-37.

⁷⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 155.

⁷⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 530.

⁷⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 113.

It is not clear if Loki is really a god, but he certainly lives among them and has supernatural abilities. He changes shape and sex and in combination with his cunningness he assists the gods many times. But he is also destined to start the Ragnarök and in the final battle he fights against the Aesir, the Asgard gods.⁷⁷

In this matter Gaiman's Loki follows the footsteps of his template. Even though he belongs to the Old Gods, he stands against them and he does not feel ashamed. He explains it as logical decision if he wants to keep his life in the hostile America.

Loki and Odin became blood brothers at some point and Gaiman draws on this information as he made Loki the missing partner Wednesday used to have in the past. Shadow realizes that it is the trickster who is the second man in the two-man con that the whole war is.⁷⁸

His shapeshifting abilities allow him to act as humble Old God who wants to save his own life, but at the same time be the brain of New Gods' operations. He is called Mr World and stays in the background for the majority of the novel. Before the final battle he is described for the very first time in his operation centre in Rock City's cave called 'The Rainbow Room.'

I believe the name is the first cue to connect the characters of Loki and Mr World. The land of gods, Asgard, is connected to other realms via Bifröst, Rainbow Bridge. Mr World's operation centre might be in a cave also as a connection to other Norse mythology story about the trickster. He was once captured and bound by his son's bowels in a cave, tortured by serpent poison dripping onto his face. Loki is supposed to stay there until Ragnarök when he would fight the Aesir.⁷⁹

In *American Gods* he plans to stay in the cave until he is brought a branch from the World Tree that he could throw over the battleground and dedicate the bloodshed to Odin. Throwing a spear over one's enemies would secure Odin's favour in the battle.⁸⁰

This is where Gaiman's story diverts from the original Norse myth. Loki is killed by the very same branch he meant to use to gain power. His killer is nobody else than Shadow's undead wife, Laura. Throughout the novel she was the one who took upon herself killing people that were endangering her husband and by killing a god she fulfilled her role.

⁷⁷ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology – A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, 217.

⁷⁸ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology – A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, 219.

⁷⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 87.

⁸⁰ Dan McCoy, *Odin*, accessed on April 15, 2016, <http://norse-mythology.org/gods-and-creatures/the-aesir-gods-and-goddesses/odin/>.

3.20 Odin/ Mr Wednesday

In the Norse mythology, Odin is the head of the pantheon.⁸¹ In Gaiman's version this does not apply only to his fellow countrymen, but to all gods, he has a natural air of leader around him and even though many gods do not like him, they recognize his authority.

Some of the readers may recognize Wednesday's real identity very quickly as the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish word for Wednesday is Onsdag, which literary means 'Odin's day.' It is true though that in English speaking countries the connection between Thursday and the god of thunder, Thor, is much more obvious.

Wednesday wears a tie pin in the shape of Ash tree which is the Yggdrasil that connects all the realms. He is also missing one eye that Odin exchanged for a drink from the well of Mímir under the roots of Yggdrasil. It is believed that he gained the power foresight after that.⁸² Wednesday explains to Shadow that he did not lose his eye and he knows exactly where it is. As for the power of foresight, Wednesday uses it instead of counting on bus schedule.⁸³ Later in the story he demonstrates that he can also see the past and sins of people.⁸⁴

Odin is the god of war, poetry, the dead and chaos. Throughout the novel he is described as very good at persuading and deceiving people, he even admits to Shadow that he is the best liar he will ever meet. He is very good with words, as good as Loki even. It is believed that Odin was able to awaken the dead to gain the knowledge from them, but he tells Shadow that he is unable to bring back his wife from the dead.⁸⁵

The god learned eighteen songs of spells whilst he was hanging from the Yggdrasil as a sacrifice to himself. Gaiman left these unchanged.⁸⁶

Wednesday is very true to his original. Under the harsh conditions of America that does not welcome gods, he manages to keep his wolves Freki and Geri, even though they are seen only in the Backstage, and his ravens Thought and Memory. According the mythology, the ravens bring Odin news from the world every morning.⁸⁷

In American Gods they are seen to be sitting on Wednesday's shoulders with their beaks in his head, almost as if they fed on it. This is how Shadow sees them on the Carousel at the House

⁸¹ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology – A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, 247.

⁸² John Lindow, *Norse Mythology – A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, 301.

⁸³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 261.

⁸⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 335.

⁸⁵ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology – A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, 250.

⁸⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 109.

⁸⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 70.

on the Rock.⁸⁸ Another time one of the ravens leads Shadow to a road when he is lost and one other time one of the ravens appears as more of a feeling than in physical form.

As for the mead that seals the deal between Wednesday and Shadow, Odin was known to treat his guests to mead. The god himself does not eat, but gives his food to his two wolves. He is said to live only on wine.⁸⁹ Gaiman's Wednesday does eat and he takes particular favour in almost raw steaks, which I believe is a reference to the deity's origin and blood sacrifices.

Wednesday knew that to get the power from the bloodshed of gods, he would have to die for real. The deities needed real death, real martyr to avenge. He was counting on being brought back by the power, but when he emerges out of shadows in the cave at Rock City, he is a mere ghost that would disappear again.⁹⁰ Odin knew that he would die during Ragnarök.⁹¹ What Wednesday did not count with is that someone like Shadow would see through his plan and sabotage it.

Mr Wednesday is definitely Odin, but he had to adapt to new environment. When Shadow goes to Iceland in the book's epilogue and meets the original Odin, it is clear that this character appears basically the same as in the legends. He wears grey raggedy cloak, broad-brimmed hat with a feather and he even has an eye patch. He 'looks like aging hippie.'⁹²

Wednesday changed his appearance and was seen like this only in the Backstage where all creatures took on their true form.

What is most interesting, Neil Gaiman distinguished these two versions of the same deity in the most basic way. Odin, as native Icelandic, speaks English very well, but with clear foreign accent. Wednesday, who was born in America, has no foreign accent at all.⁹³

3.21 Yggdrasil

In Gaiman's novel, the World Tree can be found on a farm in Virginia. There is a mad-eyed looking hawk sitting on a branch and a worm in the heart of the tree.⁹⁴

According to the original mythology, there is a snake called Nídhögg biting into the tree from beneath. In the crown of the Yggdrasil, a wise eagle is sitting there. Ratatosk is a squirrel

⁸⁸ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 146.

⁸⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 70.

⁹⁰ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 579.

⁹¹ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology – A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*, 251.

⁹² Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 633.

⁹³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 633.

⁹⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 503.

that passes messages between these two.⁹⁵ Gaiman made the squirrel into the most active of these three creatures as it brings water to Shadow during his sacrifice on the tree.⁹⁶

The hawk might be the god Horus who has significant role in the story as he is the one who helps bring Shadow back from the dead and he is described as mad.

In Edda, the tree is described as Ash tree, which corresponds to Gaiman's version. It is said that beneath one of its roots is a Urd's sacred well. Three Norns stay near the tree and water it every day with this magical water so that the tree would not wither. The water is so sacred that all things that it touches turn white.⁹⁷

The three Norns stay in the farmhouse next to the World Tree and Shadow's wife drinks their water which brings her back from the dead for some time.⁹⁸

Slavic Pantheon

3.22 Czernobog/Bielobog

Czernobog's name literally means 'Black God.' He is the personification of all evil in Slavic mythology. Czernobog was usually represented as a dark figure wearing black clothes and he was seen only during the darkest hours of night. Especially in northern Russia he was feared very much as the nights were very long and deadly during the winter months.⁹⁹

Bielobog is the force of light and life, his name's translation means 'White God.' He is usually represented as an honourable old man wearing white clothes. He roams the land during the day and does good deeds – he cures sick animals, secures successful hunt, good crop and he helps people to find things that are lost.¹⁰⁰

Serbian scholar Veselin Čajkanović, and I believe he was not the only one, pointed out that solar deities in various mythologies tend to have double aspects, that the good and evil beings are actually one. He presented the idea that Bielobog and Czernobog might actually be two versions of Slavic solar deity – Dazhbog.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 53.

⁹⁶ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 501.

⁹⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Helena Kadečková, 52, 54.

⁹⁸ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 535.

⁹⁹ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *European Myth and Legend*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *European Myth and Legend*, 37.

¹⁰¹ Karel Hlobil, *Before You*, 96-97.

Dazhbog is the son of sky god Svarog, he is the god of sun, happiness, destiny and justice. Gradually he became the solely most important deity in the pantheon. He rode across the sky every day in his golden chariot drawn by white fire breathing horses. Sun eclipse was understood as a bad omen predicting a war, plague, famine and death.¹⁰²

In *American Gods* it is not said from the beginning that the two opposites are one being, but it is understood at the very end of the novel. Bielobog is 'missing' and only the irritable Czernobog is present. When Shadow goes to meet him to pay his debt after he stops the bloodshed between gods, he finds the old man in a very good mood, lacking the dark aura that was always around him.

Czernobog's hair is turning gray and as he remarks, they start looking very alike with Bielobog. He smokes unfiltered cigarettes, cupped in his fist as if he fears someone would take it from him. On one hand that is a very Eastern Europe stereotype, but he also says that the burning cigarettes remind him of burnt offerings.¹⁰³

Interesting detail is that the man does a left handshake instead of right. This is common for scouts and comes from further past when this gesture was done as a sign of bravery and trust, because both people had to put away shields that were traditionally held in left hand.

As he says, he is almost forgotten in his old country, which is the truth as Slavic nations took in Christianity and the common people do not ordinarily hold any deep knowledge of the old religions. The deity never mentions any shrine of his, only that he used to be given human sacrifices that were killed with a rock smashed into their skull. But he once visits a meadow in Kansas where he used to be worshipped.¹⁰⁴

He shares common feature with Wednesday and that is feeding on blood and death. He is able to gain certain power only by being in the place where blood was spilled in his name many years ago.¹⁰⁵

Czernobog used to make living as a knocker in Chicago slaughterhouse, again something fairly common for Eastern European immigrants who usually did heavy manual work, but at the same time a remnant of him being a god and the way his offerings used to be killed.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *European Myth and Legend*, 61.

¹⁰³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 137.

¹⁰⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 463.

¹⁰⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 464.

¹⁰⁶ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 86.

He likes classical music, ‘the gloomier, the better,’¹⁰⁷ which I believe is a nod towards famous Russian composers like M.Mussorgsky, S.Rachmaninoff, S.Prokofiev or P.I.Tchaikovsky.

Even though Czernobog is a deity of evil, he actually helps Shadow and the Old Gods in the novel. He may have been driven by the image of Shadow’s skull crushed as the man lost his life to the deity in a game of checkers, but that seems only like the initial push. He seems to have a cold heart from the beginning, but he warms up to Shadow throughout the story and when he comes together with Mr Nancy to help get Shadow out of custody, he shows genuine concern for him.

Shadow loses to Czernobog in checkers and the deity wins the right to crush Shadow’s skull with his sledgehammer one day. This happens fairly early in the novel and I believe that this vision of violent death made Shadow accept many challenges and suffering, especially the vigil on the World Tree.

Czernobog’s relationship with the three Zoryas is never fully explained, but he does live with them and acts as the head of the family. Zoroyas are, in the Slavic mythology, the daughter of Dazhbog. There is no mention of them being connected to Czernobog or Bielobog in any way though.

Many gods degraded somehow in America, became impure, but on Czernobog it had a positive influence. From the god of death and darkness he became a moody man with a dark sense of humour.

3.23 Zorya Polnochnyaya

It is only assumed that this character really existed in Slavic mythology as she was never named, only referred to as the third of three Zorya sisters, daughters of the god of Sun, Dazhbog¹⁰⁸

The Zoryas are responsible for guarding an unnamed evil chained in the constellation of Ursa Mayor. It is said that if broken lose, the creature will destroy the world. The sisters also have the duty to open and close the gates when Dazhbog rides forth in his chariot.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 463.

¹⁰⁸ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, 189.

¹⁰⁹ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, 323.

Gaiman made this character to be one of the three women guides to Shadow on his journey. After Shadow dies during his Vigil she meets him and takes his true name. She leads him on the path of truth.¹¹⁰

Zorya Polnochnyaya cannot tell lies at all, not unlike her two sisters. She is the one who tells Shadow about the Zoryas' responsibility of watching the constellation Ursa Mayor and protecting the world from the evil contained there.¹¹¹

She is the only one that kept her goddess-like look in the family of Slavic deities. She has pale white hair and wears all white, which gives her very out-of-this-world look in the light of the Moon.

3.24 Zorya Utrennyaya

In Slavic mythology she is the goddess of dawn and the wife of the god Perun. She is the Zorya that opens the gates for Dazhbog in the morning and sees him off when he rides forth. She would also accompany Perun into the battle, she could protect warriors she favoured and save them from death.¹¹²

Gaiman made her the oldest one of the sisters as she was born in the morning, Zorya Vechernyaya in the evening and Zorya Polnochnyaya during the night. She is the one who takes care of their home and she is very hospitable.

It is interesting that Gaiman didn't chose this particular Zorya to be the one who would help Shadow as she seems to like him and he could've been her 'chosen warrior.'

3.25 Zorya Vechernyaya

According to Slavic myths, she was the goddess of dusk, the one who closed the gates when Dazhbog returned from his journey across the sky.¹¹³

In *American Gods* she is described to wear red coat, which reminds us of the colour of the sky during the sunset. Zorya Vechernyaya is also the only one of the sisters who can make money from fortune telling. When the sun sets and the shadows get darker it is the perfect time for the kind of lies people want to hear. The day ends and humans wonder what the future will bring.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 512.

¹¹¹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 99.

¹¹² Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, 321.

¹¹³ Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, 323.

¹¹⁴ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 83.

4. NEW GODS

4.1 Car Gods

They make very brief appearance, but these characters are worth mentioning in the context of always changing faith.

Since the 1950s, America abandoned public transportation and families suddenly did not own one car, but several. Number of people who die every day whilst driving a car is astronomical and with this, the circle of sacrifice closes itself.

In the ancient times, people made blood sacrifices to their gods, in Media and Technical Boy's cases their worshippers sacrifice their time more than anything. The Car Gods accept blood, once again, and human to that.¹¹⁵

4.2 Technical Boy

The character seems to be barely out of his teens. He rides in a stretch limo and smokes hand rolled cigarettes that smell like burning electro parts. His eyes glisten with the colour of old computer monitor. Even though he is very young he has children of his own.¹¹⁶ Because they are not as powerful as true deities and cannot exist in a place like The Centre of America, where gods lose their powers, I assume they are supposed to be personifications of various technical gadgets.¹¹⁷

Mr World is the mind behind the war against the Old Gods, but the second in command is the Technical Boy. He does not have the features of a leader. In one scene he is described to appear as a person with no social skills, so it is interesting that it is him who is so high in rank.¹¹⁸ The reason may be that he truly beliefs in the New Gods' cause and superiority. Given his youth, he serves as the engine giving power to their movement.

He appears to have personality issues, there are several moments when he throws himself against the wall and smashes his head against it. He is not as human as he appears to be. The Old gods bleed real red blood, but as we can observe in Technical Boy, he bleeds a different kind of fluid.¹¹⁹

Throughout the novel he acts as a spoilt child that wants to be accepted into the world of adults. He is violent and unstable, yet it is him who is in command of important operations.

¹¹⁵ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 581.

¹¹⁶ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 59.

¹¹⁷ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 477.

¹¹⁸ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 548.

¹¹⁹ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 549.

When he dies by Mr World's hand it is apparent how much he lacks any real experience. Loki and Wednesday are very old gods coming from times when death and violence was present each and every day, but Technical Boy is not able to understand how he and all the other New Gods got tricked.

4.3 Media

When we think about it, this deity is as old as America of white men, but they seem to be taking action only through television. They talk to Shadow always through the mouth of women, but I assume that Media is actually multiple personality. Especially in America, the land of cable television, deity like this could hardly keep one face and one character only.

They describe themselves as “the little shrine the family gathers to adore.”¹²⁰

Considering how much time people spend in front of their televisions, it is quite odd that Media are not the most powerful deity of all, since the amount of time, emotions and belief is astronomical.

The task of Media is to change facts, sugar-coat reality and seduce Shadow into working for the New Gods, but they fail every single time, because Shadow has the strength to do the one thing many modern people don't – to turn off the television.

Many more mythical characters make appearance in the novel, but as they are only briefly mentioned or play only the part of 'extras' in the background of *American Gods*, there is no reason to take further interest in them.

¹²⁰ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, 189.

Conclusion

Neil Gaiman is with no doubt one of the most influential fantasy writers of our time. It is surprising to find out that no academic work up to this date examined into detail what I believe is his *opus magnum*.

The novel *American Gods* further inspects themes that Gaiman introduces in his earlier works and presents them in a packaging of an epic road novel. It tests the boundaries of human belief and the core of faith into higher power in our modern times.

Gaiman is not afraid to pick up characters from various mythologies from the whole world and put them into a difficult situation, like losing faith and slowly disappearing, so that they would be forced to co-operate.

Apart from Old Gods he also presents a group of modern-time deities known as New Gods who do not lack amount of human faith. Among the first group he also placed several characters that are not gods, but folk heroes. They also live as long as people believe in them.

I focused my research on characters that have significant role in the story, take important action and influence the protagonist in a way worth mentioning, or help understand how Neil Gaiman works with characters in general.

It turned out that characters of gods that can be found in this thesis are not as hard to connect to originals as I feared at the beginning of my work.

As I found out, Gaiman is very well-acquainted with many mythologies unknown to public, but given the fact that he read his way through children's section of his local library when he was a child and always took interest in the mysterious and unknown, it should not come as a surprise.

During my research I learned that even though I was aware of similarities in world mythologies, they are actually more similar than might seem obvious. The work on this thesis was a great pleasure to me and it further enlarged my knowledge on the theme I thought I was already familiar with.

I believe my work will be of value to further academic research concerned with the work of Neil Gaiman.

Resumé

Tématem této bakalářské práce je adaptace mytologických postav v díle *Američtí bohové* současného fantasy spisovatele Neila Gaimana. Tento autor se nevěnuje pouze literatuře, je znám zvláště díky práci na komiksově sérii *Sandman*, která tento žánr ovlivnila podobně jako dílo Alana Moora. *Sandman* ukázal čtenářům moderní komiks, který se dokáže zabývat hlubšími tématy a zároveň vizuálně zaujmout.

Gaiman je ve svém oboru známý především díky svému osobitému stylu. Kombinuje náměty a postavy starých fantasy a hrdinských eposů, rozmanitých mytologií a přetváří je k obrazu svému a hlavně k obrazu, který odráží dobu, ve které žijeme.

První kapitola této práce se zabývá autorovou biografií a jeho dílem do současné doby. Kapitola druhá obsahuje vznik novely *Američtí bohové* a shrnutí jejího děje. V poslední části také prezentuje několik myšlenek zabývajících se lidskou vírou a prvky, které mytologie po celém světě sdílí.

Novela *Američtí bohové* zkoumá otázku lidské víry a její hranice. Podle autora si imigranti přinesli na Americký kontinent také své bohy ze starých zemí, kteří v zemi postupně začínají živořit, neboť víry, ze které žijí, začíná ubývat.

Ve třetí a čtvrté kapitole se tato práce pokouší rozebrat vlastnosti mytologických postav, které zásadnějším způsobem ovlivňují rozhodnutí hlavního hrdiny. U každé z nich je její chování a vlastnosti porovnány s původní mytologií, ze které pochází.

Postavy jsou rozděleny na stará božstva, která do Ameriky přišla v myšlenkách imigrantů a na božstva nová, která se zrodila v Americe. Postavy jsou dále řazeny abecedně. Ovšem vždy nejde pouze o božstva, neboť v díle se objevují například hrdinové lidových pověstí, kterým jsou také připisovány nadpřirozené schopnosti a existence díky víře v příběhy o nich.

Tato práce má za cíl přiblížit práci Neila Gaimana s postavami a ukázat kde končí původní mytologie a začíná samotný autor.

Jelikož tato novela nebyla nikdy hlouběji zanalyzována, věřím, že bude budoucím akademickým pracím zabývajících se tímto autorem k užítku.

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Anotace

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Název bakalářské práce: Adaptace mytologických postav v románu Neila Gaimana *Američtí bohové*

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Cílem této práce je analýza mytologických postav, která se objeví v díle *Američtí bohové* Neila Gaimana, konkrétně těch, které mají větší vliv na postavu hlavního hrdiny, nebo se v průběhu novely objeví ve větším měřítku. První část práce se zabývá životem a dílem autora a pokouší se prezentovat jeho vývoj jako spisovatele. Druhá část představuje vznik *Amerických bohů* a shrnutí děje této novely. Závěrečná část této kapitoly se zabývá otázkou lidské víry ve vyšší moc. Třetí a čtvrtá kapitola komparují ztvárnění mytologických postav v novele a způsob jakým jejich akce ovlivňují děj. Také se pozastavují nad způsobem, jakým se určité prvky jejich osobnosti liší od původních mytologií.

Annotation

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The aim of this thesis is the analysis of mythological figures that appear in *American Gods* written by Neil Gaiman, specifically those that have major influence on the protagonist or those that make bigger appearance throughout the novel. The first part of the thesis presents biography and the work of the author and it tries to look closely on his journey as a writer. The second part presents the origin story of the novel and its summary. The final part of this chapter deals with the question of human belief in higher power. The third and fourth chapters compare the mythological characters with literature of their origin and how they influence the story. It also points out parts of their personality that differ from the originals.