

**No Good Land for Gods:**  
**Norse Themes in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods***

By Tristan Markert

Since the first raids on unsuspecting coastal towns and monasteries Vikings have held the imaginations of the masses. Their freebooting lifestyle and apparent rejection of social order makes them a symbol of freedom while their violent and barbaric reputation also harness a darker side to our imaginations, giving them the likeness of supermen whose irresistible strength is easily capable of casually leaving one bereft of life. This has translated into literature as authors put their own spin on the Viking and the society which created such an indomitable warrior. And the duality of the savagery and nobility inherent in their nature serves to create, in the minds of those authors, the essence of the Viking as viewed by popular literary tradition. However, in *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman does not cling to the Viking which has been created by centuries of revision, instead he falls back to the themes which prevail throughout the whole of the body of works which encompass Eddas and Sagas.

The book opens with Shadow in prison, serving time for assaulting a pair of men, though it does not go into his motivations more than to say that they had tried cheating him and had deserved what they had gotten. He has spent the majority of three years in prison at this time and has come into contact with inmates who have influenced him in significant, if not readily apparent ways. He has picked up an understanding that in prison one must serve only their own time, not worrying about other men's time for them. The profound lesson which has grown in him, a sense of self-reliance, is one of the cornerstones of the Norse tradition in literature. In the harsh northlands a man needed to be able to fend for himself no matter whether he were tilling

the earth as a farmer or swinging a blade as a member of one of the Viking crews which assaulted the coastlines of Europe for nearly eight centuries. And it is this self-reliance which underscores Norse heroes as they find themselves either without support or outright abandoned when they would most benefit from outside assistance. This tendency for self-reliant behavior is repeatedly shown throughout the novel as Shadow finds himself without backup at the times which he could most use the help.

As Shadow nears his release from prison he feels in the back of his mind as though there is a storm brewing, though he does not know what form it will take. He first believes that it will be some sort of disturbance in the prison which could easily make his life difficult, then as he draws nearer to his release date and the sense of impending doom grows, he thinks briefly that it will show itself in some sort of trickery by the guards which would keep him from seeing his beloved wife Laura. This sense of doom continues even after he is released early because news of Laura's death has reached the prison and even continues to build in his mind as he travels home. This represents another of the themes which is central to the Norse Eddas and Sagas, the pressing on in the face of an unknown and unavoidable doom. This theme stems from the understanding that Norse society itself is inherently flawed and thus is relegated to a cycle of violence and revenge which will ultimately result in the complete destruction of their way of life. This theme can be seen in the tale of Beowulf, as he realizes in moments of clarity, that no matter how many monsters he destroys, the cycle of feuds and violence between clans will not end until the clans reach out from their kin to create fruitful relationships with other clans and thus it will not end until they have killed each other off.

It is on his way to the funeral of his wife that Shadow meets the man who will change his life and bring him into a world which exists walking hand in hand with the one which everyone

else lives. He finds himself sitting next to an older man who seems to know not only who Shadow is, but that Shadow would be on that very plane, though he was diverted from his original destination due to weather and had to take a rather circuitous route. This odd man introduced himself as Mr. Wednesday, an odd name to be sure, had a job offer for Shadow. When we examine the root of Wednesday's name it becomes Votansday, or Odinsday. And though Shadow does not pick up on the meaning of the name he knows that there is something strange about the man. This appearance of the god Odin serves as a plot mover and also the appearance of the All-Father in the flesh also follows with a trend which can be seen in the Eddas, where the Aesir (the gods of the Norse) are humanized, often by having their failings highlighted, which can be seen in no greater detail than in the Lokasenna (The Poetic Edda) where Loki insults each of the gods in turn, exposing their failings in the worst possible light.

This humanization of the Aesir, specifically Odin, is important in *American Gods* because it is proposed, to Shadow that America is not a good land for gods. We can see that those gods who are brought become quickly diminished as they find that their people inevitably move on to new gods, leaving those they brought from their homelands to fight for the smallest shreds of belief in order to keep themselves from fading completely. It is this diminishing which is the reason that Wednesday seems to only vaguely resemble Odin as he is represented in the Eddas. He exhibits only the facets of Odin which allow him to survive in modern America. This has turned him from the powerful god of wisdom, magic, and the gallows into a charlatan who uses his mastery of runes to sway young women into his bed and to fleece common people of money in order that he might continue to womanize and con his way through the world.

Shadow continues on to his wife's funeral, having come across the grim news that not only did his wife die, but she died in the company of Shadow's best friend Robbie and to make

matters worse, they died in the midst of having an affair together. Shadow takes the news stoically and continues on, knowing that it is right to see Laura, his wife off to her eternal rest. He attends the funeral, still not having grieved for her, his stoic front still strong even as Robbie's wife spits on Laura's corpse and throws the matter into Shadow's teeth. He responds calmly, his quiet acceptance of the situation showing another of the trends which is found in Viking literature. The trend of facing uncomfortable and distasteful truths with a sense of stoic realism, not running from the terrible truth, but instead facing it and accepting that it cannot be undone, then continuing on without grieving overmuch shows in Hrafnkel's saga where, though Hrafnkel is pained to do so as he greatly respects Einarr, he kills the man for riding Freymane as he had sworn to kill anyone who rode the horse, and had warned Einarr when he had come into Hrafnkel's employ. Much in the same way, Shadow dealt with Laura's death and burial, knowing that there was nothing he could do to bring her back. However, he gives her one last gift in the form of a coin which Mad Sweeney had given to him.

This coin brings Laura back from death, in a way. She is still dead when she later visits Shadow, in his hotel room, she promises to look out for him, setting up another theme which shows in the Norse sagas; the Viking woman. This trend is interesting because it is one which has seemed to grow in popularity along with the feminist movements of recent history, but the portrayal of women as both strong and brave is one which shows up in the sagas on a fairly regular basis. It shows up several times in the *Volsunga saga* alone, in the persons of Signy mother of Sinfjotli and Brynhild. Signy sought revenge for the deaths of her family at the hands of the man who had taken her as his wife, then when vengeance had been achieved, she walked into the burning building where her husband was being burned alive. And Brynhild, who had been instrumental in the death of the man she loved, Sigurd, then commanded a pyre be lit for

Sigurd and those who died with him, then climbed on the blazing pyre herself. In the same way, Laura, though dead, is a strong figure who comes to Shadow's aide when he is captured and imprisoned by members of the so-called "Spook Show", killing them and releasing Shadow. Again she takes this role as she carries the stick which is to be the spear that will consecrate the great battle for its ultimate purpose, to the waiting Mr. World, then when the moment was right, she took her temporarily renewed life in order to kill Mr. World along with her, dedicating the deaths to Shadow as she did. Her willing sacrifice in order to once again protect Shadow from the doom which would inevitably cause him to be lost, poignantly shows the theme of the strong Viking woman in her moment of glorious victory.

As the novel continues from Laura's funeral Shadow takes up with Wednesday and together they travel out into the world, seeking to gain the support of other gods for a battle which Wednesday believes is unavoidably coming. It is at this time that we can see the first traces of the Baldur-like role that Shadow is thrust into. This shows in several places throughout the book but there are a trio of places which it is particularly highlighted. First, in Chicago he is responsible for gaining the support of Czernobog where Wednesday failed, trading a death-blow for the support of the old Slavic god. Like Baldur, Shadow seems to draw people to him, having a magnetism which causes people to like him. The second place which we can see this mirroring with Baldur is at the House on the Rock, where the fortune telling machine which Wednesday had called their Norns Shadow receives a bleak fortune;

**EVERY ENDING IS A NEW BEGINNING.**

**YOUR LUCKY NUMBER IS NONE.**

**YOUR LUCKY COLOR IS DEAD.**

**Motto:**

### **LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON.**

This fortune is filled with foreshadowing, it speaks of the third place which Shadow resembles Baldur, this time most closely. This time is when Shadow is bound to the World Tree to hold the vigil for Wednesday, who was betrayed and murdered. Shadow hangs from the tree for nine days and nights, as Odin himself hung from the tree. Inevitably, during his time on the tree he dies. Much as Baldur did in order that Ragnarok could be ended. While he is dead, he faces a series of choices, choosing as a Viking would, the hard truths. What he learns confirms that he is the parallel to Baldur as he finds that he is Wednesday's son, the result of yet another of Wednesday's cons.

Still, perhaps the most interesting thing which shows this parallel is revealed in the conversation between Loki and Laura, just before she kills the both of them. Laura comments that Shadow has a good heart and that they had set him up, Loki agrees and says that maybe once everything is said and done he will sharpen a stick of mistletoe, the one plant which Baldur's mother had not made promise to never harm Baldur, and ram it through his eye. This is almost identical to the fate which Baldur suffered at the hands of his blind brother Hod, due to Loki's trickery, though it seems that the facets of Loki which thrive in *Amercian Gods* is willing to get his hands dirty.

Loki, the great trickster of the Aesir, is perhaps the first of the gods which Shadow comes into contact with, though he knew him only as Low Key Lyesmith. As Loki hides in plain sight he slides into his customary role as the trickster, a theme which has continued from his first mention in the Prose Edda and into popular culture. And though he does not weave any elaborate trickery during his first meeting with Shadow, it seems like he may well have been scouting Shadow for his partner in crime, his mysterious transfer serving to remove him from the story for

a time. When he returns it is in yet another guise, but at the same time as himself. He and Shadow talk briefly before the corpse of Wednesday is given to the old gods, and Shadow realizes who Low Key really is. But as the driver, which Loki is posing, he is still hiding. He is carefully pulling the wool over Shadow's eyes, so that he will feel that his only importance was that which Wednesday had seen in him, which causes Shadow to think of his obligations to Wednesday though he is death. But it the grand deception which Loki shows to be at the center of later, as Mr. World, the leader of the new gods which wish to destroy the old. And even though he has been spinning a web of deceit which allowed him to pull the strings of the new gods, it was not his position as Mr. World which was important, it served to put him in the right place at the right time so that he could fulfill the great con that he and Wednesday had orchestrated; causing a war between the gods which would be dedicated to Wednesday, sending a river of blood and power to resurrect the fallen god and charge him with power which he had not possessed in centuries. And Loki would be about to feed on the chaos that the war, and his deception had created, glutting him on power as well. This tangled web of deceptions which was spun by Loki on one side and Wednesday on the other shows how though other gods had been forced to change, Loki was able to hold onto his essence. This follows with patterns which Loki follows in the Eddas, deceiving in order to bring about Ragnarok, though it in turn brings his own doom.

In conclusion, the war is ended as Shadow explains what Loki and Wednesday had planned, halting the gods even as they had done war on each other. And as the Baldur figure which Shadow portrays, he is left to walk the world, free of strife and happy. So it is that throughout the novel, Gaiman uses themes which occur throughout the Norse Sagas and Eddas, bringing them to life in the modern world in a way which few authors would attempt. He brings

the tales of great men and women who accomplish legendary deeds to life in a way which, while set in the modern age, does not rob the Viking of that which makes them unique in their barbaric antiquity.