



Sustaining the imaginative life: mythology and fantasy in Neil Gaiman's *American gods*¹

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Abstract

Sustaining the imaginative life: mythology and fantasy in Neil Gaiman's *American gods*

This examination of "American gods" argues that mythology is the bedrock for creative and poetic expression in literature that explores and comments on the universality of contemporary human concerns in a world where the spiritual link with the gods has largely been severed and belief systems have mostly lost their meaning.

The discussion investigates and identifies the significance of shamanic properties and practices as elements which aid the protagonist Shadow Moon in his journey of self-discovery, and illustrates that the novel's mythification represents an attempt to "reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our soul" (Freke, 1999:6). Gaiman's unique style in conveying tales that have fashioned the past, the manner in which he evokes the meeting-place of science, fantasy, myth, and magic, and the synthesis he fashions between the ancient and the modern illustrate that the imaginative life is sustained by the incorporation of mythical motifs as creative device. The

1 This article is an adaptation and reworking of a chapter from Mathilda Slabbert's unpublished doctoral thesis *Inventions and transformations: an exploration of mythification and remythification in four contemporary novels* (Unisa, 2006). The phrase "sustaining the imaginative life" comes from Peter O'Connor's *Beyond the mist: what Irish mythology can teach us about ourselves* (2001).

blending of mythical elements in "American gods" and its restorative project of putting the reader in touch with the profound inner spiritual world validate investigation.

Opsomming

Onderhouding van die verbeeldingryke lewe: mitologie en fantasie in Neil Gaiman se *American gods*

In hierdie artikel oor "American gods" word betoog dat mitologie die basis vorm van kreatiewe en poëtiese uitdrukkings wat verkennend omgaan met en kommentaar lewer op die universaliteit van eietydse menslike bekommernisse in 'n wêreld waarin die spirituele band met die goddelike grotendeels verbreek is en geloofstelsels grotendeels hulle betekenis verloor het.

Die sjamanistiese eienskappe van die protagonis Shadow Moon word ondersoek. Die ondersoek toon aan dat miteskepping in die roman 'n poging verteenwoordig "[to] reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our soul" (Freke, 1999:6). Die unieke wyse waarop Gaiman verhale oordra waarin aan die verlede vorm gegee is, die wyse waarop hy wetenskap, fantasie, mite en magie oproep, en sy sintese van die oeroue en die moderne illustreer dat die verbeeldingslewe deur die kreatiewe insluiting van mitiese motiewe onderhou word. Sowel die vervlegting van mitiese elemente in "American gods", as die wyse waarop die werk herstel bewerkstellig deur die eietydse samelewing in voeling te plaas met 'n diepsinnige innerlike geesteswêreld, word ondersoek.

These are gods who have been forgotten, and now might as well be dead. They can be found only in dry histories. They are all gone, all gone, but their names and their images remain with us ...

These are the gods who have passed out of memory. Even their names are lost. The people who worshipped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their totems are long since broken and cast down. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets (Gaiman, 2001:62-63).

1. Introduction

In *The poetics of myth* Eleazar Meletinsky (2000:272) states that "myth [can be seen] as the basis for artistic creativity and the poetic expression of ... universal sentiments", while Northrop Frye (1976:71) argues that "mythology is a form of imaginative thinking, and its direct descendant in culture is literature, more particularly fiction, works of literature that tell stories". Psychologist Peter

O'Connor concurs with both these views; he elaborates by saying that "the 'poet', as writer, painter or musician, sustains the imaginative life" and he describes this as "the necessary antidote to materialism and the pervasiveness of banal secularity" (O'Connor, 2001:201). These views reflect on the healing and restorative function of the process of creative expression embedded in myth.

Neil Gaiman's *American gods* is a mythical novel² which articulates some of the universal concerns of contemporary society in a world where the spiritual link with the gods has largely been severed and belief systems have mostly lost their meaning. Gaiman addresses these concerns through the genre of fantasy, but it is fantasy which "blends the ordinary and the fantastic into an incredible mixture" (Meletinsky, 2000:270). He presents the reader with a post-modernist, metamythological combination of mythologies in which technology is an integral element in the synthesis between the ancient and the modern.

The novel's unique style in conveying tales that have fashioned the past, the manner in which it deals with what Delphi Carstens (2003:24) describes as "the crossroad of science, myth and magic", and its blending of mythical elements put modern society in touch with a profound inner, spiritual world – "the richness of the soul" (Davis, 1998:8). In this regard, the protagonist Shadow Moon has a significant role: he can be seen as a shaman or prophet through whom the novel attempts to "reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our souls" (Freke, 1999:6). Hence a large part of this article focuses on his shamanic function and how this connects with the imaginative process.

Gaiman interweaves a multitude of characters, symbols and metaphors from various mythologies and folklores to create a metamythology³ into which he introduces modern divinities, "gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and neon. Proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own

2 An interest in mythology is a recurring theme in Gaiman's short stories, novels, graphic novels and screenplays.

3 The term *metamythology* is used here as defined by Meletinsky in *The poetics of myth* (2000).

newness and importance" (p. 148).⁴ The action centres on the physical and spiritual journey of the mediator Shadow Moon, and evolves around the looming battle between ancient deities and legends – brought unknowingly to America by the immigrant believers – and the gods created by modern society. Gretchen Helfrich (2005) describes it as "a dark and kaleidoscopic journey deep into myth and across an America that is at once eerily familiar and utterly alien". Mythical characters and parallels as well as mythical elements such as magic, ritual, sacrifice, renewal and eternal return are embedded in the novel; they participate in the narrative and in the possibility of restoration and healing it offers the contemporary reader through the imaginative evocation of the soul's journey and universal truths about human nature.

The device of fantasy, which Gaiman combines with what Mark Bay (2001:153) describes as "travel writing, along with mystery, horror, philosophy and black humor", aids the entertaining plot. He builds a world distinguished from science fiction by the metaphysical quality of events and the religious undertones of Shadow's experiences. The world of the novel is inhabited not only by remarkable science-fiction creatures,⁵ but also by reincarnations of ancient mythical characters as well as a very average, real human protagonist who counteracts confrontation in a completely non-violent way. The novel further contains what Davis (1998:179) terms as "technopagans [who] attempt ... to reboot the rituals, myths, and gods of ancient polytheistic cultures" while at the same time they regard "powerful new technologies [as] magical, because they *function* as magic" (p. 181). Gaiman has "overlap[ped] computer culture and the occult fringe" (p. 181). By combining genres and providing historical and mythological information, his mythification and syncretistic technique employ, as Meletinsky suggests, "historicism and mytho-logic, social realism and folklore traditions – to interact and sometimes to

4 Page numbers in parenthesis refer to *American gods* (Gaiman, 2001).

5 Traditionally the genres of science-fiction and fantasy contain what Blommaert and Verscheuren (1998:18) describe as "remarkable creatures" who display

a human profile to which we add slightly 'abnormal' properties ... [T]hey are extremely intelligent, they speak English fluently (or as fluently as is expected of a well-educated non-native speaker), and they have characters, emotions and intentions translatable into ours ... They are human beings onto whom we project a number of physical and/or psychical abnormalities. They are what we are not, but what we somehow could or would like to be.

become something new altogether ... a means of metaphorically describing modern society by using mythical or historical parallels” (Meletinsky, 2000:334, 340). This “something new” manifests itself in large measure in Shadow’s fantastical experiences.

2. Shadow the shaman

In relation to the elements of ritual, death and resurrection, as discussed extensively in Frazer’s *The golden bough* (2004 [1890]), Shadow’s remarkable experiences in the novel become more realistically acceptable when his possible function as shaman is explored. Mircea Eliade explains shamanic exercises and the contribution of these experiences to narrative as follows:

The shaman’s adventures in the other world, the ordeals that he undergoes in his ecstatic descents below and ascents to the sky, suggest the adventures of the figures in popular tales and the heroes of epic literature. Probably a large number of epic “subjects” or motifs, as well as many characters, images, and clichés of epic literature, are, finally, of ecstatic origin, in the sense that they were borrowed from the narratives of shamans describing their journeys and adventures in the superhuman worlds (Eliade, 1989:511).

Eliade elaborates further by saying that “shamanic ‘miracles’ ... stimulate and feed the imagination, demolish the barriers between dream and present reality, open windows upon worlds inhabited by the gods, the dead, and the spirits” (Eliade, 1989:511). These observations provide a direct link between shamanic practices and qualities evident in Shadow Moon’s character and the narrative project of *American gods*.

In this context, the following shamanic qualities that feature in the novel and “feed the imagination” of the reader are considered below: magic and sorcery, ecstatic trancelike experiences,⁶ trance-inducing narcotics, alienation from society, the presence of helping spirits, the interaction with gods, the use of a secret language, special election, initiation, the presence of a mythical bird, and the restorative or healing function of the shaman.

6 The term *trance* is used here to denote “some kind of mental dissociation” (Lewis, 1971:30) or, as Hancock explains, “the universal human neurological capacity to enter ‘altered states of consciousness’ (ASCs) ... states of deep trance in which extremely realistic hallucinations are seen” (Hancock, 2005:35).

Numerous sources on shamanism confirm the religious and spiritual meanings linked to the shaman. These describe the shaman as “magician[,] ... sorcerer”, “medicine man” (Eliade 1989:3-4), and as intermediary (Hancock 2005:497), but the term *shaman* reflects on much more than just sorcery, magic and healing. The shaman possesses the ability to transcend the mundane and interact with beings and spirits on a higher level, without becoming their instrument or being possessed by them.⁷

Shamanic qualities and practices vary in different cultures and are “subject to historical development and change” (Lewis, 1971:50), as is evident in a comparison between the contemporary setting of the novel and the narrative interludes that recollect the arrival of the different mythological characters in North America. In his work on the teachings and practices of ten contemporary shamans from across the globe Timothy Freke explains that each “has encompassed both indigenous Shamanism and contemporary western culture” (Freke, 1999:9). It is this shamanic “bridg[ing] between the ancient and modern worlds” (p. 9) that is so pertinent to *American gods*.

Shadow’s isolation and alienation, his interaction with gods and demons, and his qualities as healer, saviour or mediator establish him as a shaman in the metamythology presented in *American gods* and confirm his liminal role in the in-between place he occupies in the world of the novel. He conveys, to the other characters in the novel, the insights and knowledge he obtains during his trance states or communication with supernatural beings in his dreams, and during his ordeal and death experience on the tree, ultimately establishing peace between the conflicting deities. Hancock explains the importance of these trance states and describes the shaman’s “supernatural encounters and experiences” as the processes which equip these individuals “with the gift to communicate what they *knew* to others” (Hancock, 2005:497).

2.1 Shamanic recruitment

Traditionally, one becomes a shaman through genealogical transference or supernatural election. Both recruitment forms, heritage and election, apply to Shadow’s initiation, thus rendering the ritual doubly significant. Shadow is Odin’s – or Wednesday’s – son, and

7 For more on the difference between shamanism and spirit possession, see Eliade (1989:4), Lewis (1971:46), and Edwards (1995).

Odin is “associated with a shamanic tradition” (Meletinsky, 2000:453), thus confirming Shadow’s shamanic inheritance. Concerning election, Eliade maintains that in some cultures “the gods choose the future shaman by striking him with lightning or showing him their will through stone” (Eliade, 1989:19). This seems to be the case with Shadow’s election when the flight to Eagle Point gets redirected because of a storm. We read: “Lightning burst in blinding slashes around the plane ... Shadow wondered, coldly and idly, if he were going to die ... He stared out the window and watched the lightning illuminate the horizon” (p. 19-20). It becomes apparent that Wednesday has orchestrated the storm in order to force Shadow into a position where he becomes the god’s envoy and sacrificial victim. Furthermore, Shadow’s actions are often symbolically linked with the weather, especially with lightning, storms or snowstorms. The storm motif, weaving a continuous thread throughout the novel, with many echoes and forewarnings of the impending clash of the gods, resurfaces metaphorically when Shadow later joins the other gods on the mountain-top battlefield: “This was the moment of the storm” (p. 573). As is often the case, his state is again trance-like: “It was like pushing through a membrane” (p. 572).⁸

2.2 Shamanic initiation and education

Elements of shamanic teaching or initiation can also be identified in *American gods*. Shadow’s initiation starts in Jack’s Crocodile Bar when he drinks the mead or “Honey wine ... drink of heroes ... drink of the gods” (p. 39) Wednesday gives him, and is completed after his death and resurrection. His education occurs during his trance states, interaction with spirits and legends, and in his dreams. This is where he receives information about traditional “shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etcetera” (Eliade, 1989:13).

2.2.1 Dreams and trances

Shadow often receives messages in his dreams and these dreams are trance-like and metaphysical. This seems to chime with Eliade’s (1989:67) explanation that:

8 McKenna (1991:166) repeatedly describes shamanic trances as a paradigm shift, as passing through a membrane and as a “connect[ion between] the psychedelic dimension [and] the dimension in inspiration and dream”.

... one of the commonest forms of the future shaman's election is his encountering a divine or semidivine being, who appears to him through a dream, a sickness, or some other circumstance, tells him that he has been 'chosen', and incites him thenceforth to follow a new rule of life.

Edwards (1995) concurs: "[d]reams, and in particular lucid dreams, often play a significant role in the life of a shaman or shamanic candidate".

2.2.2 Helping spirits and secret languages

Apart from Wednesday – or Odin, the divine being who selects Shadow for his own purposes – other semi-divine beings communicate with him in dreams or otherwise. So, for instance, the mysterious buffalo man,⁹ first introduced on the flight to Eagle Point, is one of the recurring images in Shadow's dreams. He is the one who urges Shadow, "Believe ... If you are to survive, you must believe" (p. 264). The need to believe and the question of what to believe recur in the novel and are pertinent to the process of mythification, if myth is defined as a system of belief that nourishes the life of the spirit. At first encounter, the creature in the dream is described as a "thing staring at him [from] a buffalo's head, rank and furry with huge wet eyes" (p. 19). Their communication is an intuitive, secret language: "Whatever words were passing between the two of them were not being spoken, not in any way that Shadow understood speech" (p. 264). Subsequently, and prior to Shadow's vigil, he communicates with and is attended to by three women who are transformations of the three norns from Scandinavian mythology.¹⁰ The communication also proves to be telepathic in nature. We read: "Afterward, he was unable to remember whether he had actually heard their voices. Perhaps he had simply understood what they had meant from their looks and their eyes" (p. 486). During his interaction with the buffalo man, the latter always has something prophetic or tutelary to say, such as "changes are coming" (p. 19), or "the storm is coming" (p. 174). Before Shadow addresses the gods in the arena on the mountain-

9 On helping spirits in animal form, see Eliade, (1989:93); on therianthropes (a figure part human and part animal), see Hancock (2005:78-79).

10 The three norns "emblemize the actions that have taken place, those that are in the process of happening, and those that of necessity must occur. ... [T]he nornir were conceived as female beings endowed with ultimate wisdom" (Jochens, 1996:40-41).

top, this strange being reassures him, “You are doing just fine” (p. 574), and after Shadow’s intervention in the impending war of the gods, “You did well ... You made peace” (p. 587).

In another fantastical dream, Shadow has intercourse with a cat-like creature identifiable as the Egyptian goddess Bast. Lewis cites many examples of shamans simulating what is described as “mystical sexual intercourse” with their familiar spirit (Lewis, 1971:58); he explains that the shaman receives instruction or guidance from these gods or spirits during such a trance session.

The buffalo man and the feline creature can be regarded as examples of the “helping spirits [who] have animal forms” (Eliade, 1989:89). Another example of a helping spirit can be identified in Shadow’s dead wife Laura, who acts as one of his guardian spirits in human form. She warns him of dangers when she visits him in the hotel room soon after her funeral. She rescues him after he has been abducted, detained and assaulted by Mr. Stone and Mr. Wood (envoys of Mr. World, or Loki), and kills them. The abduction takes place just after Shadow’s introduction to the various gods during the meeting at the House on the Rock or what could be representative of Odin’s hall “Valaskjalf” (p. 150). One of Laura’s numerous visits to him occurs while he is hanging on the tree. She says: “nothing is gonna hurt you when I’m here” (p. 500). She functions as the “spear-carrier” (p. 560), piercing her own and Loki’s heart to save Shadow. Their interactions represent, somewhat ironically, what Lewis describes as the shaman’s “authority to act as a privileged channel of communication between man and the supernatural”. One of the accessories associated with this position “is the transmission of messages from the dead” (Lewis, 1971:18).

2.2.3 Magical mental powers

In addition to the element of teaching through dreams and trances, Shadow’s shamanic education is also illustrated by the way in which he manages to mentally create a snowstorm. Wednesday tells him, “Think ‘snow’ for me, will you? ... Concentrate on making those clouds – the ones over there, in the west, – making them bigger and darker. Think grey skies and driving winds coming down from the arctic. Think snow” (p. 115). Shadow proceeds to enter a trans-like state:

Snow, thought Shadow ... Huge, dizzying, clumps and clusters of snow falling through the air, patches of white against an iron-grey sky, snow that touches your tongue with cold and winter, that kisses your face with its hesitant touch before freezing you

to death. Twelve cotton-candy inches of snow, creating a fairy-tale world, making everything unrecognizably beautiful ...
(p. 115).

Wednesday's response is "I said we're here,' ... 'You were somewhere else'" (p. 115). The trance is associated with physical discomfort: "[his] head had begun to ache, and there was an uncomfortable feeling between his shoulder blades" (p. 115).¹¹ Such illnesses caused by trance should be treated by the "master" (Lewis, 1971:32). Wednesday delivers the cure when he instructs Shadow to "Drink the coffee,' 'It's foul stuff, but it will ease the headache'" (p. 116). Shadow's trance proves successful, because "[s]nowflakes began to fall, just as [he] had imagined them, and he felt strangely proud" (p. 117). His ability to mentally induce a change in the weather, to remove memory, and his unusual coin tricks constitute the shaman's "particular magical speciality" (Eliade, 1989:5).

2.2.4 Trance-inducing narcotics

Shadow receives various potions from Wednesday in the course of the novel. Eliade does not elaborate much on the use of hallucinogenic substances in shamanism, yet other sources, such as Freke, Hancock, Lewis, Maddox, McKenna and Meletinsky, do. There is no evidence that Shadow receives any hallucinogenic narcotic before the hanging, but the squirrel three times brings him water in a "walnut-shell" (p. 495) while he is hanging on the tree. The water has a "muddy-iron taste" and "it ease[s] his fatigue and his madness" (p. 496). Soon afterwards he feels "exhausted" and falls into a "delirium" (p. 496). Before he asks Shadow to mentally create the snowstorm, Wednesday also gives him hot chocolate.¹² Hancock (2005:173) explains that a majority of shamans consume psychoactive substances to achieve altered states of consciousness and Eliade confirms that the shaman receives "drinks that make the candidate unconscious" and induce "hypnotic sleep" (Eliade, 1989:64) during the initiation ordeal. The water Shadow receives on the tree could suggest the shamanic administration of hallucinogenic substances, but McKenna clarifies that "where shamanic techniques are used to the exclusion of hallucinogenic plant ingestion ... it is more like a ritual enactment" (McKenna, 1991:166) than a psyche-

11 On illnesses associated with shamanic trance, see Lewis, (1971:124).

12 Hancock describes ayahuasca (a hallucinogenic brew made of the sacred Inca plant) as a liquid with "discordant notes of cocoa, medicine and jungle rot" (Hancock, 2005:44).

delic, substance-induced trance. It is important that the shaman should have experienced a substance-induced trance before re-enacting subsequent trance states and it is clear that Shadow experiences such a trance when he drinks the mead Wednesday gives him in Jack's Crocodile Bar (p. 39).¹³

2.3 Healer and peace-maker

By being the peacemaker between the old and the new gods after his confrontation with death, Shadow seems to confirm the traditional belief that "the shaman intercedes with spirits to bring the gift of supernatural healing to his people" (Hancock, 2005:511). McKenna supports this view; he says, "[t]hrough the ability to cure, the shaman can confer psychological wholeness on the people ..." (McKenna, 1991:14). By communicating his insights to the gods and preventing the battle between them, Shadow restores and heals the community. We read: "The storms had cleared. The air felt fresh and clean and new once more" (p. 579). He also introduces a "cure" in the village called Lakeside when he discovers the sacrificed children, an action which ultimately leads to the destruction of Hinzelmann, the deceptively friendly old man in charge of the tradition of annually leaving a car on the ice and taking bets on the day it will fall through (heralding the arrival of spring). The custom is a masquerade for the ancient ritual of child sacrifices for seasonal renewal, with Hinzelmann acting as the evil kobold.

2.4 Isolation, alienation and symbolic death

Shamans are often well travelled, need to live in isolation and solitude and have to experience a "confrontation with death" (Armstrong, 2005:26) or death and resurrection.¹⁴ Shadow meets these criteria as he travels across America and joins fantastical

13 Mead, which is made from fermented honey, was "the recreational drug of the Indo-European tribes" and honey was considered "a magical ... medicinal substance" (McKenna, 1992:140). According to Hancock (2005:164-65) not all trance states are substance-induced and these altered states of consciousness can be achieved through various techniques such as dancing or body piercing.

14 Dean Edwards (1995) remarks that the "shaman lives at the edge of reality as most people would recognize it and most commonly at the edge of society itself. Few indeed have the stamina to adventure into these realms and endure the outer hardships and personal crises that have been reported by or observed of many shamans".

godly gatherings, such as the visit to Czernobog¹⁵ and his sisters and the meeting at the House on the Rock with all the other deities. He resides in isolation in the little village of Lakeside. His death on the tree and travels to the underworld seem to contain most of the shamanic elements identified by sources on shamanic practices. Delphi Carstens (2003:31) summarises a list of elements pertaining to symbolic death as follows:

[T]he journey of the shaman involves a symbolic death, dismemberment, and a contemplation of the skeleton. Having experienced the death of self/mortality, the shaman descends through the interior landscape of the individual body and ascends/descends into the realism beyond the borders of the self ... into the connected realms of minerals, animals, plants, humans, as well as that of the invisible and abstract. This 'paradoxical passage' ... brings the shaman into contact with the 'suprasensible world' ... (and involves) a total transformation of the individual (human) into something other.

Shadow's ordeal and death on the tree reveal these shamanic initiation and ritual elements. He is visited and tormented by several beings in order to learn wisdom from them: the squirrel he communicates with that brings him water in a walnut-shell (p. 495), the "elephant-headed man" (p. 491) and the god Horus, transformed as a madman (p. 497). In his pain and mental state he interacts with the realms suggested by Carstens. We read:

In his delirium, Shadow became the tree. Its roots went deep into the loam of the earth, down into time, into the hidden springs. He felt the spring of the woman Urd, which is to say, *Past*. She was huge, a giantess, an underground mountain of a woman, and the waters she guarded were the waters of time. Other roots went to other places. Some of them were secret. Now, when he was thirsty, he pulled water from his roots, pulled them up into the body of his being.

He had a hundred arms which broke into a hundred thousand fingers, and all of his fingers reached up into the sky. The weight of the sky was heavy on his shoulders (p. 496).

15 Czernobog seems to represent Thor, the god of thunder, whose hammer "Mjöllnir" (Comte, 1994:207) was a symbol of protection and safety. Czernobog's sardonic remarks and mock threats provide many comic moments in the novel.

Eliade explains that “during the trance ... the shaman is believed to understand the language of all nature” (Eliade, 1989:96) and that the pains the initiate experiences “appear to be animated and sometimes even have a certain personality” (p. 105). As in some initiation rites, where shamans are often expected to ascend a tree with a rope, the rope being symbolical of the cord between heaven and earth, Shadow is bound to the ash tree by a rope. The tree is symbolic of what Meletinsky identifies as the “cosmic tree (*axis mundi*, world tree)”, “the image of the universe as a tree, found in Scandinavian, Egyptian, Akkadian, Sumerian, and Chinese mythology, often said to be of ash” (Meletinsky, 2000:426).

Shadow’s death during the vigil and his experiences in the underworld or afterlife confirm the agonies a shaman has to endure during his trance states and symbolic death. The death experience

includes one or more of the following themes: dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and viscera; ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits; descent to the underworld and conversation with spirits and the souls of dead shamans; various revelations, both religious and shamanic ... (Eliade, 1989:34).

Shadow’s descent into the underworld involves the extraction of his soul when Zorya Polnochnaya takes his name in the form of a “magnesium-white luminance” (p. 504) from his head. Bast later explains that if he makes the wrong choice they will “feed [his] heart and [his] soul to Ammet, the Eater of Souls” (p. 516). Lewis argues that “soul-loss without possession is rare”, but proceeds to give examples where this phenomenon does occur, such as in “many North American Indian societies” and the Bushmen or San of the Kalahari Desert in South Africa. In the Bushmen “the spirit (or soul) boils up in a man’s body and goes to his head ... the spirit temporarily leaves the body, and sets out to fight those powers which ... cause sickness and death” (Lewis, 1971:48). This seems to be the case when Shadow intervenes on the battlefield. He also experiences the process of extraction and renewal of his organs. Bast acts as the spirit or mythological character who performs the action: “‘I’ll take your heart. We’ll need it later,’ and she reached her hand deep inside his chest and she pulled it back out with something ruby and pulsing held between her sharp fingernails” (p. 510). Shadow’s dismemberment continues on a metaphysical level when Anubis, the embalmer god, examines him: “the jackal god was his prosecutor and his prosecutor and his persecutor” (p. 515). The examination seems as painful as vivisection:

But the examination did not stop. Every lie he had ever told, every object he had stolen, every hurt he had inflicted on another person, all the little crimes and the tiny murders that make up the day, each of these things and more were extracted and held up to the light by the jackal-headed judge of the dead.

Shadow began to weep, painfully, in the palm of the dark god's hand (p. 515-516).

The pain represents symbolic death and is simultaneously a result of the spiritual revelations Shadow obtains. The fact that he later returns in perfect physical health could illustrate that the initiation ceremony is complete; confirming the "renewal of his organs; ritual death followed by resurrection" (Eliade, 1989:38). That he is endowed with shamanic powers is clearly illustrated when he concurrently erases Mulligan's memory about the child sacrifices and Hinzemann's death:

And at that moment, although he could never tell you how he had done it ... Shadow reached in to Chad Mulligan's mind, easy as anything, and he plucked the events of that afternoon away from it as precisely and dispassionately as a raven picks an eye from roadkill (p. 612).

The ascent to the top of the mountain during the battle and Shadow's intermediary action can be related to shamanism. Czernobog says: "... And on the mountaintop, you did a very good thing" (p. 621). Various mythologies regard the "cosmic mountain" as the "center of the world" and believe that this mythical image facilitates connection between earth and sky. Armstrong (2005:25) explains that "[the shaman] climbs a tree or a post that symbolises the tree, mountain or ladder that once linked heaven and earth" and from here he "communed with the gods for the sake of the people" (Armstrong, 2005:24). It is the reaching of this symbolic universe which allows Shadow to intervene between the gods and orchestrate peace.

2.5 The mythical bird

The presence of a mythical bird¹⁶ features prominently in shamanic practices. Shadow encounters his mythical bird twice. The first

16 For the thunderbird or eagle as a "tutelary spirit", see Eliade (1989:245); for thunder gods who possess bird-like characteristics and effect the noise of thunder by the beating of their wings, see Spence (1994:123); Meletinsky (2000:468-69) for the thunderbird as a legendary eagle-like creature and its association with lightning and rain, and Hancock (2005:81-83) for therianthropes.

occurs in a dream where he climbs a mountain of skulls and is attacked by thunderbirds: “He reached out and tried to grasp a feather from its wing – for if he returned to his tribe without a thunderbird’s feather he would be disgraced, he would never be a man – but the bird pulled up, so that he could not grasp a feather” (p. 326). When Easter revives him after his death, he meets the thunderbird for a second time and is given a ride by it. We read:

Shadow nodded. He seemed to be trying to remember something. Then he opened his mouth, and he screeched a cry of welcome and of joy.

The thunderbird opened its cruel beak, and it screeched a welcome back at him.

Superficially, at least, it resembled a condor. Its feathers were black, with a purplish sheen, and its neck was banded with white. Its beak was black and cruel: a raptor’s beak, made for tearing. At rest, on the ground, with its wings folded away, it was the size of a black bear, and its head was on a level with Shadow’s own.

Horus said proudly, ‘I brought him. They live in the mountains.’

Shadow nodded. ‘I had a dream of thunderbirds once,’ he said. ‘Damnedest dream I ever had’ (p. 558-559).

Various other references are made to eagles, hawks and ravens in the novel. The hitchhiker that Shadow picks up, Samantha Black Crow, is a character from Siouan fables who fulfils a tutelary function when she tells him stories and fables while they travel together. They remain telepathically connected afterwards. Shadow’s mythical bird is therefore present in various forms and not only fulfils the functions of educator, protector and guide, but also underscores the creative synthesis of fantasy and mythical elements which is so characteristic of the novel’s challenge to the imaginative powers of the reader.

2.6 The realms of mineral and stone

Apart from the realms of plants, animals, humans and spirits, the shaman also connects with the realms of mineral and stone (Carstens, 2003:31). The following examples illustrate Shadow’s connection with these elements. The gold coins he is given could be seen as representative of the function of minerals in his destiny. Shadow’s encounter in dreams with the buffalo man, “[i]n the earth and under the earth”, represents a penetration of the soil and

confirms the characteristic that the shaman “descends into the earth” (Edwards, 1995). Shadow encounters the gods and spirits of the underworld in a cave of rock: “The buffalo man said nothing. He pointed up toward the roof of the cave” (p. 265). With a fire flickering in the background, the buffalo man stares at Shadow with “huge eyes, eyes like pools of dark mud” (p. 264). Later, Ibis rows him in the boat that “slipped and slid across the mirror-surface of the underground pool” (p. 513) to the “rock floor” and “the high rock walls” of “the Hall of the Dead” (p. 514). Eliade’s (1989:389) assertion that the cave is of symbolic value in shamanic initiation as a place where wisdom is obtained and a symbol of a “passage into another world” (Eliade, 1989:51) is significant in this context and Hancock (2005:276) confirms that caves are “the locations of vision quests and places where [shamans meet] their spirit helpers”.

2.7 Bridging the gap

In identifying shamanic qualities in Shadow we are not attempting to remove any of the light-hearted and often comic moments in the novel; rather, we wish to emphasise Gaiman’s unique and exciting incorporation, through the mode of fantasy, of the ancient and traditional into the contemporary. Despite Shadow’s fantastical adventures, of which we read, “None of this can actually be happening ...”, the reader can identify with him and he remains likeable. He is not represented as a cyborg or what Carstens defines as a “human/machine hybrid” with “steel prosthetics and infrared eyes” (Carstens, 2003:24). These attributes are given to the remarkable new gods of the “technoculture” (Carstens, 2003:25), such as the goddess of Media and the god of Technology. Shadow’s shamanic characteristics seem based on archaic and mystic traditions and not shamanic technology as described in Carstens’s *Techno-Genetrix* (2003:24-31). In the context of the novel Shadow fulfils an important function in bridging the gap between ancient and modern worlds. For the contemporary reader the novel provides the realisation of a need to merge contemporary materialistic Western culture and the sub-conscious desire for the archaic and fantastical. This chimes with what Timothy Freke, in his book on contemporary shamans, observes:

The Western world, dominated by scientific materialism and consumerism, has amassed extravagant wealth to conceal a spiritual vacuum. But the profound enigmas of existence have not gone away and ever greater numbers of people yearn for more meaning than the fleeting world of fashion and gimmicks

can possibly provide. Shamanism answers this fundamental need. It teaches us to reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our soul (Freke, 1999:6).

At the end of the novel *Shadow* emerges, not as some Batman-like superhero or powerful god, but as an anti-epic, very ordinary, run-of-the-mill human being. It is this quality that the reader can identify with. *Shadow's* experiences not only force him to believe in the existence of a variety of myths and gods, but also compel him to make choices, decisions and commitments. His physical and spiritual journey and death illustrate his shamanic qualities, yet in the end he prefers to be just an ordinary “man [not] a god” (p. 576) and therefore he responds to Whiskey Jack: “I guess I found my family. But no, I never found my tribe” (p. 545). His choice reinforces his position as shaman who chooses to live at the edge of society when he decides: “He had enough of gods and their ways to last him several lifetimes. He would take the bus to the airport, he decided, and change his ticket. Get a plane to somewhere he had never been. He would keep moving” (p. 627). His choice echoes the opinions of other contemporary shamans such as Andy Baggott (from Ireland), who remarks,

... because you have a certain amount of power when you work shamanically, that power can corrupt. There are plenty of people who allow that power to corrupt and get tempted all the time. It's a matter of having that clarity of mind. It's so important to be responsible in Shamanism – not using that power to manipulate people to your own ends (Freke, 1999:84).

The shamanic concept of death and resurrection and the spiritual insight *Shadow* obtains therefore seem to combine with the mythical elements of renewal and eternal return and in this way the old and the new are imaginatively reconciled in *American gods* to evoke the possibility of reaching a deeper understanding, a renewed spiritual experience.

3. Conclusion

Through *Shadow's* experiences the reader gains insight into the working of myth in literature as Gaiman creates a new mythology, “stimulat[ing] and feed[ing] the imagination, demolish[ing] the barriers between dream and present reality ...” (Eliade, 1989:511). The story he tells “create[s] a place in which artist and audience can

meet, a shared set of symbols, and an account of the significance of aesthetic experience" (Townsend, 1997:193-94). Within this communal space and the bond between artist and audience the reader is allowed multiple possible interpretations. Johan Degenaar explains that "postmodernity manifests a more relaxed view for it sees myth as a schema of the imagination which can be used in a variety of ways to illuminate human experience". He continues that "[t]he best example of the use of myth in a metamythical way is the sphere of literature where myth can give imaginative power to a novel and endow it with meaning which is not only accessible to initiates but open to public scrutiny" (Degenaar, 1995:47). Degenaar's article concludes:

Postmodernism emphasises the fact that myth is an ambiguous phenomenon and that the individual must decide what the meaning of myth is and whether it functions in terms of domination or emancipation, and evaluate and act accordingly (Degenaar, 1995:48).

By taking a neutral stance and opting for isolation, Shadow maintains "eternal vigilance, holding off all gods and tyrants who impose a final view on society" (Degenaar, 1995:47). Furthermore, Shadow's decision to have no more part in the mythical process reflects on the element of cyclical or eternal return in the novel. McKenna explains that the "highest level of the pattern, which does not repeat ... [is] the part that is responsible for the advance into true novelty" (McKenna, 1992:215). Shadow's resolutions and acquiescence echo Heidegger's theory on existence in which man's "redemption lies in that freedom which time alone provides, the freedom to make of life what [he] choose[s] to be, and thereby to change from thrown-ness to resolution" (Scruton, 1995:260). From this perspective *American gods* validates Meletinsky's (2000:156) remark that myth "is fundamentally about the transformation of chaos into harmony".

Not only does Shadow act as a healer or mediator between the anthropomorphic gods of technology and ancient mythical characters, but Gaiman also fulfils the function of the contemporary author as myth transformer to inform and contribute to the mental "health" of the reader and society. As Barthes (1977:150) explains:

... the author-writer is an excluded figure integrated by his very exclusion, a remote descendant of the accursed: his function in society as a whole is perhaps related to ... the witch doctor: a function of complementarity, both witch doctor and intellectual

in a sense stabilizing a disease which is necessary to the collective economy of health ... on the level of language.

In this respect, mythification in *American gods* is doubly significant and Gaiman's unique style confirms Meletinsky's remark that in postmodernism "mythification ... expresses the unlimited freedom of the contemporary artist vis-à-vis the traditional symbol system, which is no longer a constricting force in modern thought" (Meletinsky, 2000:303).

Literature or stories offer a creative and imaginative alternative to what might otherwise seem a rather bleak contemporary existence. Gaiman explains:

Stories are, in one way or another, mirrors. We use them to explain to ourselves how the world works or how it doesn't work. Like mirrors, stories prepare us for the day to come. They distract us from the things in the darkness (Gaiman, 1999:4).

In *American gods*, Gaiman presents a melding of mythology, fictional fantasy and reality and explores the mythical underpinnings of story-making. In the process he devises a refreshing contemporary mythology of his own, and presents a plausible alternative for the reader to the twenty-first century dilemma, which, as described by Michelle Magwood, (2006:21) is characterised by "a profound loss of faith, ... an atmosphere of doubt", where "[p]rogress has made us believe we can do anything, solve anything, cure anything, but the reality is depressingly different".

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sjamanisme

(ver)kiesing en inwyding

