

# Parallels of religion, myth, and literature in american gods and anansi boys



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Reader response criticism is a school of formal literary theory that focuses on the reader and their experience of literature. A prime thematic or style that can be found in many of Neil Gaiman's novels is his manner of taking the unknown and mysterious and presenting it to the reader in an ironic but authentic way. This style is prevalent throughout both *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* and because of the nature of these books, it enhances interactions the main protagonist has with other characters, both gods and humans. In both novels, Gaiman uses his approach of diction, his sometimes abnormal ideas and views, and his use of metaphors to produce a humorous yet authentic reader experience of the unknown and obscure, all the while maintaining a factual and intrinsic plot structure.

The most effective way of manipulating a reader's thoughts and ideas reading about a piece of literature is by using thoughtful and elaborate wording and phrasing. Neil Gaiman uses this technique effectively to create an atmosphere that attracts the reader and entices their curiosity. Gaiman's novels are mostly aimed to adults, ergo a lot of the language and themes suggested are for mature audiences and these novels are no different. In *American Gods*, although there are many instances of profane language, one that stands out as an effective and contextual use of mature speech is when Shadow is captured and threatened by the god of technology and is told "Tell him that we fucking reprogrammed reality. Tell him that language is a virus and that religion is an operating system and that prayers are just so much spam. Tell him that or I'll fucking kill you" (Gaiman, 51). This example effectively gives the reader an idea of the god's mentality and emphasizes his crude personality. Another example of the effect of diction on a reader's

experience is how Gaiman would occasionally go out of his way to explain an idea or word, giving the reader the impression that they are inferior to him. A fine example of this in *American Gods* is when Mr. Wednesday offers Shadow wine, saying “to take the analogy further, it’s honey wine, like mead’ He chuckled. ‘It’s a drink. Concentrated prayer and belief, distilled into a potent liqueur” (Gaiman, 265). The tone used by Mr. Wednesday is very condescending and makes Shadow feel lesser than him. In *Anansi Boys* however, instead of using profanity or sarcasm to crudely describe an idea, he uses simple yet deep phrasing to paint a picture or describe settings, as seen when the setting of England is explained. “It was England in the autumn; the sun was, by definition, something that only happened when it wasn’t cloudy or raining.”(Gaiman, 208). Gaiman describes the sun accurately while also implying that it is often cloudy or rainy in England. In concluding of this idea, as seen through the various wording mechanics used, Gaiman effectively sets a crude yet upbeat tone, giving the reader a unique sense of enjoyment as they read through either novel.

Another way Gaiman enhances the reader’s understanding and grasp of his novels is through his unique portrayal of the relationships between humans and non-human beings. Gaiman uses very detailed and intricate facts to create an interesting rift between the normal world and fantasy. Accordingly, many would say that to properly recognize and interpret the purpose behind his works one would require post-secondary education and comprehension of many different religions and mythological beliefs. In both books Gaiman motivates the reader’s mind to develop deeper meanings behind his work. In *Anansi Boys*, Spider makes a comment about gods and humans, saying “

Human beings do not like being pushed about by gods. They may seem to, on the surface, but somewhere on the inside, underneath it all, they sense it, and they resent it." (Gaiman, 305). This speech is an exceptional illustration of Gaiman using context to create educated and thoughtful theories about the way we distinguish and grasp the idea of worshipping a superior being. Although these books are fiction, many of the views expressed throughout can be very relatable to real-world issues. In *American Gods*, Shadow has a vision in his dream of gods, and is told by a strange voice that "Gods die. And when they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end." (Gaiman, 56). In this passage Gaiman inconspicuously takes a stab at religion and entices the reader's thoughts as this idea goes against most faiths and promotes deeper understanding of religion and idolism as a whole. Another instance found in *American Gods* where Shadow is raised a question by a god is when he talks to a god on television, who explains "the TV's the altar. I'm what people are sacrificing to." "What do they sacrifice?" asked Shadow. "Their time, mostly," said Lucy. "Sometimes each other." (Gaiman 158). This god's idea holds truth for the real world, as many people are drawn to the television, and many people do sacrifice a big portion of their time for it. These passages from the novels are only a few from many instances throughout both books where Gaiman asks very real and thought-provoking questions to play with the reader's mind and give them a sense that they are part of something bigger while reading these books and many of his other works.

The final method used by Neil Gaiman to present his books in an enjoyable and understandable sense is his use of metaphorical comparisons.

Metaphors and similes are phrases used to contrast two different things that share a common feature. These literary devices are used by almost all authors as they are very effective in creating perspective and atmosphere in a memorable and engaging fashion. A representation of comparison being used to efficiently set a tone for a scene is during Shadow's altercation with the god of technology, who draws many comparisons, saying that " language is a virus" and that " religion is an operating system" and that " prayers are just so much fucking spam"(Gaiman, 51). Although these metaphors are obscenely used, he gets the point he is trying to make across to both Shadow and the reader. This speech sets an uneasy identity for the god and the handling of metaphorical speech unquestionably enforces that tone.

Another effective use of this literary device can be found in *Anansi Boys* when Spider and Charlie have to suffer the loss of their father, contrasting masculinity and being an island, saying " no man is an island" (Gaiman, 106). This use of metaphor is a good representation of Gaiman adding emphasis and emotion to an idea, implying that no man is bulletproof and that it is okay for grown men to shed tears of sadness. Gaiman also likes to use metaphors to represent a simple thing, and such an example can be found in *Anansi Boys*, when coffee is explained as being " dark as night, sweet as sin" (Gaiman, 126). This use of metaphorical comparison really displays Gaiman's unique writing technique, as most authors wouldn't go to such extent to describe a meager item like coffee. Metaphors and similes are arguably one of the most effective ways setting emphasis or tone for a book,

and Gaiman uses this device many times effectively to produce an ominous and provoking atmosphere in both novels.

In both novels, Neil Gaiman uses his approach of diction, his sometimes abnormal ideas and views, and his use of metaphors to produce a humorous yet authentic reader experience of the unknown and obscure, all the while maintaining a factual and intrinsic plot structure. And these are all characteristics of books that are very prevalent throughout not only *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*, but many of Gaiman's other novels as well. His biggest strength is by far his ability to play with phrasing and wording to talk directly to the reader's heart, instead of their mind. He is both discreet and subtle when mentioning sometimes radical ideas and views about language and religion, which creates a very educated and effective experience for the reader, which later entices them to learn more about the concepts that they read about.