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IMAGINARY THINGS: MODERN MYTH IN NEIL GAIMAN'S
AMERICAN GODS (2001)

A Pro Gradu Thesis

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IMAGINARY THINGS: MODERN MYTH IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *AMERICAN GODS* (2001)

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Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, voiko Neil Gaimanin romaani *Unohdetut Jumalat* – alkup. *American Gods* (2001) – täyttää Joseph Campbellin määritelmän mukaiset myytin kriteerit (1949, 1968). Kaunokirjallisuutta on aikaisemminkin verrattu Campbellin teorioihin mytologioista, mutta yleensä formalistisemmin, kiinnittämättä huomiota myyttien funktioihin.

Campbell (2001a-f) esittää, että myytit ovat tarjonneet yksilön henkiselle kehitykselle tärkeää tukea, jota tuhansia vuosia sitten kirjoitetut pyhät kirjoitukset eivät nykyään enää pysty toisintamaan. Mikäli *Unohdetut Jumalat* täyttää myytin (funktionaaliset) kriteerit, osoittaa se, että moderni populaarikulttuuri kykenee osaltaan täyttämään vanhentuneiden myyttien jättämää tyhjiötä.

Tutkielman teoriaosassa esitellään ensin pohjatiedot Joseph Campbellin teorioista sankarin matka (1949) ja myytin neljä funktiota (1968). Sen jälkeen annetaan tarpeelliset taustatiedot Neil Gaimanista ja romaanista *Unohdetut Jumalat* (2001) juonitiivistelmineen.

Tutkimuksen varsinainen analyysiosa on jaettu kahteen osioon. Ensimmäisessä osiossa erittelen romaanin juonikaarta Campbellin sankarin matka -teorian vaiheiden avulla. Toisessa osiossa vertaan romaanin keskeisiä teemoja myytin neljään funktioon (Four Functions of Myth).

Tutkimuksessa todettiin, että *Unohdetut Jumalat* täyttää Campbellin myytin kriteerit ja sillä on vanhojen myyttien tavoin edellytykset toimia henkisenä tukena lukijoilleen. Jatkotutkimuksiksi esitän vastaavanlaisia tutkimuksia modernista romaanikirjallisuudesta sekä muusta populaarikulttuurista, esim. elokuvista, sanoituksista ja tietokonepeleistä.

Asiasanat: Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, Joseph Campbell, hero's journey, monomyth, four functions of myth, modern myth

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1. INTRODUCTION

For tribal cultures, myths were (and still are) the means of understanding the unknown and the frightening in the surrounding world such as fire, thunder and the movements of heavenly bodies (Cotterell, 1989). In modern world, scientific research has widely replaced the old myths as the primary tool of explaining, for example, natural phenomena. Thus, if you ask the next hundred adults you meet on the street what causes thunder, it is very likely that most of them at least attempt to give a scientific answer rather than an explanation involving Zeus, Thor, distilling of Soma or thunderbirds. However, some argue that modern people are actually worse off than their ancestors without the guidance of myths.

Campbell (1949) argues that the role that myths used to hold in providing spiritual guidance and coping strategies is now unfulfilled. While rational science has done a lot to explain how the world works, it cannot provide the same psychological guidance that myths used to offer. Major religions, on the other hand, base their teachings on scriptures written thousands of years ago in a completely different cultural context, which tends to make them harder to understand and relate to. While these religions still have a lot of followers, there are also growing numbers of those who do not feel their spiritual needs are not served (Adherents.com, 2005; see also Rauch, 2003). According to Campbell (1984) this has left many feeling lost and is also a major cause of mental problems.

Author Neil Gaiman was born in 1960 and is still alive. In his childhood he read a lot, including a lot of fantasy and science fiction literature. In his early twenties he begun working as a critic and a journalist, selling interviews, articles and book and movie reviews to magazines. In

mid-80s Gaiman also had his first short stories published in various magazines. His first published book was *Duran Duran: The First Four Years of the Fab Five* (1984). Influenced by his friendship with Alan Moore, Gaiman also began writing comics. Gaiman's breakthrough to wider publicity was his collaboration novel with Terry Pratchett, *Good omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, published in 1990. The first part of Gaiman's comic series *The Sandman*, entitled 'Preludes & Nocturnes', was published the next year. Gaiman's largest work so far, the series took approximately eight years to finish. (Wagner et. al., 2008: 27-28) After *The Sandman*, Gaiman has published a variety of works ranging from movie scripts to children's books and received a lot of critical acclaim, including several respected literature awards. (Neilgaiman.com, 2009a)

Gaiman builds a majority of his stories on a mixture of old and new myths, legends and beliefs. It is not uncommon to use the old to create the new – e.g., J.R.R. Tolkien (1955) draws heavily on existing epics such as *Kalevala* (the Finnish national epic collected and edited on the basis of folk poetry by Elias Lönnrot in 1849 (SKS, 2009)). Ancient mythologies have also served as inspiration for all forms of modern culture from plays, operas and novels to games, films, TV-series and advertisements. However, Gaiman handles myths in a very straightforward fashion. In Gaiman's works the clash of mythic and mundane takes place in an environment very close to the real world, not in a fictional country far away.

In *American Gods* (Gaiman, 2001 – hereafter *AG*), an ex-convict called **Shadow** is recruited as the bodyguard and errand boy of an old man who calls himself Wednesday. **Shadow** soon finds out that Wednesday is actually an incarnation of **Odin** (All-Father and central god of Norse/Teutonic mythology; see glossary for details) and also **Shadow's** father. **Shadow** also

learns that not only **Odin** but all other gods and mythical characters that mankind has believed in exist in flesh and blood, brought to life by mankind's belief in them. Many of the gods feel betrayed and bitter: they have been brought to the USA by settlers from all around the world, but afterwards they have been forgotten and ignored. **Shadow** now follows **Odin** on a quest of persuading other gods to join his faction in the seemingly inevitable conflict between the gods of old mythologies and the personifications of modern phenomena such as the media, television, cars and aeroplanes. However, over the course of the journey, **Shadow's** role evolves from passive observer to an active participant and he eventually uncovers the truth behind the conflict and saves both new and old gods from purposeless bloodshed.

I have chosen *AG* as my primary material because, along *The Sandman*, it is the longest individual prose work by Neil Gaiman, and because of its frequent and straightforward use of themes such as myth, belief, religion, human life, and gods. I specifically chose *AG* over *The Sandman* because the latter, in length over 2500 comic pages, was too extensive for a thesis of limited proportions, especially since it would require analysis of both the artwork and the text side-by-side. Furthermore, while some studies exist on Gaiman's works – especially *The Sandman* – there is still very little if any research available on *AG*.

My theoretic framework consists of Campbell's theories about the Hero's Journey and the Four Functions of Myth – while the Hero's Journey has been used a lot, not many researchers have worked with the Four Functions. On basis of Campbell's theories, I will conduct an analysis of the themes and storyline of *AG*, aiming to find out whether it fulfills Campbell's criteria for a functional myth. My primary method is close reading of the

novel and the use of quotes as the basis of critical examination of the themes of *AG* and the ways they are handled.

Rauch (2003) has studied *The Sandman* series with a focus similar to mine and also argues that the mixture of the old and modern and of myth and reality in Gaiman's works can exceed entertainment and serve as a substitute of myth for modern people. Rauch (ibid.) also uses Campbell's Hero's Journey as well Four Functions of Myth as a starting point, but his actual research uses a wide array of theory and ideas without a narrow scope. Because of this, his thesis reads like a collection of essays on different essays rather than a solid piece of research, especially since the chapters are very loosely structured.

Since Rauch's research on the topic is not conclusive, there is a need for more systematic research in the area. My contribution is to apply Campbell's Hero's Journey and Four Functions of Myth to Gaiman's novel *AG* with a more specific scope. I may use Rauch as a point of reference where appropriate, but my primary theoretic framework consists of Campbell's Monomyth theory and Four Functions of Myth. I will analyze the novel first in the light of the Hero's Journey theory and then in the light of each of the Four Functions of Myth respectively (see 2.2 for summary of these functions). My aim is to find out whether the story of **Shadow** in *AG* qualifies as a modern myth according to Campbell's functional definition – if it does, it can serve as proof that modern popular fiction can follow ancient myths in their task of offering spiritual guidance.

2. JOSEPH CAMPBELL, THE MONOMYTH THEORY AND THE FOUR FUNCTIONS OF MYTH

Campbell (1949) argues that all hero myths in all mythologies are variations of the same story and they all share an underlying structure and set of images. All mythical heroes experience a journey that reduplicates the same fixed stages with slight variations. The reason for the similarity lies in the function of myths – everywhere in the world myths represent the same aspects of human life and psyche. Thus, while the actual shape of the metaphors varies, the overall content remains the same.

The similarity of metaphors and thematics has led Campbell to highlight the function of myths as a source of psychological aid and guidance. While major monotheistic religions such as Christianity are formally the closest thing to ancient religions and mythologies, Campbell argues that they cannot fully serve in the function of myths for modern people. Even for those who retain faith in Christian teachings, the “inherited beliefs fail to represent the real problems of contemporary life” (Campbell, 1949: 96). Campbell (2001b) goes on to argue that religions that promote faith in a personal deity are “stuck with their metaphor”. In other words, these religions read their scriptures as literal, while they are in fact written for a metaphorical interpretation. Religious conservatives often counter such accusations by highlighting authorial intention as the aim of interpretation – what is meant as literal is read as literal, what is meant as metaphorical is read as metaphor (see for example Gray, 2009). A question arises, however, of whether even the most successful researcher can reach an accurate intended meaning of any text – let alone one written 2000 years ago in a whole different field of culture and society.

Sanctification and literal interpretation of scriptures makes the texts

themselves holy entities that cannot be changed or updated – for example new translations of holy texts often cause controversy. This fear of change, however, also prevents religions from actively answering the challenges brought by a rapidly changing society – a problem that is well visible e.g in the issues surrounding the equality of genders. Campbell also attributes the literal approach to religion as a reason for unnecessary conflicts between monotheistic religions: each of the religions worships a god with a different name, even though the gods of all the religions represent the same forces of the universe and the same aspects of human nature. However, if a religion relies on a very literal dogma, the slightest variations from it are considered heresy and the religions very similar to each other end up opposing each others' teachings because of small differences in theology.

If we suspect that modern religion cannot fully serve the function of old myths, then we need to define what this need is and how to find a replacement. First, we must understand the common pattern between mythologies – for this purpose I will introduce the Hero's Journey. Second, what exactly are the common functions behind the shared imagery – for this purpose I will introduce Campbell's Four Functions of Myth. Finally, we need to find out whether something can take the place of traditional myths and serve their function in modern society – this will be my actual core analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.1 The Hero's Journey

The Monomyth theory, also known as The Hero's Journey, is an adaptable pattern of 17 stages (divided in 3 sections: Departure, Initiation and Return) that Campbell developed in order to compare myths from a wide variety of cultures (including ancient and recent cultures from at least Sumer, Assyria,

Europe, Mediterranean, Middle-East, Africa, Asia, North-, Middle- and South America, Australia and Oceania and even the cultural knowledge available from the Paleolithic era (Campbell, 1949)) and to outline the common features shared between mythologies. A single myth very rarely includes all of the stages and the stages often appear in different order.

The formulation of hero's journey (as well as Campbell's theories in general) has been influenced by Freud and Jung, especially Jung's ideas of archetype and collective unconscious. Campbell (1968: 4) argues that "In the absence of an effective general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognized, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dream". Deprived of a functional mythology, the subconscious tries to fill the void with symbols and images which are shared between Freudian dream analysis and world mythologies. Campbell illustrates the phases of the Hero's Journey with examples from actual mythologies as well as from the dreams of patients suffering from mental problems. For example, the first stage of Hero's Journey, A Call to Adventure, is reflected in a dream of a young girl suffering from the loss of her friend to sickness and the fear of her own mortality:

I was in a blossoming garden; the sun was just going down with a blood-red glow. Then there appeared before me a black, noble knight, who spoke to me with a very serious, deep and frightening voice: 'Wilt thou go with me?' Without attending my answer, he took me by the hand, and carried me away.
(Campbell, 1949: 51)

This dream is indeed an archetypal example of this stage – a herald brings a message, an invitation to a journey that will take us towards a new revelation about the world and ourselves. Campbell goes on to argue that this absence of proper mythical images from the culture leaves people poorly prepared to face "the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by ... their mythological and religious inheritance" (Campbell, 1949:

96).

In the light of Campbell's arguments, it is unsurprising that many works of modern popular fiction have since been influenced by the Hero's Journey – for example the film *Star Wars* is based on it. Campbell (2001a) (source) agrees that *Star Wars* “fills the cycle [of the Hero's Journey] perfectly”. According to an interview, Neil Gaiman does not acknowledge intentionally using Hero's Journey as a basis for his works:

It's always interesting to see what people say about things. But I tend to be more interested in the actual myth. I think I got about half way through *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and found myself thinking if this is true – I don't want to know. I really would rather not know this stuff. I'd rather do it because it's true and because I accidentally wind up creating something that falls into this pattern than be told what the pattern is.

(Gaiman quoted by O'Connell, 2009)

However, Gaiman only argues that he has not fully read Hero's Journey and therefore has not consciously built *AG* around the Hero's Journey, and acknowledges the possibility that he might “end up creating something that falls into this pattern”.

As a tool of study and comparison of myths, the original monomyth theory has received harsh critique. Other researchers have argued that the theory oversimplifies the similarities of myths and completely ignores the cultural variations and other factors that may have lead to differences between mythologies (see for example Segal, 1987). Furthermore, the pattern of Hero's Journey is very male-oriented and there are some differences between male and female Hero's Journey – some of which may not equally apply to all cultures. On the other hand, it can be said in defense of Campbell that most societies behind major mythologies are patriarchal rather than matriarchal, and therefore a male-oriented Hero's Journey may have the best potential to find the common factors between different myths mythologies.

However, since *AG* is written for modern audiences, I will pay some attention to the gender roles of **Shadow's** Hero's Journey in relation to the stereotypes of classical Hero's Journey. Finally, Campbell himself has argued that the metaphors of myths change as a culture evolves (Campbell, 2001a). While Campbell also argues that the content of the myths has remained the same (and that that content is represented by the stages of Hero's Journey), generalizing which of these themes really represent unchangeable aspects of human nature and which are just temporary cultural features is not a task to be taken lightly. Accurate records of history are fairly young, and phenomena we think of as unchangeable may be of relatively recent origin. On the other hand, Campbell has also argued that whereas the imagery and surface structures of myths change, the ideas behind the stages of Hero's Journey are of a more permanent nature. This argument is supported by the relative freedom of the Hero's Journey pattern – that not all myths have to go through all the stages and the order of the stages varies as well.

I use the Monomyth theory as a starting point to illustrate the journey of **Shadow**, the main character of *AG*, and thus the overall dramatic arc of *AG*, and see how much in common it has with the basic Hero's Journey as proposed by Campbell (1949). The 17 stages of hero's journey are next briefly explained.

2.1.1 Departure

The first of the three sections is called Departure, and consists of 5 stages, during which the hero begins his/her journey.

The Call to Adventure

A herald of some sort (may also be abstract/symbolic) will come to the Hero,

disrupting the comfort of his ordinary world and sending him/her to undertake a quest or a challenge. According to Campbell, this stage always symbolizes a transfiguration, whether big or small, often connected to rite of passing from one stage of life to another. "The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand." (Campbell, 1949: 47)

Refusal of the Call

The hero does not always respond to the call immediately, but may hesitate and even decide not to heed it at all:

Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless (Campbell, 1968:54)

The hero thus cannot begin the journey that spiritual growth would require, and is imprisoned by his/her own indecisiveness. Refusal is always some sort of opposition of the necessary change. The hero usually requires outside assistance to change his mind and to begin the journey. (Campbell: 1949: 54-63)

Supernatural Aid

The hero is guided and supported by a protective figure - "often a little old crone or old man" (Campbell, 1949: 63). This supporter is often a magician or other wise mentor and "provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (ibid.).

The Crossing of the First Threshold

The hero crosses some kind of actual or symbolical boundary and enters

another reality, where his/her actual heroic deed will take place. There is often some kind of guardian that the hero must defeat or otherwise overcome before being able to start his actual journey. (Campbell, 1949:71-82)

Belly of the Whale

A period that hero spends, in a sense, outside the story. This may be because he has decided not to accept the quest after all, or he has failed in his quest and is killed, imprisoned or temporarily disabled. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died.

However, rather than an ordinary obstacle, the Belly of the Whale is ultimately a manifestation of a metamorphosis the hero must undergo to reach his/her Ultimate Boon: “instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again” (Campbell, 1949: 84). The Belly of the Whale, then, represents the readiness of the hero to undergo the necessary transformation. (Campbell, 1949: 83-88)

2.1.2 Initiation

The second section, Initiation, consists of 6 stages, during which the hero journeys outside ordinary world, passes his trials and accomplishes his/her heroic deed to be rewarded with whatever it was the hero sought to find.

The Road of Trials

The hero faces a series of challenges that he/she must overcome in order to become a true hero. According to Campbell (1949: 89), in this stage “the hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he

here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage.” (Campbell 1949: 89-110)

The Meeting with the Goddess

The hero encounters an unconditional love that represents the hero's relationship to life, death, and all that is good and pure in the world. “The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master.” (Campbell 1949: 111) This is one of the clear points where Campbell argues that the hero's journey varies for male and female heroes: whereas the male hero is the conqueror that usually enters this “mystical marriage” on equal or even superior grounds, the woman hero is in turn conquered by a male god, whether she originally wants it or not:

And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed— whether she will or no. And if she has shunned him, the scales fall from her eyes; if she has sought him, her desire finds its peace. (Campbell, 1949: 109-110)

Woman as Temptress

The hero realizes that “everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh” (Campbell, 1949: 112) – i.e. he understands his own biological (“fleshy”) nature, and a moment of revulsion follows. According to Campbell, these material temptations of life are often (but not necessarily) represented by a woman. (Campbell, 1949: 111-116)

Atonement with the Father

The hero must confront whatever holds power over him (in many myths, this is symbolized by the father figure). Only after the hero survives the “father's

ego-shattering initiation” (Campbell, 1949: 120), he is able to finish the quest and achieve the Ultimate Boon. According to Campbell (1949: 119-120), the meaning of Atonement with the Father is essentially the renovation and recompilation of self-image – the hero must reach a state of unity and self-understanding before he/she can reach the enlightenment of Apotheosis.

Apotheosis

The hero has passed his/her trials and reaches a god-like, enlightened state, where he/she is beyond simple pairs of opposites and holds divine knowledge: “What is understood is that time and eternity are two aspects of the same experience-whole, two planes of the same nondual ineffable” (Campbell, 1949: 140). A period of rest follows before the return. (Campbell, 1949: 138-158)

The Ultimate Boon

The ultimate boon is the quest reward that the hero originally started to look, and usually has some mystical powers. The hero can acquire the boon either by force (or cunning) or he/she may receive it as a reward for his/her deeds, and this will affect the nature of his/her return. (Campbell, 1949: 159-178)

2.1.3 Return

The third and final section, Return, consists of 6 stages, during which the hero leaves the special world and returns to the ordinary world, bringing back the boon to his/her people.

Refusal of the Return

After his/her journey, the hero may feel that he/she no longer can or wants to return to the starting place of his/her journey, and may instead decide to

remain in the realm of wonders (the special world) in which his/her heroism took place. (Campbell, 1949: 179-182)

The Magic Flight

If the hero has received the Sacred Boon with the blessing of the supernatural entity that held it, his/her return will be aided by all the powers of such entity. On the other hand, if the hero has stolen the Boon, or if there are gods or demons that do not wish the hero to return to his/her people (and to bring this gift to them), numerous dangers will be encountered during the return. (Campbell, 1949: 182-192)

Rescue from Without

The hero often cannot return from the mythical world to his own without help – either because the hero is too weak to return or because he/she does not desire to return. In this case, “the world may have to come and get him” (Campbell 1949: 192).

The Crossing of the Return Threshold

The hero returns from the mystical world of revelation to the ordinary world, his/her home. There he faces the challenge of making use of his boon (or revelation) and of teaching it to others in a way that they can understand it. (Campbell, 1949: 201-212)

Master of Two Worlds

The hero is now able to move between “worlds” on his own accord – i.e. to understand his revelation in the light of the ordinary world and vice versa. A balance is formed between material and spiritual. (Campbell, 1949: 212-220)

Freedom to Live

The hero learns to live without the need of false or unjustified self-images, and is able to live free of fear of the future. "He does not mistake apparent changelessness in time for the permanence of Being, nor is he fearful of the next moment (or of the "other thing"), as destroying the permanent with its change." (Campbell, 1949: 225)

According to Campbell (1949) these 17 stages form the adaptable pattern that most if not all of world's hero myths follow. The Hero's Journey will be applied to *AG* in chapter 4. While I do not expect that all stages of the Hero's Journey have equivalents in *AG*, I will use those stages that fit to identify some central themes of the novel that may also have potential for a modern myth.

2.2 Four Functions of Myth

Since myth is a very central term for this study, it is helpful to define the word as it will be used in the following sections. Collins COBUILD (2003) gives the word two definitions:

1. A myth is a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs.
2. If you describe a belief or explanation as a myth, you mean that many people believe it but it is actually untrue.

Since the fictional reality of *AG* very much resembles real USA, we can assume most people living in it would probably accept this definition. However, within the fictional reality of *AG* the definition is not entirely accurate. In *AG*, even if a myth is untrue to begin with, the faith of the believers can make it into reality as an actual physical incarnation. Thus, to make this definition accurate we would have to alter the second definition

slightly for accuracy:

If you describe a belief or explanation as a myth, you mean that many people believe it but it cannot be or hasn't been proven true by scientific methods.

This modification also allows the handling of current world religions by the same definition. However, while this definition would serve the needs of a purely literary critical thesis (Spets, 2007), further development is needed for it to serve the needs of this thesis.

Campbell (1968) argues that the major religions cannot serve myths' purpose in modern life, and that without the guidance of myths or any proper replacement, the members of modern societies have to face the stressful transitions of life unprotected and insufficiently prepared. This is also a major cause for increased stress and mental problems. If we accept that various myths and mythologies have served some spiritual function that exceeded entertainment and recreation, and that those myths were written by and for people that lived thousands of years ago, the logical course of action, then, is to find out what that function consists of and whether there is something that can replace it in modern society. Campbell (1988) argues that the functional dimension of myths can be divided into four functions: cosmological, mystical, sociological and psychological. He (ibid.) presents the functions in a slightly different order (i.e. mystical function before cosmological), but since I found the cosmological function important enough to be dealt first in my core analysis, I reversed the two here too for consistency. Whereas the Hero's Journey is the variable formal pattern that the hero myths follow, the Four Functions of Myth is a theory to uncover the actual function of mythology.

The functional approach represented by these four functions would seem most appropriate for assessing whether *AG* can qualify as a modern

myth. Thus, my definition of myth can be narrowed down to “a (socially) important story that fulfills Campbell's four purposes of myth”. Consequently, by mythology I mean a set of myths that share the same cultural context. I will now explain these four functions in fuller detail.

2.2.1 Cosmological function

The cosmological function is to give people a picture of the universe around them. Classical examples of this function are creation myths and myths that explain natural phenomena such as lightning, rain and the cycle of day and night. According to Campbell (1968: 611-613), modern science can handle the cosmological function adequately. Therefore a modern myth is no longer required to re-invent the world – rather, going completely against what we have learned through science would damage the myth by alienating the audience. On the basis of Campbell's arguments, I suggest that cosmological function for modern myths, then, consists of two tasks. First, the world of the myth should be credible and immersive – one central way of doing this is to use places and elements familiar to the audience. Second, a modern myth must tell the reader something transcendent and awe-inspiring about the world and the people in it.

2.2.2 The mystical function

Campbell (1968: 609-611) argues that that it is impossible for all that constitutes the unique personality and consciousness in each human individual to just come out of nowhere – rather there must be some kind of transcendent source that unifies all people but that we do not know of. The core of mystical function is to remind the readers of this mystery of human consciousness, its origin and its transcendent quality – in Campbell's words

“what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are” and thus put us in touch with the mystery of existence.

2.2.3 The sociological function

Sociological function is to pass laws and establish morals, i.e. to tell people how to behave and how to function as a part of the surrounding society. Examples of this function are evident in all religions in the form of scriptures and teachings that dictate law and morality. Campbell is fairly critical about this function – it can be used both as a means of control by society as well as a way of liberating self from responsibility for one's actions by both individual and society. In Campbell's terms, then, the new myth should not be normative, but should rather emphasize individual freedom and responsibility.

2.2.4 The psychological/pedagogical function

Psychological (or pedagogical) function is to guide us through the various significant phases and transitions of life, from birth through adulthood and maturity to death. In Campbell's words: “How to live a human lifetime under any circumstances” (Campbell, 2001b) and “how to relate to this society and how to relate this society to the world of nature and the cosmos” (Campbell, 2001a). While Campbell initially describes this function fairly briefly (1968: 623-624), it is still very important, perhaps the most important one out of all the functions (Campbell, 2001a)

These four functions – cosmological, mystical, sociological and psychological – will be the basis of my core analysis in chapters 5.1-5.4 as I will apply each separately and study how different aspects of AG relate to the functions.

3. NEIL GAIMAN

Neil Gaiman, originally British but now living in the USA, has written and published a variety of literary works including comic scripts (*Black Orchid*, *The Sandman*), screenplays (*Mirrormask*), several bestselling novels (*AG*). He has also written journalism, lyrics, poetry and short fiction (*Smoke & Mirrors*), and an episode for the science-fiction series *Babylon 5*. He has won the Bram Stoker Award four times, the British Fantasy Award once, the British Science Fiction Association Award twice, the Geffen Award three times, the Hugo Award three times, the International Horror Guild Award once, the Locus Award six times, the Mythopoeic Award once, the Nebula Award twice and the World Fantasy Award once Neilgaiman.com (2009a). When he was writing *AG*, he began writing a public online-journal on his progress. After he finished the novel, however, he decided to keep on updating the journal. On his journal he, for example, answers to questions from the readers, introduces websites that interest him and gives information on his upcoming works and public appearances. (Neilgaiman.com 2009c)

Due to the nature of Gaiman's works, the thesis includes some names of ancient gods and goddesses and of other mythical entities as well as mythical places. From now on, these names as well as names of places that need explanation will be presented in **bold**. A glossary at the end of the thesis will give some information on each of these entities and places.

3.1 *The Sandman-series*

The Sandman comic series introduces the reader to a whole new mythology created from the gods and myths of existing mythologies. In *The Sandman*, seven timeless beings called **the Endless** co-exist with gods and mythic

entities of all cultures and religions. The main character of the principal storyline is one of these beings, **Dream**, but also the others make regular appearances. The series consists of separate stories, but these stories also form a longer storyline. Rauch (2007) describes *The Sandman* as a backward Hero's Journey – instead of the basic pattern where a human hero attains supernatural powers, *The Sandman* is fundamentally about the humanization of **Dream**.

The comic series has received a lot of critical acclaim for its highly intertextual storyline and, after *The Sandman* story “A Midsummer Night's Dream” won the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction in 1991 (World Fantasy Convention, 2007), has encouraged argument on whether or not comics can be seen as a form of literature and of art among others (see also McCloud, 1993).

3.2 Novels and short stories prior to and after *American Gods*

Neverwhere (Gaiman, 1997) was originally aired as a television series in 1996 and the novel version appeared in 1997. The story takes place in a superficially ordinary London, under which, unknown to the citizens, there is another, more sinister underground realm governed by its own supernatural laws. The main character, Richard Mayhew, happens to help a person from the underground realm and ends up becoming practically invisible to citizens of ordinary London. According to Gaiman (2007), “part of the joy of doing a book like *Neverwhere* was the idea of, in my own little way, mythologizing London” (emphasis in the original).

Smoke and mirrors (Gaiman 1999) is a collection of poems and short stories that are full of references to existing mythology and literature. For example, in the story “Chivalry” an old woman in a fairly modern setting

finds **the Holy Grail** in a second-hand store and soon finds the knight **Galahad** on her doorstep. The collection was first published in US in 1998, but the UK release contains some works not included in the US version.

Anansi Boys (Gaiman 2005) is a partial sequel to the story of *American Gods*. It follows the two sons of **Anansi** (see Appendix and section 4.1.1.) after their father's death. Like in *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*, the main character is at first completely ignorant of a mythical world existing behind the scenes of mundane reality, but is drawn into it by a series of events.

Fragile things (Gaiman, 2006) is a collection of short stories and poems. It is made particularly relevant by the inclusion of the short story 'The Monarch of the Glen', (not related to the TV-series of the same name) which continues to follow AG's main character, **Shadow**, after the events of the novel. Plot summary and significant details of the novella are listed in chapter 6.6.

3.3 *American Gods* (2001)

One question that has always intrigued me is what happens to demonic beings when immigrants move from their homelands. Irish-Americans remember the fairies, Norwegian-Americans the *nisser*, Greek-Americans the *vrykólakas*, but only in relation to events remembered in the Old Country. When I once asked why such demons are not seen in America, my informants giggled confusedly and said, 'They're scared to pass the ocean, it's too far,' pointing out that Christ and the apostles never came to America."

Richard Dorson, '*A Theory For American Folklore*', *American Folklore and the historian*, (University of Chicago Press, 1971)

(quoted in Gaiman, 2001: 1)

AG, the third novel written by Neil Gaiman alone (Neilgaimanbibliography.com, 2009), was first published in 2001 and it was awarded Hugo, Nebula, Bram Stoker, SFX, and Locus awards and nominated for the World Fantasy Award and the Minnesota Book Award

(Neilgaiman.com, 2009a). *AG* is loaded with intertextuality: references to poetry, prose and popular culture are frequent. Moreover, like many of Gaiman's novels, *AG* also contains variety of old myths, stories and legends presented in a new context. Within over 600 pages (in *Headline* paperback edition), Gaiman introduces elements from African, American Indian, Irish, Norse, and Slavic mythologies as well as numerous urban myths, phenomena and objects of worship (see Glossary for list of entities referred to).

In most cases it does not serve a purpose to divide the gods into males and females i.e. into gods and goddesses. Thus, for brevity, I will use the term god for both genders when specification of gender is not needed and male god or goddess when distinction is necessary. Finally, unless clearly otherwise stated, any mention of gods within the thesis refers to characters in *AG*.

3.3.1 Plot summary

Part I: Shadows

The main character in *AG* is an ex-convict called **Shadow Moon**. In the beginning, **Shadow** appears to be an ordinary person, a convict waiting for the day he will be released and will be able to return to his wife and to his job. However, he soon learns that he has no life to return to: his wife Laura is dead as well as his best friend Robbie, who was keeping **Shadow's** old job for him. Furthermore, he finds out that Laura and Robbie had an affair during **Shadow's** stay in prison. **Shadow** has had no time to recover from these discoveries when a man who calls himself **Wednesday** hires reluctant **Shadow** to serve as his bodyguard, errand-boy and driver. They seal the agreement with mead after **Shadow** proves his skill by defeating **Mad**

Sweeney, a leprechaun. **Mad Sweeney** gives **Shadow** a gold coin.

Wednesday agrees to wait until after the burial of **Shadow's** wife Laura before embarking on a journey on which **Shadow** is to follow him. As a parting gift he drops the gold coin he got from **Mad Sweeney** in her grave. Soon after the burial, however, Laura visits **Shadow's** hotel room partially resurrected – she can move and talk normally, but she is otherwise cold and dead. Laura leaves while **Shadow** is sleeping and he subsequently follows his new employer **Wednesday** on a journey across America.

Shadow and **Wednesday** briefly visit a man called **Czernobog**, whom **Wednesday** tries to persuade to join him in some endeavor still unclear to **Shadow** at this point. **Czernobog** lives together with the three sisters called **Zorya Utrennyaya**, **Zorya Vechernyaya** and **Zorya Polunochnaya**. **Shadow** plays two games of checkers with his life on the stake. As a result **Czernobog** agrees to join sides with **Odin** in some coming conflict, but in turn reserves the right to kill **Shadow** afterwards. Spending the night at **Czernobog's** house, **Shadow** meets the midnight sister, **Zorya Polunochnaya**, who gives **Shadow** a silver liberty coin representing the moon as a charm to replace the gold coin he gave away. Another important plot point follows as **Shadow** and **Wednesday** continue their journey to the **House on the Rock**, where they also meet a man called **Mr Nancy**.

The **House on the Rock** serves as a gateway through which **Shadow**, **Wednesday**, **Czernobog** and **Mr Nancy** are transported to what appears to be the halls of **Valhalla**. There the true nature of people around **Shadow** is revealed to him. His employer, **Wednesday**, is revealed to be an incarnation of the Teutonic god **Odin** and many other people with them are also revealed as gods of ancient mythologies, apparently incarnated in flesh and blood. Throughout all these events, **Shadow** himself stays very calm and

unimpressed, numbed by the death of his wife and her supernatural resurrection.

In the world of *AG*, as **Shadow** learns, gods and other myths are creations of belief, contrary to Christian belief that God exists whether or not people believe in him. Gods are thus born from and sustained by faith of humans, which is their source of power. When sufficient amount of focused need or belief exists, an entity matching the mental image of the believers incarnates. Through worship, rites and sacrifices the newborn god gains more power and is able to perform miracles and use special powers. If believers die or lose their faith, however, the god weakens and loses power. A god that has lost all its believers is forced to sustain itself on its own skills and intellect alone. Thus, whenever people from different cultures and beliefs came over the sea into America and prayed and sacrificed to their gods, they created incarnations of their gods. After their believers little by little passed on or ceased to believe, the gods were left alone and stranded on foreign shore, waiting for their people to return to them. During the course of the book, **Shadow** meets many old gods who have had to seek alternate ways of survival. For example, the Egyptian gods of knowledge and death, **Thoth** and **Anubis**, run a burial service by the names of **Mr Ibis** and **Mr Jacquel**.

Part II: My Ainsel

Odin sends **Shadow** to the small town of Lakeside somewhere in the northern USA to be safe and out of sight of his enemies. There he assumes the identity of **Mike Ainsel**, an errand boy for his “uncle **Emerson Borson**”. **Shadow** then enjoys a brief respite from his journey in the idyllic small town, where he is acquainted with the town police officer Chad Mulligan and the local old storyteller **Hinzelmann** among others. Lakeside is a small place

with local customs. For example, an old junk car with its engine removed is left on the ice of the lake every year. A competition is then held on who guesses the closest when this “klunker” sinks through the ice into the lake. **Shadow** also ends up helping search for a girl that has gone missing and, in so doing, happens to find out that a child has gone missing in Lakeside every winter for a long time. From Lakeside **Shadow** makes several journeys with **Odin** – when **Odin** does not need him **Shadow** always returns to Lakeside.

As **Shadow** is led deeper and deeper into the world of myth, he learns that there are actually two mythical factions in the world of AG, and a violent conflict between them seems to be inevitable. **Odin's** aim and the reason for his various journeys (on which **Shadow** accompanies him) is to recruit members for his own faction of gods and creatures of ancient mythologies. Their opposition, led by a man called **Mr. World**, consists of personifications of modern symbols and beliefs such as television and media, also called “**new gods**”. At first, **Odin's** attempt to convince the other gods to go to war seems an impossible task. As he once complains to **Shadow**: “Organising [old] gods is like herding cats into straight lines. They don't take naturally to it.”

While living in Lakeside between his errands, **Shadow's** background is checked by the police because of accusations by a former acquaintance who blames him for crimes he did not commit. Understanding that he is being framed by the **new gods** he calls **Mr Ibis** and **Mr Jacquiel** for aid. While **Shadow** is kept at the police station, **Media** shows him **Odin's** death as live footage through a television set – he is murdered under a truce by the new gods. (AG: 437) This material, as we learn, is also broadcast to most if not all **old gods** in the USA. The **old gods** seem to find unity and will to fight only after **Odin** is betrayed and assassinated.

Part III: The Moment of the Storm

After **Odin's** death **Shadow**, **Mr Nancy** and **Czernobog** journey to retrieve his body in the center of the USA, on neutral territory, apparently a place devoid of mythical energy. **Shadow** decides to obey **Odin's** wish and hold his vigil, for which he is tied to the branches of **Yggdrasil** (the **world tree** of Norse/Teutonic mythology) for nine days and nine nights without food or water. On the tree **Shadow** experiences a vision of an **elephant god**, who tells him ambiguously that something is “in the trunk”. While **Shadow** is still in the tree, the war escalates quickly, until finally all the new and old gods gather for the decisive battle at the Rock City.

During his time in the tree, **Shadow** dies and journeys through the underworld, where he witnesses painful truths of his life and learns that he is actually **Odin's** son with a mortal woman, a demigod (AG: 508). After finishing his journey he is given the opportunity to choose his fate, and he chooses to cease existing. His wish is granted, but “even Nothing cannot last forever” (AG: 545) and **Eostre**, who has heard of **Shadow's** death from the mad bird god **Horus**, uses her powers to bring **Shadow** back to life. After his resurrection a **thunderbird** carries **Shadow** to the place of decisive battle where he finally realizes that there is no **Mr World** at all and the whole battle between old and new myths is in fact not a real conflict at all. Instead, the battle is the realization of a complex plot devised by **Odin** and **Loki**. When the battle began, **Loki** secretly dedicated it to **Odin**, which causes every dying god to count as a sacrifice to him: “After all, what could be more powerful than a battlefield covered with gods?” (AG: 575-576). **Loki**, in turn, gains life-energy from chaos, and thus the battle was intended to feed him as well as **Odin**. In **Loki's** own words: “...the outcome of the battle is

unimportant. What matters is the chaos, and the slaughter.” (AG: 541) Should the plan succeed, both **Loki** and **Odin** would become more powerful than ever before. However, at the last minute **Shadow** steps forward and reveals the truth to the fighting gods and, in so doing, prevents the intricate plan from coming true.

Part IV: Epilogue: Something that the Dead are Keeping Back

After the culmination point at the Lookout Mountain, **Shadow** stays the night at **Mr Nancy's** house, trying to recover from his experiences. There he remembers his vision on the tree and learns from **Mr Nancy** that the elephant god he met on the tree was **Ganesh**. **Shadow** suddenly understands the meaning of what the god told him: that the answer to the mystery of missing children in Lakeside lies in the trunk of the car left on the ice. **Shadow** then hurries back to Lakeside, where he finds the car still on the lake, although the ice is already perilously thin. Still, **Shadow** cannot resist solving the mystery but goes to the car. With some difficulty, he manages to force the car trunk open and finds inside the body of the disappeared girl, Alison McGovern. At the same moment the ice breaks (precisely on the moment **Shadow** predicted when taking place in the competition), and **Shadow** is pulled underwater.

Hinzelmann rescues **Shadow** from the lake just in time. **Shadow** is already hypothermic and ready to give up, but **Hinzelmann** carries him inside to warm up. **Shadow** knows now that **Hinzelmann** is behind the murders of one child every year for decades, but now that **Hinzelmann** has saved his life he cannot bring himself to kill the old man. However, the local policeman Chad Mulligan has overheard their discussion and shoots **Hinzelmann** as he tries to run. Mulligan proceeds to burn the cottage and the evidence, but is afterwards overcome by despair and suicidal thoughts.

Shadow then reaches into Mulligan's mind and erases the memories of the evening, saving him from his guilt and despair.

Afterwards, **Shadow** finally goes back to meet **Czernobog** to pay back his gambling debt by letting the dark god kill himself. Everyone – including **Czernobog** – suggests that he should come later, but **Shadow** insists that the debt should be finally settled. Instead of killing **Shadow**, however, **Czernobog** touches **Shadow's** forehead with the hammer “gently as a kiss” (AG: 622).

Postscript

Afterwards **Shadow** journeys to Iceland, where he meets the local incarnation of **Odin**, separate from **Wednesday**. **Shadow** gives him Wednesday's glass eye, which amuses him greatly. **Shadow** then walks away. As seen in “The Monarch of the Glen” (Gaiman, 2006), this is only beginning for his travels abroad.

Structure

AG is narrated in third person, but the point of view is held by the main character. Frequent sideplots that provide additional background for the story make an exception of this rule, as they describe events not witnessed by **Shadow**. Like *Neverwhere*, AG handles a theme of being behind the scenes of the known world where fabulous beasts and great myths live on unknown to the ordinary people. A strong contrast is created between the world that looks like our own and the myths we may label as fiction. Realism of details such as real-world places, TV-shows and everyday routines makes this contrast even stronger.

AG mixes various genres, which is not unexpected in the context of

Gaiman's novels in general. Gaiman's works often use a lot of intertextual and inter-stylistic elements as plot devices, and their worlds are usually modeled after real world with some added supernatural elements. In terms of traditional genres, *AG* includes at least road trip (**Odin** and **Shadow's** journey as well as the theme of searching the centre of America), crime story/thriller (the Lakeside murder mystery), romance (**Shadow** and **Bast**, but also **Shadow** and Sam), Science Fiction (very complete explanation of how the world could work), fantasy (the use of ancient mythologies and supernatural powers) and horror (Laura's resurrection and a lot of the supernatural elements). Sinisalo (Blomberg, Hirsjärvi and Kovala, 2004) argues that Gaiman's works in general can be classified as horror, since Gaiman frequently uses themes and imagery from that genre. However, in the same context Sinisalo (2004: 18-19) describes a sub-genre of fantasy stories called Unicorn in the Garden (orig. Yksisarvinen puutarhassa) that seems to describe Gaiman's works more accurately than plain horror:

Yksisarvinen puutarhassa -kategoriaan voidaan lukea ne fantasiakertomukset, joissa arjen ulkopuolinen elementti saapuu keskelle arkea, eli omaan maailmaamme putkahtaa jotakin rationaalisen logiikan ulottumattomissa olevaa.

[translation:]

Unicorn in the garden -category covers those fantasy stories in which an element from the outside enters our mundane reality – i.e. something unexplainable in terms of rational logic enters our world. (Blomberg et. al. 2004, all translations by present author)

On the basis of this definition, the most accurate genre classification for the novel would be (modern) fantasy. On the other hand, it is arguable whether any single genre should be forced to accommodate the novel. Therefore, either a new genre should be devised (though it would have to be very specific and thus not very useful for organizing literature) or the work should be handled as having multiple genres. As a third option we can abandon the traditional genre and admit that many modern novels do not

have a set genre.

AG includes two introductory pages after the title and dedication that are not numbered. First one is the introductory paragraph or disclaimer titled “Caveat and Warning for Travellers”, while the second consists of a block quote from Richard Dorson. In terms of page numbers, these pages are referred to as 0.1 and 0.2, respectively.

3.4 'The Monarch of the Glen'

The story of **Shadow** is continued in the novella 'Monarch of the Glen' (Gaiman, 2006). The novella takes place about two years after *AG*, around year 2002 judging from the fact that **Shadow** has spent two years traveling outside the USA, and has “been away when the towers fell” (Gaiman, 2006: 302), which refers unambiguously to the terrorist attacks of New York's World Trade center that took place 11th of September 2001. **Shadow** spends some time in Scotland and is hired by Mr. Smith and his employer Mr. Alice as a security guard at their mansion. However, their true intention is for **Shadow** to take part in some recurring ceremonial battle between humans and some other race.

In the novella, **Shadow's** name is also confirmed to be **Balder Moon**, although he also denies being the original **Balder** (see Glossary for details). Mr. Smith and Mr. Alice are characters called from Gaiman's previous story “Keepsakes and Treasures”, re-published in the same collection. (Gaiman, 2006)

3.5 Gods and personifications

God is a thought. God is an idea, but its essence is something that transcends all thinking. (Campbell, 2001f)

The definition of gods often includes supernatural powers. They are conceived as supreme beings and objects of worship, far above ordinary humans. Depending on the culture, they can possess features such as immortality, omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience. In *AG*, however, old gods have lost most of their followers and lots of their influence, which leaves them only slightly above mortals in power.

While the true appearances of gods vary, most if not all of them are able to look like human beings, which is in many cases essential in order to blend in. Both the human appearance and non-human form are simply different aspects or facets of the same entity – i.e. different ways of perceiving them – rather than different forms requiring a complete metamorphosis to move between. Since the ways of perceiving even the same myths vary, in many cases there are even more overlapping images to these entities. Each appearance is always present – the one that is seen depends on the way of looking. It is also possible to see more than one of them at a time, as happens when **Shadow** is led behind the scenes of the mundane world into the mythical reality within **Odin's** mind. There he suddenly perceives the nature of **Mr Nancy** at the **House on the Rock**:

...it was like seeing the world through the multifaceted jeweled eyes of a dragonfly, but each facet saw something completely different, and he was unable to combine the things he was seeing, or though he was seeing, into a whole that made any sense. (*AG*: 141)

It is notable here that Gaiman has not chosen a single form for each of the gods. Rather, all the overlapping interpretations and variations of the same myth, **Anansi**, are present at the same time, incarnated in the same body. To mythical characters, as well as to myth in general, Gaiman applies a principle

of subjectivity of perception – after all, observers always shape the world with their presuppositions and expectations.

Able to hide their supernatural form, most old gods in America are able to lead (at least superficially) ordinary lives among ordinary people. The Slavic black god **Czernobog** is enjoying a pension from a slaughterhouse, where he smashed cows' heads with a sledgehammer – the same method that humans sacrificed to him used to be killed. Half-demon queen of Sheba **Bilquis**, in turn, has found herself a source of faith in prostitution.

Incarnations of each god are very local, meaning that a god with enough believers probably has a separate incarnation on each continent on which they are or have been worshipped. When people land for the first time on a new continent, their faith, worship, rites and sacrifices bring new incarnations into existence even if a similar incarnation already exists in another part of the world. Each incarnation of the same god must also sustain itself, as discussion between **Shadow** and **Mr. Jacquell**:

“So, yeah, Jesus does pretty good over here. But I met a guy who said he saw him hitchhiking by the side of the road in Afghanistan and nobody was stopping to give him a ride. You know? It all depends on where you are.” (AG: 223)

While gods of AG are immortal beings to an extent, they can be destroyed. They are immune to diseases (“I don't worry about diseases. I don't catch them.” AG: 261) and resistant to physical damage, and not all gods even have a physical body of their own, such as **Baron Samedi**, who, when introduced, has “taken over the body of a teenage goth girl from Chattanooga” (AG: 522). Even when a god is destroyed, something similar will take its place if they are not completely forgotten. However, being forgotten is the worst that can happen to a god. Soon after his wife's funeral, **Shadow** meets **the Land** in a dream, and is told the following:

“Gods die. And when they truly die they are unmourned and

unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end." (AG: 63)

Still, a slightly contradicting claim is made by **Odin** in another passage of the book, stating that "In the god business ... it's not death that matters. It's the opportunity for resurrection." (AG: 465). This claim, along with as **Odin's** plan to regain his physical body with the power from sacrificed gods, proposes that even after a god dies, as long as it is not forgotten and a possibility of resurrection is available, it can avoid disappearing completely or being replaced with a new incarnation. The fact that **Odin** appears in bodiless ghost form at the Lookout mountain after his physical death seems to support this claim.

One major difference between **personifications** and other mythical beings is that **personifications** are not deliberately worshipped or believed in, nor are they usually thought of as gods. In order for a **personification** to be born, an abstract idea of such importance is needed that it truly affects people's lives and that many people regularly devote their time to it, something that people begin to take for granted and build their lives around. Some such ideas are television, traffic and media, all of which are everyday phenomena in modern America. At one point in *AG*, the **personification** of **Media** speaks to **Shadow** in the form of a character from a TV-show. **Shadow** asks if the speaker is television and gets the following reply:

"The TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to.' ... 'Their time, mostly' ... 'Sometimes each other'" (AG: 187)

Following the same logic, all the people dying in traffic accidents every year are accounted for as sacrifices to the "car gods" (Gaiman 2001: 574), and the dreams of flying are incarnated in the "grey gods of airplanes" (ibid.).

In *AG's* present, **personifications** are strong and in many ways better off than their predecessors. Although they are much younger than the

ancient gods and are not actively worshipped, the modern way of life itself is their religion and provides them with faith of the masses and numerous (although indirect) sacrifices. While this alone gives them advantage against the old and forgotten gods in direct conflict, as children of the modern era they seem to be at a natural technical advantage. This reliance on technology is also a weakness of the new gods – they feel uneasy when derived of the things they take for granted. In the center of the America where old and new gods meet for the burial rites of **Odin**, one of the **personifications** complains:

“This place is such a fucking dump. No power. Out of wireless range. I mean, when you got to be wired, you're already back in the stone age.”
(AG: 468)

While the new gods are not a part of an ancient mythology and are not often recognizable as individual characters, they do represent another level of intertextuality parallel to what the old gods represent. Television, mass media, cars and popular culture are everyday phenomena for the readership of the book in America and Europe.

Finally, the gods and mythology of *AG* is generally very much similar to Campbell's definition – all the gods are creations of human subconscious, created to represent the mysteries of the universe in a more understandable form. Therefore, it is no wonder that both Gaiman and Campbell bring up the idea that all gods of all mythologies are equally real. Gaiman ends his preface of *AG* with the words “only the gods are real”, which mirrors the idea behind Campbell's argument: “Every god, every mythology, every religion is true ... as a metaphorical of human and cosmic mystery.” (Campbell, 2001b) Also, the gods of *AG* are experiencing and fearing the same change of society that Campbell (2001b) speaks of when arguing that in modern society things are changing too fast to become mythologized.

3.6 Shadow Moon

The identity of **Shadow Moon**, the main character, and his relationship to the Norse god **Balder**, is a complex issue and has encouraged a lot of discussion on, e.g., the author's official discussion forums and on numerous fan-sites. In the novella *Monarch of the Glen*, **Shadow's** real name is revealed to be **Balder Moon**. **Shadow** bears significant resemblance to the original **Balder** who was one of **Odin's** sons in Teutonic mythology. At one point late in the book, **Loki** threatens to “ram a mistletoe through his [Shadow's] eye” (AG: 562). According to *Teutonic* mythology, the only thing that could kill **Balder** was mistletoe. **Balder** is also said to be very gentle and just, while **Shadow** also acts according to a quite high morality (e.g. AG: 337). Still, there is also evidence against **Shadow** being the **Balder** in Teutonic mythology, for example, the fact that **Shadow** was conceived of a mortal mother speaks against this. According to *Lokasenna*, **Balder's** mother appeared to be **Odin's** wife **Frigg** (Northvegr Foundation, 2007: 1). Also the threat could imply that **Shadow** might repeat the fate of his dead brother in being deceived and killed by **Loki**.

Shadow takes two roles in relation to the mythical elements. In the beginning he is an outsider, an observer whose viewpoint is that of an ordinary mortal. Like the protagonists in some of Gaiman's other works, **Shadow** is there as a representation of mundane reality, an element of contrast and comparison to the gods and the world of myth. Yet as he grows into an active participant and a mythical hero, he possesses supernatural abilities, and actions based on his own judgement affect the outcome of the conflict greatly. Still, the character of **Shadow** does not seem to rely on his mythical side as much as, for example, **Odin** and **Loki**. If **Shadow** was a full god, a part of this duality would be lost and the story might even suffer: he

might be too different for the reader to identify with.

If then one of myth's purposes is to teach us how to live a human life, **Shadow's** storyline supports this function well. From the theme in *AG* that "symbol is the thing" (*AG*: 562), we can draw the conclusion that **Shadow** as the human protagonist represents the whole of humanity in the struggle between gods. Furthermore, as **Shadow** finds out, everyone has to claim their own role in the world to be truly alive.

In this section I handled two main topics. First, I described the career and main works of Neil Gaiman. Second, I introduced the central plot, the main character **Shadow**, some central themes (such as gods and **personifications**) and some stylistic details of *AG*. Next section will cover the first half of my theoretic background, the Hero's Journey, also known as the Monomyth theory.

4. HERO'S JOURNEY

This section will contain an analysis of **Shadow's** journey within the novel in the light of Campbell's Hero's Journey. One should keep in mind that Campbell's theory was originally written for the purposes of comparing actual mythologies and their hero-stories rather than analyzing novels and modern popular fiction. Still, Campbell's theory has been successfully applied on novels too: for example, Kesti (2007) has shown that many characters in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1955) seem to have quite complete Hero's Journeys. In this chapter I will find out how well **Shadow's** journey can be divided to the steps of Hero's Journey.

4.1 Departure

For **Shadow**, the safe, ordinary world that he lives in before his journey is an abstract stage rather than a physical place – it is the world before **Laura's** death and the realization of her adultery, and on another level, his view of the world before he meets **Odin** and the other gods. It is only after both of these transitions that **Shadow** is truly ready for his journey. **Shadow** later experiences glimpses of the ordinary world, especially during the time he lives in Lakeside under the alias of **Mike Ainsel**, but he cannot truly return to it, since he cannot unlearn what he has learned about the presence of gods and **personifications**.

The Call to Adventure

Shadow's Call to Adventure is fairly straightforward – he meets the mysterious gentleman **Wednesday**, who asks **Shadow** to work for him.

Shadow's Call to Adventure is forceful rather than voluntary, though the full extent of this is not revealed in the beginning: **Odin** and **Loki** knew that if **Laura** were alive, **Shadow** would not follow them and caused the disaster that killed her as well as **Shadow's** friend who was to offer him a job.

Refusal of the Call

Like many heroes, **Shadow** refuses the journey at first – despite his wife's death, he still believes he has a job waiting, and does not want to accompany **Wednesday**. **Shadow's** initial dislike of **Odin** may be partly because **Shadow** senses something about the old god's dishonest nature – **Shadow** shows similarly accurate (perhaps supernatural) perception at several other points in the novel.

However, **Shadow** soon finds out that his friend who held the job for him is dead as well, and agrees to accept the job and follow **Odin**. While he still hesitates and wants to delay their departure, the meeting of the resurrected **Laura** and learning of her adultery unsettles **Shadow** enough to send him on his journey.

Supernatural Aid

Like most classical heroes, **Shadow** often receives help – both natural and supernatural – from others. **Shadow** receives a golden coin from the **leprechaun, Mad Sweeney**. Later it is revealed that the golden coin is a very powerful magical talisman representing the power of the sun (even able to resurrect the dead). To replace the lost gold coin, **Shadow** later receives a silver liberty dollar that represents the moon:

'Watch,' said Zorya Polunochnaya. She raised her hand and held it in front of the moon, so that her forefinger and thumb seemed to be grasping it. Then, in one smooth movement, she plucked at it. For a moment, it looked like she had taken the moon from the sky, but then

Shadow saw that the moon shone still, and Zorya Polunochnaya opened her hand to display a silver Liberty head dollar resting between finger and thumb. (AG: 98)

This amulet has a lot of power too – as we hear afterwards from **Zorya Polunochnaya**, it bought him his liberty twice and lights his way in the darkness of afterlife. Again, on the branches of **Yggdrasil**, the elephant god **Ganesh** gives **Shadow** the solution to Lakeside murder mystery. After his death at the tree, he is guided through his afterlife by **Bast**, **Zorya Polunochnaya**, **Anubis** and **Thoth** and finally resurrected by **Eostre**. From the tree, **Shadow** is carried by **Thunderbirds** to the battleground of the gods and **personifications**, where he can perform his actual heroic deed (and achieve the Ultimate Boon).

Shadow has several supernatural helpers during his journey – all of whom he ends up helping in the end. However, when it comes to his own transformation, the greatest helper that **Shadow** has is probably the **Land** itself. It is the **Land** that approaches **Shadow** in dreams and guides him by showing him things about the gods and about the world rather than handing out ready truths. The **Land** also provides the encouragement that **Shadow** needs – as **Shadow** stands in the battlefield between gods and personifications and starts his speech, it is the Land that tells him that he's “doing just fine” (AG: 574). According to Campbell (1949: 66), the metaphor of supernatural aid represents “the benign, protecting power of destiny”. In AG, then, the **Land** seems to fit this description best – it is certainly the closest thing to a highest power that we are introduced to. It exists independent of gods and humans alike, while all the others depend on it. While the **Land** does not seem to actively control the events (i.e. does not appear to enforce a preordained destiny), it still seems to possess some knowledge about the future. For example, after **Shadow** reaches his Ultimate Boon, the **Land** tells

him about the future: "Soon they [the stars] will fall and the star people will meet the earth people. There will be heroes among them, and men who will slay monsters and bring knowledge, but none of them will be gods" (AG: 267). This is certainly very sophisticated prediction if not knowledge of the future. As the "protecting power of destiny", then, the Land represents a causal destiny rather than one dictated by an outside source – a destiny that is the result of our freely decided actions rather than a preordained pattern that all individuals are forced to match.

The Crossing of the First Threshold

For **Shadow**, there are several transitions to make rather than one before achieving his Ultimate Boon. The first boundary that **Shadow** crosses is from the relative safety of prison to the outside world transformed to unfamiliar and hostile by the death of Laura and the knowledge of her adultery. It could also be argued that **Shadow** experiences a transition from the old outside world to a new one via his time in prison. The second boundary is crossed when **Shadow** makes a deal with **Odin** and agrees to follow him away from Eagle Point – by then he has come to terms with the fact that there is nothing holding him back, although he still knows very little of his role in the coming events. Finally, **Shadow** leaves his old life behind permanently when, at the **House on the Rock**, he follows **Odin** to the halls of **Valhalla** and for the first time sees the gods in their true forms. While the first two are equally important to **Shadow's** journey, the transition at **Valhalla** is perhaps the one that most accurately matches **Campbell's** idea of entering another reality, for it is the first time **Shadow** really faces the true depth of the supernatural quality of the America he lives in.

Belly of The Whale

There are several stages on **Shadow's** journey where his journey is interrupted and unable to proceed. He is imprisoned by the underlings of the **personifications** and held captive until he is rescued by Laura. Even **Shadow's** peaceful stay in Lakeside (and the role of **Mike Ainsel** that he assumes there) is, in a sense, a Belly of the Whale that he must be ejected from before he can reach his Ultimate Boon.

The ultimate physical manifestation of the stage is **Shadow's** death and decision to cease exist – at the end of his journey in the afterlife, **Shadow** chooses nothingness over any other form of afterlife, which would effectively end his quest there were it not for outside help from **Eostre** (See Refusal of the Return).

However, **Shadow** also experiences another, spiritual level of Belly of The Whale that compromises his development on a much wider scale – the spiritual emptiness that follows him throughout the novel. By **Shadow's** own apprehension his dullness of spirit and emotion started when he heard about Laura having an affair with his best friend, but there is proof that **Shadow's** problem runs deeper than that. In his encounter with **Bast** (see Meeting with the Goddess) he catches something – a thought about transience and a realization that he has been “holding his breath... three years... maybe longer” (AG: 230). **Shadow** cannot hold on to his realization at this point, it escapes him like the memory of a dream – he has not yet escaped the Belly of the Whale completely.

Again, later, when he talks with Laura at Lakeside, she tells him that he is not really alive, and probably wasn't even when they lived together before his time in prison. **Shadow** is hurt by this and unable to understand it at this point – he even tries to prove that he is alive by arguing that he is not

dead either. However, **Laura** seems to be right in her assessment: unable to experience awe or wonder at anything, **Shadow** is not dead but is not alive either. **Shadow's** spiritual condition is noticed by others as well – even **Odin**, who is rarely perplexed by anything, is surprised by **Shadow's** lack of response at the revelation: “Why don't you argue? ... Why don't you exclaim that it's all impossible? Why the hell do you just do what I say and take it all so fucking calmly?” (AG: 368) Answering **Odin's** question, **Shadow** realizes that he hasn't really felt anything after he learned about **Laura's** affair with **Shadow's** best friend Robbie.

Shadow, then, experiences Belly of the Whale twice: once spiritually and once physically. The spiritual Belly of the Whale is that he lacks the experience of being alive, which is something he must recover before he can complete his quest and reach the Ultimate Boon. The physical Belly of the Whale, on the other hand, is his death and his following decision to cease existing. However, while the Belly of the Whale is often something that stands between the hero and the Ultimate Boon, it is also a stage that forces the hero through a necessary metamorphosis: “instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again” (Campbell, 1968 : 84) True enough, it is only after his death and resurrection (both physically at the tree and spiritually through his loss of experience of living) that **Shadow** can regain the control of his own life and achieve his Ultimate Boon. For **Shadow**, then, the Belly of the Whale is perhaps the most important stage of his Hero's Journey.

4.2 Initiation

The Road of Trials

In **Shadow's** journey, Road of Trials is one of the most difficult stages to define, because there is no single phase in the journey for trials. **Shadow** does meet several challenges, but rather than struggles for a known goal, they are individual situations, the significance of which for the Ultimate Boon is only understandable afterwards, which is the prevention of war between gods and **personifications**.

One level of **Shadow's** Road of Trials could be the constant testing of his loyalties and morality during his journey. His loyalties are tested by the **Media**, who tries to tempt him to join the side of **personifications**, offering him fame and money (see Woman as Temptress), but **Shadow** withstands this temptation and refuses to be bribed. **Shadow's** morality, on the other hand, is constantly challenged by **Odin**, who is more or less the complete moral opposite of **Shadow**. **Odin** has very little regard for others and he feels he has the right to take what he needs from the humans who brought him to America but abandoned him. This places **Shadow** in several situations where following Wednesday compromises his moral integrity. In these situations **Shadow** is ready to challenge **Odin's** leadership, especially when individuals are concerned: "You stiffed that girl for ten bucks, I slipped her ten bucks ... It was the right thing to do." (AG: 337). As we see, while he is not obsessed with the letter of the law (he was in prison for assault and participates in **Odin's** ATM fraud), **Shadow** goes to great lengths to avoid harm to innocents. However, in functional sense these situations tell the reader about **Shadow** and his honesty rather than test it – there is no real development in **Shadow** in terms of morality, since he is a very compassionate person from

the beginning. Also, this kind of Road of Trials still does not make him ready for his ultimate moral dilemma when he has already found out that **Hinzelmann** is a murderer who will continue to kill one child each year if he is not stopped, but the old **kobold** has just saved **Shadow's** life. **Shadow** falters in this test – he finds that there are situations where there is no simple right answer and cannot bring himself to kill **Hinzelmann** even if it was for greater good.

Another a set of trials, perhaps more alike to examples in ancient mythologies, is found in **Shadow's** journey through his afterlife. Even though **Shadow's** trials take place after he has made his sacrifice and died, the knowledge that he obtains from them is crucial to his journey and development. First, he must choose between the “way of hard truths” and the “way of fine lies”, and chooses the first one, learning valuable although painful things about himself and his origins. Because of this selection, he finds out that **Odin** is his father, which gives him more leverage to convince the fighting gods after his resurrection. For this he has to pay with his own real name that he never knew of. Second, he meets **Bast**, who tells him he must choose one of three paths: “One way will make you wise. One way will make you whole. And one way will kill you [permanently].” (AG: 509) Here, he trusts **Bast** to choose for him. As a fee, **Shadow** has to give up his heart, which is to be weighted against a feather (it is notable that since **Shadow's** physical body is still hanging on the tree, already dead, the loss of his heart does not kill him in the afterlife). The center way chosen for him leads him to meet his final judgment without fear. Finally, after his judgment **Shadow** is given a choice to make a decision about his actual afterlife and chooses “...nothing. No heaven, no hell, no anything.” (AG: 517) While he has already cleared most of his trials by now, here **Shadow** makes a choice that threatens

to stop him from achieving his Ultimate Boon and instead sends him to his (physical) Belly of the Whale.

Meeting with the Goddess

While **Shadow** meets several goddesses during his journey, the one that most fits this stage, in Campbell's words "the hero's mastery over life" is **Bast**, the Egyptian cat goddess. **Shadow** first meets her and sees her human (or at least humanoid) form for the first time in a mixture of dream and reality in which they make love. For **Shadow**, this encounter with **Bast** is deeply spiritual, purifying experience, even to the point that his previous physical injuries are healed. More important, however, is the spiritual process that **Bast** initiates in him: "...he took a breath, a clear draught of air he felt all the way down to the depths of his lungs, and he knew that he had been holding his breath for a long time now. Three years, at least. Perhaps even longer." (AG: 230) **Shadow** was in prison because he had assaulted and robbed a group of men that he and **Laura** had helped rob a bank, but who tried to steal their share of the money. During his three years in prison and, probably, ever since committing his crime, he has not been able to absolve himself of his deed – perhaps more so because the bank robbery charge on all of them was dropped because of lack of evidence. No matter how much he had thought the men he assaulted had deserved it – even **Laura** has not been able to really help him because of her involvement in the case – it was, after all, **Laura** who persuaded her to take part in the crime. **Bast**, as a complete outsider, is able to give him a moment of respite that does not leave him unaffected. The effects of this encounter are not limited to the claw-marks he finds on his skin when he awakes from his sleep: his point of view is already slightly altered by the experience: "There was an idea that hovered at the edge of his perception.

Something about *transience*. It flickered and was gone.” (AG: 230, emphasis in the original)

According to Campbell, this stage also represents the unconditional love of a mother, and **Bast** is, in many ways, a protecting mother figure to **Shadow**. **Bast** is never controlled or mastered by **Shadow** - she is there of her own will, a force of her own, benevolent to **Shadow** because she chooses to be and because she hopes him to be of use in preventing the war between gods and personifications. She also saves **Shadow** from a dangerous situation when he is shaving with a very sharp knife in front of a bathroom mirror and is overcome by sudden thoughts of suicide as an easy escape from the pain of living (this scene is possibly a reference to *The Sandman* character **Despair**, whose kingdom is connected to every mirror in the world). **Bast's** sudden arrival into the bathroom in her cat form distracts **Shadow** from his thoughts and brings him to his senses. The timing of **Bast's** arrival was not likely to be a coincidence either, since **Shadow** was fairly certain that he had locked the door.

Like the **Land**, **Bast** is different from the other gods and myths in the sense that she is an outsider in the coming conflict – she was hoping **Shadow** would take part in preventing it, as she tells him at his final judgment, but does not intend to be directly involved since she doesn't “like other people picking [her] battles” for her (AG: 517). Also, like the **Land**, there is a truly transient quality to **Bast** – as a solar deity she represents the source and continuity of life itself. Through her feline side she is also attuned to and included in nature rather than separate from it. **Shadow's** encounter with her is wild and sexual and there is no shame or guilt involved – through **Bast**, **Shadow** can lower his defenses and experience a moment of connection to the natural world around himself.

Woman as Temptress

Shadow does not seem to experience an actual experience of revulsion of his “odor of flesh” - rather, as seen in the Meeting with the Goddess, sexuality is associated with spirituality and with the experience of life. However, he does experience a momentary situation of the sort when **Media** first contacts him through his television set and tries to manipulate him into switching sides in the coming conflict. Among other things, **Media**, at the time appearing as the name character of the tv show *I love Lucy*, asks **Shadow** whether he “ever wanted to see Lucy's tits” (AG: 188), which disturbs rather than intrigues **Shadow**. The scene also matches Campbell's definition of the meaning of this stage, as the manifestation of the material temptations of life – Media also offers **Shadow** money, fame and certain victory if he agrees to betray the old gods and join sides with the **personifications**. **Shadow** easily overcomes the temptation (as a part of his Road of Trials).

Atonement with the Father

Atonement with the Father is a stage where the hero must confront whatever holds power over him – often a father figure. For **Shadow**, this seems to be so – his father **Odin** has used him as a part of his selfish plan that only **Shadow** can prevent. **Shadow's** Atonement with the Father, then, is the resolution of their conflict when **Shadow** stops **Odin's** planned massacre of gods from taking place and, in so doing, denies him his resurrection. **Shadow's** days and nights on the branches of **Yggdrasil** as well as his discussions with the **Land** (in his dreams), **Bast** (at his final judgment), and finally with the **cultural hero Wisakedjak** (in his afterlife just before his resurrection) have prepared him to realize the truth about **Odin's** plan on his own and thus

enabled him to prevent it. **Shadow** does not have to face **Odin** in a physical fight, since the god has already sacrificed himself as part of his own plan. This would also seem to fit Campbell's definition of the meaning of Atonement with the Father: by preventing **Odin's** plan from succeeding, **Shadow** also defeats his own passivity and, in so doing, practically redefines himself.

In the end of the novel there is also a kind of literal atonement with the Icelandic version of **Odin**, but this incarnation of **Odin** is not called **Wednesday**, nor has he anything to do with the deeds of his American counterpart. Still, his immediate approval of **Shadow** is a notable point – as is the recognition and delight of Icelandic **Odin** when he receives the fractured glass eye of his American counterpart. **Shadow** has made peace with the concept of **Odin** at least, if not with actual **Wednesday**.

Apotheosis

Apotheosis is a phase of enlightenment following the trials and initiatory phases, and it is required to reach the Ultimate Boon. **Shadow's** self-sacrifice on the branches of **Yggdrasil** is certainly a crucial part of his final transition to a larger point of view and his discovery of the experience of living. Often a Hero reaches a state of enlightenment that readies him for the self-sacrifice needed for the Ultimate Boon.

In **Shadow's** case, however, he makes the decision to sacrifice himself first and achieves the expansion of consciousness only afterwards. When he decides to hold **Odin's** vigil on the branches of **Yggdrasil**, **Shadow** does not seem aware of the reason for it – he simply does not value his life as much as he respects what he feels is his duty for the deceased **Odin**. However, after his involuntary return from the afterlife (see Refusal of Return), **Shadow** is

able to experience a larger point of view and is ready for the realization that is a crucial part of his Ultimate Boon, the truth about **Odin's** plan: "It's a two-man con," said Shadow. 'It's not a war at all, is it?'" (AG: 549) Using this knowledge, and the details he got from **Odin's** ghost (who was certain it was too late to stop the war), he is able to convince the gods and **personifications** to end their war.

The Ultimate Boon

Unlike in many hero myths, **Shadow's** Ultimate Boon is most directly helpful to the mythical world (i.e. the world beyond the First Threshold), since his prevention of the war between gods and **personifications** saves the two mythical groups from purposeless bloodshed. On the other hand, the prevention of **Odin's** ascension to power through the sacrifice of other gods is probably also beneficial for humans – as **Shadow** has observed, **Odin** is not a selfless or merciful god, and still holds a grudge at humans for forsaking their gods and leaving them alone in a foreign land: "They made me. They forgot me. Now I take a little back from them. Isn't that fair?" (AG: 337) Furthermore, **Odin** and **Loki** are both gods that draw their power from warfare, death and chaos. Had the two gods achieved the power their plan would have given them if successful, humanity would probably have suffered.

However, there are also other Boons that **Shadow** bestows in the end. For his wife Laura, he finally gives the death she asks for by taking away the gold coin that was keeping her spirit attached to her dead body. Without going through the Road of Trials and his own death, it is unlikely that **Shadow** could have released her. For the town of Lakeside, **Shadow** gives a freedom of the **kobold Hinzelmänn** that has protected the town but

sacrificed town children to himself as a cost. He nearly falters in this challenge – after **Hinzelmann** saves his life, **Shadow** is unable to kill the **kobold**. Still, **Shadow** had to solve the murder mystery in order for the local policeman to overhear him and shoot the escaping **Hinzelmann** dead.

4.3 Return

Refusal of the Return

After his death, **Shadow** is given the option of selecting his afterlife, and chooses to cease to exist, feeling that he has suffered enough. Without the help of **Eostre** (see Rescue from Without) he would not have been able to continue his quest or achieve and deliver his Ultimate Boon.

The Magic Flight

Often in hero myths a dead hero would have to escape from the underworld, but in **Shadow's** case there is no clear case of Magic Flight – his return from the death is only hindered by his own unwillingness – supposing **Shadow** could choose some form of reincarnation as an option of his resurrection.

Rescue from Without

Shadow is resurrected by **Eostre** and brought back from the nothingness that he chose for his afterlife. Although he found his experience of being alive on the tree, he expresses no wish to return to life. When **Eostre** brings him back, he seems at first shocked at first at the fact that he was brought back against his will:

'You called me back.' He said it slowly, as if he had forgotten how to speak English. There was hurt in his voice, and puzzlement. ... 'I was

done. I was judged. It was over. You called me back. You dared.' (AG: 552)

Having surpassed his fear of death, **Shadow** has become to appreciate death as an earned rest at the end of a lifetime.

Shadow's resentment at his resurrection, however, also shows another side of his character development. After being a follower most of his life, following figures like Laura and **Odin**, he has finally ceased to be a passive character and become an active agent. However, also having rediscovered his appreciation of life, **Shadow** is not suicidal in his regret of being brought back – since he is alive again, he seems to think, he can as well go through with the rest of it.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold

A nominal return threshold is crossed when **Mr Nancy** brings **Shadow** back from the battleground to the Lookout Mountain. However, **Shadow** can never completely leave the mythical world behind, because he cannot unlearn what he has learned about the mythical quality of the world around him.

Master of Two Worlds

On the literal level, **Shadow** becomes a Master of Two Worlds when he is able to enter the battlefield of the gods and personifications on his own, despite the fact that it is located on a level of existence beyond the ordinary world – it indicates that he has reached a balance between his natural and supernatural (demigod) sides. If we consider Campbell's definition of the stage, however, an even closer match is found in **Shadow's** character development. Through his trials and his resurrection, **Shadow** has reached a peace with himself and the world, between his material existence and the spiritual transience of being human. For **Shadow**, this means that he is able to

understand that truth is all about viewpoints and that, in some cases, a single objective truth may be impossible to find. **Shadow** speculates this idea several times, once on the Lookout Mountain (where he has just arrived flying on a **thunderbird**):

A trail of lightning speared across the clouds, and Shadow wondered if that was the thunderbird returning to its high crags, or just an atmospheric discharge, or whether the two ideas were, on some level, the same thing.

And of course they were. That was the point, after all. (AG: 566)

Here we have an example of plurality within one phenomenon – and of the subjectivity of truth. The immediately visible and audible effects of thunder are rather unambiguous, but the wish to explain the nature of the phenomenon has led to two completely different explanations – one mythical and one scientific. What is notable here is the realization of **Shadow** that the “two ideas were, on some level, the same thing” – i.e. the both of the explanations are equally true, only from different points of view.

Freedom to Live

In **Shadow's** journey, Freedom to Live is not only the meaning hidden behind metaphors, but also the literal theme of the whole journey. Even if **Shadow** at first believes his journey is not his own but only a vocation he must follow, the real purpose of his journey is all about **Shadow's** growth into a complete human being and his achievement of the experience of being alive. His experiences have replaced his weary passivity with an appreciation of life. “Shadow felt good. ... He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so alive and so together.” (AG: 549)

Based on my research in this chapter, it seems that *AG* can be fitted into the pattern of Hero's Journey. While not all stages have clear equivalents in *AG* (Magic Flight) or they require some modification to fit (Road of Trials), some stages are easy to match (Apotheosis). In some stages, such as Freedom to Live and Master of Two Worlds, the metaphors used are somewhat different than the examples given by Campbell (1949), but they match the function of the stages.

With the results of this section, we can already outline some central elements of **Shadow's** journey, and make an initial assessment of whether *AG* can serve as a hero myth. On the basis of central stages of themes of the novel are **Shadow's** initial lack of the experience of being alive (Belly of the Whale, Ultimate Boon), death as a catalyst of the experience of life (Apotheosis) and, finally, the theme of truth as a matter of point of view (Master of Two Worlds). These themes indicate that **Shadow's** journey is centered around his spiritual development – after all, to reach the goal of his journey he must reach a level of enlightenment and connection with life that he lacks in the beginning. According to Campbell (2001a), the meaning behind the standard hero myth is an individual's spiritual growth – all the dragons and challenges faced during it represent the (spiritual) problems and obstacles that an individual must overcome. In this sense, then, *AG* fulfills the central criteria of Hero's Journey.

Having outlined the Hero's Journey and basic thematics in *AG*, I will now examine several of the themes of **Shadow's** journey with more detail using the Four Functions of Myth.

5. FOUR FUNCTIONS OF MYTH IN *AMERICAN GODS*

I have already discussed the change of form from oral tradition to mass media that modern myths have undergone to serve larger societies. Next I will assess the challenges that the content of modern myths must answer – not all works of popular culture are on equal basis in their suitability for modern functional myths. For example, while a computer game with emphasis on storyline could serve as a myth, this does not mean that all games with any kind of story are equally powerful – and it is hard to find any mythical function in a game of computer solitaire. Same goes for literature – not all stories match the Four Functions of Myth with equal accuracy. I will now apply Campbell's Four Functions of Myth (see 3.2.) to *AG*, with focus on the central themes identified in the previous chapter. I will begin with the cosmological function, then move on to mystical, sociological and psychological/pedagogical functions, respectively. My specific aim is to find out if there is credible argument to support the idea of *AG* as a modern, functional myth.

5.1 The cosmological function

Furthermore, it goes without saying that all of the people, living, dead and otherwise in this story are fictional or used in a fictional context. Only the gods are real. (*AG*: 0.1)

The cosmological function is to give people a picture of the universe around them and awaken in them “a sense of awe, humility and respect” before it's mystery. According to Campbell (1968: 611-620), this function of myth is, in modern times, quite adequately fulfilled by modern science. Campbell (*ibid.*) goes on to explain in some detail a series of scientific revolutions ranging from the discoveries of Columbus all the way to penetration of the shell of

the atom and formulation of the theory of relativity. Old myths already seem to have found a successor in this function – natural sciences such as physics, earth science, biology and chemistry can offer satisfactory explanations for many of the everyday phenomena such as rain, lightning and the sun as well as the shape and structure of our planet and the plants and animals living on it. However, as I will argue in this chapter, a modern myth can help natural science in overcoming the bridge between itself and modern individualistic humanity.

Science attempts to be objective, measured and systematic, and defines the best answer as the one with the best evidence to support it. It can produce theories about the world around us and help us use its resources efficiently to our benefit. It is also a global system – scientists from all around the world use each other's findings as the basis for their own research. However, despite how advanced our education system, the human mind and perception are not parts of a machine – we make mistakes and false judgments and are affected by our emotions and our previous knowledge. For natural sciences, emotions and a personal point of view are a distraction that must be eliminated or at least taken into account if results are to be considered credible. Natural science, then, is a great tool for problem-solving and efficiency, but potentially incompatible with the individualistic and inaccurate human mind – while it is perfectly able to evoke a sense of wonder at the complexities of universe, it cannot answer all questions regarding, for example, the associations, emotions or priorities we tend to assign to the things and phenomena around us that we value.

Of course, the gap between natural sciences and human culture is already bridged – to some extent – by humanities and social sciences: linguistics, psychology, sociology, philosophy and literature each have their own tools for disassembling our existence in terms of communication, mental

health, society, purpose and culture, respectively. In modern times these sciences also aim to describe and understand our culture not only as a set of static structures, but also as a living, changing and functional system. However, despite their closer connection to our self-image and thought processes, humanities remain approaches not easily available to everyone – even in countries with high standards of education, the compulsory education is under a lot of pressure to ensure that all students have the most vital necessities for surviving the demands of modern world, and there is only limited time and resources to spare for anything beyond the basics of literature and culture study, not to mention philosophy or psychology.

Therefore, what myths can offer to the cosmological function is a lighter, more readily available humanistic approach to the understanding of our culture as well as other cultures. Unlike science, myths also value the subjective experience of an individual and/or of the society. Furthermore, a functional myth is traditionally composed of metaphors and descriptive language understandable in the cultural context of the receiver – it should only require the common knowledge of the society the myth itself belongs to. Myths provide schemes – frameworks to reference ourselves and the world around us against (Campbell, 1949, 1968; see also Rauch, 2003).

What remains to be defined is the specifics of the demands the cosmological function has for a modern myth. In the modern multicultural world, a new myth faces several new challenges and requirements that old myths tend to be unable to meet for the modern audiences. First, the new myth must be approachable – it should be based in a (mythic) reality that is somehow familiar to the readership. While the world of modern myth does not have to be a carbon copy of the modern world we live in, it should retain some connection to our own world and society or the myth becomes too unfamiliar – it is no longer about us, and loses its meaning, in the mythical

sense. Everything that is different should have a purpose – whether it is to gain distance on issues too difficult or too established to be handled as they are (alternate realities of fantasy literature) or to predict the results of our actions (alternate futures of science fiction). Second, since science has a central position in modern society and way of thinking, a myth would suffer from ignoring scientific discoveries completely – i.e. the world should be logical, and its inner logic should preferably be based on the rules of our own world. A story can certainly be a myth even if it takes place in a world governed, for example, by dream logic, but that kind of myth is not cosmological (note that it can still be assessed separately using the three other functions). Third, the myth should take into account the demands of a multicultural world. Things have changed a lot since myths were told and shared within small, relatively isolated and homogeneous societies. Therefore, to appeal to society as a whole rather than a homogeneous fraction of it, a modern myth should promote understanding of diversity. In the words of Campbell (2001a): “Only myth relevant in the near future is about the planet and everybody on it”. Fourth, Campbell (2001b) argues that “We can't have a mythology for a long long time [...] Things are changing too fast. The environment in which we're living is changing too fast for it to become mythologized.” This I would counter, in AG's case, with a suggestion that I think would fit in with the core of Campbell's ideas: that to withstand the constant change of society, a modern mythology has to be *about* change. Therefore, the fourth challenge I propose is that to fulfill the cosmological function in changing times a modern myth should somehow reflect the theme of change (and/or coping with change). Finally, the fifth and the last challenge I propose is that a modern myth should encourage a symbiotic relationship between humans and the Earth. Many old religions were founded back when human population was significantly smaller and the

resources of the planet were believed to be limitless. In modern times, the image of civilized human as the anointed ruler over nature is outdated and has led to global environmental problems. These five challenges are the core of my analysis of how well *AG* can fulfill the cosmological function of myth.

5.1.1 Approachability & Science

The first challenge I proposed is that the myth must be approachable and easy to relate to, in terms of the world. *AG* is set in a world that to the majority of its occupants very much resembles the real United States of the late 1990s or early 2000s. In the preface to the novel, titled “Caveat, and Warning for Travellers” Gaiman (*AG*: 0.1) explains that the book is a novel, not a guidebook: while many of the locations in it can be visited, he has “obscured the location of several places” and taken “fewer liberties than you might think, but liberties nonetheless”. This initial setting seems ideal for a modern myth, at least from the viewpoint of the cosmological function. Numerous references to individual songs, TV-shows and movies help make the setting distinctly modern and connect it to real world and present day. The downside of *AG*, in terms of accessibility, is its complexity, which may discourage many readers. The novel is long and the intensity of the plot makes it hard to understand on the first read. However, in comparison to ancient mythologies and holy scriptures it is still a significantly easier read – not only is it located in modern world, but it is also written in modern English (instead of, for example, ancient Hebrew). Furthermore, the metaphors of *AG* are mostly rooted in modern times rather than in ancient Greece or even medieval Europe. Finally, while the novel is rich with names and characters from ancient mythologies, very little knowledge of them is assumed – the main character **Shadow** is not an expert of mythology either,

so he too has to come to his own conclusions about the old gods he meets. Overall, then, *AG* answers the first cosmological challenge.

5.1.2 Subjectivity of truth

The second challenge that I presented – that modern science cannot be ignored – has already been met, since the world functions very much like the real world. As we have identified, the basic setting is fairly familiar for contemporary readers: a modern western country, where the primary tool of explaining the unknown is science. However, *AG* goes even beyond this requirement – it brings together the modern scientific world view and the world of mythology and human belief, combining them into one seamless explanation of the world. Rather than a black and white, scientifically-measured and thoroughly understood plane of existence, the world presented is a pluralistic world of interconnected and overlapping ideas. There is rarely (if ever) one single all-encompassing truth. This theme of subjective truth was already identified in previous chapter. For a first example of this plurality, I quote a passage where a fire speaks to **Shadow** in a dream, telling him about the creation of the earth:

'This land was brought up from the depths of the ocean by a diver,' said the fire. 'It was spun from its own substance by a spider. It was shat by a raven. It is the body of a fallen father, whose bones are mountains, whose eyes are lakes.'

'This is a land of dreams and fire,' said the fire. (*AG*: 264–265)

To this list we could add that it was created by God in seven days and that it was formed from a cloud of gas and dust – each explanation is equally true, the only difference is in the point of view. The same idea is echoed earlier, in the underworld, when **Zorya Polunochnaya** places a silver Liberty dollar as a moon on the sky to light **Shadow's** way:

Shadow could not decide whether he was looking at a moon the size of a dollar, a foot above his head; or whether he was looking at a moon the

size of the Pacific Ocean, many thousands of miles away. Nor whether there was any difference between the two ideas. Perhaps it was all a matter of the way you looked at it. (AG: 504)

The moon is another motif featuring in mythologies almost as frequently as the sun, and the reason is obvious – it is something that can be seen from anywhere in the world and the effect of its cycle on tides has hardly gone unnoticed. Still, at the same time, it is something intangible, almost metaphysical in its unreachable presence. Before powerful telescopes and space shuttles there was no way of confirming whether the moon was a small object that was relatively close or a huge object at an unfathomable distance. However, as **Shadow** begins to realize here, what we call truth is based on subjective perception. Rather than one truth, then, there are several truths, all creations of our conviction in them. Here we come across the theme of symbolism and of imaginary nature of many human concepts that runs throughout the novel. After **Odin's** death **Mr Nancy** says:

'This isn't about what is ... It's about what people think is. It's imaginary anyway. That's why it's important. People only fight over imaginary things. (AG: 457)

What we can read here is that by naming and defining things and by assigning symbolic meanings to them we constantly structure and recreate the world around us. However, these structures that help us understand and control the world also shape us and our behavior, to such extent that the symbol becomes the thing. When asked about the stick he wanted brought from the branches of **Yggdrasil**, **Loki** explains to his underling that “It symbolizes a spear, and in this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing. [emphasis in the original]” (AG: 562) With belief, therefore, comes also a certain responsibility for one's own beliefs, as **Shadow** summarizes in a moment of realization, soon after his return from the death, on the battlefield between old and new gods:

People believe, thought Shadow. It's what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine, and people believe: and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen. (AG: 573)

Whatever is our viewpoint on the supernatural, myths and religions as they exist in the world and in human society are still constructed and formulated by humans, and it is humans who are responsible for them. This is not to say that myths and imagined things in themselves are harmful – they can be an excellent resource for us if we use them right – but to say that we can not escape our own responsibility for them.

5.1.3 Multiculturalism

The third challenge I proposed was that a myth should take into consideration the multiculturalism of the modern world. Choosing to locate the novel in United States, while not completely free of problems, is still a valid decision from the perspective of this challenge. The USA is, after all, not only an influential and highly multicultural country, but one that is immediately recognizable to a wide readership outside its borders through exported films, novels, comics, music and other popular culture. Of course one could argue that these kinds of references are a lot more culture-specific than the variety of world mythology, especially if we take into consideration that the USA also carries severe negative associations for many non-Americans and could alienate part of the audience because of this. Gaiman, however, does not write about a very stereotypical USA. Even if the novel is rich with American culture and lifestyle, it isn't an attempt to reproduce the American Dream. In a sense, it's a book about the USA, but not the same USA that Hollywood movies export – rather it is a representation where the expectations resulting from these stereotypes have taken a concrete form (in

gods and **personifications** but also in the forms of various **culture heroes**). To sum it up, *AG* is, to an extent, about the country as it is, but also about how it has been changed and affected by what people believe.

One could again argue that picking any individual country as the setting still makes it unable to serve a heterogeneous audience rather than a single limited society or culture. By writing about USA, however, Gaiman also writes about the immigrant experience—after all, USA as a country has historically very recent immigrant roots. Between the chapters, the main plot of *AG* is interrupted by short stories under the common title “Coming to America”, usually touching the difficulties and alienation of both humans and the gods they brought with them. During these interludes Gaiman shows us the holy woman Atsula with her tribe and her mammoth-skull god in 14,000 BC (*AG*: 442); the arrival of Vikings (and their gods) to the land they call Vinland in 813 AD (*AG*: 72), and the meeting of an Arab salesman and a **jinn** taxi driver in modern New York (*AG*: 194), among many others. Each of these stories handles individual life stories of people and their experiences, small joys and tragedies of life and of the immigrant experience. Furthermore, the very fact that the gods and myths of the world are handled as equally real adds to *AG*’s quality as a multicultural myth. Finally, very few of the modern myths or **personifications** are as culturally bound as the old mythologies used to be – gods of aeroplanes, media, computers and cancer are rooted on the same phenomena recognizable in most parts of the world. Based on these arguments, I am ready to suggest that *AG* is a multicultural story rather than a homogeneous one.

5.1.4 Change

The fourth challenge I proposed is the theme of change. The world of *AG* – which for the reader symbolises the real world – is a world of constant change. This shows best in the character cast of *AG*, which consists of a collection of real-world mythical beings, gods and **cultural heroes** as well as a collection of modern **personifications**, who are metaphors of change in themselves – many of them represent phenomena that are very recent and/or only made possible by recent technological advancements. Still, while the **personifications** first appear to be antagonists of the story, in the end they are in a position very similar to that of the old gods. Whereas, unlike most old gods, **personifications** are very keen to adapt to changes, their greatest fear is still that of losing their positions of power and becoming old-fashioned and forgotten. **Shadow's** observation seems to confirm this:

They were afraid that unless they kept pace with a changing world, unless they remade and redrew and rebuilt the world in their image, their time would already be over. (*AG*: 574)

In the modern society that created them, change is constant and if they wish to remain on the top they must submit to it. However, in *AG* the fear of change is frequently more harmful than the feared change itself – it is the uncontrolled fear of both old gods and personifications that allows them to be led into a purposeless war against each other. Again, Hinzemann, in his fear of change, is ready to kill countless children as a sacrifice to himself to be able to capture the town of Lakeside into a bubble under his control, where no big changes can happen without his authorization. Therefore, we can read in *AG* the suggestion that even if change in itself is frightening – for humans as well as for their gods – coming to terms with it is vital to our survival. A complete lack of change would, after all, practically mean the end of the

world, since growth, development and movement each consist of change.

The theme of change is also closely attached to the theme of death and mortality, which will be handled with the psychological/pedagogical function in section 5.4.

5.1.5 The relationship of the Earth and the human race

As we have seen, no single pantheon, mythology or culture is selected to provide the mythical characters. Instead, they come from a great variety of cultures and locations, including Africa, Ancient Greece, Arabic countries, China, Egypt, Ireland, India, Japan, Native American cultures, Norway, Russia and any other country from which colonists ever came to America. Since in *AG* the only element needed to bring the supernatural into reality is sufficient faith, there is no need or even a possibility for only one right answer for a religion – it is real as soon as it has enough believers. While this further answers the previously mentioned challenge of appealing to a (culturally) heterogeneous readership, it also serves to stress the idea that nationality and borders of nations are equally “imaginary things”. This takes us to my final challenge concerning the cosmological function: the relationship between human race and the land itself. In *AG*, this challenge is answered by a representation of Earth as a living being, **the Land**. This is an idea used in numerous myths (see for example **Gaia**), but it represents an attitude very much different from, for example, Christian beliefs of humans as a superior race that has the right to exploit the nature limitlessly. In *AG* the **personification** of the land is a man with a buffalo's head. As my studies on Hero's Journey indicated, **the Land** is the most powerful mentor during **Shadow's** journey, guiding him in his spiritual growth. **The Land** is also a power of it's own, above the humans and gods. In it's own words:

"They [gods] never understood that they were here - and the people who worshipped them were here - because it suits us that they are here. But we can change our minds. And perhaps we will." (AG: 587)

This summarizes the fundamental conflict of man and nature that has caused many of the environmental problems of the modern era – we are slow to realize that we cannot exist if our planet dies, whereas the planet could survive our extinction. It took very long for Western cultures (as well as several Asian ones) to realize that the view of the land as something to be used and exploited in abundance is not valid in the long term. This is certainly something that we need to be reminded of again and again – unless the constant campaigns of environmental organizations are completely mistaken.

To conclude this section, the answers of *AG* for the five cosmological challenges I proposed are as follows. First, approachability: the fact that *AG* is written in modern times, about modern world and in modern language makes it more approachable and its meanings more understandable than ancient mythologies. Second, the inclusion of science and the theme of subjective truth (i.e. the plurality of viewpoints that define truth). Third, this also includes the notion that all the "gods are real" (*AG*: 0.1) – there is no actual conflict between gods, only between people who cannot bear the differences of each others' formulations of faith and the universe. Symbols and myths as formulations are of human origin and we are, therefore, responsible for them and for how we use them. Fourth, nothing lasts forever and change is a constant factor in the modern life. Fifth, that the earth we live on is a living entity and we live and prosper on its conditions – this much is true, no matter how hard we work to place ourselves above nature. Since *AG* answered these challenges, it can fulfill the cosmological function of myth.

5.2 The mystical function

'You're fucked up, mister. But you're cool.'

'I believe that's what they call human condition' (AG: 184)

Campbell (1968: 609-611) argues that it is impossible for the knowledge and that which constitutes self to have suddenly sprung from nothingness: there must be a transcendent source that unifies not only humans but all sentient beings. The mystical function, then, is the function of myth that can put us in touch with this mystery of life and existence, in other words, remind us of “what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are” (ibid.). To answer such a challenge, a myth should touch two themes: first, the source and origin of our existence (and of the individual) and second, human nature.

As Campbell (2001b) points out, creation myths of various mythologies and religions have a lot in common. There is, however, a curious difference between religions and their sets of metaphors in the relationship of humans, god and nature. Campbell argues that in Christian tradition all life and nature are somehow sinful. The whole idea of original sin is built on this notion – that there is something inherently evil in everyone, a tendency to do evil or, according to some interpretations, to be evil. Some point out that this may be a partial cause to the attempts of western culture to overcome and use nature rather than coexist with it (Bill Moyers in Campbell, 2001b). This is not a shared feature between all major religions, though: Campbell (2001b) points out that in other doctrines – e.g. in Hinduism – the creation myths are often similar, but the creator is also part of the creation, i.e. everything in nature is divine.

The world of AG is closer to this latter set of teachings. As we have seen, the idea has been developed to the point that **the Land** itself takes the

place of the supreme deity, above gods who only live on it because it suits **the Land**. It is better off than gods, since it does not seem to be dependent of human belief – rather everyone else is dependent on the land, humans and gods alike. Because **the Land** is the supreme deity, there can be no division between divinity and nature. Therefore, as a set of metaphors *AG* seems more up-to-date with the condition of the planet and it's ecosystem.

As for the second demand I placed for a mystical function – to touch on the theme of human nature – there is plenty of material in *AG* that fits the description. While the book is superficially about gods, under the surface it is equally (if not more) about humans who create and abandon gods and myths as they suits their needs. Despite the mundane quality of the surroundings, the world of *AG* possesses supernatural qualities unknown to ordinary people. However, the source of this power are the ordinary humans themselves. They each carry within them a power they are unaware of: the power of imagination and belief. Through faith and devotion, mankind has created an international pantheon in which all gods and creatures of mythologies exist side by side.

Therefore it is unsurprising that the question of human nature (and of human belief) is also present in the gods themselves. Gods in *AG* are a creation of, and as such, reflection of their believers. In the Bible, God created man in his own image. Similarly in *AG* the people created the gods as their own image and as the image of the world around them. Whenever people ran into the unexplained, the awe-inspiring or the frightening in their surroundings, they needed to personify it into a comprehensible form – gods, demons and spirits. As cultures evolved and their primary source of sustenance switched from hunting and foraging to agriculture, the gods had to adapt to the changes. Spirits of the hunted animals gave way to gods of

earth, growth and fertility. Again, as science and advanced agriculture provided means of ensuring enough nourishment every year, the gods of crops and nature became superstition and protector gods of human civilization replaced them (a type of gods that includes most Greek and Roman gods as well as Christian God and the saints). The principle is very logical – gods are, in sense, theories of what might be. Therefore, it could be argued that modern day science is only an advanced form of the same process – scientists learn of a phenomenon and devise theories to explain it.

The gods, then, are a metaphor of the humanity and what we surround ourselves with. Modern **personifications** show this analogy in even clearer themes, because the phenomena they represent are based on human inventions, technology and social structure. We have the car gods, “a powerful, serious-faced contingent with blood on their black gloves and on their chrome teeth: recipients of human sacrifice on a scale undreamed-of since the Aztecs” (AG: 574); and “the great grey gods of the airplanes, heirs to all the dreams of heavier-than-air travel” (ibid.), among many others. What makes them fundamentally different from old gods is that they are incarnations of our belief in our own creations. While old gods usually represented natural powers, celestial bodies and other powers beyond human control, many **personifications** mirror human inventions such as cars and airplanes – a prime example of both human vanity and of our fears of our own potential.

In conclusion, *AG* is about the land we live in, the gods and myths that inhabit it and, through all that, about the human condition. Through these themes it can be credibly argued to support the mystical function as well.

Finally, there is one issue not yet handled that touches the experience of awe at the source and quality of living: the question about meaning of life – i.e. whether there is an overall purpose to human existence, part of some

divine plan. Campbell criticizes the whole concept of meaning of life, and suggests that what we actually seek for is not a meaning but “an experience of being alive”. However, since this is a strongly overlapping idea between mystical and sociological functions, it will be covered in detail in the next section.

5.3 The sociological function

The core of sociological function is to pass laws and morals, i.e. to tell people how to behave and how to function as a part of the surrounding society. Clear examples of this function are found in all cultures, mythologies and religions throughout history, including, for example, the Ten Commandments of Christianity and Aqidah of Islam. Less central but equally applicable examples include sayings, parables and cautionary tales with a clear moral. This function is also mirrored in the morals of old (and some newer) fairy tales and children's literature. Important topics associated with the sociological function are law and morality and meaning of life.

5.3.1 Myth and religion as basis for law and morality

Campbell (1968: 621-623) is very critical towards the social function in the classical sense: if laws and moral codes are tied to religion and holy scriptures, changing the law to reflect changes in world and society often becomes increasingly difficult, even impossible. In this sense, a normative sociological function of myth is obsolete to begin with. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Campbell seems to argue that, unlike the other functions, the sociological function is not needed in modern myths – “the individual is now on his own” (Campbell 1968: 622).

I am ready to argue that the dangers of building morality upon

religion are shared between modern myths and their old counterparts. Any text – be it sacred text, fact or work of fiction – that attempts to fulfill the sociological function in its original sense immediately aims for a position of immense authority. Furthermore, if a text (or collection of texts) is declared holy and therefore flawless, it loses the adaptability that is absolutely needed in any modern juridical system. A static collection of laws and moral guidelines may be close to ideal at the moment that it's written, but within years changes of society as well as technological and scientific advancement could have rendered it less than adequate by creating new loopholes and/or causing it to no longer represent the predominant values. In short, then, it would seem that we are looking for a myth that is not normative i.e. a suggestion of what should be (and how people should act), but rather descriptive, i.e. an attempt to represent what is (and, as we have seen elsewhere, what could be).

The model of society that *AG* provides would seem to adhere to this guideline. The world presented in *AG* is not an idealized model. Rather it shows both pleasant and unpleasant sides of the world. As we can have already seen, it is a world of change rather than a static utopia. Like real life, it is full of complexities and morally gray situations. The novel begins with **Shadow** in prison, as we later find out, for a crime that he committed to support and protect a loved one. **Laura**, on the other hand, rescues **Shadow** from his captors by brutally killing several men, at least one of them completely defenseless:

"Oh and one of the men had gone into the cell down there to jack off with a magazine. He got such a shock."

"You killed him while he was jerking himself off?"

She shrugged. 'I guess,' she said uncomfortably. (*AG*: 163)

Both acted only to save a loved one, but both still chose a potentially

destructive means to reach that goal.

Unlike old educational fairy tales, modern fiction is rarely normative in its sense of morality – modern novels are unlikely to contain an explicit moral, and *AG* is no exception. However, though the story doesn't have a clear morality, it is not to say that it does not comment on the issue of morality at all. Rather, there are very strong themes in *AG* that raise questions, to say the least, about morality, laws, right and wrong.

The first and perhaps the most visible of these “morals” is the issue of responsibility. There is no actual higher power in *AG* that would force meaning on the events of the world. Unlike some popular hero myths, there is no preset destiny that **Shadow** or any other character is bound to follow. Despite **Shadow's** final role in unraveling the plot that threatened the lives of numerous gods, old and new alike, he is not once called a hero or a chosen one. Even many of the supernatural helpers that he has are far from infallible and even lead him astray. While there are gods and goddesses in abundance, none of them have a divine plan that the world would adhere to. The only ones with a plan of any kind, after all, seem to be **Loki** and **Odin**, and even their explicitly selfish plan fails in the end. While **the Land** seems to hold the position of supreme deity in some respect, as we have seen, it is never associated to any set of teachings about how to behave. Even the afterlife seems to be nothing more than a formality – possibly something that people usually choose for themselves like in *The Sandman*, where **Lucifer** explains that nobody goes to hell without choosing to and feeling they deserve to be punished: “And then they die, and they come here (having transgressed against what they believed to be right), and expect us to fulfill their desire for pain and retribution” (Gaiman, 1992: 82, see also Rauch, 2003: 86)

Rather, then, all characters act upon their free will, only limited by

their own nature (and naturally by their circumstances such as the choices of others). This also means that all characters are, at all times, responsible for their own actions and the choices that they make. As we saw, even **Shadow** has made his share of mistakes. However, he is very much unlike his father **Odin** in the sense that he also admits guilt and responsibility for his own actions. Before his release, **Shadow** is asked by the prison warden how he feels about his offense afterwards: "It was stupid,' he said, and meant it." (AG: 8)

For **Odin**, it's harder to admit past misdeeds and make amends for them, since he has to justify a continuum of questionable actions rather than some past deed – his whole method of survival is based on deceit and theft. When **Shadow** has found out about **Odin's** plan is to betray both the old and the new gods and cause a massacre of divine beings for his own benefit, **Odin** shows no regret, only contempt: "And why the hell not? I've been trapped in this damned land for almost twelve hundred years. My blood is thin. I'm hungry." (AG: 570) Instead, **Odin** he projects his frustration on the humans, who created him and whom he holds responsible for his current condition: "They made me. They forgot me. now I take a little back from them. Isn't that fair?" (AG: 337) Still, it is not finally any outside force that destroys **Odin**, but his own failed plan – he has to die in order to be resurrected stronger than ever with the sacrifice of a battlefield of dead gods, but only the first part succeeds – his resurrection ultimately fails because of **Shadow's** meddling. As such the ending is ideal in a karmic sense – **Odin** is hurt by his own selfish actions, not by any outside authority. The case of **Loki**, on the other hand, is not as simple case of causality. **Loki** would otherwise survive the conflict unscathed, but Laura takes the role of justice and mortally wounds **Loki**. While her death seems to grant her some

objectivity on issues, she is very subjective because of her love of **Shadow** and kills **Loki** more or less out of revenge because he threatens to harm **Shadow**. However, **Loki's** case is probably closer to a common real-life scenario. We cannot expect destructive behavior to be automatically punished by the universe or by some divine force. Rather society usually has to act to enforce its rules and to punish behavior that is considered unacceptable.

This takes us to the second important sociological theme – the issue of good and evil. Unlike many novels in the genre of classical fantasy (examples), there is no absolute good or evil in AG. Even **Shadow**, who has a very strong sense of right and wrong, has to make choices that are less than ideal. When **Shadow** is once asked to just say he's “one of the good guys”, he answers: “I can't ... I wish I could. But I'm doing my best.” (AG: 424) Instead, all characters – the protagonists and the antagonists – have very human motives for acting the way they do. None of the characters are evil for the sake of evil – i.e. while some characters do evil, there are none who, like the villains of old fantasy novels, want to destroy the world or cause pain for their own enjoyment. The **kobold Hinzelmann** has killed one child per year for centuries, but in doing so he has kept his town safe from change when the surrounding towns have suffered from rising crime rates, despair and mass joblessness. **Loki** and **Odin** engineer an intricate plan to make old and new gods go to war for their own benefit; but while their motives are completely selfish, they too act out of fear rather than malice.

The mixed duality of AG is perhaps best represented in the character of **Czernobog** – the Slavic black god who supports **Shadow** on his journey after their game of checkers (see section 6.1). At first the character is introduced as very dangerous – he is, after all, a dark god that used to accept

human sacrifices and was considered the source of evil by his people (cf. **Lucifer**). However, the first signs of his true quality begin to manifest when he tells **Shadow** about his brother **Bielebog**, the white god and his good counterpart. **Czernobog** used to have black hair, **Bielebog** white hair, but as they grew old, the difference between them diluted. Their connection runs deeper than their appearances, as **Czernobog's** dream indicates: "I dreamed that I am truly Bielebog. That forever the world imagines that there are two of us, the light god and the dark, but that now we are both old, I find it was only me all the time, giving them gifts, taking my gifts away" (AG: 454) We finally find out that this is the case – during winter, he is **Czernobog**, but during summer he becomes **Bielebog**. However, it is important to note that their dualism is not strict – even **Czernobog** has potential for good – when **Shadow** goes to meet **Czernobog** to let him claim his prize and kill him, **Czernobog** chooses to forsake his right and lets **Shadow** live:

The head of the sledgehammer was cold, icy cold, and it touched his forehead as gently as a kiss.

'Pock! There,' said Czernobog. 'Is done.' There was a smile on his face that Shadow had never seen before, and easy, comfortable smile, like sunshine on a summer's day. (AG: 622)

This gesture is so unexpected that **Shadow** becomes suspicious:

'Czernobog?' asked Shadow. Then, 'Are you Czernobog?'

'Yes. For today,' said the old man. 'By tomorrow, it will all be Bielebog. But today, is still Czernobog.' (AG: 622)

Thus, it is not really only about a good half and a separate bad half alternating, but the evil half also has a potential for good – just as good intentions can cause harm to others.

Though perhaps the most evident one, **Czernobog** isn't the only example of similar duality within one entity. In an interlude, a **leprechaun** tells an old Irish woman about the nature of his kind: "Good and ill ... We're like the wind. We blows both ways." (AG: 110) This isn't surprising – similar

thematics are common in many if not all mythologies. If, as I argued in chapter 9.2, we handle gods as metaphors of human condition, all these metaphors point to the same source – the potential of humans for both good and evil. However, as Campbell (2001b) points out, the teachings of major religions have a tendency to break up the metaphor into separate sources of good and evil. For example, the source of evil in Christian doctrine, **Satan**, is also interpreted as **Lucifer**, a fallen angel (Cotterell, 1989: 217) – and thus he comes from the same source as everything that is good. His story, however is often interpreted only as a moral lesson against pride, dismissing the underlying theme that good and bad are not always easily distinguishable.

A world view of simplified dualism – i.e strong division into good and evil – may be easy to handle and thus a psychologically effective survival strategy – especially when combined with a promise of afterlife and divine judgment after death that may make the injustices of life easier to bear. However, in a dualistic world view, a danger exists that anything that does not fulfill the standards of good is automatically evil and punishable. From here, there is a thin line to the extremist notion that the (absolutely) good have a moral imperative to punish the (absolutely) evil – according to this view, everyone is with you or against you, nothing in between. **Odin** sums up this principle perfectly: “The really dangerous people believe that they are doing whatever they are doing solely and only because it is without question the right thing to do. And that is what makes them dangerous.” (AG: 251) This is also the notion that the plan of **Odin** and **Loki** is ultimately based on: both the old gods and the **personifications** act out of the strong notion that they are doing the right thing. Their group ethics very nearly drive them to their doom.

In conclusion, *AG* avoids the first danger that Campbell associates with the sociological function – building morality upon unchangeable beliefs.

First, the model of society in *AG* is not dualistic in terms of morality, which allows it to handle real-world issues rather than abstract formulations about good and evil. Second, *AG* carries a strong theme of free will and individual responsibility rather than the “group ethics” that Campbell criticizes (1968: 621-623). Third, the clearest examples of good/evil-duality present in the story are often same-centered rather than divided into different sources for good and evil. While many cultures have one source for good (e.g. God) and one source for evil (Satan), in real life the boundary is not always clear. I argue that a same-centered metaphor of dualism can better express human potential for both good and evil.

5.3.2 Meaning of life

Another point that Campbell associates with the classical application of sociological function is the question about the meaning of life itself. To outline the problem, Campbell (1968: 621-622) quotes a passage from Dewey (a 20th century American psychologist and philosopher) that suggests that people who seek divine, unchangeable rules to govern their life also share a tendency to seek “*the meaning of life and the purpose of the universe*” (emphasis in the original) – i.e. one single unified meaning and purpose of life and the universe. Not finding one, these people have a tendency to get depressed and often opt for strict nihilism. These alternatives, however, “are not exhaustive” (ibid.). Rather than seeking an outside answer or meaning to life or, Campbell (1988b) argues that a more productive thing to seek is “an experience of being alive”.

This experience of living is a theme that is present throughout *AG*. The **Shadow** we meet in the beginning of the novel appears to adopt a world view of passive nihilism. He is in prison, where he passively observes the

anguish of other prisoners while minding his own business.

One thing he'd learned early, you do your own time in prison. You don't do anyone else's time for them. Keep your head down. Do your own time. (AG: 6)

He is not really happy in his life, but not unhappy either. The only speck of light in his life seems to be his wife, Laura, whom he genuinely seems to love: "So he kept himself in shape, and taught himself coin tricks, and thought a lot about how much he loved his wife." (AG: 3) As further proof, **Shadow** also went to prison to protect her, though his sacrifice at this point lacks depth because of his complete passivity. Even in the prison, he does not seem depressed in an active sense, but clearly lacks the "experience of being alive". Even his wife Laura, though she appears to love him too, has noticed this and, after her death, explains her notion to him without realizing it will hurt his feelings:

'I love you,' she said dispassionately. 'You're my puppy. But when you're dead you get to see things clearer. It's like there isn't anyone there. You know? You're like this big, solid, man-shaped hole in the world.' ... 'sometimes I'd go to a room and I wouldn't think there was anybody in there. And I'd turn the light on, or I'd turn the light off, and I'd realise that you were in there, sitting on your own, not reading, not watching TV, not doing anything.' (AG: 396)

This observation outlines a central theme in the growth of **Shadow** during the novel – his passivity is perhaps the most notable obstacle during the novel. He observes and he absorbs and he talks like others, but he has very little of his own character. He is altruistic and does not want to see others hurt, but he has very little concern for himself. For example, he gambles his life in checkers with **Czernobog** but he seems to do it to gain a victory for **Odin's** cause rather than for any of his own. Instead of being shocked by losing – he has just bet his own life and lost – he does not hesitate but suggests another game with the excuse that **Czernobog** might not manage to kill him on the first blow.

Finally, **Shadow** only regains his experience of being alive when he hangs on the world tree **Yggdrasil**, expecting to die. It is this last sacrifice of himself that earns him his liberty. It is like it's the first thing he does completely out of his own volition – against the advice of his friends. By doing so, perhaps, **Shadow** has finally triumphed over the fear of death left by the passing away of his mother. The idea of mortality, then, should not be a force that can extinguish our experience of life, but rather one that motivates it.

The survival story of **Shadow** seems to adhere to Campbell's ideas about living: that all life is in itself sorrowful, but it is also an opportunity we should not miss. Campbell (2001b) illustrates this idea by quoting an Irish saying: “Is this a private fight or can anyone join?” Since we cannot prove existence of any form of afterlife, it is in this life that we must search for the experience of living – not a reason or purpose but the raw emotion that constitutes the core of humanity.

5.4 Psychological/pedagogical function

The psychological (or pedagogical) function is to guide us through the various significant phases and transitions of life, from birth to death. Campbell (1968: 623) describes this function as “the centering and harmonication of the individual”. For major religions this function has usually been fulfilled by dedicating oneself to a higher power and authority – at times “even giving up of oneself altogether” (Campbell, 1968: 623-624). Very much like the sociological function, the traditional psychological function receives harsh criticism from Campbell, also for somewhat similar reasons. While the morality and laws dictated by a sociological myth can be used as a means of control, the psychological function can be used in a

similar way. To illustrate this, Campbell (1968: 623-624) quotes Eiseley (a 20th century anthropologist): “The group ethic as distinct from personal ethic is faceless and obscure. It is whatever its leaders choose it to mean; it destroys the innocent and justifies the act in terms of the future.” Campbell's criticism is, no doubt, rooted in history: religion and religious scriptures have been used as a tool for totalitarian control (accusations of heresy) as well as a means to justify violence, torture or other morally objectionable means (witch hunts, religious wars). The problem here, according to Campbell (1968: 623-625), is that the promises that religion makes are often spiritual and intangible issues such as a favorable afterlife. While it is true that such promises can serve as coping strategies for difficulties in life, they can also lead into a life spent in passive expectation of a better future, while neglecting active means of improving the present.

Still, as I argued that there is a positive aspect of the sociological function that AG can serve, there is a positive aspect to the psychological function as well: to guide and promote understanding of life as it is. Therefore, to promote a healthy psychological function, I argue that the myth should handle one or several of the stages and transitions of life as well as the temporal nature of life. I propose that a modern myth, then, should address as many as possible of the following themes, which I have selected by considering various phases and transitions of life in which an individual might need psychological aid. First, birth, childhood and formation of identity – a set of themes often handled in stories and fairytales for children. Second, coming of age and entering adulthood – this would be the equivalent for the coming-of-age ceremonies in various cultures. Third, how to relate to past and future – i.e. the temporal aspect of life. Fourth, if we assess religious group ethics as potentially dangerous, it should stress individual freedom and responsibility rather than unquestioned group ethics. Fifth, if myth is to

serve as a psychological aid for us, it must also somehow touch the issue of death and mortality and offer guidance in dealing with the knowledge of it. The first and second items on this list are not handled in depth within *AG*. This is, however, understandable, since the primary audience of the novel are adults rather than young children. The third, fourth and fifth themes, however, are dealt with some depth.

The past and the future are handled on two levels in *AG* – historical and personal. The historical level is most evident in the interludes under the title *Coming to America* and overlaps with the cosmological function in explaining the past of the nation. The personal level, on the other hand, is mainly focused around **Shadow**, who has a lot in his past to overcome. A notable scene takes place during **Shadow's** afterlife experience, when he chooses to take the “path of hard truths” (after all, he has “come too far for more lies”) (*AG*: 504) and has to witness several difficult scenes from the journey of his life. First, he sees himself in the past beating his accomplices after a bank robbery to protect his wife Laura. Second, he has to witness himself at the death bed of his mother, dying of a too-late discovered lymphoma while he himself is immersed in a book just next to her bed. This scene in particular awakens a clear emotional response in **Shadow** – he would like to shake his younger self into doing or saying something instead of letting his mother simply pass away. However, he cannot change the past and simply has to deal with it and pass on. This is clearly one of the events that have had most influence to **Shadow's** passive approach to life – from **Shadow's** inner monologue we learn that after his mother's death he stopped reading books because “what good were books if they couldn't protect you from something like that” (*AG*: 507). In the next scene, he sees himself arguing with his mother before her death, demanding to know who his

father was. Finally, **Shadow** sees **Odin** dancing with his mother, finally understanding something he already suspected – that **Odin** is his father. However, in the end, when **Bast** asks him if it was worth it, he answers: “Yes. Maybe. It wasn't easy. As revelations go, it was kind of personal.” To this, **Bast** answers that “all revelations are personal ... that's why all revelations are suspect”. (AG: 510) The metaphor here is that only after **Shadow** can overcome his past can he enter the final phase of his afterlife that, eventually, leads to his rebirth as a more whole individual.

The next theme – that of individual freedom – is closely tied to individual responsibility (moral and otherwise) – a theme we have already covered in the context of the sociological function. To recapitulate, there is no pure good or pure evil in the world, only the individuals and their own responsibility for the results of their actions. **Shadow** as a human (or still as a demi-god) is, despite his initial attachment to **Odin's** faction, still a relatively free agent when compared to the old gods and new gods, reliant on human belief. To be human, then, is also to be free. Of course, this freedom can be obstructed by a totalitarian society – a theme often handled in fiction (see for example Orwell, 1949) – or by others' decisions – but as a whole, this is a phenomenon of humans as a species limiting their own freedom rather than control from an outside force. There is a certain freedom in the very essence of humanity that is captured by **Shadow** in his speech to the battling gods: “You know ... I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do.”

Finally, mortality and death are themes handled in some way by every mythology. The theme of death enters the narrative very early when **Shadow's** wife Laura dies in a car accident just before he is released from prison. Attending her funeral he learns that, before her death, his wife had an affair with his best friend that also died in the same accident. Yet **Shadow**

hasn't had any time to cope with the situation when he finds out that Laura's spirit has been bound to her body by the magical gold coin he received from **Mad Sweeney** and dropped in Laura's grave as a parting gift. Laura visits his room, but **Shadow** finds it more unsettling than comforting. Not only is he still confused about the revelation about Laura's affair with his friend, but while Laura has been reanimated by the coin, she still has the flesh of a corpse:

Laura's tongue flickered into Shadow's mouth. It was cold, and dry, and it tasted of cigarettes and of bile. If Shadow had had any doubts as to whether his wife was dead or not, they ended then. (AG: 68)

This understandably puts **Shadow** in a very difficult position emotionally. **Shadow** is torn between anger at Laura's betrayal, horror at her resurrection and sadness for her passing: "He wished that he were mourning Laura: it seemed more appropriate than being troubled by her or [...] scared by her." (AG: 70) After this first meeting, Laura comes to **Shadow** several times. Not one of their meetings is a standard Hollywood reunification of lovers, rather the moments they share are at best somewhat awkward. **Shadow** does his best to find a way to resurrect Laura for real, but does not discover a method that would not go against his morality. As time goes by, **Shadow** keeps himself occupied and, despite the fact he still hasn't recovered his experience of life, his pain is somewhat dulled. The visit of Laura at Lakeside is already easier for **Shadow**.

A car came around the corner. The driver waved them hello. Shadow waved back. It felt wonderfully normal to walk with his wife.

'This feels good,' said Laura, as if she was reading his mind.

'Yes,' said Shadow. (AG: 395)

Even though Laura is still visibly "very dead" (AG: 393), for a moment they can catch something of their past years together – a sense of belonging, like a memory of their happier times. Still, the moment passes and **Shadow** still

does not feel comfortable with her, and cannot bring himself to lie to her about it:

'You didn't want to see me.'

'It wasn't that.' He hesitated. 'No. I didn't want to see you. It hurts too much.' (AG: 397)

As long as Laura is around, **Shadow** cannot help remembering the pain of her loss as well as the hurt from her adultery – the ceremony of burial has failed to help him overcome his grief, because she still clings to him.

However, holding **Odin's** vigil on the branches of **Yggdrasil**, **Shadow** begins the change of perception that finally helps him overcome his grief. When Laura comes to see him at the tree, they have already reached a certain peace:

'Stay, he said, in a breath that was almost a whisper, unsure whether or not she could hear him. 'Please don't go.' He started to cough. 'Stay the night.'

'I'll stop a while,' she said. And then, like a mother to a child she said, 'Nothing's gonna hurt you when I'm here. You know that?' (AG: 500)

For the first time since her death, **Shadow** asks her not to leave – her presence is no longer painful over anything else. In the moments before his death through a voluntary self-sacrifice, he has already begun to discover the value of his own life and death – a realization necessary in order to understand and cope with the death of others.

In the end, when the conflict between new and old gods is already settled, **Shadow** meets Laura for the last time. **Shadow** has now reached his Apotheosis and experienced an enlightenment that has restored his feeling of life, and is ready for his final challenge – letting go of Laura:

'Did you ever figure out how to bring me back from the dead?' she asked.

'I guess,' he said. 'I know one way, anyway.'

'That's good,' she said. She squeezed his hand with her cold hand. And then she said, 'And the opposite? What about that?'

'The opposite?'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I think I must have earned it.'

'I don't want to do that.'

She said nothing. She simply waited. (AG: 578-579)

Through his experience of rebirth **Shadow** has also recovered his love and attachment for her, but Laura wants to be released from the artificial life that has grown to be a burden to her – Laura, then, has developed too, in her attitude to life and death. **Shadow** obliges her, removing from her neck the gold coin necklace that was keeping her alive, despite his sadness at losing her – he cannot choose otherwise, now that he has learned to better understand the importance of death.

Laura's death, of course, is not the only one that **Shadow** – and through him the reader – must deal with. After all, in AG even the gods possess the capability to die. It would seem that for gods, who have experienced relative immortality, the threat of death (and of change) is even more fearsome – a lifespan of thousands of years has only made it harder to give it up. Here we are very close to Rauch's findings about *The Sandman* – in it, Death (see **Endless**) tells a man who has lived thousands of years: “You lived what everyone gets, Bernie. You got a lifetime. No more. No less.”(Gaiman, 1994)

On the other hand, among gods in AG we also get positive examples of dealing with death. During the brief respite that **Shadow** enjoys working with **Mr Ibis** and **Mr Jacquel** in their funeral parlour, he gets to witness them working on a recently dead person, doing an autopsy before preparing the body for the burial:

He [Mr. Jacquel] weighed each organ, reported them as normal and uninjured. From each organ he took a small slice and put it into a jar of formaldehyde.

From the heart, the liver, and from one of the kidneys, he cut an additional slice. These pieces he chewed, slowly, making them last, while he worked.

Somehow it seemed to Shadow a good thing for him to do: respectful, not obscene. (AG: 215)

Mr Jacquel is an expert of his field – as expected of an incarnation of **Anubis**. While funeral rites and customs vary, there is one thing in common for funeral rites in all cultures: it is the other people – relatives, friends and the close ones of the deceased – that these rituals and formalities are there for. As we see from **Shadow's** reaction, even though he never knew the deceased while she lived, he is still comforted and relieved by the respectful professionalism of **Mr Jacquel**.

Last, **Shadow** also comes face to face with his own death. Hanging from the branches of the world tree **Yggdrasil**, **Shadow** dies. For **Shadow**, however, this is a moment of realization and of freedom rather than of despair. Afterwards, **Shadow** enters an afterlife that is not, perhaps, all that he expected. Instead of “Saint Peter and the Pearly Gates” (AG: 514), he finds **Thoth**, **Anubis** and **Bast** waiting for him, telling him that “‘It doesn't matter that you didn't believe in us,’ said Mr Ibis. ‘We believed in you.’” (AG: 514)

Furthermore, as we have seen, it is not a permanent death in his case – “Even Nothing cannot last forever.” (AG: 545). If we accept that **Shadow**, despite his demi-god origins, represents humanity, then **Shadow's** resurrection has clear symbolic value – especially since it is **Eostre**, goddess of spring, that brings him back to life from the nothingness of his own selection. Without commenting on the possibility of an afterlife – i.e. any form of continuity of individual's existence and preservation of thought processes after physical death, a phenomenon we can get no reliable evidence of – new generations are born to take our place and ensure that our memory goes on in one form or another.

Finally, **Shadow's** thrill of living evoked by nearing death also carries a more personal lesson: we should take the knowledge that a human lifetime

is limited by an eventual death as a resource rather than an omen of doom that eventually voids everything we achieve in life. As we have seen, Campbell (2001b) also argues that while “all life is sorrowful”, it is still worth living, since it's the only certain chance we get at reaching the experience of being alive. This idea is integral in the conversation that **Shadow** has with **Thoth** on his way to his final judgment:

'What you have to remember,' said Mr Ibis testily, 'is that life and death are different sides of the same coin. Like the heads and tails of a quarter.'

'And if I had a double-headed quarter?'

'You don't.' (AG: 513-514)

In this short exchange we can read the issue of life and death in a nutshell. Metaphor of the double-headed quarter can be read in many ways, all of them connected to the idea of cheating death – whether through technology, magic, cunning or divine grace. However, no trick can guarantee us eternal life – no matter how long we live, the death is still something we must consider and learn to accept. Constructing and valuing one's lifetime in expectation of death may seem a grim world view, but it is only a matter of view point – it can also help us enjoy everything that is good in life to it's full extent rather than live only in expectation of a better afterlife.

In conclusion, *AG* handles several important themes about human life, essential to the psychological/pedagogical function. First, the temporal aspect of life: **Shadow** has to learn how to relate to his past (and learn not to fear the future) in order to achieve his ultimate reward. Second, individual freedom and responsibility vs. group ethics: as seen in previous chapters, *AG* has a strong theme of individual freedom of thought and of action. **Shadow** has to take control of his own life in order to avoid being used in a plot he cannot approve of. Third, the theme of death and of letting go of the dead. The story of *AG* revolves around the concepts of death and resurrection – **Shadow** also

has to come to terms with his mortality in order to become whole as a person. On the other hand, those who stay behind must learn to let go of the dead in order to go on with their lives – **Shadow** does not let **Laura** go because he wants to, but because he understands it is necessary. Finally, *AG* seems to support a viewpoint of death (and especially knowledge of death) as a catalyst of the experience of living rather than an oppressing force that makes life in itself futile and purposeless. Understanding and accepting the concept of eventual death is, after all, a key factor in truly valuing and appreciating life. In conclusion, it would seem that *AG* has enough proof to warrant an argument that it can serve the psychological function of myth.

6. CONCLUSION

I studied *AG* using Campbell's the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1949) and the Four Functions of Myth (Campbell, 1968). While others have studied the similarities of form of the – i.e. the use of old in creating new – my focus was on the functional aspect of myth. My specific aim was to identify themes and patterns common in mythology and, through a functional analysis, see if *AG* can recreate one or several of the functions of myth in a form approachable for a modern readership.

I begun my analysis with Hero's Journey to the journey of the main character of *AG*, **Shadow Moon**. While *AG* did not fit all stages of Hero's Journey easily, I found strong candidates for equivalents for most of the stages. On the other hand, because of the adaptability of Hero's Journey, if interpreted freely, almost any work of fiction could be read as following the Hero's Journey, while a tighter interpretation can easily exclude stories that can serve the functions of myth. Therefore, it would seem that while Hero's Journey may be helpful in outlining the similarities between various mythologies and hero myths, it is not a very accurate means of distinguishing what can be called myth and what cannot.

However, my analysis on the Hero's Journey helped outline the storyline of *AG* and to highlight some of the stages that have most potential to serve the functions of myth. With the help of the Hero's Journey I identified some of the central themes of *AG*: experience of being alive, death as the catalyst of life and the issue of subjective truth. While this section alone wasn't enough to prove or disprove the mythic potential of *AG*, it helped establish a view of the general structure of the novel.

While the Hero's Journey helped define the overall structure of the

story, the results I got from the functional analysis were more conclusive in defining whether *AG* qualifies as a modern myth. I analyzed the novel in relation to mystical, cosmological, sociological and psychological function, respectively, and found sufficient evidence to support the argument that the story can serve each function. I read this as evidence that *AG* can indeed be read as a modern myth (or even a modern mythology), at least according to Campbell's criteria. This discovery is significant, because it shows that modern popular fiction can actually bring the function of myth into the modern times. At best, then, literature may help us understand our world (cosmological function), it may promote the ideas of personal freedom and responsibility (sociological function), it may teach us to regain a sense of wonder and respect of ourselves and our environment (mystical function), and, finally, it may support an individual's psychological balance and offer survival strategies in difficult phases of life (psychological/pedagogical function).

An obvious starting point for further research would be to examine what other works of fiction – and popular culture in general – might qualify as modern myths if a similar functional analysis were to be applied. Furthermore, my study of *AG* as well as similar studies on *The Sandman* (Rauch, 2007) suggest that there is no reason to narrow works qualifying as “modern myths” to works of classical fantasy that closely adhere to Hero's Journey. Rather, the research should be expanded to different genres and different media – for example children's books, TV-series and movies would certainly be fruitful fields for primary sources. While the more modern works may be less orthodox in form and subject area, one must keep in mind that this is not necessarily a bad thing if it is modern myths we are looking for. If Rauch's (and Campbell's) argument about the old religions and their scriptures no longer serving the needs of majority of society has any base in

reality, then what is needed are fresh approaches – not simply carbon copies of old myths. To actually serve the functions of their old (and arguably outdated) counterparts, new myths need a modern context and, even more importantly, modern forms of expression. In Campbell's own words, “the world changes, then the religion has to transform ... just bring your same old religion into a new set of metaphors and you've got it.” (Campbell, 2001b)

In conclusion, despite the fact that a lot of has changed since the ancient times, myth and mythology still seem to have something that is permanent – a solid core that only needs to be updated and polished to take it to a new era. However, we have no need to confine our new mythology in any single form. All in all, literature and other forms of expressive culture still contain the seed of what myths used to be about – a primal force that can still reawaken in us the sense that we are not alone in our confusion, in our sorrow or in our joy – the same emotion that Campbell talks of:

...heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world. (Campbell, 1949: 23)

What Campbell argues here is that the hero myth is still a valid pattern, even for modern societies, as long as we can bring it into our own culture through a renovation of the metaphors and the imagery. Whether the form is movies, fiction or comic books or any other, it is possible to recreate an emotional and spiritual experience similar to what our ancestors found in old mythologies. Furthermore, in doing so, we can create new modern mythologies, able to help us solve problems we thought were ours alone. While a lot has changed, the basic pattern of our existence is still the same – people are born, live their lives and eventually die. Myths can teach us that we do not have to face the

most fundamental difficulties and fears of our lives alone – many others have walked the same path and we still have a lot to learn from them.

GLOSSARY

Anansi (African): African trickster god, often attributed the form of a spider. (Bray, 1935) In *AG*, **Anansi** is incarnated as Mr Nancy, a charismatic African American man who helps **Shadow** on his journey.

Anubis (Egyptian): Son of Osiris and the Jackal-headed guardian of the Egyptian underworld. (Cotterell, 1989:61)

Backstage (Fiction): A place outside and behind mundane reality in *AG*. **Odin** once describes it to **Shadow**: “Think of it as being behind the scenes. Like in a theatre or something. I just pulled us out of the audience and now we're walking about backstage.” (*AG*: 372)

Balder (Teutonic): Son of **Odin**, a gentle, beautiful and beloved god. Because of a foretelling of **Balder's** ill fate, the gods took a pledge from all things so that they would not hurt him. Only mistletoe was ignored as too insignificant to be dangerous. However, **Loki** deceived **Balder's** brother Hod to accidentally kill **Balder** with a dart of mistletoe – the only thing that could harm him. (Willis et al., 1995)

Balder Moon (Fiction): See **Shadow**.

Baron Samedi (Haitian): One of the great spirits of Haitian voodoo religion. A spirit of death and fertility. Baron Samedi is often depicted as a tall man with a black frock coat, a black top hat and dark glasses. (Cotterell, 1989)

Bast (Egyptian): Feline goddess of the sun and of war in the Egyptian mythology. (Cotterell, 1989: 188)

Bielebog (Slavic): Also Bylebog. The white god and the source of all good, the counterpart of **Czernobog**.

Bilquis (Islamic): Queen of the ancient kingdom of Sheba. (Wood, 2005)

Culture hero (All cultures): A type of mythological hero that is not an actual

god, but often a human or an animal. American culture heroes found in *AG* include **Johnny Appleseed** and **Wisakedjak**, the latter of which once explains the difference of culture heroes and gods to **Shadow**: “We do the same shit gods do, we just screw up more and nobody worships us. They tell stories about us, but they tell the ones which make us look bad along with the ones where we came out fairly okay.” (AG: 548)

Czernobog (Slavic): Also Chernobog, Cernobog. The black god, the god of the dead, counterpart of his brother **Bielebog**, the white god (Bray, 1935). The dual gods are among the oldest Slavic gods (McLeish, 1996).

Jinn (Islamic): Also djinn, ifrit. Fallen angels or devils of Islamic mythology. (Cotterell, 1989: 202)

Dream (Fiction): The main character of *The Sandman* comic series and one of the **Endless**. Dream or Dream King, also known as Oneiros or Morpheus, is the lord of dreams, who oversees both pleasant dreams and nightmares from his kingdom, **The Dreaming**. (Gaiman, 1991)

Dreaming, the (Fiction): The domain of **Dream** of the **Endless** in *The Sandman*. Dreaming is the place where humans come when they are asleep and dreaming.

Emerson Borson (Fiction): The name that **Odin** assumes when he pretends to be Mike Ainsel's uncle. The name consists of a direct reference to **Odin's** family: Bor, son of Ymir was **Odin's** father, therefore Ymir's son Bor's son is **Odin** himself. (Cotterel, 1989: 71)

Endless, The (Fiction): Seven antropomorphic personifications in the Sandman comics by Neil Gaiman, named after the forces they represent. They are: Death, **Dream**, Destruction, Delirium (formerly Delight), Desire, Despair and Destiny. (Gaiman, 1991)

Dreaming, The (Fiction): The domain of **Dream** in *The Sandman*. As the name

suggests, the **The Dreaming** exists in the minds of sleepers. (Gaiman, 1991)

Frigg (Teutonic/Norse): Wife of **Odin**, mother to **Balder**. (Northvegr Foundation, 2007)

Galahad (Celtic): According to the Arthurian myth, Galahad was a Knight of the Round Table and the most noble and virtuous of all knights. He was tasked with finding the **Holy Grail** and, as the only one, succeeded in the task. (Cotterell, 1989)

Ganesh (Hindu) Elephant-headed god of wisdom and remover of obstacles. (Cotterell, 1989)

Hinzelmann (Teutonic/German) A famous German **kobold**. It was believed to live in Hudemühlen and once appeared to a curious maid as “a naked child apparently three years old, and two knives sticking crosswise in his heart, and his whole body streaming with blood”. (Keightley, 1870) In AG, the character called **Hinzelmann** is a former god who, in the form of an old charismatic man, has taken the town of Lakeside under his protection at the cost of one child sacrifice per year.

Holy Grail, the (Christian, Celtic): Also known as Sangreal. The cup from which Jesus was said to have enjoyed his last supper, later sought by the Knights of the Round Table in Arthurian mythology. (Cotterell, 1989)

House on the Rock (Real place): A massive roadside attraction in Wisconsin, featuring e.g. The Largest Carousel in the World, “the world's only mechanically operated symphony orchestra” and other places visited by the characters of AG. (Thehouseontherock.com, 2009)

Johnny Appleseed (Cultural hero): Also known as Johnny Chapman. An American pioneer, who was known for introducing apple trees in a wide area of Northern America as well as for his wandering lifestyle. (Haley, 1871)

Kobold (German): A trickster spirit of German folklore. (Encyclopedia Mythica Online, 2009a)

Land, the (Fiction): The anthropomorphic personification of the land of America in AG. Takes the form of a fire and of a buffalo-headed man, through whom the fire speaks.

Leprechaun (Irish): A type of Irish male fairy. (Encyclopedia Mythica Online, 2009b)

Loki (Teutonic): Trickster god who deceived Hod into killing his brother **Balder**. Loki is believed to have been a personification of forest fire, at that time the most destructive and terrifying known natural phenomenon. (Cotterell, 1989).

Low-Key Lyesmith (Fiction): In AG, **Loki** first introduces himself by this name to hide his identity and to avoid suspicion. The name is a pun on his name, since the pronunciation is the same as with "**Loki** Lie-smith." (AG)

Lucifer (Christian): Lucifer Morningstar was originally an influential angel, who was banished from heaven and became the lord of hell, the Christian afterlife for sinners. (Cotterell, 1989: 217)

Medea (Greek): A powerful witch who fell in love with the Greek hero Jason. After Jason wanted to leave her and marry princess Creusa instead, Medea murdered Creusa with a poisoned wedding dress and supposedly also killed her two children she had given birth to for Jason. (Cotterell, 1989: 220) Medea herself does not make an appearance in the novel, but Czernobog once confuses her with **Media**: "Media. I think I have heard of her. Isn't she the one who killed her children?' 'Different woman,' said Mr Nancy. 'Same deal.'" (AG: 463)

Media (Personification): One of the "new gods" in AG, the **personification** of modern media (especially television). In her own words, "The TV is the altar. I'm what they're sacrificing to." (AG: 187)

Mike Ainsel (Fiction): The name (and personality) that **Shadow** assumes

when hiding in Lakeside. (AG: 261) The name is probably a reference to folktales (of several variations) in which an ordinary boy meets a mythical being (often fairy) and introduces himself as My Ainsel (My Ownself). After the boy somehow hurts the being, some stronger creature asks: "Who has hurt you". Hearing the answer – My Ainsel – the stronger creature believes the being has hurt himself/herself and the boy escapes responsibility. There is a resemblance here to the story of Ulysses and the cyclops in the *Odyssey*.

Morpheus (Fiction): See **Dream**.

Morrigan (Irish): Irish triple-goddess of war, consisting of Morrigan ("Great Queen / Phantom Queen"), Badb ("Crow") and either Macha ("Crow") or Nemain ("Frenzy"). (Encyclopedia Mythica Online, 2009c)

Mr Ibis (Fiction): See **Thoth**

Mr Jacquiel (Fiction): See **Anubis**.

Mr Nancy (Fiction): See **Anansi**.

Mr World (Fiction): Leader of the faction of personifications (also modern gods) in AG. He is later revealed to be **Loki**, disguising himself as a part of a mutual plan with **Odin**.

Odin (Teutonic): The All-Father of Teutonic mythology. (Cotterell, 1989: 139-140)

Shadow Moon (Fiction) : The main character of AG. In the novel, **Shadow** is an ex-convict, who ends up working for **Odin** and finally finds out he is actually **Odin's** son with a mortal woman. **Shadow's** real name is **Balder Moon** (Gaiman, 2006), at least until he gives away his name in the afterlife in AG. He bears much resemblance to the Teutonic god **Balder**, son of **Odin** and his wife **Frigg**.

Thoth (Egyptian): The divine scribe, protector of learning, the judge of dead souls and one of the most influential gods in old Egypt. Thoth was often

depicted with the head of an ibis. (Cotterell, 1989: 165)

Thunderbird (North American): Mythical bird of power and strength in many North American mythologies. (Encyclopedia Mythica Online, 2009d)

Valhalla (Teutonic): **Odin's** domain and the afterlife for dead warriors in Teutonic mythology. In Valhalla, the warriors feast, but also train their skills in combat in preparation of Ragnarök, the final battle at the end of the world. (Cotterell, 1989: 245)

Wednesday (Fiction): In *AG*, **Odin** first introduces himself as Wednesday. The name is a pun on his real name: the Old English form of Wednesday was *Wodnesdæg*, “**Woden's** day”. (*AG*:22) Gaiman first had a story idea with several gods named after days of the week, but when he learned that Diana Wynne Jones had already told a similar story in *Eight Days of Luke*, he abandoned the original idea but used the name Wednesday in *AG*. (Wagner et al. 2008: 335) In the last chapter, after the American **Odin** has died and failed to resurrect himself, we also meet the Icelandic incarnation of **Odin**, who seems to be a separate individual with his own memories. (*AG*: ??)

Personification (Fiction): In *AG*, a set of modern gods exists among the old ones. For brevity, these gods are generally referred to as personifications in this thesis. The term is appropriate because these new gods are incarnations of inanimate, non-human and/or abstract phenomena such as **Media**, cars, aeroplanes or cancer.

Woden (Teutonic): See: **Odin**.

World tree (Various mythologies): A repeated motif in many different religions. World tree is usually a giant tree that supports the heaven with its branches. In Norse/Teutonic mythology, the world tree is called **Yggdrasil** and it also features in *AG*.

Wisakedjak (North American): Aka. Wisagatcak (anglicized as Whiskey

Jack). A native american trickster and cultural hero. According to a myth, Wisakedjak was involved in the re-creation of world after a great flood in the beginning of time. (Bierhorst 1985)

Yggdrasil (Teutonic): Yggdrasil, the Norse world tree, was a great ash tree. It's branches reached the worlds above: Muspelsheim, Vannaheim, Svartalfaheim, Ljosalfaheim, Mannheim and Helheim. Yggdrasil also had three massive roots that reached into worlds below: Jotunheim, Nifelheim and Godheim. Thus the world tree reached through all the nine worlds of Norse mythology. In Scandinavia, Yggdrasil is often associated with **Odin**, who hung himself on it's branches in order to gain knowledge. (Cotterell 1989: 176) In AG, Yggdrasil is located in Virginia, in the back yard of an old farm. (AG: 484)

Zorya (Slavic): Three goddesses of dawn (**Zorya Utrennyaya**), twilight (**Zorya Vechernyaya**) and night (**Zorya Polunochnaya**) (McLeish, 1996).

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