



LUND UNIVERSITY
Humanities and Theology

Comprehending Complexity

A Pluralistic Analysis of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

Amanda Bjernestedt

ENGK01 Literary Seminar

Autumn 2011

English Studies

The Centre for Languages and Literature

Lund University

Supervisor: Chloé Avril

Contents

Introduction	1
The theory of pluralism	2
Diversity and pluralism	2
The philosophy and psychology of pluralism	3
Pluralism and identity in <i>American Gods</i>	6
Pluralism and mythology in <i>American Gods</i>	12
Mythology and rejection of dualism	12
Comprehending reality – mythology, belief, and pluralism	14
Conclusion	18
Works cited	20

Introduction

Ambiguity, it has been said, is systemic in the universe ... Those who demand cut-and-dried, either-or answers will be disappointed. This is not to say that there are no answers at all, only that the answers are nuanced and the path to them is sometimes long and arduous. No shortcuts will suffice. (Harmon 9)

The above statement by David Harmon could be used to describe the complexity of life. More specifically, it describes life and the world from a pluralistic perspective.

Pluralism is a metaphysical and philosophical theory. Instead of focusing on unity and trying to find universal principles in a particular sphere or system (monism), or describing the world in terms of polarizing opposites (dualism), pluralism recognizes “the multiplicity and diversity of things ... in being as well as in their relations with one another”. Furthermore, it takes into account the “changeability of things”, and the transcendent nature of the world at large (“pluralism and monism”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, para. 3). The theory of pluralism can also be used in a political or a sociological context, in regards to different cultures and identities. However the term is used, it emphasizes concepts of multiplicity, changeability, and diversity.

Neil Gaiman’s novel *American Gods* (2005) is arguably a pluralistic work. Gaiman incorporates a number of literary genres into the story, including fantasy, horror, mystery, and romance. The form and the plot are also pluralistic: there are several elaborate subplots, and different narrators are used in different passages. As the main character Shadow reluctantly embarks upon an epic journey through the United States, he passes through and stays in a large number of cities in different states, and sometimes he even travels into other dimensions. As Shadow tries to make sense of an unpredictable world and the many multifaceted characters that inhabit it, he learns that there are no simple answers to anything, and that there are more sides to everything – even himself – than he had previously thought.

In this essay, I will argue that apart from being a literary portrayal of pluralism, the novel brings up questions of how to approach, define, and comprehend a pluralistic being. If everything is multidimensional, diverse, and changing, can there be a core or essence to an individual, or to reality itself, and how can such an essence be defined?

How can we attempt to comprehend the world and all its complexity, while avoiding simplifications, and without simply concluding that it is chaotic? Firstly, I will present the pluralistic theoretical framework that will be used in the discussion. Secondly, through close reading, I will examine how the novel depicts the identities of some of the characters, and how these depictions contain critique of essentialist ideas. Thirdly and finally, I will investigate how mythology is used in the novel to further portray and explain its pluralistic message.

The theory of pluralism

Diversity and pluralism

Diversity is the main concern of the theory of pluralism. The concept of diversity is defined in broad terms by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* as “a range of different things” (“diversity”, para. 1). Diversity can be found everywhere in the world: for instance, in the large variety of species on Earth, or in the vast amount of sensory impressions we perceive in a day. To be affected by a number of sensations successively and to be able to distinguish between them is regarded by the psychologist Alexander Bain as “the primary fact of consciousness”. This basic process of discrimination, and the related ability to create mental generalisations by “identify[ing] any sensation or present mental impression with one that occurred previously”, occur more or less unconsciously (quoted by Harmon, 121-2).

In addition to these unconscious mechanisms, diversity has been explained and comprehended in different ways through the Western history of ideas, prior to the modern theories of pluralism. One of the early influential ideas about the world’s complexity is Plato’s notion that the world we can perceive is a mere reflection of the “real” world populated by “eternal Forms”, of which all the things we can see are flawed copies (“Western Philosophy: Plato”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, para. 5). Plato’s idea has influenced the prevailing notion that the perceivable, diverse world is subordinate to “the ideal of heavenly harmony” and that “earthly diversity” is just a distraction “from the Oneness, [or] the Absolute, which is the highest good” (Harmon

6). David Harmon, a scholar and scientist specialised in biocultural diversity, refers to this notion as absolutism, and positions it in opposition to pluralism. He further explains that prior to Darwin's discoveries, the idea of the Chain of Being, which is based on absolutist notions, dominated Western metaphysical philosophy. The idea is that God has appointed all organisms in the universe a specific position in the "cosmic hierarchy" and that this hierarchy is linearly structured with God as the highest being (10). This system supposedly explained the logic of the diversity of the universe, and served to unify it.

A different way of explaining and understanding diversity was developed by the philosopher and psychologist William James in his theory on pluralism. It is worth noting, as Harmon asserts, that the philosophical debate of how to regard and comprehend the diversity of the world is still ongoing (149), and that there are many other views on the variety and unity of the world. However, James' pluralistic worldview is particularly relevant in relation to *American Gods*.

The philosophy and psychology of pluralism

With his philosophy of pluralism, James contradicted the absolutist and monist ideas dominant in Western philosophy around the last turn of the century. As Harmon recounts, James opposes the idea of the Chain of Being, where every individual has its determined place (136). Furthermore, pluralists deem it insufficient to describe the contents of the world as essentially belonging to two categories. Consequently, the pluralistic worldview is opposed to that of dualistic philosophers, for instance Plato and Descartes, who believed in the existence of two exclusive and opposing principles, for instance good and evil ("dualism", *Oxford Reference Online*). Also, instead of believing, like monist thinkers, that uniformity in the world's diversity is the only way to unity, James argues that what unifies the universe is the very diversity of it.

Pluralism is a philosophy as complex as its subject matter, but according to Harmon it basically asserts that the diversity that we experience in nature is real: that "the variety we perceive everyday is actually there", and is not just a flawed copy of another world (123). James believes that the universe is held together not by structures

and principles, but by the connections between and “overlapping of partially similar entities” (Harmon 135-6). As James explains in *A Pluralistic Universe*, “Our multiverse still makes a ‘universe’”, because all parts of it are connected “with its very next neighbour”, which in turn causes all parts of the universe, however different from each other, to be somehow connected to one another (84).

As different entities over the world partially overlap, so do the categories by which we structure the world. This idea contradicts the Aristotelian practice of “classification by essences”, which asserts that everything can be categorized according to its “essence”, a “singular characteristic” that stays unchanged by time (Harmon 97-98). In rejecting the idea of the world as belonging to a series of fixed categories and that everything has a constant essence, James argues that a single entity can belong to several categories at once, and that to generalize by applying a single concept to something is inaccurate. A pluralistic categorization of the world is the one that corresponds most accurately to how we actually experience the world (James 75). Different essences can overlap in a single being, and every being changes with time, because “nothing real is absolutely simple” (83).

Also contained within the pluralistic philosophy is the idea of a pluralistic or ambiguous sense of self or identity. One identity can belong to several overlapping categories, and may contain “simultaneous characters” (75). On the subject of pluralistic identities, Yngve G. Lithman and Hakan G. Sıcakkan also give warning about using generalizing concepts and emphasize the importance of remembering that “categories are human constructs which we employ in order to understand the world around us”, and that categories can also be used to simplify complex identities and concepts. Indeed, “the members of the groups that have been defined as belonging to a category – like immigrants and women – have their individual identities in addition to their common one” (15-16). The idea of pluralistic and multidimensional identities appears in *American Gods*, and will be the subject of the next chapter.

An additional idea belonging to this already complex worldview is that the world and everything in it is always changing and developing. Nothing is static, and change is inevitable. From a pluralistic viewpoint, change and continuity are prevailing characteristics of the world in general and are partly what makes it pluralistic. Modern

societies such as the one in which *American Gods* takes place are particularly changeable, in a way that can be difficult to adjust to. As Don S. Browning reports:

James never fully applied his metaphysics of pluralism and change to the dynamics of highly advanced technological societies. Yet he was more than dimly aware that modern societies were an extreme, and possibly lethal, manifestation of the general pluralism and change which run through every level of reality. ... He was fully aware of the great increase of technological advancement that the twentieth century was witnessing. He once observed that the rate of technological increase 'accelerates so that no one can trace the limit.' (28-29)

Regardless of whether one perceives the changeability of modern societies as intimidating, as some characters in *American Gods* do, it arguably adds to the complexity of reality.

Since the world is so diverse and changeable, we use both unconscious and conscious psychological mechanisms in order to make sense of it. Having instinctively recognized the diversity of our environment and ourselves, we use "discriminative attention" to focus on one or only a few of our sensory impressions while ignoring others (Harmon 123-4). Furthermore, we use our senses to create a "sense of sameness" from a diversity of impressions (128). Apart from these largely unconscious and automatic psychological processes, we also consciously use different mechanisms in order to make sense of the world. Some mechanisms can also be viewed as ways of resisting the pluralistic nature of the world, and describe it as simpler than it is. In the words of James: "The facts of the world in their sensible diversity are always before us, but our theoretic need is that they should be conceived in a way that reduces their manifoldness to simplicity" (quoted by Harmon, 125). As we consciously think about the world, our "intellect ... gives ... separate names" to parts of the world that we intuitively experience as joint together, and thus our minds create paradoxes that do not actually exist in nature (Harmon 129). After these paradoxes have been created, they are often emphasised in order to be incorporated into a dualistic worldview. When consciously trying to organize the world in this manner, we might end up with classifications that are too strict.

All of these methods serve to rationalize and perhaps resist the sometimes overwhelming unpredictability and complexity of world. However, it is important to

recognize and accept these pluralistic features. This is the central message in *American Gods*, and it is partly conveyed through the depictions of the characters and their multidimensional identities.

Pluralism and identity in *American Gods*

According to Lithman and Sıcakkan, the Aristotelian or essentialist definition of identity is “that which is like – identical. One of his main ideas refers to the likeness between phenomena which belong to the same category. Categories may be age groups, nations – and also the two sexes, immigrants, the disabled, etc.” (15). In other words, a homogeneous identity is only possible within an essentialist frame. This manner of viewing identity could be seen as an extension of the psychological mechanism of creating a sense of sameness: an identity, based on the notion of an innate core, is chiselled out of diversity. As previously mentioned, the pluralistic view is that the essentialist categories are often too narrow when defining an individual. Instead, identities are seen by pluralists as multidimensional. Lithman and Sıcakkan’s diversity perspective on identity also acknowledges “identity blends” that are composed of characteristics or belongings that “stand in stark contrast to each other and, thus, cannot be interrelated using the conventional conceptual frames” (6). In diverse societies that contain “a variety of intersecting groups and categories” (4), and where many people also belong to numerous groups, there is a risk that identities get simplified and labelled with narrow concepts. This risk is one that many characters in *American Gods* face, as they, as one of them puts it, “... all have so many functions, so many ways of existing” (522). Most of the characters in the novel are portrayed as pluralistic and highly complex individuals. The gods and mythological beings are prominent examples of this, as they, in addition to being part of polytheistic mythologies, are diverse and ambiguous in themselves, as demonstrated in the next paragraph. However, they are rarely recognized as such, and instead their identities tend to be simplified. How do the gods and the humans express their identities and attempt to control how they are perceived? Is it possible to see someone as they really are, when the complexity of an identity transcends typical boundaries?

The novel presents a scenario which answers the second question. As Shadow and some gods visit the roadside attraction The House on the Rock, in itself a symbol of pluralism with its plethora of widely different rooms and displays, they ride a carousel which seemingly functions as a portal into another dimension. In this other dimension, Shadow has a peculiar experience:

Shadow turned, slowly, streaming images of himself as he moved, frozen moments, each him captured in a fraction of a second, every tiny movement lasting for an infinite period. The images that reached his mind made no sense: it was like seeing the world through the multifaceted jewelled eyes of a dragonfly, but each facet saw something completely different, and he was unable to combine the things he was seeing, or thought he was seeing, into a whole that made any sense. (144)

Here, Shadow can view the gods in their true, pluralistic forms. Consequently, with his “multifaceted” perspective, he sees Mr Nancy as two different men, a boy, and a spider, and Czernobog appears as both an old man and a demon-like creature. Wednesday’s appearance is almost unchanged, but Shadow is instead made aware of the various names and epithets that Wednesday carries: “I am called Glad-of-War, Grim, Raider, and Third. I am One-Eyed. ... I am All-Father, and I am Gondlir Wandbearer. I have as many names as there are winds, and as many titles as there are ways to die” (145). Seeing the different appearances at the same time should be psychologically impossible with regards to the mechanisms of discriminative attention and sense of sameness.

However, because Shadow is not entirely human, and because he is in a different dimension, he is able to see “the many things” that Mr Nancy and Czernobog consist of, at the same time (144). Also, with his new abilities, Shadow sees the manifoldness of his own identity, or his “full self” as James would describe it, “each him captured in a fraction of a second”. Still, he reacts in what James would consider a fundamentally human manner, as he cannot “combine the things” he sees, unable to find a notion of sameness. His vision “made [no] sense” as “a whole”: he cannot intellectually comprehend the pluralistic truth of reality. Shadow’s experience implies that this is the nature of the relationship between the pluralistic reality and the human intellect: we can be made aware of it, but have difficulty or are incapable of creating logical meaning from it. The ability to simply believe in the illogical reality that can be empirically

perceived, rather than try to comprehend it through simplifications is repeatedly emphasised throughout the novel. The implications of this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

This scene presents the idea that gods can display radically different appearances at the same time, although they are mostly seen in only one specific incarnation. These incarnations appear to be simplifications of the gods' true, multidimensional identities, adapted in both appearance and behaviour to what people expect them to be. Mr Ibis, who at this point has not yet revealed himself as a god, alludes to this as he speaks of his Egyptian heritage, explaining that while he does not see himself as "African" or "black", this is what other people perceive him to be. "Mostly you are what they think you are", he explains, thus indirectly describing how the pluralistic gods adjust themselves to correspond to human, more narrow categorizations of the world (210). Just as mythological figures are based on people's belief, a non-mythological person's identity can be seen as being created by other people. For the gods who, more than humans, are defined by other peoples' opinions of them, it is important to adapt to those opinions. For humans, this could be seen as more of a choice, but the same idea of identity as controlled by other people is still valid. Different characters choose to handle this notion differently: Shadow denies other people information about him, and Sam tries to define her identity as specifically as possible.

Shadow, whose name indicates obscurity and ambiguity, is also a pluralistic character. His identity corresponds to the idea of "simultaneous characters" that "overlap each other with their being" (James 75), as he continuously shifts between, and simultaneously holds different personas. Even before he finds out that he is partly human and partly a god, another sort of ambiguity of Shadow's identity is stated. In the beginning of the novel, a prison guard rudely questions him about his ethnicity, and Shadow displays some uncertainty about and unwillingness to reveal his own ancestry. This is repeatedly brought up throughout the novel, as several people he meets ask him about it, and he continues to give avoiding answers. Mr Ibis says that "you are what they think you are", and if ethnic identity is seen as a social construct based on essentialist ideas, then other people's reading of Shadow's ethnicity is already part of his identity. However, the fact that Shadow refuses to reveal his ethnicity to others can be read as a refusal to let others further simplify his identity. They obviously already

have some opinion of him based purely on his appearance, but he does not give them any more facts to base their construction of his identity on, and the subsequent prejudice that might follow. This way, Shadow strives to undermine other people's control of his identity. By not clearly defining Shadow's ethnicity, the text also rejects the idea that the group defines the individual, as there is never an explicitly stated one for Shadow to belong to and be defined by.

Aside from his unspecified ethnicity and background, there are other sides to Shadow's character that add to his ambiguous identity. Shadow's human identity is changeable, and he takes on several roles and shifts between social groups throughout the novel. Starting out as a seemingly ordinary man with an unfortunate criminal past, he carries the social stigma of an ex-convict. Early on in the novel he also becomes a widower. Later, as Wednesday's employee, he takes on the name of Mike Ainsel. Just as for Wednesday, the use of different names is important to Shadow's identity, and the new name seems to signify an identity shift for Shadow. He has an identification card and credit cards in the name of Mike Ainsel, and when he has to admit that it is not his real name, he feels as though he is "letting go of something important, abandoning Mike Ainsel by denying him, as if he were taking his leave of a friend"; or, in fact, parting with a piece of his own multidimensional identity (423). Since Wednesday, who thinks names are closely connected to an individual's personality and function, has given Shadow this name, it also means that Wednesday has power over Shadow's identity. While Wednesday's different epithets signify powers that he possesses, Shadow's Mike Ainsel identity means that someone else has power over him, as it is the name he uses as Wednesday's employee. Even though Shadow repeatedly refuses the idea of needing others to define his identity, it seems that this is in fact something he depends on, and even embraces, when he identifies himself as Mike Ainsel.

Furthermore, when Shadow discovers that he is a demigod with a human mother and a divine father, yet another aspect of his identity is out of his control. As another character points out to Shadow, the identity of a god is created in the minds of believers, and becomes even more multidimensional: "You barely have your own identity anymore. Instead, you're a thousand aspects of what people need you to be" (504). In the novel, being a god is the ultimate symbol of an identity created by others with little control from the individual. Perhaps as a reaction to this particular aspect of his identity,

and as a way to handle his identity blend which indeed consists of characteristics that “stand in stark contrast to each other and ... cannot be interrelated using the conventional conceptual frames” (Lithman and Sicakkan 6), Shadow seems to identify most with the human part of himself. He uses “we” to refer to humans while speaking to a group of gods: “I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don’t need anyone to believe in us” (584). However, this does not seem to be true of Shadow’s character arc. As previously stated, he continually has to rely on others to define who he is: when living as Mike Ainsel and finally when receiving the revelation that he is a demigod. To “just keep going anyhow”, as he puts it (584), without any external confirmation, does not seem to be possible for Shadow. Even humans need other people to believe in them to some extent, as identity is partly created in the minds of others. Just like gods need belief to survive, so humans need external confirmation to fully exist.

As previously mentioned, Sam chooses a different approach than Shadow when attempting to influence others’ perception of her. She is also a complex character, although she is one of the few characters in the novel that can be declared “[a]n honest to goodness, born of man and woman, living breathing human being” (179). She transcends binary classifications and exposes the narrowness of categories that are typically used to classify people. Similarly to Shadow, she is of mixed ethnicity, but in contrast to him, she speaks assuredly and openly about her own background: “I’m a Cherokee ... [but o]nly four pints. My mom was white. My dad was a real reservation Indian” (186). By later recounting her mother’s family history, she draws attention to her complex identity, perhaps in order to avoid being narrowly categorised as either white or Native American. Sam also presents some gender ambiguity: when Shadow first meets her, and hears her voice without seeing her face, he asks whether she is “boy Sam or girl Sam” (178) and later describes her appearance as “slightly mannish” (180). The fact that her education is related to identity and self-expression – she studies art history and women’s studies, and casts bronzes – further portrays her as a person who wishes to create and control her own identity. She appears critical towards Shadow’s habit of not revealing much about himself, as it is so different from her own approach. However, her eagerness in asserting her own identity ironically turns her into somewhat of a stereotype, as suggested by the fact that Shadow correctly guesses her education, hobbies and occupation almost immediately upon meeting her.

Shadow's and Sam's struggles to be perceived as nuanced, multifaceted individuals both seem to fail: Shadow is mostly seen by other characters as simply quiet and mysterious, and repeatedly loses control of his own identity to someone else, while Sam's efforts to project her diverse identity makes her appear stereotypical. The novel's portrayal of both of their strategies as unsuccessful could have several implications: that it is impossible not to be categorized or simplified by others in one way or another, or that a combination of Shadow's and Sam's approaches would be more effective. In line with the pluralistic philosophy, the novel gives no straight-forward answer.

Another aspect of Sam's character serves as an additional contrast to Shadow: she has the ability to believe in things that she has not seen herself, or that are impossible to prove. The novel presents this as a fundamentally human trait: to believe what cannot be empirically experienced, however illogical it might seem. She displays her capacity of maintaining a plethora of different, sometimes paradoxical, beliefs and opinions in a lengthy monologue where she sums up her pluralistic worldview. When Shadow hesitates about telling her about his supernatural experiences, she declares:

I can believe things that are true and I can believe things that aren't true and I can believe things where nobody knows if they're true or not. ... I believe ... that it's aerodynamically impossible for a bumblebee to fly, that light is a wave and a particle, that there's a cat in a box somewhere who's alive and dead at the same time ... I believe in a woman's right to choose, a baby's right to live, that while all human life is sacred there's nothing wrong with the death penalty if you can trust the legal system implicitly, and that no one but a moron would ever trust the legal system. (424-425)

Sam's personal system of beliefs is pluralistic in itself: it consists of many principles, several of which seem to contradict each other, that co-exist in the unity of her individual worldview. She shows that, in addition to being a complex individual herself, she possesses the ability to imagine and accept a pluralistic universe outside herself. She also inspires Shadow – and perhaps, by extension, the reader – to fully trust his own perception of incredible things. The fact that she is portrayed as fundamentally human, with no supernatural abilities, implies that this is something that everyone is capable of. In this way, Sam's identity connects to the novel's themes of belief and mythology. How belief and mythology function in the novel, and the implications of these functions, will be discussed below.

Pluralism and mythology in *American Gods*

Mythology and rejection of dualism

Allusions to mythology feature heavily in *American Gods*, and many of them connect to a pluralistic message. To start with, a mythological metaphor is used to portray the pluralistic notion of a changing and continuous reality, and emphasise the circular continuity of the past, the present, and the future: “The new gods rise and fall and rise again. But this is not a country that tolerates gods for long. Brahma creates, Vishnu preserves, Shiva destroys, and the ground is clear for Brahma to create once more” (473). If the gods represent ideas, then this mythological cycle represents the inevitable rise and fall of all ideas – even the new, currently popular ones that are personified in the novel as The Technical Boy and Media. If a group of gods is viewed as a paradigm, this idea signifies that the paradigm shift that is referred to repeatedly in the novel will not be permanent. However, this message is contrasted with dualistic ideas held and spread by some of the characters. The main conflict in the plot is one between dualistic and pluralistic thinkers: the gods who believe that only one side will win the “war” of the gods, and the ones who believe that such a “war” is unnecessary, thus rejecting the foundations of the conflict.

This dualistic motive for the war is the basis of Wednesday’s propaganda. Just as Browning presents James’ view of modern society as “possibly lethal” (29), Wednesday refers to modern life as literally deadly to the old gods. He tries to position them against the new gods, who are “gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television” (150-1). They all represent novelty and modernity, and are portrayed as mostly antagonistic. However, contrary to Wednesday’s dualistic propaganda, they are not particularly threatening. It is not a coincidence that the first person to protest against Wednesday’s view of the new gods as a threat is a goddess who is depicted as characterized by the idea of continuity: she has “watched the new ones rise, and ... watched them fall again” (151). The Technical Boy – a symbol of new technology – is soon revealed to be less powerful than he thinks he is. Thus, great “technological increase” or extreme change and novelty that even the pluralists James

and Browning describe as rather frightening (Browning 29), is not depicted by the novel as a great threat in itself.

Instead, the antagonistic quality of the new gods is based in their dualistic view of their own society: as The Technical Boy summarizes his own views, “It’s all about the dominant fucking paradigm, Shadow. Nothing else is important” (60). Consequently, instead of portraying novelty itself as a threat, the novel implies that lack of history and ignorance of old ideas is a danger to the diversity of society and the world. In addition to the tragedy of each individual loss, such as the brutal murder of Bilquis, the deaths of the old gods contribute to a loss of diversity. Similarly to what Harmon argues in his discussion of biocultural diversity, *American Gods* implies that without old ideas, modern society cannot be truly pluralistic, and stresses the tragedy of such a loss. However, the narrative offers a solution to this problem: the function of mythology to preserve the ideas that the gods represent through stories. Thus mythology serves as a form of immortality for gods, just like history does for ideas. Indeed, if the novel is read as a portrayal of the pluralistic world at large and not just America, it is implied that there are few clear boundaries between mythology and fiction by letting Mr Ibis refer to American history as “fictional” (103). Regardless of whether mythology and history are actually synonymous, the novel suggests that both types of knowledge are necessary in order to preserve a diversity of ideas in society. Furthermore, the novel stresses the importance of the ability to not only be aware of but also believe in a plurality of ideas, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

Apart from the depiction of excessive dualism as the indirect cause of a lack of history and as a threat to the diversity of a pluralistic society, the novel also implies that an extremely dualistic worldview is a danger to those that subscribe to this worldview. This is hinted at in this statement by Mr Nancy: “the biggest trouble with the new kids [is that] they figure they know everythin’, and you can’t teach them nothin’ but the hard way” (488). His assertion also serves as foreshadowing, as The Technical Boy, the most arrogant of the new gods, dies before the battle even starts. As Matti Delahay notes, the characters that believe in the division of the gods into two sides, and the subsequent belief that only one of them is right, are “very nearly ... [driven] to their doom” by their own extremist notions (78). Ultimately, as Shadow and the reader realises when the war is revealed to be a “a two-man con” (557), it does not matter which side of the battle

one belongs to: the world where everything is divided into black and white is a threat to everyone. Shadow realizes this by being, as Delahay puts it, “able to experience a larger point of view” (52), or indeed a more pluralistic point of view. The anticlimactic conclusion of the war shows that in the mythological war of ideas, no side has to overpower the other. In fact, the dualistic motive for the war – that one side will forever overpower the other, thus ending the continuous cycle of dominant paradigms – does not really exist. Mr Nancy is correct in two ways in saying that “people only fight over imaginary things” (462): the war is about ideas, and the reason for the war is imagined by the dualists. In this manner, the dualistic worldview is portrayed as a futile attempt to resist the real complexity of the world, echoing the similar ideas of Harmon and James. With the message that nothing is permanent and that it is fruitless to divide the world into two sides, the novel rejects or undermines the mythologies that are characterized by dualistic ideas.

Comprehending reality – mythology, belief, and pluralism

As an alternative to a dualistic worldview, the novel endorses pluralistic ideas, and the ability to acknowledge all aspects of the world – even the impossible. The world of *American Gods* is highly unpredictable and multifaceted: a literary portrayal of the complexity of the real world. Without certain mechanisms that help explain the unfathomable, comprehending the world can be difficult. In his discussion of the functions of mythology, Joseph Campbell suggests that one of them is to create a basic worldview or “render a cosmology” in order to understand the universe, but that in modern societies, science and its natural laws often serve this function (611). Still, there are many things that science has not yet explained, and Campbell also argues that in more recent history, science has found that the world is even more complex and unpredictable than what was previously assumed. In *American Gods*, Mr Ibis alludes to a similar idea by saying that scientists will “talk about the odd, but they won’t talk about the impossible ... as soon as something becomes impossible it slips out of belief entirely, whether it’s true or not” (212). In other words, it is implied that, despite evidence of the contrary, phenomena that are deemed to be scientifically impossible

become so due to lack of belief. Moreover, this suggests that what contradicts one person's worldview, or the worldview held by the majority, might still be true.

That the novel casts doubt on previous conceptions of reality is also noted by Tryggvi Hrólfsson, who in his postmodernist analysis of *American Gods* argues that the text questions the very concept of "any abstract idea or definition that attempts a total explanation of the world" (10). He also claims that the novel describes reality as "much more chaotic and malleable than traditional perspectives have taken it to be" (para. 1). What Hrólfsson does not mention is that in addition to merely questioning and disproving the idea of all-encompassing explanations, the novel offers its own alternative in the form of the pluralistic worldview. As previously established, pluralism does not attempt a "total explanation" to any part of reality: rather, it says that there are no possible "total explanations", only individual worldviews and meanings. The world as presented by *American Gods*, although unpredictable, is not chaotic: it has an order to it, albeit a complex one, and the novel suggests manners of comprehending the complexity that it portrays.

What, then, can be relied on as filter for all the diverse impressions that we encounter, apart from the psychological mechanisms that Bain and James describe? How can we comprehend what facts cannot explain, such as why there is all this complexity to begin with and what, if anything, unifies it? The answer that the novel gives is that mythology and belief can serve this function. Thus, for questions that science cannot answer satisfactorily, or where the answer is too complex to comprehend, mythology can still serve Campbell's worldview-constructing function.

Firstly, the novel stresses the importance of myths and stories themselves as tools to comprehend a pluralistic reality. Even though mythology often uses archetypes based on essentialist notions as well as dualistic ideas, such as those of Wednesday and The Technical Boy, it can also be used to portray complexity and dimensions that are difficult to comprehend. Shadow thinks that "[he] knew that he did not have the personality to be a magician: he could not weave the stories that were so necessary for belief" (63). As Mr Nancy asserts, "a story's a good way of gettin' someone on your side" – stories and myths help create trust and belief (147). In order to believe the impossible, we need stories: and to believe an entire world filled with impossibilities or

concepts that are difficult to comprehend, we might need an entire system of stories: a mythology.

Secondly, the novel suggests that stories have little importance unless someone believes in them: the gods die when they are no longer believed in. In other words, belief makes ideas real. Additionally, in a pluralistic world with an infinite variety of ideas, everyone has to assign their own meaning to reality in order for it to make sense, which is what Sam has done in her personal credo. This idea is similar to one of James’:

A conception of the world arises in you somehow, no matter how. Is it true or not? you ask.

It *might* be true somewhere, you say, for it is not self-contradictory.

It *may* be true, you continue, even here and now.

It is *fit* to be true, it would be *well if it were true*, it *ought* to be true, you presently feel.

It *must* be true, something persuasive in you whispers next; and then – as a final result –

It shall be *held for true*, you decide, *it shall be* as if true, for *you*.

And your acting thus may in certain special cases be a means of making it securely true in the end. (James 85)

The idea that the meaning we assign to reality is subjective is emphasised particularly when Shadow sees the battle of the gods, and deems their battle scene “the heart of things as they [are]” and “the true place” (580). Throughout the novel, Shadow is sceptical towards everything he cannot experience empirically, and in the beginning of the novel he is advised to “believe ... [*e*]verything” in order to survive what he will go through (19). In the previously mentioned carousel scene, he sees impossible things, but does not quite believe them. By the end, he has learnt to believe the impossible, illogical, and ineffable. His belief is now a filter for his impressions and in line with James’ idea his own actions – his decision to trust his impressions – is what makes these impossible things true.

Thirdly, in addition to suggesting that stories are “necessary for belief” (63), the novel implies that belief is necessary for a unified worldview. The battle – the symbol of the imagined center of reality – is located outside of but still connected to the reality that humans perceive. Shadow’s identity blend of human and god is the connection between these realities, as he has the unique ability to see both sides. He has now, as Delahay notes, “reached a balance between his natural and supernatural (demigod)

sides” (54). His ability to see the core of reality might be a divine ability, but the capacity to believe the impossible is profoundly human, as suggested by Sam’s credo and personality. This scene, and Shadow’s belief, is a unification of his personal worldview.

Finally, apart from the previously mentioned implications that reality is not dualistic, the novel brings forth another message about reality: that it is ultimately subjective. When he comes to this realization, Shadow summarizes this idea effectively: “Perhaps it was all a matter of perspective. Perhaps it was all a matter of point of view” (513). The “true place” in *American Gods* is created in peoples’ minds. As such, the core of reality is not an essence in the essentialist sense of the word – an unchanging, “singular characteristic” (Harmon 97) – since it changes depending on the perspective. This notion can also be found in the novel’s portrayal of America, which, as previously mentioned, can be read as a metaphor for the real world, or the pluralistic “multiverse” (James 84). The very structure of the country is pluralistic, with its separate but interconnected states. It is a particularly diverse society that resists essentialist categorization. Mr Ibis directly alludes to this:

Determining the exact center of anything can be problematic at best. With living things – people, for example, or continents – the problem becomes one of intangibles: What is the center of a man? ... And in the case of the continental United States, should one count Alaska when one attempts to find the center?” (461)

The novel’s treatment of “the center of a man” has been discussed in the previous chapter, and according to the text, “the center” of America is “what people *think* it is”, and “all imaginary” (462). This way, the concept of an essential identity is questioned and redefined in the novel. If there is one, it is created by and in the minds of people: it is imaginary, and mythological.

If the center of reality is unique to each perspective, as the novel portrays it, then reality as a whole can only be explained through details that are somehow connected but not entirely unified. This idea points towards the conclusion that Hrólfsón made about the novel’s message: that there is no possible “total explanation” of reality. *American Gods* presents no Great Chain of Being, nor any general principles. What, then, connects the details, or the snapshots of the country that the reader experiences as

Shadow drives across the different states? One way is to liken the identity of America, or reality itself, to a mythology: a system of interconnected stories. Thus, the complexity of the world can be explained and comprehended through myth. Just as the center of America is imaginary, so is the essence of reality itself. But does this mean that this core does not exist? Is it, as Hrólfsón reads the novel's depiction of reality and the gods, "a sea of images, all vying for attention and transforming themselves as needed", and because of this, do we need to, as he bleakly suggests, "despair" (22)? Again, the novel seems to say that the imaginary is real and has a value in itself. Perhaps it is not important what is "real" or not, as long as someone believes it.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to show how the novel's portrayal of multidimensional characters and a nuanced reality brings up questions of how to handle and define such complexity. Through my analysis, in which I used a pluralistic theoretical framework, I found that the novel offers some answers to these questions, but that those answers were as complex as their subject matter.

Concerning pluralistic identities, the novel tells us, similarly to what Lithman, Sıcakkan, and James argue, that a human identity can never be fully represented simply through essentialist categorizations. Shadow's experience on the carousel shows that it is difficult to have a truly multifaceted perspective on identities, and to acknowledge an identity that contains seemingly illogical or paradoxical aspects: difficult, but not impossible. Even more difficult is the process of trying to be recognised as a complex individual by others, as made evident by Shadow's and Sam's struggles. In combination with the portrayals of them and of the gods who are created by belief, the novel illuminates the complicated relationship between identity as a self-creation and as created by others. Additionally, essentialist ideas and homogenous classifications are further criticized and subverted, as information about Shadow's background is withheld and his group belongings shift, and as both he and Sam refuse to identify exclusively with any social group. However, neither of them fully succeeds in avoiding

simplification of their identities in the eyes of others. The novel's solution to the problem of dealing with individual diversity is left ambiguous.

In its depiction of gods and mythological figures, *American Gods* reverses the relationship between our world and the ideal world as described by Plato: the world of ideas is created by people, and the gods are images of them and their belief, and not the other way around. Nor are the ideas eternal: in the novel they disappear without belief and knowledge, which corresponds to the idea of a continuous reality. When defining the world and reality itself, the message is that excessive dualism simplifies the world to a dangerous degree. It is implied that it can lead to a lack of diversity as well as unnecessary hostility. Instead, as Shadow finds, the way to unify a worldview is to look for subjective meaning to reality. The novel defines the "essence" of reality in pluralistic terms: it is multifaceted and changing, since it consists of a variety of ideas that are unique to each individual's personal mythology.

In conclusion, the novel suggests that the identity of a person and of reality is multidimensional and mostly subjective. Additionally, one person can hold several seemingly conflicting views, like Sam does, which makes the possible identity of anything even more complex. Furthermore, it is implied that to find an unambiguous and constant essence in a person or any other being is extremely difficult or perhaps even impossible. However, this does not mean that the novel presents reality as chaotic or completely unpredictable. Instead, in line with James' pluralistic ideas, the message is that the world is unified by its diversity and the connections between dissimilar beings and categories, such as Shadow's dual identity and the belief that unites the ordinary world and the world of gods and ideas. Regarding the question of how to comprehend the complexity and unpredictability of reality, the final pluralistic message of the novel is that in order to find "the true place", it is necessary to create a personal worldview consisting of a unique collection of ideas – and believe in it.

Works cited

Primary source

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. Author's preferred text. Great Britain: Review (Headline Book Publishing), 2005 (first edition published in 2001).

Secondary sources

Browning, Don S. *Pluralism and Personality*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*. New York: Arkana, 1991 (originally published in 1968).

Delahay, Matti. "Imaginary Things: Modern Myth in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001)". *Jyväskylä University Digital Archive*. Department of languages, University of Jyväskylä, 2009. Web. 8 Dec. 2011.

"diversity." *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Angus Stevenson, ed. Oxford University Press, 2010. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 26 Oct. 2011.

"dualism." *World Encyclopedia*. Philip's, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. 31 Oct. 2011.

Harmon, David. *In Light of Our Differences: How Diversity in Culture and Nature Makes Us Human*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002.

Hrólfsson, Tryggvi. "Reality at the Breaking Point: A Study of Nietzsche's, Lyotard's and Baudrillard's Postmodernist Theories in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*". *Skemman*. Department of foreign languages, literature and linguistics, University of Iceland, 2009. Web. 28 Dec. 2011.

James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. Stilwell: Digireads.com, 2005 (originally published in 1909).

Lithman, Yngve G., and Hakan G. Sicakkan. "Introduction: Diversity and Multidimensional Identities." *What Happens When a Society is Diverse? Exploring Multidimensional Identities*. Eds. Hakan G. Sicakkan and Yngve G. Lithman. Lampeter, Ceredigion: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

"pluralism and monism." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 29 Sep. 2011.

"Western philosophy: Plato." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2011. Web. 26 Oct. 2011.