

Construing the Monomyth in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

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Abstract

Neil Gaiman has acquired his eminence in the domain of fantasy fiction. Gaiman's works are often an amalgamation of multifarious god lore. His inventive work of fiction *American Gods* is a gripping saga about the world of gods. Shadow Moon the protagonist of the novel inadvertently finds himself being the causative of war between gods. The paper explains Gaiman's contribution to literature in particular to mythology and the appropriateness of studying Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* under the light of Campbellian Monomyth. The paper puts into effect the theory of Monomyth pertaining to Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. The seventeen stages are fundamentally inseparable from the narrative of the novel. The researcher provides discernible and conclusive examples from the novel for each stage. The arrangement of course of action in the novel is done in way that it can easily serve as the prototypal exemplification of the Monomyth model. The paper supports the aforementioned thought. The paper aims to deconstructs the style of the novel as one based on mythology but posed in a technical world. It also brings together the process of the protagonist Shadow Moon Moon's journey from ignorance to perceptiveness, alongside the limitations and forthcoming avenues of the thesis.

Keywords: Adventure; Character arc; Heroes' journey; Monomyth, Mythology; Quest.

Neil Gaimea's works are a modern take on mythology. Gaiman's writing style is ineffable and is constantly changing to fit whatever mythic sphere he is creating. Gaiman's work often contains illusions and references to his other work and nod to ancient myths of different cultures. Gaiman is not just merely presenting or retelling mythologies, but also creates his own mythical world. His novels are interlaced with mazy

plots, distinctive characters, pronounced themes Gaiman's literary canon includes works read by all ages some of his best works including *Neverwhere* (1995), *Stardust* (1999), the Hugo and Nebula Award winning *American Gods* (2001), *Anansi Boys* (2005), *Good Omens* with Terry Pratchett (1990). Gaiman has also written short story collections *Smoke and Mirrors* (1998) *Fragile Things* (2006). His first collection of short fiction, *Smoke and Mirrors* was in the run for the UK's MacMillan Silver Pen Awards as the best short story collection of the year. Gaiman's thoughtful tying of various myths creates a refreshing narrative and also a style that is vivid and profoundly meaningful where every action is a reference to myth of some kind, this gives the readers the pleasure to decipher and venture into the world of myths.

American Gods is a magical and whimsical story filled with myths and peculiar gods of the old and new world. The plot structure is character driven following the life of the protagonist Shadow Moon upon his release from the prison. *American Gods* is built on the world of pagan deities which established Gaiman in the world of literature. Shadow Moon embarks in a road trip across US cities with old mythological deities where the new gods of media, fame, technology dominate seems fitting to the American society. Gaiman explores the America that is hidden by delving deeper into the American society's fractured psyche, unraveling mythologies of all cultures along the way spinning the yarn of suspense beautifully till the last page. *American Gods* has been released in an expanded tenth anniversary edition.

The books entire plot pivots on Shadow Moon hence it seems fitting to apply the concept of Monomyth to the novel *American Gods*. The novel is amalgamation of various myths. But across all myths there is a common pattern and that pattern is decoded by the famous mythology writer Joseph Campbell in his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

Joseph John Campbell was an American professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College who unified concepts of comparative mythology and comparative religion in his various works. His progressive findings greatly influenced literature. The Hero's Journey decrypts the history of spiritual evolution of humans across all cultures and mythology

The said pattern in Hero's Journey comprises 17 stages where the hero departs and sets on to fulfill his quest while facing various trials and tribulations. This theory is based on observed that a common pattern exists behind the narrative elements of great myths regardless of their time or

origin of creation. This framework is a three act structure each stage comprising various sub-stages the first stage being 'The departure' where the chosen one leaves his world and family behind and starts his adventure willingly. The second stage is called 'The initiation' where the hero learns to navigate his way into the unfamiliar world also learn a lesson and rectifies his fatal flaw. The third stage is 'The return' the hero returns home as a better person being transformed with newfound knowledge gained through his quest.

The aim of this paper is an attempt to provide a concise overview of the protagonist Shadow Moon's peregrination in Neil Gaimen's novel *American Gods*. The researcher also makes an attempt to discern the ruminations of the protagonist Shadow Moon. The need to construe Shadow Moon's thoughts is considered vital to the researcher because, his introspection gives rise to his decision, which makes him fall in line with Joseph Campbell's Monomyth. The study also aims to lend weight to, how much of a non-conformist and maverick hero Shadow Moon is which makes him beyond any archetype.

As Monomyth is frame of reference unmistakably conceived primarily for mythology. The novel *American Gods* is a voyage through a plethora of mythologies. *American Gods* is much of a traveler's tale which accounts and registers the expedition of the chief character Shadow Moon. It seems appropriate to disentangle the Monomyth structure in *American Gods* as it's congruent with the requirements of the template.

Shadow Moon is the protagonist of the novel *American Gods*. His impetuous decisions frequently land him in harm's way. Shadow Moon's obdurate ways makes him land up in prison. After being disencumbered from the clutches of penitentiary, he lands himself in the dire straits of tussle between the old and new gods. This scuffle leads Shadow Moon to walk down the path of a hero. This journey contributes to his subsequent enlightenment.

Departure is first of three main stages of the hero's peregrination. The hero is existing in a world where he thinks he belongs, without a warning is the hero is pushed into a surreal world and this unprecedented situation puts a halt in the plans of hero. The hero may enter into the suspicious world without reluctance, due to the circumstances of the given moment the hero is left with no choice but to depart, as he might have to salvage the unfamiliar world.

Call to adventure is the first substage of Departure. A new opportunity presents itself in hero's life which gives him an opportunity to leave behind the familiar world. However, the hero does not instantly accept this call to adventure as the fear of uncertainty and unknown dangers of the unfamiliar world pulls him back. Due to a series of misunderstandings and misreading the situation he lands himself in prison. He carefully plans his days and anticipates the day of his release due to unforeseen demise of his wife Laura in an accident Shadow Moon is released a day earlier due to this. During his flight back home Shadow Moon meets Mr. Wednesday in a layover caused due to a sudden storm. Shadow Moon hesitates as Mr. Wednesday a complete stranger who surprisingly knows every detail about Shadow Moon's life puts him off. Shadow Moon is completely oblivious of the fact that Mr. Wednesday is Norse God Odin. Shadow Moon is wary of the puzzling old man and his mysterious job offer which may be dangerous. Mr. Wednesday to lure Shadow Moon into taking up the job says, "you have lost everything. I am offering you a chance to something back" (Gaiman 152). Shadow Moon's call to adventure presents itself in the form of a job offer from the Norse God Odin.

Refusal of the call is second substage, where the hero refuses to accept the invitation to go on the quest. The hero is bewildered which roots from the fear of uncertainty and perils. Shadow Moon acknowledges that it is not easy to secure a job being a former felon. Being stripped off is previous life with his wife along with his safety net offered by his friend Robbie Burton being gone. Being in a desperate need for a job and searching for a way to reintegrate into society. Shadow Moon wants to step out of his comfort zone and accept the job Mr. Wednesday offers but he bears in mind that he is on a conditional parole and the job that Mr. Wednesday offers does seem a sketchy involving some law breaking. Shadow Moon decides to turn down Mr. Wednesday's offer.

Supernatural aid is the next stage of the Monomyth. A mentor is the one who can guide the hero through his quest providing him with magical gifts, advice and insight. Mostly the mentor figure is a person of supernatural abilities. The mentor emboldens the hero for his journey ahead. In the novel *American Gods* Mr. Wednesday assumes the role of Shadow Moon's mentor. But the role of the mentor is constantly shifting between some minor gods like Ibis Mad Sweeney who unintentionally gives Shadow Moon the gold lucky coin and Zoya Polunochnaya presents Shadow Moon with a silver liberty dollar symbolizing the Moon for his protection. But the responsibility of the mentor mostly lies in the hands of Mr. Wednesday who accompanies and guides Shadow Moon into his journey

of understanding the world of deities.

Crossing the threshold, the fourth stage of departure shows that the hero is steadfast and driven in the new voyage he has undertaken. Shadow Moon helps Mr. Wednesday to rob a bank therefore indirectly hinting that he is committed to the quest. He also encounters the other gods from different cultures during his trip to House on the Rock. There is a meeting for all the old forgotten gods because Mr. Wednesday wants the aid of the old gods to walk into to a war with the new gods of technology, media and globalization who are taking over the world from the hands of the old gods. After the meeting Shadow Moon feels taken aback and shocked that he had been working for a god all along but still he does fall back from his responsibilities therefore pledging his alliance to the quest.

Belly of the whale is the fifth stage of the hero's journey. The phrase belly of the whale indicates the revival of the hero in the course of his ordeal. Hero springing up from the belly of the whale signifies darkness and death and is also symbolic of his subsequent reawakening. Occasionally the hero does not fight back but rather yields to the darkness

and qualms in his mind. He spends time withdrawn from this quest. After coming back from the House and the Rock he is abducted Mr. Stone and Mr. Wood who are the henchmen of Technical Boy. He wants to fight them and escape but

Shadow Moon feels mentally drained and trapped and "He was numb: heart numb, mind numb, soul numb." (Gaiman 170). He enters a dark space in his mind where he witnesses his mother dying feels helpless as he watches the tragedy as a bystander. The emotional trauma holds him back and darkness engulfs his mind. When he wakes up in a cold sweat, he finds out that Laura Moon his wife who has been resurrected. Laura Moon comes to the aid of Shadow Moon who is getting lynched by Technical Boy's Spooks led by puzzling figure Mr. World and kills them. Shadow Moon does not undergo this stage physically but rather mentally.

Road of trials is the stage where the hero becomes familiar with his enemies, allies and about the purpose and his role in the ordeal. Shadow Moon works up his courage and reaches out his hand to know about bygone days of other gods even though some gods are hostile towards him. He attempts to understand that Gods are also immigrants to the land of America and they need mankind's belief in them to survive. Shadow Moon empathizes with the old gods who are hanging on to their last straw

of pride. Shadow Moon understands the standpoint of the old gods who are resolute in giving their all into the war. Shadow Moon actively gears up himself in the premeditation of the war. He develops a rapport with the old gods for reasons unknown to him. Shadow Moon becomes completely onboard to whatever decision the old gods take.

Meeting with the Goddess is a stage where the hero encounters a goddess and also a stage where Campbell starts to discern a difference between genders. This particular allegorical figure can be in the form of a mother, sister, mistress and bride. This figure will serve as the representation and embodiment of all feminine qualities. Shadow Moon comes across many such figures during his road of trials. Easter who is the American reincarnation of Germanic goddess Ostara who is the goddess of dawn and spring. In the later part of the novel Easter even resurrects Shadow Moon at the cost of her own life. Egyptian goddess Bast also helps Shadow Moon to make a choice between hell, heaven and purgatory in Hall of the Dead after dying in the World Tree performing the vigil for Odin.

Women as Temptress, the stage mainly focuses on the temptations and distractions the hero faces during his ordeal. The word woman merely serves as the metaphor and the representation of hindrances in many cases. This stage is a cognitive test for Shadow Moon. Shadow Moon upon arriving to his wife Laura Moon's funeral learns about her issues of infidelity which brings down Shadow Moon's life into shambles. Laura misleads Shadow Moon from his actual quest for her own needs. Laura manipulates Shadow Moon to her own will as he is in love with her. Shadow Moon at many times gets pushed around and gets sidetracked for the whims of Laura. But Laura is pivotal for Shadow Moon's character arc, as she makes Shadow Moon acknowledge the feelings, he still has for her. Shadow Moon eventually makes up his mind to let her go.

Atonement with the father is the stage where the hero comes up against a father figure whom he is at odds with, who must be defeated or reconciled with so the hero can proceed with this quest. The father figure also typically has authority over life and death. But nonetheless the hero must overcome his dread and apprehension towards the father figure to forge ahead. Shadow is enraged but is also resolute that he shouldn't let Mr. Wednesday have control over his emotions. He becomes unrelenting and musters up his courage to go up against Mr. Wednesday and Mr. World.

Apotheosis is a stage of rebirth for the hero. The death causes a huge shift in the journey of the hero so he can move forward unhindered. The apo-

theosis is the culmination point of the hero's personal development. In the novel *Shadow Moon* has outgrown his old self while performing vigil for Mr. Wednesday in Yggdrasil. He deduces the fact that he is a demi-god and Mr. Wednesday has offered him job for the very same fact. The moment *Shadow Moon* is determined to face his fears uninhibited, still performing the vigil kills him on day three.

The Ultimate Boon is the stage where a reward is given to the protagonist for completing his quest even though he may have things to do in the outside world and outside his quest.. *Shadow Moon* realizes that he has not been giving a head start to the old gods but rather been aiding in a manoeuvre orchestrated by Mr. Wednesday and Loki. *Shadow Moon* deciphers that Mr. World and LowkeyLyesmith are both as improbable as it may seem is the Norse God Loki. Mr. Wednesday and Loki have both deliberately coordinated the meeting of *Shadow Moon* and LowkeyLyesmith in prison. *Shadow Moon* realizes that he has been a puppet of Mr. Wednesday plan all along and Mr. Wednesday has been double-crossed and deceived all gods while recruiting them for war. The intention of the war being the death of the gods will be in the name of sacrifice for Mr. Wednesday and Loki so they can power up from the deaths which will be considered as sacrifices.

Refusal of the return is the stage where the hero is evolved into man who is now preparing to descend back to his old life. Refusal of the return is the stage where the hero is comfortable in the new found place during his ordeal and would rather not return again. The hero does not want to return to his regular normal existence as it may be meaningless and burdening for his soul. Infrequently hero does not return because he wants to put an end to his banal life. The hero has experienced everything he wanted to and the world doesn't have anything new to offer him anymore. The refusal to return maybe a short pause or a perennial one. *Shadow Moon* after dying in the world tree is evaluated for the quality of life he has lived on earth by Egyptian god Anubis and Ibis. When the scales tipped in *Shadow Moon's* favor, *Shadow Moon* is given a choice to choose between heaven, hell and nothingness, he chooses to end his life. His decision stems from the fact that life has not been kind to him right from the moment of his birth. Returning back into a world of nothingness seems like the best option given to *Shadow Moon*, as he feels unwanted with every passing second. *Shadow Moon* chooses being free over everything as the weight of dejection is heavy on his shoulders.

The magic flight is one of the final stages where the hero returns with an

ultimate boon after achieving his purpose. Occasionally bringing back the boon can even be more arduous and strenuous than the initiation itself. The boon may be newfound knowledge, privileges, and blessings of God or supernatural support. The hero has a clear vision of what he has to do next as his quest isn't complete yet. Shadow Moon after dying is again resurrected by Easter. Shadow Moon who has been accepting everything that has been thrown at him finally recompenses. In the novel Shadow Moon projected as the human embodiment of passivity. But after resurrection he decides to avenge himself and becomes skeptical of everyone and everything. His dauntless spirit moves him forward as he concludes that he has nothing to lose anymore. Shadow Moon is determined in stopping the war between gods and witnesses a positive outcome, as Shadow Moon rides a thunderbird and lets the other gods know of Odin and Loki's plan.

Rescue from without, the hero at this stage is rescued by a complete stranger or a person whom he knew all along. This particular liberation of the hero helps him reach his ultimate goal and sustains him in his path towards victory. For Shadow Moon the last person he expects to rescue him is Laura, but still she turns up and rescues Shadow Moon from the unforeseen circumstances he has found himself in. Laura deduces the plan devised by Odin and Loki. Laura learns that Shadow Moon was a tool to incite an aggravation among the old and new gods. Laura stabs Loki helping Shadow Moon and also putting a stop to Mr. Wednesday's plan of being resurrected.

Crossing the return threshold marks the nearing end of the hero's journey. The hero acknowledges the journey he has been through and looks beyond the journey. This stage represents the culmination point of hero's efforts and hero is ready to derive delectation in the outcomes of the uphill battle. The hero at this point is taking away a lot of substantial life skills and in many instances is even looking forward to his next ordeal. Shadow Moon appreciates the new person he has evolved into, as he tries to break away from his toxic habits of fickleness, inconsistency and indecisiveness. Shadow breaks away from the cycle of seeking validation from others.

Master of two worlds is the stage where the hero having completed his quest has the choice and freedom to switch between the normal and phantasmagorical world. The hero begins to integrate the life lessons he learnt in his day-to-day life. The hero can crossover both worlds on his own terms as he is a force to be reckoned with. Along the course of time Shadow Moon has learned it the hard way from the gods themselves that America is not a land for gods. He even misses his acquaintances he has

made along the way like Jack, Anubis and Ibis. Shadow Moon develops a sense of belonging among the gods and it even feels like home to him occasionally. Even though the way Shadow Moon views the world after his encounter with the gods is drastically different from how he did before. The world still seems infinite and brimming with boundless resources for Shadow Moon.

The stage freedom to live, the hero has finally figured out what life is about. The hero reunites with people he has come across during his quest. Shadow Moon revisits Lakeside after getting intimation about the disappearance of Allison McGovern from the Buffalo Man. Shadow Moon comes to know that it was Hinzlemann who was his acquaintance during his short stay at Lakeside. Shadow Moon catches on that it was Hinzlemann has been sacrificing children every winter as his elixir of long life. Shadow Moon than decides to drop by to meet Samantha Black and gives her some roses expressing his gratitude. The postscript part of the novel Shadow Moon after months of journey comes across a new avatar of Odin in Iceland. Shadow Moon does not antagonize him but rather scrutinizes him in a collected manner. The new Odin reminds Shadow Moon that a new life is waiting for him in America. Shadow Moon using his newfound abilities performs a coin trick for Odin bids his farewell. Shadow Moons final act of benignity and compassion towards Odin indicates his retaining of humanity through his journey marks the end of his quest.

In *American Gods*, Gaiman reimagines America where gods are no longer mythical beings of the spiritual world, but beings with concerns about survival. Gaiman explores the theme of indestructibility through gods in his work *American Gods*. Gaiman's language in *American Gods* expresses moments of vulnerability even in gods. To establish this, Anansi and Ibis are seen expressing their regret about their bygone days, Mr. Wednesday reminisces about his lost pride. In *American Gods* every factor of the novel is explained through the eyes of the protagonist Shadow Moon. The author of the novel makes it so that Shadow Moon is a compelling figure. To achieve this effect Gaiman makes Shadow Moon build himself up with the help of others, so that even the supporting characters of the novel are intriguing. One such example in *American Gods* would be Laura, who is driven, persuasive and enthralling.

Shadow Moon is nowhere near a conventional hero archetype as his time in prison for robbery itself proves it. But at the end of the novel, he becomes a changed man. In mythology the hero usually returns home with material rewards. But in the case of Shadow Moon, it is not necessarily

material rewards, but newfangled profundity and sagaciousness towards life. He is nowhere near the most willing and active heroes in literature. In the end of his expedition Shadow Moon gets rid of his ambivalent nature and no longer regrets the decisions he has made. He is a self-made hero, a man made of his own decisions since his mentor figure Mr. Wednesday has failed him. Against all odds Shadow Moon springs up as a hero at the end of his journey due to his willingness to be committed to his quest and owning up to his mistakes through the course of the novel.

The novel fits the hero's journey which was designed to decipher classic myths because the novel itself is a retelling of age-old myths. *American Gods* is a novel in which Gaiman puts his new spin on the pattern that has been passed down the ages. For Shadow Moon undergoing his hero's journey gets a chance of redemption. Shadow Moon's character arc is compelling and is capable of being identified with. He withstands the highs and lows of his quest. Shadow Moon at the end of his quest is a reformed man which denotes the success of his Monomyth structure. The end of Monomyth does not mark the end of Shadow Moon's progress in his life. Shadow Moon's undertaken path as a hero might be different from conventional ones, but the journey and destination always ends up being the same. By applying the concept of Monomyth to a novel it provides a better insight and perception about the hero's cognition. The concept serves as an understructure to obtain a better discernment of Shadow Moon's journey as he tries to orient himself in new surroundings. Monomyth reveals the plan of action adapted by the hero Shadow Moon. It also provides points of reference to this newfound perspicacity of Shadow Moon. The Monomyth unravels the underlying process of Shadow Moon's advancement into judiciousness.

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