



## **Bakalářská práce**

# **Slavic mythology in the book *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman**

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## Zadání bakalářské práce

# Slavic mythology in the book *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman

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### Zásady pro vypracování:

Práce se bude zabývat tématem slovanské mytologie a jejím zobrazením v díle *Američtí bohové* od Neila Gaimana. Specificky bude zjišťovat jaká slovanská božstva a mytologické prvky jsou zahrnuty v knize.

Bude probírat slovanskou mytologii, bohy a mytologické prvky a jejich znázornění v knize, se specifickým zaměřením na to, jak se zobrazení slovanské mytologie liší od zobrazení ostatních mytologií v knize a jak se Gaimanův výklad liší od "tradičního" zobrazení slovanské mytologie.

The thesis will deal with the topic of Slavic mythology and its depiction in the work *American Gods* by Neil Geiman. Specifically, which Slavic deities and mythological elements are included in the book.

It will discuss Slavic mythology, gods, and mythological symbols and their representation in the book, with a particular focus on how the depiction of Slavic mythology differs from the depiction of other mythologies in the book, and on how Gaiman's interpretation differs from the "traditional" depiction of Slavic mythology.

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## Anotace

Bakalářská práce *Slovanská mytologie v knize Američtí bohové od Neila Gaimana* se zabývá rozbořením díla „*Američtí bohové*“, mytologických postav a symbolů ze slovanské mytologie, které jsou součástí novely. Práce zahrnuje přehled Slovanů a jejich mytologie. Dále obsahuje přehled děl Neila Gaimana, která obsahují mytologické prvky z různých kultur.

Následuje představení děje novely a norské a egyptské mytologie, které jsou její součástí. Postavy a symboly z těchto mytologií jsou v novele nejvíce zastoupeny a mají největší vliv na děj. Tyto kapitoly slouží k porovnání toho, jak se liší zobrazení mytologií v knize.

Další kapitola se věnuje slovanské mytologii, postavám a symbolům, které se v novele nacházejí. V novele jsou čtyři božské postavy ze slovanské mytologie, které mají největší vliv na děj a provázejí protagonistu na jeho cestě. Tato kapitola je zaměřena na zobrazení interakcí těchto postav v novele, rozbor jejich zobrazení a to, jak se Gaimanův výklad těchto postav liší od „tradičního“ zobrazení slovanské mytologie.

Poslední kapitola je zaměřena na porovnání zobrazení Norské, Egyptské a Slovanské mytologie. Je zřejmé, že Gaiman více začlenil norskou a egyptskou mytologii do děje novely, zatímco slovanské mytologii se věnoval spíše okrajově.

**Klíčová slova:** Slovanská mytologie, Američtí bohové, Neil Gaiman, Czernobog, Zorya Vechernyaya, Zorya Utrennyaya, Zorya Polnochnaya

# Annotation

Bachelor thesis *Slavic Mythology in the book American Gods by Neil Gaiman* deals with the analysis of the work "*American Gods*", mythological figures and symbols from Slavic mythology that are part of the novella. The work includes an overview of the Slavs and their mythology. It also includes an overview of Neil Gaiman's works, which contain mythological elements from various cultures.

This is followed by a presentation of the novella's plot and the Norse and Egyptian mythology that is part of it. Characters and symbols from these mythologies are the most represented in the novel and significantly influence the plot. These chapters compare how the book's portrayal of mythologies differs.

The next chapter is devoted to Slavic mythology, characters and symbols found in the novel. In the novel, four divine figures from Slavic mythology influence the plot most and accompany the protagonist on his journey. This chapter focuses on the novella's portrayal of the interactions of these characters, an analysis of their portrayal, and how Gaiman's interpretation of these characters differs from the "traditional" depiction of Slavic mythology.

The last chapter compares the depictions of Norse, Egyptian, and Slavic mythology. It is evident that Gaiman incorporated Norse and Egyptian mythology more into the novella plot, while he dealt with Slavic mythology more peripherally.

**Keywords:** Slavic Mythology, American Gods, Neil Gaiman, Czernobog, Zorya Vechernyaya, Zorya Utrennyaya, Zorya Polunochnaya

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# 1 Introduction

Neil Gaiman's "*American Gods*" offers an exciting blend of mythological elements with contemporary storytelling and the American identity. Within its pages, Gaiman weaves a tapestry of deities from various cultures, such as the Norse, Egyptian, West African, Hindu and many more. He breathes life into ancient gods struggling to survive in modern America. Among these divine beings are the Slavic gods, whose presence in "*American Gods*" offers a fascinating glimpse into the rich world of Slavic mythology and its enduring relevance in a new cultural landscape.

Slavic gods in central and western Europe seem forgotten by the general population. While this might be true, in some cases, luckily, some of the traditions, spirits, and other elements are still remembered by the Slavs. For example, at the end of winter in the Czech Republic, they throw a doll of the goddess Morana into the river. In the past, this was part of the tradition of welcoming the spring ancient Slavs.

This thesis delves into the portrayal of Slavic gods in Gaiman's work, exploring how these ancient entities are portrayed in the novel and their similarities or differences to their mythological counterparts. It will also briefly discuss Norse and Egyptian mythology to help distinguish features of Slavic mythology from other mythological elements. Ultimately, this is used to compare Slavic, Norse, and Egyptian mythology.

This thesis aims to show that, besides the better-known and more frequently discussed Norse and Egyptian mythologies, Neil Gaiman's "*American Gods*" creatively reworks elements of Slavic mythology. It also aims to present the mythological background of Slavic mythology in the novel.

The thesis has been divided into several chapters. The first chapters introduce the Slavs, who they are and where they reside in Europe. This chapter introduces the reader to the people who worshipped the Slavic gods.

The next chapter is focused on Slavic mythology. It outlines the beliefs and practices, specifically the spirits and gods worshipped by ancient Slavs. However, it is essential to emphasise that this is done only briefly since the world of Slavic gods and spirits is much broader, and it would need another thesis only about this topic.

Chapter four briefly introduces other works by Neil Gaiman, including different types of mythologies. Chapter five introduces the novel and its representation of (non-Slavic) mythology. First, it briefly summarises the novel's story and then explains how Norse and Egyptian mythology appear within the book.

The last chapter analyses the representation of Slavic mythology in the novel. By examining the characteristics, roles, and interactions of Slavic deities, namely Czernobog, the Zorya sisters, and briefly also Bielobog, it aims to unravel the complexities of their representation. It also discusses the possible Slavic symbols mentioned in the novel.

This thesis concludes with a comparison of the use of Slavic, Norse and Egyptian mythology in the novel.

## 2 Who are the Slavs – A Brief Introduction

While this thesis is focused explicitly on Slavic mythology, it is important to introduce who are the Slavs. Slavs, or Slavic people, are the largest ethnic-related group in Europe, with a population of around 250 million mainly concentrated in eastern and central Europe. They belong to the Balto-Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 275).

With its numerous dialects, contemporary Slavs can be classified into three linguistic and cultural subgroups:

- the Western Slavs, including the Poles, Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks;
- the Eastern Slavs, made up of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians;
- the Southern Slavs, comprising the Bulgars, Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes

Historically, there were also Polabian Slavs who lived in what is now known as eastern Germany. They were conquered by Saxons and Danes in the 9th century C.E. and consequently Germanised (Gieysztor 2020, 24) (Váňa 1990, 11-12).

Till the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., Slavic culture was relatively united among the Slavic tribes. Cultural and linguistic ties were close, strongly suggesting the idea of a shared religious system among the tribes. The ancient Slavs lived in the marshes and woodlands of what is now the Pripyat River in southeastern Poland and northwestern Ukraine. After the Migration Period (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), they settled in Europe, and the one big Slavic tribe was divided into several branches of Slavic nations: Eastern, Western, and Southern Slavs. Due to this, we have a variety of lifestyles, agriculture, and beliefs, which were mainly focused on natural spirits and demons. Christianity started to be incorporated into the shared religion and

culture around the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Around the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the shared language developed into specific Slavic languages (Polish, Czech, etc.) (Podborský 1994, 141-146).

The diversity of Slavic groups also means a diversity of beliefs among them. Although nowadays, the majority of Slavs are Christians (some groups, such as Bosniaks, primarily identify as Muslims), historically, Slavs believed in a variety of gods (polytheism), myths, symbols, practised rituals, made offerings, and more.

While information about the formation of languages, their history, politics, and cultural identities is well documented, very little about ancient Slavic beliefs and legends is known. Only a few scholars wrote about the ancient Slavic religion (Slavic paganism) at the time when it was most practised. Such as Byzantine scholar Procopius of Caesarea (the 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E), who wrote about Southern Slavs. Helmold of Bosau and his “*Chronica Slavorum*” (12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) or Thietmar of Merseburg (11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), both of whom wrote about the Polabian Slavs. For the Eastern Slavs (mainly Russian sources), we have the monk Nestor, who wrote “*Nestor’s Chronicles*” (11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.).

Most of the information about the Slavic religion comes from scholars and historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., who used comparative mythology and other methods (Dixon-Kennedy 1999, 275). Such as Aleksander Gieysztor, Jan Máchal, E. Wienecke or H. Lowmiansko.

All these historians, however, gave us some pieces of information that, when combined, outline the culture of the ancient Slavs and, most importantly, Slavic paganism and Slavic mythology (Máchal 1995, 4-6).

### 3 Slavic Mythology

The ancient Slavs practised paganism, also known as the Slavic religion, which consisted of their religious beliefs, ritual practices, gods, spirits, and myths before the Christianization of Europe.

This thesis focuses on a specific aspect of Slavic paganism: Slavic mythology. This includes stories, poems, and legends about the relationships between gods and the gods themselves. The novel “*American Gods*” by Neil Gaiman also mostly features Slavic paganism in terms of its gods and some spirits (Gieysztor 2020, 18-19).

At first, Ancient Slavs did not have gods per se, or more precisely, although they had some vague idea of gods in the sky, their beliefs were mainly aimed at natural phenomena (animisms), lower beings such as demons and spirits (pandemonism), and the worship of their ancestors (manism). These beliefs also included magical and sacrificial rituals, oracles, priests, and more. It was the worshipped spirits and demons that later evolved into the gods of Slavs (Váňa 1990, 62).

Therefore, this chapter discusses two aspects of Slavic mythology: the gods and the spirits worshipped by Slavs. Specifically, the chapter briefly introduces the vast array of demons and spirits (Charney and Slapsak, 2023, 7-14). In addition to the spirits, it covers the five Slavic gods that are common to all the Slavic tribes in order to serve as a brief introduction to the topic. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, besides main Slavic gods, many other deities also belong to specific branches of Slavic paganism, i.e. to the eastern (mainly Russian sources) and western and southern branches.

### 3.1 Natural Spirits

The oldest and largest aspect of Slavic religion is the belief in spirits. These spirits are not unique to the Slavic religion. They can also be found in other religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, such as angels, demons, and djinns. Worshipping lesser spirits is an important aspect of Slavic paganism that continued even after Slavs adopted Christianity (Gieysztor 2020, 187).

We also have the most written evidence about these spirits and demons, dated mainly from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E., such as “*The Homily of Opatovice*” (*Homiliář opatovický*) for Czechs, Thietmar, Helmond of Bosau, Nestor’s chronicles, and others. The oldest evidence about the spirits is from the beforementioned Procopius of Caesarea, who wrote that Slavs worshipped rivers and water nymphs (Váňa 1990, 101-105).

Natural spirits are a part of myths and folktales, and their function can be to protect, guide, or even be evildoers. Throughout the Slavic countries, the names and functions of these beings remain relatively similar. That is also why we have the most evidence about them. Georges Dumézil divides these beings into five categories: Water spirits, Spirits of the dead, Forest and animal spirits, Spirits of weather and Spirits of households, gardens and fields (Gieysztor 2020, 193).

### 3.2 Slavic Pantheon

While there are several reports about the demons and spirits worshipped by Slavs, there is little to no information about Slavic gods owing to a lack of written sources and archaeological evidence. (Váňa 1990, 83). It is theorised, however, (for example, by H. Lowmiansko or E. Wienecke) that the idea and belief in gods came about during or after the Migration Period. Before that, Slavs mainly worshipped their ancestors, demons and spirits (Von Wienecke 1940). The earliest information about Slavic gods comes from the Byzantine

historian Procopius of Caesaria in the 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E. He states that the main god of Slavs was an unnamed lord of lightning (démíurgos astrapés), possibly Perun, alongside countless nature spirits and gods.

Slavic gods' names, attributes, and worship practices remain largely unknown. Those deities that survived the Christianization of Slavs are known from when the Slavic tribes lived separately and often without contact with each other. This led to local transformations of deities, fragmenting the originally common pantheon over time. From the local deities, we have, for example, **Lada**, a goddess of war worshipped by Polish Slavs (Gieysztor 2020, 149). **Radegast**, worshipped by Polabians and Moravians (Gieysztor 2020, 127-128), **Morana**, goddess of death and winter worshipped by Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Moravians (Gieysztor 2020, 28). or **Czernobog** a bad god and his supposed brother **Bielobog** the good god, who were worshipped by Polabian Slavs (Váňa 1990, 64-66).

However, apart from the local deities, there are some which are common to all the Slavic tribes. These are, for example, **Perun**, the head of the Slavic Pantheon, god of lightning and storms (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 233-234). **Svarog** is a god of the sky, and, based on the legends, he was the one who created the sun. He is considered to be the main god in for the Eastern Slavs. Christianised (Váňa 1990, 67-68). **Svarozhich** is the god of fire and prophecy. **Dazhbog** is a god of the sun, happiness, destiny, and justice. In some sources, Svarozhich and Dazhbog are identified as one being and brothers in others. Dazhbog is also served by two goddess sisters, **Zvezda Dennitsa** and **Zvezda Vechernyaya**, who are personifications of the Auroras (Profantová and Profant 2004, 61).

While some of the gods mentioned in the novel “*American Gods*” are included, many are not. However, it is important to mention them so that the reader gains an understanding of the Slavic pantheon and which gods were worshipped by the ancient Slavs.

## 4 Mythology in Neil Gaiman's work

Mythology plays a significant role in many books written by Neil Gaiman. Apart from "*American Gods*," he also wrote books with mythological content, such as the comic book "*The Sandman*," or novels "*Anansi Boys*" or "*Good Omens*", the latter written in cooperation with Terry Pratchett. They all contain elements of known mythologies, or Gaiman most frequently takes elements of ancient pantheons, gods and beliefs and uses them to create a whole new universe.

In "*The Sandman*," for example, he created a universe ruled by the Endless, cosmical beings. These beings are Death, Dream, Destiny, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium (Gaiman 1999, 75-77). Gaiman created a new pantheon of the gods mentioned above for this work, consisting of elements from ancient pantheons. For example, Dream, the graphic novel's protagonist, is called Morpheus, which shows his strong connection to Greek mythology. While in Greek mythology, Morpheus is the god of sleep, in Gaiman's version, he is one of the Endless who are older than the gods themselves (gods are separate beings to the Endless), and unlike other beings, cannot be killed (Dream Country 1990). The Endless are described as anthropomorphic entities that embody natural forces and fulfil the jobs assigned using a specific force. So, Dream, for example, is the personification of nightmares and dreams and the ruler of the Dreaming (a world where people go to dream) (Jimenez 2008, 115).

Dream also has a son, Orpheus, who is also a character from Greek mythology. He was a bard and a prophet who travelled with Jason and the Argonauts to search for the Golden Fleece (Carabatea 1997, 225). Orpheus's mother is called Calliope, and as her son is also



found in Greek mythology, she was a muse who presided over eloquence and epic poetry (Miate 2022).

In "*Good Omens*," a novel co-authored with Terry Pratchett, the two authors use the Christian text "*The Book of Revelation*," which focuses on the Apocalypse of the world, as done by the Antichrist. Some may perceive this book as a satire of Christianity, given that the protagonists are the demon Crowley and the angel Aziraphale. However, it can also be seen as a novel that challenges the typical Christian narratives of the Apocalypse. It portrays both angels and demons as corrupt forces concerned only with their own goals rather than the well-being of the world (Gaiman and Pratchett [1990] 2019).

Gaiman says mythologies have always fascinated him and calls the mythological works an experiment. In "*Reflections*," he says the following:

"I culled some from the comics, took others from old myths – Egyptian, Norse, Japanese – added in angels and demons and, in a final moment of experiment, I even added in some fairies, and was astonished to find how robust the structure was; it should have been an inedible mess, and instead (to keep the cooking metaphor) seemed to be a pretty good gumbo" (Gaiman 1999, 78).

Along with many other examples, Gaiman uses mythology quite often in his works. His success as an author of bestselling books with mythological themes and topics, many of which have been adapted to TV shows, radio shows, and movies, shows that the use of that content works very well as an authorial strategy.

The rest of the thesis, in turn, is devoted to the specific content of Slavic mythology and his use of Slavic myths and gods in the novel "*American Gods*

". It concludes with a comparison of the use of Slavic, Norse, and Egyptian mythology in the novel.



## 5 Brief Introduction to “*American Gods*” by Neil

### Gaiman

#### 5.1 The Premise of the Book

“*American Gods*” combines the characters of old myths and folktales with contemporary technologies and advancements. The novel follows an ex-convict called Shadow Moon, who was released earlier from prison due to the death of his wife, Laura. After his release, Shadow takes the bodyguard job to a mysterious Mr. Wednesday.

Mr. Wednesday explains that Shadow's role is that of an errand boy; he must accompany Mr. Wednesday on his travels and protect him. The most important part of his work is that if Wednesday dies, Shadow will hold vigil for him. Then, they set off on a journey across the USA to recruit curious characters, progressively revealed to be gods. The recruitment is for the upcoming war between the old gods and a new god. Shadow also learns that the old man is not as fragile as he seems; he is an aspect of Odin, the Old Norse god of knowledge and wisdom.

While travelling, they meet various interesting characters, including Mad Sweeney, who embodies the pagan Leprechaun. He accidentally gives Shadow his lucky coin, which Shadow then places into Laura's grave, ultimately reviving her back to life.

Their next journey leads them to Chicago, where they try to recruit Czernobog, a Slavic deity. They also meet the Zorya sisters, relatives of Czernobog, who are part of the Slavic pantheon. The other gods they encounter are the Egyptian Gods Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel, owners of a funeral home; Mr. Nancy, a West African and Caribbean trickster god; Mama-ji, a Hindu goddess; and others.

Their enemies are the New Gods, manifestations of modern technologies and life, such as the Internet, Media, Transportation, and Globalization. These new deities threaten the Old Gods' existence, causing a decrease in their worship.

The plot twist comes when Mr. Wednesday, who has been captured, is killed on a live broadcast by Mr. World. This action ignites the fight between New Gods and Old Gods, who realise they could be destroyed next.

In the meantime, Shadow holds a vigil, a sacrifice on the world tree at Ash Farms (Yggdrasil). He hangs on the tree for nine days and nine nights. Shadow's visions (which he experienced throughout the book) strengthen when performing the vigil. He learns he is Odin's son, and he is called Baldr. In addition, he learns that Mr. Wednesday and Mr. World deceived both the Old and New Gods. The war was artificially made by these two to gain power through the sacrifice of New and Old gods.

Shadow ultimately perishes but is revived by the goddess Eostre and the god Horus. He successfully ends the bloodshed and finds Loki and Wednesday on the brink of death. Unfortunately, he also discovers Laura in a similarly dire state. He takes the leprechaun's gold coin from her, after which she passes away.

In the postscript, Shadow goes to Iceland, where he meets the original Odin and gives him Mr. Wednesday's glass eye (Gaiman 2017, 707-712).

## **5.2 Mythology in “*American Gods*”**

"*American Gods*" by Neil Gaiman delves into various mythological themes and draws from various cultures and belief systems. The novel incorporates gods and beings from different mythologies and intertwines them within a contemporary American setting. The book's prominent mythological categories and figures include Norse mythology, Egyptian

mythology, African and African American mythology, Irish mythology, Native American mythology, Asian mythology, and Slavic mythology.

This chapter specifically examines Norse and Egyptian mythology in the novel. Its significance lies in providing a comparative framework for the three mythologies discussed: Norse, Egyptian, and Slavic.

### **5.2.1 Norse Mythology**

In Neil Gaiman's novel "*American Gods*," Norse mythology is a significant part of the story, with many prominent deities from the Norse pantheon appearing as characters. The book intertwines these ancient gods into the modern American landscape, where they coexist with gods from other mythologies and belief systems. One of the key characters is Mr. Wednesday, who we later discover to be the All-Father, Odin, also known as Grimmir, the supreme god in Norse mythology:

“Do you know me, Shadow?” said Wednesday. He rode his wolf with his head high. His right eye glittered and flashed; his left eye was dull. He wore a cloak with a deep, monk-like cowl, and his face stared out at them from the shadows. “I told you I would tell you my names. This is what they call me. I am called Glad-of-War, Grim, Raider, and Third. I am One-eyed. I am called Highest, and True-Guesser. I am Grimmir, and I am the Hooded One. I am All-Father, and I am Gondlir Wand-bearer. I have as many names as there are winds, as many titles as there are ways to die.

“Odin?” said Shadow, and the wind whipped the word from his lips.

“Odin,” whispered Wednesday, and the crash of the breakers on the beach of skulls was not loud enough to drown that whisper. “Odin,” said Wednesday, tasting

the sound of the words in his mouth. “Odin,” said Wednesday, his voice a triumphant shout that echoed from horizon to horizon. His name swelled and grew and filled the world like the pounding of blood in Shadow’s ears (Gaiman 2017, 171-172).

Gaiman also cleverly uses the name Mr. Wednesday as a nickname in the novel, which originally refers to Wednesday (a day of the week) as Odin’s day. This, however, is not unusual even in the Norse myths (“*Saga of Volsungs*” or in “*Elder Edda*”), in which, in many instances, Odin takes a concealing name (Crawford 2017).

Odin is one of the oldest gods who came to the New World along with his worshipers, the Vikings. His role in Norse mythology is fairly complex. While he is a god of wisdom, he also serves as a god of war and the dead. In modern popular culture, he is portrayed as an honourable ruler and battle commander (such as in Marvel Comics). In the original myth, he is far from it. He does not concern himself with some noble warrior but rather seeks berserkers or warrior shamans, who represent a chaotic battle style on a battlefield. This shows the duality of the god, which is evident even in the novel (Lindow 2002, 264-268).

Both in mythology and in “*American Gods*,” he is the Father to Thor, who is also briefly mentioned. He and Shadow embark on a journey to “save” the Old Gods. While the other gods respect Mr Wednesday, he is not very well-liked. He also has a lot of other attributes from the original mythology, such as his missing eye, ravens and wolves (Groeneveld 2017). As Mr. Wednesday says:

My ravens are Huginn and Muninn: Thought and Memory; my wolves are Freki and Geri; my horse is the gallows.” Two ghostly-gray ravens, like transparent skins of birds, landed on Wednesday’s shoulders, pushed their beaks into the side of Wednesday’s head as if tasting his mind, and flapped out into the world once more (Gaiman 2017, 171-172).

Surprisingly, Odin is a tricky god even in the original Norse myths. This feature of Odin Gaiman is also used in the novel. He is a cunning, scheming man who lies and cheats and uses people as he pleases:

“No,” said Shadow. “You were the Judas Goat.”

The wraith-shape in the shadows swirled and shifted. “Not at all. That implies that I was betraying the old gods for the new. Which was not what we were doing.”

“Not at all,” whispered Loki.

“I can see that,” said Shadow. “You two weren’t betraying either side. You were betraying both sides.”

“I guess we were at that,” said Wednesday. He sounded pleased with himself.

“You wanted a massacre. You needed a blood sacrifice. A sacrifice of gods.” (Gaiman 2017, 648)

In addition, the duality of the character can be seen in the theme of self-sacrifice. Wednesday, linking back to Norse Odin, says”

“Nine nights I hung on the bare tree, my side pierced with a spear’s point. I swayed and blew in the cold winds and the hot winds, without food, without water, a sacrifice of myself to myself, and the worlds opened to me.” (Gaiman 2017, 226).

This quotation links back to the self-sacrifice of Odin at the tree of Yggdrasil to gain the ultimate wisdom and knowledge of the runic alphabet. In this case, the sacrifice had a noble purpose: to further the knowledge of the gods (Gaiman 2020, 14). However, later in the book, he sacrifices himself again, disguising it as an attack from the New Gods. This sacrifice is only for his selfish reasons. It seems he died a noble death, which ultimately rallies the old gods to fight the New Gods. It is revealed that it was all staged by Wednesday and Loki

(posing as Mr. World) to gain power. This is to be done by the fight between Old and New Gods. Luckily, this fight is stopped, leading to Wednesday's ultimate defeat.

There are many more examples of Norse mythology in the book. For example, Loki, also Shadow, is ultimately revealed to be the son of Mr. Wednesday, which corresponds to the mythological Baldur. The themes of Ragnarök, with Shadow's sacrifice being the start (Baldur's death started the Ragnarök) (Gaiman 2020, 135). Or something small like Ratatosk, the squirrel that lives in the branches of the world tree Yggdrasil (Gaiman 2017, 315).

In the novel, Norse mythology is very similar to the original myths. Gaiman uses a “copy” of the original Norse god Odin and projects it into the book. Norse mythology is the most used in the novel and nicely put into the story of “*American gods*.” The Norse gods, especially Mr. Wednesday, often interact with the Slavic gods, mainly with Czernobog. He is one of the core trio of gods (along with Czernobog and Mr. Nancy) who follows Shadow on his journey.

### **5.2.2 Egyptian Mythology**

In Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, Egyptian mythology also emerges as an integral part of the book's plot and symbolism. Deeply rooted in ancient Egyptian civilisation, these deities bring a rich history and a profound significance that plays a crucial role in the story.

As a part of his journey, Shadow is sent by Mr. Wednesday's ravens to Cairo (Kay-ro as he calls it). While it is not specified which of the ravens, Huginn (Thought) or Muninn (Memory), are sent to relay the message to follow the Mississippi, go south and find Jackal. Shadow then travels to Thebes, Illinois, where he encounters a black dog (a shapeshifter) called Mr. Jacquel, a brown cat, Bastet and a crane-like man, Mr. Ibis, who are the Egyptian gods (Gaiman 2011, 222-226).



Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel run a small, independent funeral home. While Mr. Jacquel embalms the bodies and prepares them for their last departure, Mr. Ibis writes and manages the business. According to Mr. Ibis, Egyptian gods are the oldest that came to America around 3530 years ago. While there were originally more Egyptian deities in the New World, they have been forgotten (Gaiman 2011, 246).

Mr. Ibis is the American version of the god Thoth, Lord of Magic, inventor of writing, teacher of man, and scribe of gods. As a scribe of gods, he recorded the decisions of gods and became their messenger; thus, he is sometimes also identified with Hermes, the messenger of Greek gods. According to Egyptian mythology, Thoth created language, writing, geometry, mathematics, and more (Ions 1991, 85-86).

In *“American Gods”*, Thoth is described as a crane-like man (in Egyptian texts, he is described as having an ibis head and man body). He is a writer of stories, and many of the stories in the book are recorded by him, such as the story of early immigrants to America, like Essie Tregowan (Gaiman 2011, 128-130). Also, the tale of enslaved twins from Africa in 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E., or that of the Girl Wututu and her twin brother Agasu and his significance in the fight against the slavers at St. Domingue (soon to be known as the Republic of Haiti) (Gaiman 2011, 394-414).

He keeps records about everyone, even the gods. He tells Shadow that:

“The Lord gave my business partner dominion over the dead, just as he gave me skill with words. Fine things, words. I write books of tales, you know. Nothing literary. Just for my own amusement. Accounts of lives” (Gaiman 2011, 244).

When Shadow sacrifices himself, he comes across Mr. Ibis as he performs the role of a psychopomp, a sort of escort of the living to the world of the dead. (Gaiman 2011, 585-588). However, while Mr. Ibis acts only as an escort, Mr. Jacquel holds dominion over the dead. In

Egyptian mythology, it is similar: Anubis is traditionally portrayed as a dog or a jackal, a desert animal. At first, Anubis was a god of death only for the pharaoh. Later, his role changed, as he supervised the correct embalming of bodies, receiving the mummy into the tomb, conducting the soul to the Field of Celestial Offerings and most importantly, supervising the weighing of souls (Ions 1991, 83-85).

The embalming and taking care of the dead body is also Mr. Jacquel's role in the book, he is what Mr. Ibis calls a prosector, rather than a coroner. He does autopsies, saves tissues for sample analysis and works for the country's medical examiner. When Shadow meets Mr. Jacquel for the second time, he is in the process of performing an autopsy on a murdered girl (Gaiman 2011, 248-252).

While performing the autopsy, he talks about Ka, the concept of the soul in Egyptian mythology. The ancient Egyptians used it to refer to an aspect of man and gods connected with the creative life force. He talks about how, in the old days, the great gods could bind a man's Ka to his body for five thousand years (Ions 1991, 123).

We last meet Mr. Jacquel during Shadow's journey through the Underworld. He examines Shadow as he did with the murdered girl when they first met. He examines Shadow and judges his soul. He removes his heart, and Mr. Ibis puts it on the golden scales. If his heart were not balanced, it would be eaten by Ammet, the Eater of Souls. Shadow's heart, however, is balanced, and he can choose where he wants to go next (Gaiman 2011, 588).

Other examples of Egyptian mythology include Bastet, the goddess of cats, motherhood and guardian of the house; her opposite is Sekhmet, the lioness goddess. In the book, Bastet seduces Shadow, and in the end, she takes Shadow's heart and gives it to Mr. Ibis, who weights it on the scales (Gaiman 2011, 265-267). Or Horus, a falcon deity, a god of the sky and the moon (Ions 1991, 66). In the book, he mainly appears as a hawk or naked in

human form. He is mainly present when Shadow is resurrected, as he helps to warm him up by lifting his body to the sky and closer to the sun (Gaiman 2011, 629-634).

Egyptian mythology is used quite often in the novel. It is also fairly similar to the original myths. Among other differences, the most prominent is the role of Bastet. In the novel, she is used as a “temptress” who seduces Shadow, but in the original myth, her role is quite different as a patron of mothers, childbirth, and home. In addition, there is also a duality of the goddess, which is not explored in the novel.

## 6 Slavic Mythology in “*American Gods*”

This chapter explores the core theme of this thesis: Slavic mythology in “*American Gods*”. After Egyptian and Norse mythology, it is arguably the most influential to the story of Shadow Moon. We first meet the Slavic gods in chapter four, when Mr. Wednesday and Shadow Moon are just starting their journey summoning the Old gods for battle against the New Gods. Shadow and Mr. Wednesday travel to Chicago to pick up some money and meet an old friend (Gaiman 2011, 101-103).

The choice of residence for Slavic gods, Chicago, is quite obvious. In Chicago, there were quite a number of Russian immigrants between 1861 and 1880. However, the term “Russian” immigrants was misused by U.S. immigration authorities. This term also included Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, sometimes Germans and non-Russian Jews (Eubank 1986, 46). In addition, Chicago is also known as a Polish American city, with the migration of Poles beginning in the 1830s. Poles from Europe were mainly Catholic, but there were also numerous protestants and, in some cases, Jews (Kępa 2020).

Despite the scarcity of evidence of pagan beliefs in Chicago during this time, remnants of such traditions likely endured among European immigrants, at least in the form of some traditions. This notion finds resonance in the portrayal of weakened pagan deities in the novel “*American Gods*”, where they persist despite their dwindling worship. Shadow encounters this legacy firsthand when introduced to the three sisters—Zorya Vechernyaya, Zorya Utrennyaya, and Zorya Polnochnaya—as well as to Czernobog and briefly his brother Bielobog (Gaiman 2011, 105-138).

Shadow initially mistakes the Slavic gods for gypsies. Still, his assumptions are corrected when Wednesday identifies them as Russians and Slavs, illustrating the complexity of ethnic identities within the broader Russian and Slavic context (Gaiman 2011, 105-107).

It is interesting to point out that, out of all the other Old gods (Norse, Egyptian, and Hindu, etc.), the Slavic gods are the only ones who retain their original names and are not addressed by a sort of “nickname” such as Mr. Wednesday, who is Odin, or Mr. Ibis who is Thoth. This could indicate the state of belief among the Slavs, who have already forgotten their Old Gods. As they no longer partake in traditional rituals and have consequently lost touch with their deities, there is no need for new “Americanized nicknames” for Slavic gods, given the dwindling number of people who retain knowledge of these deities.

In addition, this may be due to the state of the Slavs themselves. While they did not retain their beliefs in gods and other beings from Slavic mythology, and their culture was also being suppressed in favour of “Americanisation” (Cambridge Dictionary 2020), what they did keep was their names, which function as a remembrance of their old lives in Europe (Roucek 1969, 29–48).

The next chapter will discuss the Slavic gods mentioned in the book and their similarities and differences with their mythological counterparts. Since the most common Slavic immigrants in Chicago were either Polish or Russian descendants, we will look mainly into these two branches of Slavic mythology. In addition, there will be a discussion about the mythological symbols in the book. Last, a separate chapter concludes this thesis by comparing the use of Slavic, Norse and Egyptian mythology in the novel.

## **6.1 Zorya Vechernyaya**

She is the first of the Slavic gods introduced in the book. Zorya Vechernyaya is described: “as a woman who wore an old red coat, buttoned up to her chin, and, perched on

her grey hair, a green velvet hat that was, in appearance, a little bit flowerpot, a little bit bread-loaf” (Gaiman 2011, 104).

Zorya Vechernyaya is the middle one of the three sisters as Zorya Polunochnaya tells Shadow: “I am the youngest. Zorya Utrennyaya was born in the morning, and Zorya Vechernyaya was born in the evening, and I was born at mid-night. I am the midnight sister: Zorya Polunochnaya” (Gaiman 2011, 123).

She shops, cares for their home, cooks, and cleans. She also brings money to the household with fortune-telling powers since, unlike her sisters, she can tell lies to her customers (Gaiman 2011, 104). However, as Zorya Polunochnaya says, her most important job is to guard the monster in the stars in the evening (Gaiman 2011, 122-123).

In Slavic mythology, there is little to no mention of either of the sisters. However, in the Russian branch of Slavic mythology, there are two sisters, Zorya Utrennyaya and Zorya Vechernyaya. They are the daughters of the god of the Sun, Dazhbog. Their names mean Morning Zoya and Evening Zorya (Dixon-Kennedy 1999, 189).

The role of Zorya Vechernyaya is to close the gate at the end of the Sun's path when it returns from its journey around the world. This is described in the “*Novgorod Khudov Psalter*,” where a supposed ancient Russian artist painted a miniature of two women. A green sister on the right side of the miniature called Evening Dawn is believed to be Zorya Vechernyaya. The stripe of the sun, which begins in the hands of the first sister, turns from light green into dark green in the hands of the second green sister, signifying the end of a sun cycle (Zarubin 1971, 70-76).

This specific feature of the goddess is also described in the book when Zorya Polunochnaya says:

“My sisters are of their times. Zorya Utrennyaya is of the dawn. In the old country, she would wake to open the gates and let our father drive his—um, I forget the word, like a car but with horses?”

“Chariot?” says Shadow

“His chariot. Our father would ride it out. And Zorya Vechernyaya, she would open the gates for him at dusk, when he returned to us.” (Gaiman 2011, 122)

While the Russian source mentions one aspect of the character, the Polish sources say that there are three sisters and mention their power and fortune-telling. In Polish folklore, there are three sisters, or the three Auroras: Morning Zorza (Utrenica), Midday Zora (Południca), and Evening Zora (Wieczornica). The tripartite structure is often used in Slavic mythology; in some cases, it implies the heavens, earth, and underground, which recalls the unfortunately long-forgotten cosmological ideas of Slavs (Andrzej Szyjewski 2003, 69-72).

The powers displayed are taken from the three fates (similar to the Fates of Greek mythology). These fates usually belong to the field of demonology in Slavic mythology. In Russian sources, they are called rožanice or roždenice. They are invisible female beings who decide a person’s fate immediately after birth (Gieysztor 2020, 154-155).

Zorya Vechernyaya’s powers are mentioned twice. First, when meeting Mr. Wednesday and Shadow. She tells them:

I am going to buy groceries. You see, I am the only one of us who brings in any money. The other two cannot make money fortune-telling. This is because they only tell the truth, and the truth is not what people want to want to hear. It is a bad thing, and it troubles people, so they do not come back. But I can lie to them, tell them what they want to hear. I tell the pretty fortunes. So, I bring home the bread. (Gaiman 2011, 104-105)

Next, when Shadow lost the checkers game to Czernobog:

“Such a pity,” said Zorya Vechernyaya. “In my fortune for you, I should have said you would have a long life and a happy one, with many children.”

“That is why you are a good fortune-teller,” said Zorya Utrennyaya. She looked sleepy, as if it were an effort for her to be up so late. “You tell the best lies.”

(Gaiman 2011, 117)

While the novel does not mention these three goddesses deciding a person's fate, it is possible that due to the dwindling number of worshippers, they adapted their powers to be more suitable for the modern world (Gieysztor 2020, 154-155).

## **6.2 Zorya Utrennyaya**

The second sister introduced in the novel is Zorya Utrennyaya. Zorya Vechernyaya first mentions her when telling Mr. Wednesday and Shadow, "She is at the top of the flat and the one awake" (Gaiman 2011, 105). She is the oldest of the three sisters, born in the morning, yet she is smaller and more fragile than her sisters and has long golden hair.

Zorya Utrennyaya is the one who takes care of Shadow and Mr. Wednesday when they come to their flat. She brings them coffee and keeps them company while Zorya Vechernyaya is out shopping. She takes care of their home and is very hospitable to both visitors. During the chapter, she is also portrayed as very sleepy. This indicates her role as a morning star (or a morning person) during the evening meeting. Later, her sister Zorya Polunochnaya also says that her job as one of the three is to guard the monster in the stars, specifically in the morning (Gaiman 2011, 122-123). While Mr. Wednesday and Czernobog argue, she tries to de-escalate the situation and keep her sister, Zorya Polunochnaya, asleep (Gaiman 2011, 105-123).



Her powers are similar to those of Zorya Vechernyaya, but while Vechernyaya can tell lies, Utrennyaya can only tell the truth. She tells Shadow, "I do not tell good lies, so I am a poor fortune-teller" (Gaiman 2011, 108).

In the Russian branch of Slavic mythology, two sisters, Zorya Utrennyaya and Zorya Vechernyaya, are mentioned alongside their father, the sun god Dazbog. These sisters stand on different sides of the Sun cycle. Zorya Utrennyaya is known for opening the gates of heaven and allowing the Sun to shine upon the earth. In the "*Novgorod Khudov Psalter*," she is depicted as a fiery red woman representing the morning dawn. She holds the red sun in the form of a ring in her right hand and a torch on her left shoulder. The torch ends in a box from which a light green stripe emerges, turning into dark green, representing the beginning of the sun cycle (Zarubin 1971,70-76). This description is found in the book when the third sister, Zorya Polunochnaya, speaks to Shadow:

“My sisters are of their times. Zorya Utrennyaya is of the dawn. In the old country, she would wake to open the gates and let our father drive his—um, I forget the word, like a car but with horses?”

“Chariot?” says Shadow

“His chariot. Our father would ride it out. (Gaiman 2011, 122).

In some sources, Zorya Utrennyaya is the wife of the thunder god, Perun, who often accompanies him to battle. She spreads her veil to show and protect her chosen warriors. While this specific feature is not mentioned in the book, it could be implied that her hospitality towards Shadow is her way of showing favour to the hero of the story (Dixon-Kennedy 1998,337).

In addition, her welcoming nature could be assumed by the choice of the colour of the entrance door. “The landing at the top of the stairs ended in a single door painted red, with a

peephole in it” (Gaiman 2011, 104). It is odd to mention the door's colour, although this could also imply the danger Shadow and Mr. Wednesday can face from Czernobog.

In Polish folklore, she is again one of the three Auroras, Morning Zorza (Utrenica) (Andrzej Szyjewski 2003, 69-72). Her power is similar to fates, which, in Polish, are called the zorze (auroras). They often accompany the god Rod, a possible supreme god of family, ancestors, and fate (Gieysztor 2020, 153-155). Of the three sisters, she is included the least in the novel.

### **6.3 Zorya Polunochnaya**

The last of the sisters and the youngest of the three is Zorya Polunochnaya. She is first described as the other sister asleep while Shadow and Mr. Wednesday visit their home. Zorya Polunochnaya is described as a woman with unlined skin, dark eyes and long lashes. Her hair is long and white and much taller than her sisters. She is also barefoot, only wearing a nightgown when meeting Shadow later in the chapter (Gaiman 2011, 109).

Shadow first meets her when waking up from one of his “prophetic” dreams. At first, he believes her to be Laura, his wife. He calls her “the sister who was asleep.” Zorya is studying the night sky and points out to Shadow the constellation she is studying, “Ursa Major or the Great Bear,” as Shadow calls it.

Zorya Polunochnaya invites Shadow to accompany her to the roof to look at the stars. While on the roof, Shadow asks if she is not cold, to which she replies:

“No, The cold does not bother me. This time is my time: I could no more feel uncomfortable in the night than a fish could feel uncomfortable in the deep water.”  
(Gaiman 2011, 121).

Her job is to guard a monster residing in the stars when the night comes. As she says when studying the Great Bear with Shadow:

“Odin’s Wain, they call it. And the Great Bear. Where we come from, we believe that is a, a thing, a, not a god, but like a god, a bad thing, chained up in those stars. If it escapes, it will eat the whole of everything. And there are three sisters who must watch the sky, all the day, all the night. If he escapes, the thing in the stars, the world is over. Pfl , like that.”

“And people believe that?”

“They did. A long time ago.”

“And you were looking to see if you could see the monster in the stars?”

“Something like that. Yes.” (Gaiman 2011, 122-123).

She is the only one of the sisters who cannot tell lies, so instead of some fortune, she gives Shadow protection. Zorya tells him that:

“You were given protection once, but you lost it already. You gave it away. You had the sun in your hand. And that is life itself. All I can give you is much weaker protection. The daughter, not the father. But all helps.” (Gaiman 2011, 124).

She then gives him “the moon” by taking it from the sky and transforming it into a silver Liberty-head dollar. After giving him the coin, she kisses Shadow on his eyelids. The coin is an important artefact which protects Shadow, and he often uses it as a fidget to keep him at ease (Gaiman 2011, 122-125).

Zorya Polunochnaya and Shadow meet again at the novel's end when he holds a vigil for Mr. Wednesday and dies. Zorya Polunochnaya waits for Shadow in limbo before the other Old Gods judge him. Shadow gives Zorya back her liberty dollar, to which she says:

“Thank you. It bought you your liberty twice,” she said. “And now it will light your way into dark places.” (Gaiman 2011, 574).

Shadow is offered two paths to follow, neither safe nor hard, but one will give him the hard truth and reveal the secrets of his heritage, and the second will show him the way of fine lies. He chooses the truth, to which Zorya relays that there will be a price to pay, this being his name, which she extracts. His true or birth name is not mentioned in the book. The name here is supposed to represent the soul of Shadow. In theory, Shadow has two names: Shadow Moon and his birth name. It is possible that due to him being a demigod, it is possible that he only gave up half of his soul, the divine half, and became only human (Gaiman 2011, 573-575).

Here, Zorya acts as one of the psychopomps (such as Thovt, Anubis, or Bastet), responsible for escorting newly deceased souls to the afterlife (Gaiman 2011, 585-588). In Slavic mythology, she is the evening star, one of the three sisters, and a daughter of Dazhbog. Not much else is known. We can also attribute her to one of the fates, as can her sister (Gieysztor 2020, 153-155).

## **6.4 Czernobog**

Czernobog is the last Slavic god whom Shadow and Mr. Wednesday meet in Chicago. In the novel, he is described as a man “with iron-gray hair and craggy features” and has a strong Eastern European accent. His hands are rough and calloused since he used to work in the meat business.

His job was to knock down the cows with his sledgehammer, which he calls a knocker. The choice of his profession may be because Czernobog’s mythological counterpart is associated with food, mainly with banquets and feasts, where he and his brother Bielobog

were worshipped during such events. His brother is also somewhat present at the end of the novel (Gaiman 2011, 105).

It is not clear what his relationship with the Zorya sisters is. While it is clearly stated that the three are sisters and have an unknown father who oversees the sun (strong implication of him being the mythological Dazbog), their relation to Czernobog is not revealed. Shadow asks if Zorya Utrennyaya is Czernobog's wife, to which he informs him that "She's nobody's wife" (Gaiman 2011, 105-106).

Mr. Wednesday wants Czernobog to join him and Shadow on the journey to recruit the Old gods for the upcoming battle. Czernobog at first does not want to participate due to his aversion to Mr. Wednesday, exclaiming that:

"You bring trouble!" he was shouting. "Nothing but trouble! I will not listen! You will get out of my house!" (Gaiman 2011, 109).

While staying at the flat in Chicago, Shadow and Czernobog play checkers, a game which Shadow learned in prison. After a few games, they make a wager: if Shadow wins, Czernobog will join their journey. If not, and Czernobog wins, he will get to "knock" Shadow's brains out with his sledgehammer. In the end, both win one game, and Czernobog joins them. At the end of the journey, when the battle against New Gods is over, he kills Shadow with his sledgehammer.

Czernobog first accompanies them for a meeting with Mr. Nancy, who represents an African deity called Anansi. They reminisce about the old days when the gods got offerings, as Mr. Nancy says:

"Best I could hope for was a pile of fruit to eat, maybe curry goat, something slow and cold and tall to drink, and a big old high-titty woman to keep me company." (Gaiman 2011, 164).

As for Czernobog, there is little mention of his offerings. It is possible that his line of work, being a knocker of cows, is an offering to himself as a way to retain power (Gaiman 2011, 105-110).

The three gods and Shadow go together to the Carousel at the roadside attraction, a museum called the House of Rock. The House of Rock is a prayer site that draws in humans who unknowingly worship the gods. The Carousel, in the centre, can be interpreted as a Bifröst, which in Norse mythology is a burning rainbow bridge connecting Earth and Asgard, the realm of gods (Simek 2007, 20). The Carousel in the novel is to take them to which are taking them to the Valaskjafn. In Norse mythology, this is an Odin hall situated in Asgard (Simek 2007, 364). In the book, this serves as a place where the Old gods, somewhat inclined to join Mr. Wednesday's cause, meet (Gaiman 2011, 167).

To enter the “other realm,” they must choose a mount, a link to the “other realm.” Mr. Wednesday chose a golden wolf, symbolising his wolves Freki and Geri (Simek 2007, 90). Mr. Nancy is a lion, which could refer to the story of Anansi and the lion (Mouse 2015).

Czernobog chose an armoured centaur. In Slavic mythology, Czernobog is not accompanied by a centaur. However, a creature which corresponds to the Greek centaur is called Polkan. Which, however, is not a part of the original mythology of the ancient Slavs but instead is a “new” addition to the Russian branch of Slavic mythology in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Radišev 1799)

When they enter the Valaskjafn, the true form of Czernobog is shown:

“Shadow saw a grey-haired old east-European immigrant with a shabby raincoat and one iron-coloured tooth, true. But he also saw a squat black thing, darker than the darkness that surrounded them, its eyes two burning coals; and he saw a prince, with long flowing black hair, and long black moustaches, blood on his hands and his face,

riding, naked but for a bearskin over his shoulder, on a creature half-man, half-beast, its face and torso blue-tattooed with swirls and spirals.” (Gaiman 2011, 171).

This “god form” is possibly inspired by the hero characters of Slavic (mainly Russian) literature called Bogatyr. These heroes are described as warriors with immense strength who are physically strong and were revered by the folk as demigods (Dixon-Kennedy 1999, 55). Specifically, it could be inspired by the cultural character Prince Bova Korolevich, who is accompanied on his journey by a Polkan (Steele 2017).

Czernobog is one of the gods who travel with Shadow for most of his journey. When Shadow gets arrested due to a violation of parole, Czernobog and Mr. Nancy are the ones who rescue him (Gaiman 2011, 503).

Following the murder of Mr. Wednesday, Czernobog, Mr. Nancy, and Shadow assume responsibility for gathering as many Old Gods as possible for the impending conflict. Additionally, they have to retrieve Mr. Wednesday's body from the "centre of America “. Together, they take the body to Yggdrasil (the world tree), where Shadow holds vigil for Mr. Wednesday. (Gaiman 2011, 530–534).

During the novel, Czernobog is shown as an older man with dark tendencies and a thirst for blood. Nevertheless, by the conclusion of the story, he has changed. After everything that transpired, Shadow looks for Czernobog to fulfil his vow. When Czernobog uses a sledgehammer to hit Shadow in the forehead, he seems different to Shadow: “The sunlight glinted on his Gray hair and moustache, making them appear almost golden.” Signifying his “transformation” into his brother Bielobog (Gaiman 2011, 705).

When Czernobog is to fulfil the “sacrifice,” he only lightly taps Shadow on the head. Then Czernobog smiles in a way that Shadow had not seen, and to him, it seems like

“sunshine on a summer day.” Here begins the real transformation of one brother to the other. With winter ending and spring coming soon, Bielobog will be playing checkers with Shadow.

“Because” said the old man, after some time, “there is blood. But there is also gratitude. And it has been a long, long winter.” Shadow got to his feet. There were dusty patches on the knees of his jeans, where he had knelt, and he brushed the dust away.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” said the old man. “Next time you want to play checkers, you know where to find me. This time, I play white.” (Gaiman 2011, 706).

Among the Slavs, Czernobog is known as the bad god Diabol, Zcerneboch, Zernebuch, or “evil god,” mainly worshipped by the Polabian Slavs. He is mentioned in quite a few historical sources, such as “*Chronica Slavorum*” (1164-1168) by Helmond of Bosau or Daniel Cramer's “*Grosse Pommerische Kirchen Chronicon*” (1628).

Helmond writes that Czernobog, the black god, was worshipped heavily by Western Slavs and, in some places, by the Baltic Slavs (Profantová and Profant 2004, 29). According to him, Slavs worshipped Czernobog while drinking and eating, reciting strange prayers to a good and an evil god. For luck to the good god and bad luck to the evil god. (Máchal 1907,139-138).

“There exists among the Slavs a strange delusion. At their feasts and carousals, they pass around a drinking bowl over which they utter words, not of consecration but of execration, in the name of the gods - of the good one, as well as of the bad one - professing that all propitious fortune is arranged by the good god, ad verse, by the bad god. This is why in their language they call the bad god Diabol or Zcerneboch, which means the black god” (Znayenko 1993)



Later, it is assumed that, with the influence of Christianity, his role was shifted into that of a devil (Profantová and Profant 2004, 29).

In “*American Gods*” and Slavic mythology, Czernobog is part of a duality, his opposite being Bielobog. While Czernobog lives in winter and autumn as a gloomy old man, Bielobog emerges as a younger, more vital man in spring and summer. They are not twins per se but halves who live their own lives.

Such duality is not unheard of in other mythologies either: in Greek mythology, there are the gods Artemis and Apollo (Jordan 2022, 26) or Nut and Geb, two Egyptian gods (Ions 1991, 21). Both of them are twins. However, it is important to mention, as it is also relevant in the context of the novel, that while Artemis and Apollo can exist alone, and at the same time, Czernobog and Bielobog cannot. While one lives, the other lays dormant.

It can be said that Czernobog in “*American God*” is fairly similar to his mythological counterpart. He is not, per se, a god who does evil actions but a figure who seems evil but is more inclined to do good as the novel progresses. One significant difference in “*American Gods*” is that he possesses a sledgehammer. There is no mention of the mythological character having one. The one who typically bears a sledgehammer is Perun or the god Svarog (Profantová and Profant 2004, 162-163).

## **6.5 Bielobog**

Bielobog is only briefly mentioned in the book by other characters, such as his brother Czernobog. He lays dormant in autumn and winter and emerges during spring and summer. Because the novel takes place during winter, he is not present.

When first meeting Shadow, Czernobog says angrily that he wants his brother, not him. This is possibly because Bielbog is supposed to embody good.

“Talking of Bielebog, have you heard anything from him?”

Czernobog shook his head. Then he spoke, staring down at the threadbare carpet.

“None of us have heard of him. I am almost forgotten, but still, they remember me a little, here and in the old country.” He looked up at Shadow. “Do you have a brother?”

“No,” said Shadow. “Not that I know of.”

“I have a brother. They say, you put us together, we are like one person, you know? When we are young, his hair, it is very blond, very light, and people say, he is the good one. And my hair it is very dark, darker than yours even, and people say I am the rogue, you know? I am the bad one. And now time passes, and my hair is gray. His hair, too, I think, is gray. And you look at us, you would not know who light was, who was dark.” (Gaiman 2011, 110).

In Slavic mythology, just as in the novel, he is the opposite of his brother Czernobog. He was called Belbog or Belbuck. The chronicler Helmond states that he was worshipped mainly by the Polabian Slavs. His existence is also confirmed by the names of cities in the Czech Republic: Bělbožice and others (Profantová and Profant 2004, 46).

In Russia, he was known as Belun, usually represented as a venerable old man with a flowing white beard and dressed in white clothes. He is known for his kindness, curing sick animals and helping to retrieve lost items. With Czernobog, they are possibly the oldest of Slavic deities (Dixon-Kennedy 1999, 53).

## 6.6 Other Slavic Deities

While this is not certain or unambiguous, there is also a possibility that there might be a **Slavic werewolf** in the novel. At the end of the novel, when the Old Gods are preparing for the last battle, it is stated that:

“Something that looked a little like a wolf and a little more like a man grunted and spat on the forest floor. “When better to attack them, dedushka? Shall we wait until the weather clears, when they expect it? I say we go now. I say we move.” (Gaiman 2011, 620).

Dedushka is a Slavic term (in Polish and Russian) that refers to someone of an older status who holds a significant position in society, here referring to Czernobog. Based on this, it can be deduced that the wolf-like creature might be somebody of a lower status, a sort of human demon. These are called werewolves. They are mythological beings that stand between the human world and the natural demons. They can also be humans who can turn into wolves (Zdeněk Váňa 1990, 139-140).

Another possible deity is **Dazhbog**, the father of the Zorya sisters. He does not play a role in the novel and is only mentioned in passing.

-As Zorya Polunochnaya states:

“My sisters are of their times. Zorya Utrennyaya is of the dawn. In the old country she would wake to open the gates, and let our father drive his—um, I forget the word, like a car but with horses?” (Gaiman 2011, 122).

It is strongly implied that this is Dazhbog, a god of the sun, happiness, destiny, justice and the supposed son of Svarog. He is also usually identified with Svarozhich or is mentioned as his brother. The Russians believed that Dazhbog ruled over twelve kingdoms of the zodiac.

He was also served by two sisters Zvezdy, (Zvezda Dennitsa and Zvezda Vechernyaya), who are also personifications of the Auroras (possibly the Zorya Utrennyaya and Vechernyaya) (Profantová and Profant 2004, 61). He also drives a golden chariot, which is pulled by a pair of fire-breathing white horses (Dixon-Kennedy 1999, 77).

## 6.7 Slavic Symbols

It is rather apparent that **coins** hold significance in the book. While usually, coins represent luck, such as in Irish folklore (Kiely 2022), in many cultures, they are representative of death and sometimes life, such as in Chinese mythology. In Greek mythology, coins were used as an “offering” to the ferryman, who took them across the river Styx to the underworld (Carabatea 1997, 193). As for a symbol of life, in China, coins were used in funeral rituals to pay a “debt of reincarnation” to ensure wealth in new life in the hereafter (Amaro 1996).

In the novel, coins can be interpreted as symbols of life and death, a binary opposition. At first, Shadow gets a gold coin from Mad Sweeney, a charm of luck, which brings Laura Moon back to life. In this case, the coin is a relatively positive symbol for Shadow. For Mad Sweeney, however, it is a death sentence.

The silver coin is arguably more a representation of life. Shadow gets the Liberty 1922 coin from Zorya Polunochnaya when visiting her at the top of the roof. The coin protects Shadow during the book. When he dies and is transported into limbo, he returns the coin to Zorya Polunochnaya (Gaiman 2011, 574).

In the novel, at least one of the coins is associated with a Slavic god. However, in Slavic mythology, these coins do not hold significance. They are mentioned as sacrifices to the gods. In some areas, such as Belarus, they are used as an offering when the dead are placed in the coffin. Here, they serve as a "bribe" for the journey to the underworld (Gieysztor 2020, 171).

The situation is somewhat similar with the **Sledgehammer** owned by Czernobog. As he states in the novel, he used to be a “knocker” in the meat business. He would take the sledgehammer and knock the cow down. The sledgehammer is likewise supposed to be the tool used to kill Shadow at the end of the book, which, luckily for Shadow, does not happen in the end.

A hammer specifically is used quite often in Slavic mythology. Perun, the supreme god of Slavs, is one of the gods who wield a hammer (in some recounts, an axe). This hammer is used in battle to bring lightning and storms. The thunder-wielding deity on a horse or war chariot smashes a tree with lightning or a hammer, burns it, or breaks a stone. (Gieysztor 2020, 74).

The other god, who in Slavic mythology wielded a hammer, was Svarog. He was the personification of heavenly light and warmth and a heavenly blacksmith. He belonged to the older generation of gods and was also identified with the Greek god Hephaestus (Zdeněk Váňa 1990,67-68).

While there is no specific mention of a sledgehammer being Czernobogs weapon of choice, the reason for the choice might differ. The article in *RadioTimes*, “*American Gods Mythology Guide: Who is Bloodthirsty Slavic Deity Czernobog?*” raises an interesting point. At the end of the novel, Shadow, Mr. Nancy and Czernobog stop in Kansas Cherryvale. Here, we learn that there used to be a sacrificial site for Czernobog. As Mr. Nancy said:

“They worshiped him here, over a hundred years ago. They made blood-sacrifice to him, libations spilled with the hammer. After a time, the townsfolk figured out why so many of the strangers who passed through the town did not ever come back. This was where they hid some of the bodies.”

Czernobog came back from the middle of the field. His moustache seemed darker now, and there were streaks of black in his gray hair. He smiled, showing his iron tooth. “I feel good, now. Ahh. Some things linger, and blood lingers longest.” (Gaiman 2011, 523-524)

As the article states, this is a reference to a family of serial killers named the Bloody Benders, who resided in Kansas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This family was reported to have killed at least a dozen travellers, with their choice of weapon being a hammer. While there is no mention of the Bloody Benders being worshippers of the Slavic god, it was reported that they had a sort of German accent (Griffiths 2019). It is only speculation, but they could have been immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Slavic Germans. Although they might not have worshipped Czernobog, he could have used the sacrifice to his advantage and drawn power from it.

## **6.8 Difference between Slavic, Norse and Egyptian Mythology**

Each of the three mentioned mythologies in the novel serves a distinctive role. In his treatment of Norse and Egyptian mythology, Neil Gaiman adheres closely to their respective mythic frameworks.

Notably, in the context of Norse mythology, Gaiman meticulously follows the original myths. Mr. Wednesday is almost a carbon copy of the mythological Odin, albeit with subtle modifications. For example, he is more evil and a mentor to Shadow. In the end, he betrays him for his gain. Norse mythology visibly assumes a preeminent position within the narrative fabric.

While less prominent than Norse mythology, Egyptian mythology still assumes an important role, mainly through characters such as Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jackal. Both are pretty similar to their mythological counterparts. Gaiman even includes an animal-like appearance, a

core aspect of the gods in Egyptian mythology. Although relegated to secondary roles, the Egyptian deities accompany the protagonist, Shadow, throughout his journey. Their role mainly centres around death and its introduction to Shadow. They also deal with the theme of the afterlife and resurrection.

Turning to Slavic mythology, Gaiman's narrative adopts a dual approach, possibly combining lore from several branches of Slavic mythology. While principally represented by figures such as Czernobog and the Zorya sisters, Gaiman also incorporates references to lesser entities like the Slavic werewolf. Slavic mythology assumes significance within the narrative arc, particularly in portraying Shadow's demise, which embodies motifs of duality and human frailty. Czernobog's duality serves as a reflection of the moral complexities inherent to human existence.

## 7 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore Neil Gaiman's representation of Slavic mythology in “*American Gods*”. The novel contains many other mythologies from other cultures, such as Egyptian, Norse, North American, and Hindu. Gaiman cleverly takes elements from the original mythologies and transforms them into entertaining characters who still represent the original myths.

While for Slavs, the most important aspect of their beliefs was the worship of natural spirits, Gaiman does not incorporate these beings in the novel “*American Gods*”. This is understandable because the novel mainly focuses on the deities of various cultures. As for Slavic gods, apart from Norse and Egyptian gods, these are the most prominent in the novel. Those are Czernobog, the three Zorya sisters, and the background characters, such as Bielobog, Dazhbog, and the lesser spirit of Slavic werewolf. To create these characters, Gaiman uses elements from different branches of the Slavic religion, mainly Russian and Polish.

Czernobog especially has a prominent role in the novel as one of the three main gods accompanying Shadow on his journey. While the characters are fairly similar to their mythological counterparts, Gaiman uses the creative liberties of his writing to make them their own, such as the hammer Czernobog possesses or the inclusion of a Polkan as his choice of mount. As for the Zorya sisters, they seem to be created by combining the mythological goddesses Zoryas and the lesser spirits of fate, the Auroras. In addition, in most studied sources, there are only two sisters instead of the three in the novel.



Although the resulting characters are compelling, Gaiman could have delved deeper into the lore of Slavic gods. Gaiman occasionally portrays Slavic gods using stereotypes and primarily focuses on Russian Slavs, neglecting the diversity of other Slavic nations.

Compared to Norse and Egyptian mythologies, Gaiman's exploration of Slavic mythology feels superficial, failing to fully utilise available resources. Overall, while the representation of Slavic Mythology in "*American Gods*" is decent, there is room for improvement. Gaiman could have further explored the various branches of Slavic Mythology. Nonetheless, the novel presents an entertaining cast of characters that continue to captivate audiences after two decades.

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