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## Discreet Feminism: Neil Gaiman's Subversion of the Patriarchal Society in American Gods

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Discreet Feminism: Neil Gaiman's Subversion of the Patriarchal Society in *American Gods*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English  
British Literature

by

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## Abstract

Neil Gaiman's use of a hyper-masculine American culture in *American Gods* sheds light upon the multiple issues surrounding a misogynistic society in which women are treated as sexual objects and punished for their independence as sexual beings. Gaiman's efforts at highlighting these issues are discreet and hidden under layers of patriarchal expectations, but through the use of his protagonist, Shadow, Gaiman is able to provide an alternative to the society he represents. While he successfully illustrates this more "ideal" society, his endeavors fall short and are almost imperceptible throughout his novel. Gaiman's work in *American Gods*, while lacking in its overall presence, brings attention to the issues within a hyper-masculine society and it is through this unique, feminist approach that Gaiman is able to present his strong argument for change.

Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*, hyper-masculine, feminism, patriarchy, misogyny, American culture, societal expectations, gender norms, subversion

*“There are stories that are true, in which each individual’s tale is unique and tragic, and the worst of the tragedy is that we have heard it before, and we cannot allow ourselves to feel it too deeply. We build a shell around it like an oyster dealing with a painful particle of grit, coating it with smooth pearl layers in order to cope. This is how we walk and talk and function, day in, day out, immune to others’ pain and loss. If it were to touch us it would cripple us or make saints of us; but, for the most part, it does not touch us. We cannot allow it to” (Gaiman 284).*

Neil Gaiman has proven himself unafraid to challenge socially accepted gender norms concerning the oppression of women. bell hooks argues that the root of all struggles faced by women comes from these social norms based around gender, and are exactly what needs to be fought in order to make a change: "The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long range impact" (hooks 57). In his novel *Stardust*, powerful female characters fight for their own desires within societies bent on controlling their thoughts and actions. The oppression of women in this novel does not go unpunished, and characters such as Yvaine, the heroine of *Stardust*, offer a redemptive narrative where the female is able to overcome the obstacles of gender inequality. Kristine Larsen makes note of this in her summation of the three witches’ end goal as they “seek to kidnap Yvaine in order to possess her lifeforce/youth” (264), something which would give them power, not only in a physical sense, but also as women in a world that judges the worth of female individuals by their appearance. In a similar vein, *Coraline*, another of Gaiman’s novels, takes the notion of identity and provides a lens to view societal expectations. *American Gods*, however, stands in stark contrast to Gaiman’s earlier works.

The society Gaiman creates in *American Gods* is unapologetically misogynistic. Female sexuality is treated as a transgression: both mortal and immortal women are objectified and generally brutalized throughout the novel. While this portrayal of women seems inconsistent

with his earlier works, Gaiman does present an alternative/counter depiction of women through the protagonist Shadow. Shadow becomes a reflector, or mirror, of the thoughts and actions that the mainly male-dominated world around him possesses, echoing the beliefs of those he comes in contact with. This idea of “reflection” is portrayed through Shadow’s musings on those he interacts with, often opposing their opinions on women. In one instance, Shadow reflects on an interaction that Wednesday is having with a young waitress, one he will later take to his motel room:

He stared at her—it was almost a leer—as if nothing that she could offer him would be as toothsome a morsel as herself. Shadow felt deeply uncomfortable: it was like watching an old wolf stalking a fawn too young to know that if it did not run, and run now, it would wind up in a distant glade with its bones picked clean by ravens. (Gaiman 211)

The world is reflected through Shadow’s eyes, but his own thoughts and beliefs offer a better, more equal world. Moments after Wednesday’s flirtation with the waitress, Shadow attempts to begin a conversation with Wednesday about making a change and asks, “Don’t you ever get tired of lying?” (Gaiman 249). To which Wednesday replies, “Not in the slightest” (Gaiman 249). Just as Shadow exists in the realm of *American Gods* only to juxtapose it, Gaiman creates novels in a heightened misogynistic world only to expose his hope for the future of women in America. Gaiman has gone further than simply representing strong, female characters in *American Gods* by providing a misogynistic representation of society, while discreetly subverting the expectations and norms of that society.

In order to fully grasp Gaiman’s subtle subversion of patriarchal norms in *American Gods*, a deeper exploration of his previous work is needed to understand the development of Gaiman’s feminism from blatant feminism to discreet subversion. Jessica Burke states, “Neil

Gaiman has a knack for making the most unbelievable, believable and the most surreal just two degrees shy of odd. He has challenged boundaries deeply ingrained in fiction and the Western psyche—in regard to female characters” (141). Burke’s essay deals mainly with the ways in which Gaiman utilizes the trope of the female witch in his writings, but her arguments on his ability to “challenge boundaries” is especially important. The witches in *Stardust*, for instance, are “seeking the power of the fallen star...so that they may feed on her heart and so regain their own power and youth” (Wagner 323). These powerful characters are given autonomy and control over their own lives, while still highlighting the problematic obsession over youth and the female image. They have incredible, magical power, but their demise occurs when they seek to change their appearance in order to regain the beauty of their youth. By bringing this to the forefront of his text, Gaiman is demonstrating the power that women can have within society, while still existing in a culture that has overwhelming demands placed upon them concerning their looks and appearances. Yvaine, on the other hand, is objectified the moment she enters the story, as she is to be a wedding gift for the young Tristan’s “true love.” She, like the witches, must fight an uphill battle in order to break free of all the societal expectations for her gender. Where the witches fail and are punished for their pursuit of youth and beauty, however, Yvaine succeeds and decides what she truly wishes her own destiny to be without the demands of the world around her.

*Coraline* is another of Gaiman’s stories in which he is able to challenge socially-acceptable norms, and in this instance the Neil Gaiman canon utilizes a more representative use of the world as dictated by social pressures. As David Rudd states, “*Coraline* is centrally concerned with how one negotiates one’s place in the world; how one is recognized in one’s own right rather than being either ignored on the one hand, or stifled on the other” (160). The “mirror-

like house” (160), as Rudd calls it, succinctly provides a glance into the two extremes of social expectations. One side allows the main character, Coraline, to do what she chooses “at the expense of her individuality” (Rudd 160), and the other side suppresses her desires and actions. The “Other Mother” character in the mirrored world that Coraline discovers is incredibly attentive and fits to the 1950’s nuclear family style, *Leave It to Beaver* mother. At first, Coraline enjoys the attentiveness and fawning but quickly realizes that everything is just a façade, and nothing is truly real or meaningful. Rachel Martin discusses this phenomenon utilizing the “Other Mother” as the perfect example: “Gaiman’s works exemplify the way phallogocentric discourse places women at odds with one another in ways that readers see as the natural relationship strains by (re)iterating relationships in doubled binaries that fracture the phallogocentric discourses of his female protagonists” (Martin 22). The “Other Mother” represents what Coraline believes to be the “perfect” family life, although her dreams and beliefs are quickly shattered. The amount of control exerted by the “Other Mother’s” world may seem appealing from the outside; however, the moment one becomes entangled within its grasp, it is harder than anything to become free and independent, as Coraline ultimately figures out (*Coraline*).

The patriarchal culture of *American Gods* is Gaiman’s representation of the current male-dominated cultural experience of individuals living in modern-day America. One of the earliest moments in which this can be clearly seen is on Shadow’s trip back to reality on the prison bus. One of the other released inmates sees women outside the bus and exclaims, “Shit...There’s pussy out there” (Gaiman 13). Gaiman’s use of the misogynistic language/patriarchal discourse within his novel is his attempt at showing overpowering societal expectations, not just for the



individuals being targeted, but also those who do not wish to condone it (and even those who benefit from misogyny?). Rut Blomqvist argues that:

The protagonist realizes his own need to exist within a social context, but at the same time finds it impossible to wholeheartedly involve himself in American culture. He develops a critical view of the culture to which he nevertheless needs to belong, and the intermediary position he attains carries moral and ethical, as well as epistemic and ontological, implications. (Blomqvist 5)

Escaping society is an unrealistic goal for any of the characters in the novel to have, just as it is unrealistic for any individual to fully shun a society that is oppressive toward them and others they care about. Shadow, the recently-released inmate whose only desire is to do what is right, is unable to fully escape from the civilized world around him, dying in an attempt to do so, but then revived in order to fulfill his destiny and assist in ending the battle before it even begins. By the end of the novel, Shadow has abandoned America entirely, hoping to one day return, but later finds he cannot fully integrate himself into a society that exists to completely manipulate its members. *American Gods* is a story about that society—a society in which mortals, especially women, are handled like marionettes by their heteronormative puppet-masters; a society that is “a bad land for gods” (Gaiman 478). *American Gods* is Gaiman’s way of illuminating the problems with such a society while advocating for a change—a change he develops and introduces through his protagonist.

In *American Gods*, Gaiman immediately introduces Shadow, an ethnically-ambiguous transplant to America, as he was born in America, but due to his mother’s career, spent the majority of his youth overseas. Shadow is also a recent inmate who is released from prison early due to the tragic events that have occurred in his personal life. Gaiman writes, “he kept himself

in shape, and taught himself coin tricks, and thought a lot about how much he loved his wife” (Gaiman 3). Unfortunately, his wife, Laura, has been killed in a car accident a mere three days prior to his release, and he is left without a plan for his future. Mr. Wednesday, an older, shabby-looking conman, presents himself to Shadow as a potential employer hoping to retain Shadow into his services for unknown reasons. With no other options, Shadow decides to join with Wednesday and they begin the process of preparing for Mr. Wednesday’s ultimate endgame, a battle between the new American gods and the old. Gaiman presents two sets of gods, those who were brought over from the “old country,” the old gods, and the new gods of economic and technological triumph. The battle that Wednesday wishes to start, would be a battle of survival in a world where there is only so much belief and worship to go around, and all the gods, both powerful and fading, would be fighting a battle for Wednesday giving him an almost limitless supply of belief and worship to draw from. As the pseudo-bodyguard and chauffeur, Shadow is tasked with doing anything and everything asked of him by Wednesday. As time passes, he recounts his experiences with misogynistic and sexist associates, while experiencing more of the same from the new characters he meets along the way. As Wednesday and Shadow begin the long and arduous task of collecting as many Old Gods who are willing to fight for their place in the world, the nature of American society becomes clearer to Shadow until, in his judgment upon the World Tree (his death), he is able to fully grasp the truth about the world. He now knows what he must do in order to not only stop the chaos and battle, but also begin to make a greater, systemic change in the world.

Gaiman paints a vivid picture of misogyny and sexism in American culture through Shadow’s past experiences and retellings of stories from individuals in his life. Shadow also meets characters who continue to support this objectifying culture by demeaning the female

characters they meet along the way; characters like Wednesday, Mr. Nancy, and Mad Sweeney continually treat women as objects whose only purpose in life is to provide them with pleasure of the sexual or visual variety. Gaiman presents a hyper-patriarchy, in which the old gods have more of a “traditional” view on the place of women in the world and are not afraid to share their thoughts on the matter through words or actions. The new gods, while not as demeaning toward women as the old gods, are more concerned with their own personal agendas, mainly centered on their survival in an ever-changing world. In his essay on the ways in which Gaiman utilizes a “phallogocentric discourse,” Martin argues that it is this very patriarchal world Gaiman creates that allows him to fully demonstrate the problematic nature of the culture in and of itself: “Gaiman operates within and utilizes the phallogocentric discourse in his creation and depiction of women, even to the extent that he evokes some of his strongest, most popular female characters through the voices of his male characters and through dominant narrative structures, utilizing the dominant discourse to critique and problematize its own assumptive frameworks” (Martin 12). Shadow’s voice is the dominant one throughout the novel, but his words are often not his own. Women are, in the majority of cases, not given a voice of their own and are represented through the patriarchal interactions/voices that dominate the novel. Shadow’s interactions with Wednesday, in particular (as well as other male, chauvinistic individuals), are what get retold through Shadow to represent society as a whole. This can be most clearly seen through the novel’s main antagonist, Mr. Wednesday.

Wednesday is an American depiction of the Norse god, Odin, the All-Father. As Shadow and the reader learn toward the end of the novel, Wednesday is also Shadow’s father and the circumstances leading up to their connections, including the death of Shadow’s wife, were all orchestrated by Wednesday in order to enlist Shadow in his war. Throughout the novel,

Wednesday has several rendezvous with women he meets on his travels. One of their first nights travelling together, Shadow and Wednesday stop at a motel. Shadow is visited by his recently reanimated wife Laura, Wednesday is busy with the woman from behind the front desk, a woman he describes as “the kind of women I liked when I was younger. Pale-skinned and blue-eyed, hair so fair it’s almost white, wine-colored lips, and round, full breasts with the veins running through them like a good cheese” (Gaiman 67). Wednesday’s description is typical of his feelings toward all women. He treats them as sexual objects, ones that can be controlled and used for his personal needs before tossing them aside. As Wednesday claims, “the secret is charm. Pure and simple” (Gaiman 67). It is this very charm that allows him to approach a woman like Zorya Vechernyaya, who is previously described as a “gaunt old woman,” and greet her with, “Zorya, my dear, may I say how unutterably beautiful you look? A radiant creature. You have not aged” (Gaiman 68). The charm that Wednesday employs was one that even he admits to gaining through one of his vigils on the World Tree, providing him with the power to gain any woman that he desires. That this is a goal of his and that he went through such a difficult and time-consuming process to be able to accomplish anything he desired with women goes to demonstrate the misogynistic manner in which he treats women. His manipulation, while powered by his godliness and magical prowess, is all there to control and influence women in order to bend them to his will. Wednesday manipulates and charms his way into every corner that he needs in order to get exactly what he wants, not dissimilar to the way he treats Shadow.

Misdirection is pivotal to Wednesday’s success at duping Shadow and others, so he can persuade all of them to unwittingly do his bidding. Elizabeth Swanstrom states that, “Misdirection takes advantage of the mind’s tendency to ascribe causal relations from instances of constant conjunction, but it only works if it is subtly employed, and it takes Shadow the bulk

of the novel to hone in on how it's happened" (11). At the end of the novel, after Shadow has come to the realization that Wednesday's endgame was a two-man con with Loki, the Norse trickster god of chaos, as his partner, Wednesday praises Shadow for his assistance in the con, revealing the play for what it is. Wednesday states, "It's called misdirection. And there's power in the sacrifice of a son—power enough, and more than enough, to get the whole ball rolling. To tell the truth, I'm proud of you" (Gaiman 472). Through his constant womanizing and focus on gathering the Old Gods together, Wednesday has deceived everyone around him, but none more than Shadow. Shadow, whose own opinions on women and society are much more idealistic and fair, was too taken up with Wednesday's ploy to realize what was actually going on behind the scenes. Comments such as, "I've never been overly concerned about legality...Not as long as I get what I want. Sometimes the nights are long and cold. And I need her, not as an end in herself, but to wake me up a little" (Gaiman 214). This is quickly followed up by Wednesday blatantly stating, "Then the sooner I am making the two-backed beast with the little hotsy-totsy lass from the restaurant in a back room of the Motel 6, the better" (Gaiman 216). These comments, and many others are exactly what Wednesday employs in order to distract and force Shadow to follow the empty hand, rather than the one with the coin in it.

Misdirection is also the key to Gaiman's success at achieving his goals of subverting the societal expectations of women in his novel. Shadow, the strong, ethnically-ambiguous recent con has been perfecting his skills with coin tricks. During an early interaction with Mr. Wednesday, Shadow describes his abilities with coin tricks, "'I'm just learning,' said Shadow. 'I can do a lot of the technical stuff. The hardest part is making people look at the wrong hand' ... 'It's called misdirection'" (Gaiman 95). Misdirection is an important part of the novel, and one that is employed by several of the characters. Shadow's description here offers a glimpse

into the ways in which a master conman, like Mr. Wednesday, would make the “people look at the wrong hand.” While Shadow’s use of misdirection is foreshadowing the same misdirection that Wednesday has been employing the entire novel, it also brings the notion of feminism to the surface. Gaiman’s novel, up until this point, has been filled with sexual comments about women, how the men want to, or inevitably do, use them to fulfill their own fantasies, or how they are merely objects through which goals can be accomplished. Shadow reflects what he has collected and gathered from his experiences in life, revealing the deepest, darkest traits of a society determined to possess and control all women. Simone de Beauvoir, in her discussion of woman as “Other” states, “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being” (Beauvoir 35). Women, as Beauvoir is arguing, have no independence of their own and are merely objects in a world ruled by men. Gaiman’s use of misdirection trumps both Shadow’s coin tricks, as well as Wednesday’s inevitable plans, as it forces the reader to look deeply into the depth of society, while the ideal world in which women have autonomy, rights, and equality is represented in the words and actions of Shadow, the man reflecting society’s views.

Wednesday is certainly not alone in the hyper-patriarchy (need to explain what you mean by this—why not just use patriarchy?) that Gaiman has set up in his novel. Characters like Mr. Nancy (the American incarnation of the African god, Anansi), as well as other minor characters, all take part in the misogynistic culture that persists through the entire novel. Mr. Nancy, the old storyteller, likes to tell a good tale, but mostly likes a good tale that involves him and a “high-titty woman.” Nancy states, “But there still ain’t nothing out there in the world for my money that can beat a big old high-titty woman. Some folk you talk to, they say it’s the booty you got to inspect at first, but I’m here to tell you that it’s the titties that still crank up my engine on a cold

morning” (Gaiman 112-3). Again, the sexual objectification of women runs rampant throughout the interactions that Shadow has with these characters, but each time they speak, he finds himself not engaging in their vulgar and diminishing comments. In comparing himself with Shadow, Nancy argues, “I can get more pussy in an afternoon than you’ll get in a year. I can dance like an angel, fight like a cornered bear, plan better than a fox, sing like a nightingale...” (Gaiman 379). It always comes down to how much better a man is at manipulating the women around them, getting “pussy” or enjoying the “high-titty woman” that comes along. While the plot that surrounds these characters seems chaotic and fantastical, in both its use of mythology as well as the dominating patriarchal tone, there is an underlying sense of belief and realness beneath the surface. Richard Rosenbaum sees this concept and explains how it correlates to the real world:

But beyond that, it [*American Gods*] also takes concepts from philosophy—  
amalgamating ancient and modern ideas—and uses them to create the rules of the novel’s  
world that are not just logical and consistent but in a strange way *believable*, telling us, in  
the process, a lot about how our real world works. (Rosenbaum 49)

Characters like Wednesday and Nancy, whose very words and actions sustain a male-dominated, misogynistic culture, are not solitary individuals belonging only to the world of *American Gods* but also real American culture. Gaiman is proposing, in an almost unnoticeable manner, the ways in which women are unjustly treated and abused within society, something that is not only incredibly problematic with modern day American culture but also highly prevalent within the social structures of the real world.

Other characters, such as Mad Sweeney [whose t-shirt when Shadow first met him said, “IF YOU CAN’T EAT IT. DRINK IT. SMOKE IT OR SNORT IT...THEN F\*CK IT!” (Gaiman 32)], as well as the Iceman from Shadow’s prison [whom Shadow recalls stating about his Greek

ex-girlfriend, “And it ain’t true what they say about them, neither. I tried giving it to my girlfriend in the ass, she almost clawed my eyes out” (Gaiman 6)] leave little to be admired within the world of the novel, but two of the main female characters are also represented in a very negative light. Laura, Shadow’s recently deceased wife, and Bilquis, the “man-eating vagina,” are not only shown in a negative or fearful light due to their sexuality, but are also treated appallingly by the majority of the male characters in the novel, with Shadow as the exception. While the sexist culture surrounding these characters, and other women, is overwhelmingly present throughout the majority of the novel, it is a mere reflection of what Shadow experiences. Shadow himself refuses to accept this reality by declining to participate in the objectification and sexualization of women, treating everyone he meets as an individual deserving of respect and equality, even when he does not particularly enjoy them or their company. He reflects on the society around him while subtly presenting a different way of treating women; one in which equality and respect are present throughout the majority of interactions.

Shadow isn’t completely separate from the society in which he lives. While he did grow up outside of America, he tends to slip into the pitfalls of patriarchy at times. Jessica Burke points out this fact when critiquing Gaiman’s overall writing style, “Despite being a writer who offers a unique and forward-thinking view on and about women, Gaiman intermittently displays a misogynistic tone” (147). Gaiman’s use of this “misogynistic tone,” however, is purposed toward undermining the very patriarchy that it would appear to support. Shadow does not completely immerse himself within the world of sexism and misogyny. While he still exists in this problematic world, the cases in which he interacts with women in a less than equal manner are more deferential in tone than characters like Wednesday or Nancy. During an instance of



remembering his recently deceased wife, Shadow recalls the playful times they spent together, and the sweet pet name she had for him. Shadow thinks, “I’ll be your puppy. What do you want me to do? Chew your slippers? Piss on the kitchen floor? Lick your nose? Sniff your crotch? I bet there’s nothing a puppy can do I can’t do! And he picked her up as if she weighed nothing at all, and began to lick her nose while she giggled and shrieked, and then he carried her to bed” (Gaiman 9). This interaction is sexual and shows the submissive side of Shadow. Shadow allows himself to be taken advantage of, “disciplined” in a sense, as a puppy would need to be if they had committed the actions listed above. This fantasy is one of the ways in which Shadow’s ability to be submissive, not only to Wednesday, an all-powerful god, but also to a woman becomes implicitly clear and provides a window into the soul of Shadow, a man willing to break free of hierarchical gender stereotypes.

Laura, on the other hand, is harshly treated due to her indiscretion with Robbie, Shadow’s close friend, and this leads to their combined death. Shadow only knows that his wife is dead, but Audrey Burton, Robbie’s wife, reveals the true nature of what happened when she sees Shadow at the funeral home, “They didn’t tell you?...Your wife died with my husband’s cock in her mouth, Shadow” (Gaiman 45). It is later revealed to have all been a part of Wednesday’s plan, but what throws a wrench into the whole situation is when Shadow drops a golden coin into Laura’s grave and she returns to the world of the living. Burke compares her to a witch in the sense that, “She, herself, is the victim of a spell, of a kind, Shadow being the cause of her liminal state—her undeath—because of the coin he placed in her grave” (Burke 150). This “undeath,” as Burke calls it, is a part of what negatively impacts Laura’s story throughout the novel. Since she was sexually indecent, according to the patriarchal society, she must be punished for her transactions. And punished she is, as the state of rotting away slowly while the world continues

to rotate begins to take its toll on Laura and her emotional state. Shadow, although hurt by her actions, wants to help her and asks, “Laura...What do you want?” (Gaiman 136). In response, Laura says, “I want to be alive again...Not in this half-life. I want to be really alive. I want to feel my heart pumping in my chest again. I want to feel blood moving through me—hot, and salty, and real” (Gaiman 137). This continues to come up again and again, even to the point where Laura asks Shadow to look into a way that she can be alive once more. Laura, literally a decaying corpse, does not wish for Shadow to see her in this state, “Please don’t look at me...You won’t like it” (Gaiman 323), but Shadow does not care about the way that she looks or what has happened to her, because somewhere, deep down, he knows that he has love for her: “I want to look at you” (Gaiman 323).

Laura is continuously punished for the choices that she made leading up to her death, not simply from her own point of view in which the rotting and decaying is taking its own toll, but also from those around her who, even though she is decaying and rotting away, still sexualize and objectify her. In a similar fashion, the *femme fatale* of early Film Noir where women who were punished for the use of their sexuality. Jack Boozer writes, “Often serving as catalysts for criminal behavior in men, they encouraged the blame heaped on women's sexuality and furthered the calls for her sexual repression and restriction to the household. But these dark sirens of classic noir, it must be remembered, use their sexuality as a means to an end” (21). While Laura was not attempting to murder her husband to gain an estate or inheritance left behind in a will, she was punished, as the *femme fatale* typically were, for transgressions against the proper manner of expressing her sexuality. On the way to the final battle, Laura is picked up by Mr. Town who introduces himself as Mack and she thinks, “when he was talking to women in bars, he would sometimes follow that up with ‘And the ones that know me really well call me Big

Mack.’ That could wait. They would have many hours in each other’s company to get to know each other, after all” (Gaiman 448). This moment is short-lived, and Mr. Town actually begins to develop feelings for Laura, feelings that he believes could be love, but he is also thinking purely of getting her into a bath at a motel after dropping off the stick from the world tree. Laura quickly disposes of him and heads up to face off with Mr. World, otherwise known as Loki, the trickster.

Mr. World, or Loki, in a fashion consistent with other males in the novel, begins to comment on the way in which Laura looks—how she looks good for being dead so long. When she mentions that the women of the world tree gave her water from Urd’s Well, Loki scoffs and states, “It won’t last...The Norns gave you a little taste of the past. It will dissolve into the present soon enough, and then those pretty blue eyes will roll out of their sockets and ooze down those pretty cheeks, which will, by then, of course, no longer be so pretty” (Gaiman 467). He then proceeds to coax her into what he believes to be submission so that he can get the stick from the world tree and enact the final part of the plan. “‘Good girl,’ he said reassuringly, in a way that struck her as being both patronizing and indefinably male. It made her skin crawl” (Gaiman 468). While lines like this would make a normal individual’s skin crawl, it is even more interesting to note that Laura, as a being undead, does not really feel anything anymore, giving her the strength and power to stab the stick through her own chest and into Loki’s who has been standing behind her. He once again reacts aggressively and misogynistically, yelling, “Bitch...You fucking bitch” (Gaiman 470). Needless to say, Laura does not seem to catch a break when it comes to being consistently punished for her indiscretion with Robbie. The most interesting part of her experience is not necessarily the male domination that is still present all around her, but how she believes she has to hide herself. In an effort to mask her decaying body,

she must plaster on the makeup and perfume in order to “fit in” to a society in which she no longer belongs. While this can be viewed as a simple fact that she must accomplish in order for normal people to accept her and not find out she is actually dead, it is similar to the way in which all female individuals are expected to fit a certain ideal standard. In her article on the “Defense of Choice,” R. Claire Snyder-Hall argues that women should not have to fit into the societal expectations laid out for them, but they should also not be judged on how they choose to live their lives: “In my view, feminism cannot tell any woman how to resolve her internal conflicts, but it does ask each woman to reflect on her own desires and seriously consider how her choices might play a role in propping up or calling into question the sex/gender system” (Snyder-Hall 259). Internalizing and identifying one’s own, individual desires versus those laid upon one by society is an important step in breaking from the expected norms of any cultural expectation. In Gaiman’s representation of American society, women are expected to smell nice, wear makeup, have all excess body hair removed, etc. Laura must take this to the extreme in order to fit in, but her being dead only intensifies the already extreme social expectations that face all women. Very few women in *American Gods* are given the autonomy to freely choose how to live according to their own desires and beliefs. Sam Black Crow, Bast, and Easter are some of the only women who are able to control their lives, and even then, they are still judged for resisting the status quo. Even if they are courageous enough to take that stand and make their own decisions, they still face the consequences that society presses upon them.

One such woman facing the extreme socially acceptable norms of how a woman should behave in a civilized world is Bilquis, who is first introduced in a short segment in which she consumes a whole man through her vagina as he “worships” her. Bilquis, previously the human “Queen of Sheba,” is now a street-walking prostitute in L.A. She states about her previously

sacred profession and those who now take part in it along with her that, “She is proud that she owes nothing to anyone. The other girls on the street, they have pimps, they have habits, they have children, they have people who take what they make. Not her. There is nothing holy left in her profession. Not any more” (Gaiman 329). Bilquis does not quite fit in with the rest of the gods, and she makes it clear from the very start that she will have no part in the war that is going on between the new and the old gods. Burke argues that:

Because Bilquis runs contrary to what the new order of gods desires, because she straddles the division between god and human, and because she ‘represents a woman of intellect and will who demonstrated to cope with any patriarchal and hegemonic societies...’ she cannot survive to fight the war between the gods. (153)

She has chosen her particular battlefield, and it is not amongst the gods of new and old, but rather the real world that she inhabits. Having lived through thousands of years, Bilquis has learned a thing or two about mankind and what it wants, and she has also developed a keen sense for staying alive. Unfortunately, due to the fact that she goes against the status quo and does not have a place within the social norms as she flaunts her power which comes directly from her own sexuality, she is punished and subsequently executed.

Bilquis’ power is one that comes directly from her ability to influence men to worship her. She has sex with them and eventually consumes them whole, and this is something which typical, American culture as represented in the novel is not comfortable with. A woman, immortal or not, having this type of power is intolerable, and she must be cleansed from the world. The fear of female sexuality is what places her power into a category separate characters like Laura as she has total control over her sexuality and that is something which the males dominating society are extremely uncomfortable with. Burke provides an interesting look into

how Gaiman approaches a character like Bilquis, in that she isn't easily categorized into one section, but more representative of reality, "Neil Gaiman's role in portraying the witch can't be easily categorized as feminist or misogynist. His work is neither, and yet he portrays a realistic view of witches, of the culture surrounding them, perhaps more so than any other" (167). Bilquis isn't simply a two-dimensional characterization of a prostitute. Her character has depth. She is an actual, independent, intellectual individual who has thoughts and emotions all her own and is not afraid to think them or make them known. She has control, but it is limited to her own locus of power. This leaves her defenseless in certain situations, such as dealing with the "fat kid" in the limo, one of the new gods. When she realizes that she has been suckered into the limo and has limited options, she begins to devise a plan to escape and free herself, but her powers are of no use against the "fat kid" who is not having sex with her. Even though Bilquis is independent and has power and control of her own sexuality, regardless of what society states is right or acceptable, it is also her downfall in that it is her only line of defense and she is, in essence, punished for that. In the end she escapes, only to be run over by the limo multiple times in a brutally grotesque and vivid scene, "She lands on the road behind the limo, and the impact shatters her pelvis, fractures her skull" (Gaiman 334). Her pelvis is broken, the source of her power and independence shattered as she was unable to use it to fight back against the quickly moving social change represented by the kid in the limo. As the limo drives off, the kid yells back at the bloodied pile of meat and bones on the side of the road, "You fucking madonnas. All you fucking madonnas" (Gaiman 334). In this moment of calling her a madonna, the kid in the limo is invoking the Madonna/Whore complex, demonstrating his inability to be sexually attracted to any woman, even a "whore" like Bilquis. Browyn Kara Conrad describes the Madonna/Whore complex as "categorizing women according to (1) their degree of removal from

carnal knowledge and (2) their degree of obedience to male authority thus results in a polarity between the Madonna, whose grace derives from her marital chastity, and the Whore, who, as an unmarried woman, exudes sexuality” (Conrad 311). This display by the kid in the limo effectively shows him as impotent and implies that he is only able to gain satisfaction through violence against women, as seen in his attack and murder of Bilquis.

The punishment experienced by Bilquis is not a new one, and Gaiman sheds light on this issue and its relevance, both in the old world as well as the new in how he approaches her death. Bilquis herself has been around for centuries, and her “job,” that of providing men with sexual comfort, is one of the oldest in history. That being said, she is punished, not by an old god, but by the fat kid in the limo, a new god representing the current American cultural landscape. The women on the street with Bilquis all had their issues and, as she herself states, there is “nothing holy left in her profession. Not any more” (Gaiman 329). Times have changed and the new American culture cannot present a space in which Bilquis can succeed and flourish, not as a woman of independence and power over men. The other women on the street all have pimps or others whom they owe allegiance or money to, leading to them having very little of the control, even if they control men sexually. Bilquis had all the power, but her punishment was carried out by a new American god in order to illustrate the lack of space for her in an ever-changing patriarchal, American society that must control and keep women under its overpowering force and influence.

Up until this point, the misogyny and sexism presented by Gaiman is fairly bleak and depressing, especially given that it is representative of the real American culture that Gaiman is commenting on. However, there is hope for a better future presented in the protagonist, Shadow. Gaiman’s end goal in presenting this realistic version of society is to deconstruct the patriarchal

culture through a hyper-patriarchal narrative. Shadow's role in dismantling the patriarchal system lies in his ability to show a stark contrast and non-compliance with the culture already presented all around him. Shadow tends to view things as they are, not in a particularly positive or negative light, but simply as they are presented before him. At the Motel America, Shadow describes the woman behind the counter as having "pale blonde hair and a rodent-like quality to her face that was most apparent when she looked suspicious, and eased when she smiled. Most of the time she looked at Shadow, she looked suspicious" (Gaiman 51). Shadow's description and thoughts about the woman are not in anger for her looking at him suspiciously, although this could be construed as her taking note and being cautious due to his ethnically ambiguous origins, but merely a simple telling of exactly how things are, without a flourish or negative comment. Shadow is a "reflector" of the society he views and experiences around him. He takes it all in and will repeat what he has heard, make note of those who have expressed sexist sentiments, but he never takes part in the cultural "game" of it all. In fact, he begins to demonstrate a different path to take. This is especially true when characters like Mr. Wednesday make negative comments about women that seem to dominate the story. Blomqvist argues that, "These efforts, such as Shadow's development of a critical position in relation to American culture, embody the dominant ideology of American Gods; an ideology which indicates an alternative to the problematic values and limited choices of lifestyle suggested by the binary pairs of American culture in the novel" (8). Shadow does begin to judge what is being said around him and not only does he respond to them, but eventually, he takes action in order to demonstrate that change can come if you believe in it; something that it takes him the entirety of the novel to fully comprehend and act upon.



Gaiman's hyper-patriarchy begins to dissolve under the scrutiny of Shadow's gaze as he begins making choices, based not on what is expected out of him as a man, or as a member of civilized American society, but as an independent, decent, moral, just individual who chooses to do what is right, rather than what would bring him the most success or power. Blomqvist argues that "it is through this dominant ideology that Gaiman manages to impart a vague but profoundly relevant idea of reality, something that reaches beyond the limiting cultural image of the real" (8). While Blomqvist is talking about the overall cultural and mythological dimensions of American culture, this analysis of *American Gods* makes a similar analysis from a feminist vantage point. Women are treated in a very particular way within the culture of *American Gods*, and in order for them to break free of that reality, there needs to be something that "reaches beyond" and opens up what can be accomplished without bringing the world down around them. Shadow is Gaiman's way of showing that there is a better way, there is a means to break the shackles of American cultural expectations and stand independent of any socially accepted norms. It is through his own actions, as well as the interactions he has with other individuals he meets on his travels that allow Shadow himself to develop and grow into a person who is not only capable of making these decisions, but takes the necessary steps to achieve them successfully.

As Shadow begins his journey into self-improvement, a process that will allow him to accomplish Gaiman's goals of subverting the patriarchal status quo, he is confused and unable to make any choices for himself:

I feel...like I'm in a world with its own sense of logic. Its own rules. Like when you're in a dream, and you know there are rules you mustn't break, but you don't know what they are or what they mean. I have no idea what we're talking about, or what happened today,

or pretty much anything since I got out of jail. I'm just going along with it, you know?

(Gaiman 83)

His interactions here with Zorya Polunochnaya, the sister of the night, begin to open Shadow up to the ideas that he can begin to step out and figure out what the rules are, but more importantly, that they might not need to be followed. In one instance, she teaches Shadow something about interacting with women, specifically concerning his dead wife, saying, "Did you ask her what she wanted?" (Gaiman 82). Shadow had not, so Zorya continues, "Perhaps you should. It is the wisest thing to ask the dead. Sometimes they will tell you" (Gaiman 83). Shadow is incredibly respectful of Zorya Polunochnaya, and not in the way in which Wednesday had been respectful to Zorya's sisters. Wednesday was charming them in order to get something that he wanted, but Shadow treats Zorya as an individual, one deserving of respect and, in the case of Shadow, a little intimidation as he is unsure of what to expect from her as he "became uncomfortably aware that Zorya Polunochnaya was wearing nothing at all underneath" (Gaiman 81). Gaiman's use of the word "uncomfortably" in this moment provides more access into the inner depths of Shadow's character, allowing the reader to begin to see the differences between Shadow and the rest of society when it comes to women. While still sexual in nature, and so in line with the overarching theme of the novel's treatment of women, Shadow's interaction is nothing like the moments prior to it when using a woman for their sexuality was all that was being spoken of. In this instance, Shadow is learning and growing under the immense knowledge and power that is represented in Zorya, the sister of the night. He is able to begin his journey toward truly being alive and changing the world around him.

The most independent and free-thinking mortal woman in Gaiman's novel is Samantha Black Crow, a young girl who is "four pints" Cherokee (Gaiman 153). Instead of sexualizing her

or viewing her as an object, Shadow simply speaks with and interacts normally with her. She also plays a big role in teaching Shadow about what is expected versus what can actually be achieved. In their first meeting, Sam is looking to get a ride from Shadow as she hitchhikes up to her college. Her introduction of herself shows that she is not one to follow the status quo: “Girl-Sam. I used to be Sammi with an I, and I’d do a smiley face over the I, but then I got completely sick of it because like absolutely everybody was doing it, so I stopped” (Gaiman 146). Shadow is unsure about giving her a ride, but she convinces him with a patriarchal cliché about chivalry. Shadow asks, “What makes you think I’m giving you a ride?” (Gaiman 147), to which she responds, “Because I’m a damsel in distress...and you are a knight in whatever. A really dirty car. You know someone wrote Wash Me! on your rear windshield?” (Gaiman 147). By invoking that specific literary trope, the damsel in distress, Sam is playing into the social expectations, but also subverting them in her follow-up about the dirty car, as well as her resistance to acquiescing to the social norms and expectations for her behavior. She still wants to believe in societal standards, however, and asks Shadow during their second interaction whether he is one of the good guys or not, something which Shadow cannot completely and honestly say, but he does give her the truth that he believes he is doing his best, to which she responds, “good enough” (Gaiman 350). Ray Bossert argues that this is a turning point for Sam, who previously did view much of the world in the “good-guy, bad-guy” black and white lens. “Sam wants to see the world with a simple good-guy-bad-guy pragmatism. When Shadow complicates this worldview, she settles for the most simple truth she can get. The phrase ‘good enough’ takes on particular significance” (Bossert 41).

Shadow continues to be thrown by the independent, “fight against the man” style of interactions Sam throws his way. When confronted with Audrey Burton in the bar and accused of

murder, Sam does the last thing someone accompanying an accused murderer would do—she kisses him: “Then she went up on tiptoes and pulled Shadow down to her, and kissed him hard on the lips, pushing her mouth against his for what felt to Shadow like several minutes, and might have been as long as five seconds in real, clock-ticking time” (Gaiman 352). Shadow’s own ideas about how he treats women as individuals can also be seen in this moment, as during the kiss, Shadow thinks to himself, “It was a strange kiss...It was a flag-waving kiss. Even as she kissed him, he became certain that she didn’t even like him—well, not like that” (Gaiman 352). Shadow’s mind doesn’t go straight to taking advantage of her, or having sex with her, but to the fact that she most likely doesn’t like him in a sexual or romantic manner, and he is completely fine with that, not angry or upset, but fully accepting the fact that she is not attracted to him in that way. Shadow continues his progression through the end of the novel, when almost all is said and done with, he returns to give flowers to Sam, only to find her enamored with a young woman she had been dating. He thinks to himself, “It had been a good kiss, Shadow reflected, but Sam had never looked at him the way she was looking at the pigtailed girl, and she never would. ‘What the hell. We’ll always have Peru...And El Paso. We’ll always have that’” (Gaiman 513). He doesn’t make a crude comment about her being with a woman instead of him, he doesn’t think that is wrong in anyway, nor does he even interrupt their evening, slipping the flowers into her hands unknowingly and walking away. Sam does not fit into the socially acceptable position that the patriarchy in control would expect of her in choosing someone other than a man to love. Lois Tyson invokes the idea of the “patriarchal woman” as an individual who submits to the male-controlled patriarchy and yields to their demands, “By patriarchal woman I mean, of course, a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (Tyson 85).

Samantha Black Crow not only showed Shadow that there were social expectations as one way the world could be viewed, but that they are easily triumphed over and laid to rest if one is willing to go against the grain.

Marguerite Olsen, Sam's half-sister, is also one of the women that Shadow interacts with who holds strongly to her independence. Marguerite lost her son one year before meeting Shadow (going under the alias Mike Ainsel), and has since been raising her second son on her own. While Marguerite is not as adventurous or independent as Sam, she still holds her own against the social standards being pressed upon her. She is not afraid to comment on things she does not like, as she does with Shadow when he is performing magic for her son in town, "Hello, Mister Ainsel. Leon says you were doing magic for him...Please don't" (Gaiman 262). But she also succumbs to the pressures of society and hides the fact that she is hurting and suffering still from the loss of her other son, Sandy. Shadow's apartment is right next to hers and one of the first nights he spends there "he could hear somebody nearby, crying, only the thickness of a wall away. He was certain it was Marguerite Olsen, and her sobbing was insistent and low and heartbreaking" (Gaiman 269). Marguerite is a strong-willed, independent woman, but she is also heartbroken over loss, and while Shadow closes the sound off from his room, he cannot sleep after hearing the pain and suffering that she is experiencing: "then he went into his bedroom and closed the door, blocking off the sound of the crying woman. Outside the wind howled and wailed as if it, too, was seeking for a lost child, and he slept no more that night" (Gaiman 269). In this and several other interactions with Marguerite, Shadow reveals an underlying care for those around him that we don't get from other characters. Shadow is concerned with the wellbeing of his fellow humankind, whereas characters like Wednesday or the male voices Shadow continually references from his past, do not. The loss of a child is an agonizing and

painful thing for anyone to experience, and Shadow's empathy with Marguerite affects him to such an extent that he cannot stop thinking about it. The way that he interacts with female characters is a huge contrast to comments made from other characters in his past and provides a hopeful glance into a more idealistic society. If Sam is the outgoing, audacious, "stick-it-to-the-man" type of woman fighting back against society's expectations, Marguerite is the silent fighter, keeping all of her emotions blocked from view and living life the best way she can according to what she must do for her son, not what society believes she should do.

One of the most commanding characters representing a powerful, female figure, appears within Shadow's dreams, both at the funeral home, as well as when he is on the world tree holding Wednesday's vigil. Bast, the Egyptian cat goddess, comes to Shadow his first night in the funeral home, and commands him sexually. Shadow is almost powerless to make any choice or decision during his dream interaction with Bast, and simply succumbs to her powerful demands:

—*Down there*, said the woman. She was wearing a leopard-print skirt which flapped and tossed in the wind, and the flesh between the top of her stockings and her skirt was creamy and soft and in his dream, on the bridge, before God and the world, Shadow went down to his knees in front of her, burying his head in her crotch, drinking in the intoxicating jungle female scent of her. (Gaiman 188)

She continues with her demands, pushes him down and proceeds to straddle and ride him, controlling his every movement, every motion, making him do whatever it is she pleased. He even takes a moment to ask for her name twice, but doesn't dare ask a third time when he gets no response (Gaiman 190). Bast's moment in the story comes and goes as quickly as the dream occurred, one minute there, the next, gone, but this is one of the first moments in which a

powerful woman takes charge and control of a man within this story (other than Bilquis and her all-consuming vagina). In this case, however, Bast doesn't destroy Shadow in the process, as he is left to wonder if his experience was truly real or if he dreamt the whole thing.

One of the final female characters who maintains autonomy and power, regardless of societal expectations is Easter. Easter, as described upon Shadow's first introduction to her has hair that "was so fair that it was white, the kind of platinum-blond tresses that should have belonged to a long-dead movie starlet, her lips were painted crimson, and she looked to be somewhere between twenty-five and fifty" (Gaiman 271). Shadow was immediately "caught in headlights" (Gaiman 272) and was unable to react in his normal manner, as she had enamored him so completely. After the initial greeting, things cooled down a bit, and Wednesday began to pester Easter about joining his cause, which she was originally against as she was still worshipped, at least until Wednesday proved that no one even knew she existed, just her name on a national holiday. A point made even clearer when a young pagan girl was asked about her own worship, to which she responded, "The female principle. It's an empowerment thing. You know...She's the goddess within us all...She doesn't need a name" (Gaiman 274). In this particular moment, the response from the pagan girl receives negative backlash, at least from Wednesday's point of view as it demonstrates a lack of understanding of worship and prayer as far as gods are concerned. The blanket statement about "the female principle" does not provide any substance to what is worshipped, and while not a bad thing to focus on and attempt to achieve in a highly misogynistic world, falls flat in its ability to hold its own credence when compared to the type of belief and worship that the old gods are looking to receive. Needless to say, Wednesday's "death" convinces her, as it does many of the old gods, to travel to the final battle and fight for their right to maintain their place in America.

Easter, however, is not present for the battle as Horus flies to find her in order to revive a dead Shadow who has held vigil over Wednesday's body on the world tree. Horus tells Easter, "The man on the tree. He needs you. A ghost hurt, in his side. The blood came, then it stopped. I think he is dead" (Gaiman 446). Shadow consistently requires the assistance of women throughout this novel, first with Laura who killed two of the "spooks," next with Sam Black Crow who didn't reveal his identity to her sister Marguerite, and now, Easter, who is coming to save his life. When she arrived at the tree, Horus assisted her in lowering Shadow's body to the ground and "She lowered her lips to Shadow's lips, and she breathed into his lungs, a gentle in and out, and then the breath became a kiss. Her kiss was gentle, and it tasted of spring rains and meadow flowers" (Gaiman 459). This moment, reminiscent of Christ coming off of the cross, only to be reborn three days later, the day that is now celebrated as Easter, foreshadows the place that Shadow will have in the coming battle, as well as his role in the world, not only as the "son" of Odin, the all-father, but also as the savior and hero who stops an all-out bloodbath between the new and the old gods. None of this would have been possible, however, without the help of Easter. Easter, then, is the final point in Shadow's development and growth into the character he ends up becoming. It is with her breath and final help that he is able to take on anything and everything, including what is expected by the American culture. While it is only through Easter that Shadow is able to regain his life and fulfill his destiny, there is something reminiscent of the woman being secondary to the man. In the story of the Resurrection, it was Christ himself who was the most important character, and in this moment, although Easter is the one who brings him back, it is obviously Shadow who maintains the position of power as the male figure who sacrificed everything for the world. Simone de Beauvoir states that, "She [woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the



inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (Beauvoir 35). In this instance, Shadow is the “Subject,” the “Absolute,” and Easter is the “Other.” It is in this moment that Gaiman’s misogynistic representations of American culture might be seen as going slightly too far in the attempt to subvert a patriarchal society, but a case can be made for Shadow’s unavoidable complicity. While Shadow is presented as the main figure, the “Absolute,” he is also bringing further attention to the problematic nature that is inherent in a patriarchal culture. That the male characters, no matter how much they may fight back individually against misogyny and patriarchy, can still be complicit in its overall influence. This is partially what Shadow is experiencing after his reanimation from the World Tree.

While all of these female characters are a part of the *American Gods* world that Gaiman has created, there are short “Interludes” and “Coming to America” tales intricately placed between chapters in order to split up the action, but they serve a rather interesting purpose outside of that. The majority of the tales deal with individuals, typically women, who fought back against the status quo and gained some semblance of power and control back into their life, even though their lives were controlled by the patriarchal structures in place around them. Essie Tregowan, a woman arrested and in line for the gallows was persuaded to “plead the belly,” or ask for exile instead of death based on her being pregnant. Essie wasn’t pregnant, however:

And now she remembers the warden of Newgate telling her that it would be a good twelve weeks before her case would be heard, and that she could escape the gallows if she could plead her belly, and what a pretty thing she was—and how she had turned to the wall and bravely lifted her skirts, hating herself and hating him, but knowing he was right; and the feel of the life, quickening inside her, that meant that she could cheat death for a little longer... (Gaiman 92)

Essie was forced out of her home, her country, and her body was taken possession of as well, all in order to survive, but she never forgot the magical “piskies and such folk” from her childhood, and in her old age, they came to her and took her into death, as an old friend, giving her a well-deserved reward for her years of belief and worship.

In another story, a young African girl and her twin brother are kidnapped and taken into slavery to America. Wututu, the young girl, fears being raped on the ship to America and tells the slaver, “If you put it in me down there I will bite it off with my teeth down there. I am a witch girl, and I have very sharp teeth down there” (Gaiman 290). The control she exercised over that slaver saved her from being raped, but was not enough to save her from slavery, nor was it enough to keep her brother with her. She struggled through life and slavery, making of it what she could, and as Jessica Burke writes, “She ended her life in a liminal state not controlled by her own appetites, but the intention of others” (Burke 151). As a slave for the majority of her life, she was unable to make many choices for herself. She was unable to see her brother ever again, unable to remain with her family at certain times, but she was able to keep the traditions that she brought with her from her homeland; traditions of worship and magic that allowed her to become a voodoo woman, known far and wide. She held onto her beliefs and they provided her with a purpose that she could stick to and not lose like so much else that had been lost in her life.

These two stories, and several others, are all of individuals who have maintained their beliefs in whatever gods they brought with them from their countries, and were given something in return for continuing to believe, practice, and worship. While neither of these women lived a particularly pleasant life, they made do with what they had and forgot those who watched over them. In her essay, bell hooks argues that challenges and hardship like the ones these women faced are representative of a larger issue feminism is plagued with. She states, “Feminism is the

struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives” (hooks 54). The very thing hooks is attempting to argue, is exactly what these women in Gaiman’s short stories are facing. The struggle to end oppression; to end their continuous suffering and inability to take control of their own lives. In these instances, Gaiman is using incredibly traumatic and controlling experiences, ones that completely take hold of these women’s’ lives and change them in whatever way seems fitting, in order to show that even in the most difficult of experiences, there are still some things which a society cannot take from an individual. They cannot take their thoughts and who they believe in or pray in the belly of a slaver’s ship surrounded by hundreds of others. A culture can demand everything, but cannot truly force everything, no matter how hard and how tough the circumstances become. These women were brutalized, forced into lives that they would not have chosen for themselves, and yet, they still fought back against the phallogocentric nature of the world. These interludes of powerful women support the ways in which Shadow has already begun to illuminate the issues with a misogynistic culture, while showing those who have fought for an alternative to the male-dominated world they lived in.

The world of *American Gods* is an unforgiving one, especially when it comes to being a woman. There is rampant sexism, misogyny, and traditionally patriarchal gender roles that are thrust into each and every woman’s life within this novel, and the level of difficulty for those few who can rise above it is extreme. With that being said, there are moments, brief and few, but moments nonetheless, where individual women shine through and in those rare moments, Gaiman is providing a glimpse of hope for something better. Mr. Ibis gives power to women when he tells Shadow that “Women survive their men. Men—men like him—don’t live long

when their women are gone. You'll see—he'll just start wandering, all the familiar things are going to be done with her. He gets tired and he fades and then he gives up and then he's gone" (Gaiman 183). One of the woman who reside by the world tree stared out at Mr. Town as he was leaving with the stick, and although Mr. Town was unsure of what he saw, he thought that "The woman who was staring at him began to smile, a huge smile that seemed to split her face lengthwise, a smile that crossed from ear to ear. Then she raised a finger and touched it to her neck, and ran it gently from one side of her neck to the other" (Gaiman 444). These images and more provide power to the female characters in the novel. Power that can only be gained through determination and a resilience they can outlast all male power because women are forced to put up with more challenges in every moment of the day, fighting back against the status quo in an attempt to achieve some level of independence and individuality.

This feat is not accomplished without some level of struggle, however, as Wednesday has demonstrated time and again. In Shadow's time holding Wednesday's vigil, he is finally drifting into death and is greeted once more by Zorya Polnochnaya. During Shadow's first encounter with Zorya, she had provided him with a silver Liberty coin and told him not to lose it like the last one. This one was much weaker as it was the "daughter, not the father" (Gaiman 83), but still powerful. As Kristine Larsen states, "In other words, once again we are reminded that the moon is seen as inferior and less powerful/active than the male solar deity" (Larsen 263). There are only moments of success and triumph, but they are oftentimes overrun with the crushing weight of society bearing down upon any step forward, shoving back in whatever way possible. Even in the moments when Shadow inspects the coin more closely and states his thoughts on Lady Liberty, "I think she's beautiful" (Gaiman 96), they get torn down as in that very moment, Wednesday opens himself up and explains his own thoughts on women and the

way that men end up ruining their lives: “‘That,’ said Wednesday, driving off, ‘is the eternal folly of man. To be chasing after the sweet flesh, without realizing that it is simply a pretty cover for the bones. Worm food. At night, you’re rubbing yourself against worm food” (Gaiman 96).

Throughout the entirety of the novel, Shadow has taken a constant stand to commit to doing what he believes is just and necessary in the world. He continually does what is right, for the basic and simple reason that it is indeed the right thing to do. When Wednesday confused a waitress and kept ten dollars more than he should have, Shadow paid her with his own money, telling Wednesday, “You stiffed that girl for ten bucks, I slipped her ten bucks...It was the right thing to do, and I did it” (Gaiman 277). His wife cheated on him, died, came back, and he still wanted to help her in whatever way he could so in his interactions with the buffalo man, he asked, “How do I help Laura?...She wants to be alive again. I said I’d help her. I owe her that” (Gaiman 218). And in one of the most incredible moments of connection that Shadow might have had throughout the novel, when he was still believing in Wednesday’s illusion, Shadow saw how tired and old Wednesday looked and in that moment, “Shadow wanted, wanted very much, to reach out and put his hand over Wednesday’s gray hand. He wanted to tell him that everything would be okay—something that Shadow did not feel, but that he knew had to be said” (Gaiman 257). He didn’t end up placing his hand on Wednesday’s, but he wonders about it and if it would have done him any good to have that type of connection. He didn’t think that it would have, but he still wished that he had taken that moment to attempt bringing comfort to the old god (Gaiman 257). All of these and more are representative of Shadow’s utter refusal to go against what he feels is right and just. He won’t start a fight. He won’t do things that he doesn’t believe are for the better good, and it is this set of beliefs and the ways in which he approaches life that makes him the ideal character to bring about a change in the overall structure of society. His realizations

of the underlying truth behind reality and everyday life are what allow him to see the two-man con and stop the battle from happening. He was able to see the strings being pulled behind the stage and he cut the lines, if only for that moment, if only for those gods, he made a difference. Shadow was able to finally realize, as Baba Singh argues, “Worship, in Gaiman’s America, is a process of active maintenance, coercion, even extortion; it is in itself an object of contention” (Singh 157). And by bringing this very fact into the light, in front of all the gods, old and new, he was able to stand his ground and make a difference.

While Shadow illuminates the world and the issues surrounding societal expectations of women, *American Gods* is problematic in that the women are not given autonomy to do what?. Gaiman’s novel supports the idea of a feminist society as the ideal over what is explicitly presented as a patriarchal social order, but all the female characters are viewed through a male-dominated lens. This is, more than anything else, Gaiman’s novel, and the female characters end up without much identity besides that which Shadow and the narrator present to the reader. Gaiman is also unable to pass the Bechdel test, a test to see if a piece of media has gender bias, mainly as it relates to women. Alison Bechdel originally conceived of this idea through one of her comics, and the test asks whether or not two named female characters speak to each about something other than a man within the work. While named female characters do speak with each other within *American Gods*, there are only small moments, such as when the Zorya sisters are with each other, or Samantha and Marguerite talk. The focus, however, still comes back on Shadow, if not for the entire conversation, for a good portion of it, failing the third criteria of the test; not speaking about a man (Bechdel). This particular moment can be seen with Marguerite and Sam talking over the phone about an upcoming visit in which Shadow, or Mike Ainsel, is brought up. Sam asks, “Is he cute?” (Gaiman 335), to which Marguerite replies: “His name’s

Ainsel. Mike Ainsel. He's okay. Too young for me. Big guy, looks...what's the word. Begins with an M" (Gaiman 335). Sam then goes on about the possible "M" words he might be, "Mean? Moody? Magnificent? Married?" (Gaiman 335). This problem is more systemic of a larger issue of gender bias that Gaiman brings attention to, but in his attempt to shed light on the issue, he fails to successfully and completely provide a place for women to have a voice within the novel.

Even characters like Easter and Zorya Polunochnaya are given very little leeway of their own, remaining tacked down to the requests and demands of a society bent on controlling their every move. They are not as strong as their male counterparts, nor are they able to stand up for themselves on their own. Easter is defeated by Wednesday's quick tongue and intellect, while Zorya Polunochnaya is never awake during daylight hours, and is relegated to sleeping away the days. The most prominent female character throughout the entire novel, Laura, is given almost no power of her own. Even before Shadow went to prison, Laura remembers feeling unalive with him, leading her to go for Robbie, "I loved being with you because you adored me, and you would do anything for me. But sometimes I'd go into 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 realize that you were in there, sitting on your own, not reading, not watching TV, not doing anything" (Gaiman 326). Shadow is the one who brought her back from the dead, although unwittingly, and he is the only one who can finally give her peace at the end. She has no autonomy to seal her own fate. Even after stabbing herself through the chest in order to kill Loki and save Shadow, she still was unable to end her own life/death. She had asked Shadow to find a way to bring her back to life again, but in the final moments after stabbing Loki, she asks, "And the opposite? What about that?...I think I must have earned it" (Gaiman 481). Shadow doesn't want to end her life, but finally says "Okay," to which she responds, "'That's my husband.' She said it proudly" (Gaiman

482). He then removed the golden coin from around her neck, ending her life. “He bent down then, and kissed her, gently, on her cold cheek, but she did not respond. He did not expect her to. Then he got up and walked out of the cavern, to stare into the night” (Gaiman 482). While Shadow acquiesces to his wife’s wishes at the end, it is still his hand that has to do the deed. She is left with no ability to end her life or get it back on her own; and, in a novel that has progressed from overtly sexual objectification of women, all the way to characters like Easter, Zorya Polunochnaya, and Bast having power over life and death, this moment is somewhat problematic.

What does that mean for the future of American culture then? Is there going to be a change that occurs, allowing a more equal and idealistic social norm to develop? From the very beginning of the novel, Shadow has been given the same message again and again. The buffalo man tells him to “Believe...If you are to survive, you must believe” (Gaiman 17). “‘Believe what?’ asked Shadow... ‘Everything,’ roared the buffalo man” (Gaiman 17). This confusing command seems like an easy way out for Gaiman. “Believe,” that’s simple (and vague) enough and something that a reader could take into their own and develop a meaning for, regardless of what it may or may not mean. Ray Bossert, however, believes that, “The buffalo man doesn’t offer this advice to stimulate Shadow’s curiosity. The buffalo man doesn’t exhort belief as a means of achieving some kind of higher spiritual plane, or expand one’s intellectual capacity. The buffalo man tells Shadow to believe because his survival depends on it” (Bossert 43). It is only through belief that things change, and it is only through things changing that the world becomes better and ideas are born and assumptions are changed and adapted. At several moments during Shadow’s journey he has to stop and simply remind himself to believe. If he



thinks he can do it, he can do it, but he must believe in order for it to happen, otherwise nothing will come of it.

Neil Gaiman is able to take a picture of the world and its overall treatment of women, show a reflection of that society using Shadow as the mirror, and then completely subvert the societal expectations for women that are present in what is demanded of them from said society. Gaiman's mastery of this version of feminism, one that is as discreet as it is powerful, is what makes *American Gods* a novel that defies what is expected of it and flips the world on its head, exposing the worst that patriarchy represents, while subsequently revealing some of the best, most idealistic representations possible through Shadow. In writing about feminism and fairy tales, Mathilda Slabbert argues for endorsing Gaiman as an author who is able to write and contribute in a manner that was originally and almost solely done by women. Slabbert states, "Gaiman's narratives transcend previous conventions and subtly enhance contemporary concerns that are not only linked to female 'liberation and metamorphosis' and 'the histories of women's lives' but without ignoring these" (Slabbert 69). Gaiman's powerful and accusatory novel all but demands a change of society's expectations for women. In a moment of realization, Shadow, looking down upon the battlefield of the gods thinks:

People believe...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. (Gaiman 477)

Not only is this a change in the mythological landscape of America, but in the ways in which everyone is thought of and treated. Shadow has attempted to make a change throughout the entire

novel, and in the end, he continues to return to the places he has unfinished business because it was the “right thing to do.” People like Shadow not only illuminate the world and show all of its faults, but they also work toward a more ideal world.

Gaiman’s representation of modern society illuminates the most negative and objectifying aspects of a patriarchal world, while providing room for change and hope for the future. His subversion of societal norms and his subtle, yet palpable exploration of female identity in *American Gods* is a jarring look into our own, masculine-controlled and unequal world. The inequality of women represented in the novel versus male characters, becomes even more present when the world where Shadow learns the truth, the place behind the world, Backstage, is revealed and there is a noticeable lack of any female presence. Gaiman sheds light on this issue, but his attempt to argue for a more feminist society is almost too discreet and loses some of its convincing power through Gaiman’s inability to fully open his world to his female characters.

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