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“IT WASN’T ME, IT WAS MY DEAD WIFE”
Death and Immortality in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Sanni Petäjäistö : "It wasn't me, it was my dead wife" : Kuolema ja kuolemattomuus Neil Gaimanin *American Gods* -romaanissa
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Kuolemattomuus on iso teema spekulatiivisessa fiktiossa. Sekä fantasia- että tieteisfiktiossa käsitellään kuolemattomuuden mahdollisia positiivisia ja negatiivisia puolia. Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tarkastelen kuolemaa ja kuolemattomuutta Neil Gaimanin *American Gods* (2001) -teoksessa laji- ja sosiaaliopintojen avulla. Minua kiinnostaa, kuinka *American Gods* -romaanin hahmot suhtautuvat kuolemaan tai sen puutteeseen ja kuinka se mahdollisesti ohjaa heidän toimiaan.

Teoriaosiossa tarkastelen ensimmäiseksi, kuinka kuolemaa ja kuolemattomuutta käsitellään yleisesti fantasia- ja tieteiskirjallisuudessa. Sen jälkeen tarkastelen kuolemattomuusnarratiiveja ja kuinka niitä hyödynnetään sekä fiktiossa että todellisuudessa. Viimeiseksi selvitän, miten kuolemaan on suhtauduttu amerikkalaisessa yhteiskunnassa 1990-luvulla ja miten siihen suhtaudutaan tänään, kaksituhattaluvun alussa. Analyysiosiossa tarkastelen asennetta kuolemaa kohtaan kolmesta eri näkökulmasta *American Gods* -romaanin henkilöhahmojen avulla.

American Gods kuvastaa melko hyvin amerikkalaisia asenteita kuolemaa ja kuolemattomuutta kohtaan kaksituhattaluvun alussa. Romaanissa kuolemattomuudella on sekä hyviä että huonoja puolia.

Avainsanat: kuolema kirjallisuudessa, kuolemattomuus, kuolemattomuusnarratiivit, amerikkalainen kulttuuri, spekulatiivinen fiktio.

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ABSTRACT

Sanni Petäjistö : "It wasn't me, it was my dead wife" : Death and Immortality in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*
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Immortality is a major theme in speculative fiction. Both fantasy and science fiction offer both negative and positive outcomes for immortality. In my thesis, I will examine immortality and its possible outcomes in the fantasy novel *American Gods* (2001) by Neil Gaiman through genre studies and social sciences. I am interested how the presence of death or its absence affects the characters and their actions in *American Gods*.

In the theory section, I will first examine how death and immortality are represented in fantasy and science fiction. Then I will examine immortality narratives and how they are employed both in fiction and reality. Lastly, I will examine how death and immortality have been seen in American society in the twentieth century and how it is seen now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In my analysis section, I will look at the attitudes towards death and immortality from three different perspectives through the characters of *American Gods*.

American Gods is mostly a fair representation of how death and immortality are perceived in the beginning of the twenty-first century American culture. The novel offers both negative and positive outcomes for immortality.

Keywords: death in literature, immortality, immortality narratives, American culture, speculative fiction

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1. Introduction

Life after death is a fiction. (Bennett 1)

Not only is life after death fiction, but life without death as well: immortality. As far as we know, immortality is something humans cannot achieve. The absence of death is something we can only imagine, even though “[t]he desire for immortality has existed as long as humanity has been conscious of death” (Yoke 7). Speculative fiction allows us to contemplate possible outcomes of what that absence might mean to us and offers us both good outcomes and warning examples. In my thesis, I will examine immortality and its possible outcomes in the fantasy novel *American Gods* (2001) by Neil Gaiman.

American Gods is a contemporary fantasy novel of an oncoming confrontation between old gods¹ and new ones,² set in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The protagonist Shadow has been in prison for three years after a bank robbery gone awry. He is released a few days early due to his wife, Laura, having been killed in a car accident. He is on his way to her funeral when he is approached by an older man who offers him a job as his bodyguard, and after Shadow realizes he has nothing else to live for, he agrees; soon he realizes that he is actually working for the Norse god Odin who is trying to agitate the old gods into a war for their survival. The seemingly immortal gods and goddesses are afraid to be forgotten, which would lead to their disappearance.

American Gods was published in 2001³ but not many studies have been conducted on the novel. There are studies on *American Gods* and mythology, national identity, as well as dystopia and transgression (see Slabbert; Carroll; Tally), but I am however surprised how few

¹ The gods from different mythologies, religions, and folklore that immigrants have brought to America with them in their memories.

² The modern deities, “gods of credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and neon” (*American Gods* 150).

³ *American Gods* has also been made into a television series (Starz Network) in 2017. My thesis, however, will only concentrate on the book, as the plot of the television series considerably differs from the book.

studies there is concerning immortality (or mortality) as the main research topic considering how prominent the theme is in the book. The text I am utilizing in my thesis is the author's preferred text from 2004, which is about twelve thousand words longer than the original version published in 2001 (Gaiman, "Introduction").

American Gods portrays immortality in several different ways. The gods are arguably immortal, but they can be killed. They have bodies that can be harmed but if enough people still believe in them, they continue their existence even if their bodies are destroyed. Only when they are forgotten, they cease to exist. Prayers and rituals are keeping most of them in their strength, but the existence of the new gods and the ongoing change in values and belief systems in America is threatening their lives. Most of them are living very poorly; for example, a djinn (a supernatural creature in early Arabian and later Islamic mythology) is working as a taxi driver in Manhattan. Another kind of immortality *American Gods* portrays is Laura, Shadow's wife, who rises from her grave with the help of a leprechaun's (a fairy creature in Irish folklore) magic coin and walks the earth in her decaying body like a creature from a horror movie. Her immortality is of a different kind from that of the gods. She does not need anyone to believe in her, but she cannot prevent her body from deteriorating. She yearns to go back to her old self, to be truly alive again with her husband, who does not want to have a relationship with her while she is basically dead. Shadow himself dies and is later resurrected against his will.

In my theory section, I will approach death and the theme of immortality in *American Gods* through genre studies and social sciences. First, I will examine how immortality in fantasy literature differs from immortality in science fiction, the two genres being the most prominent ones in speculative fiction. I will also examine how mythology and different myths have been used by authors, giving the myths and their characters their own kind of immortality. Then I will move on to the different varieties of immortality according to

Stephen Cave in his book *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives a Civilization* (2012). These varieties, which he calls immortality narratives, are *Staying Alive*, *Resurrection*, *Soul*, and *Legacy*. I will examine each narrative with examples from speculative fiction. As the events in *American Gods* are mostly located in Northern America of the present day (or, the beginning of the twenty-first century), it will be beneficial for me to use studies of contemporary American cultural studies regarding the main themes of my thesis, i.e. death and immortality. I will determine how Americans feel about death with the help of Lawrence R. Samuel and his book *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America* (2013). I will introduce terms that are relevant in examining death in literature that are psychological in nature: death anxiety and terror management, which was created to help people deal with that anxiety. Death is at the core of many belief systems, including Christianity; the death of Jesus “holds the promise of salvation and eternal life” (Kastenbaum 106). I am not making evaluating statements regarding various religions and their belief systems, but I will examine the characters of *American Gods* and their beliefs in the analysis section. However, it is important to note that according to Robert Kastenbaum “[r]eligion could be seen as either a buffer against death anxiety, or a source of special concern (e.g., fear of damnation)” (133), whereas “Templer and Dotson (1970) found no significant relationship between a variety of religious variables and death anxiety in an undergraduate sample” (133). Thus, there is no evidence that religion has curative effects on death anxiety as it can either mitigate or aggravate it.

I will divide my analysis section in three chapters, in which I will analyze the different ways in which the characters deal with their coming death (or the state of *being* dead in the case of Laura) and the anxiety – or the lack of anxiety – it causes them as well as the possible consequences of such feelings. Most of the older gods are struggling with the knowledge that they may die some day; or, as some have already died at least once, that they

may cease to exist altogether. They have been living – existing, in some cases – a long time and do not know how to prepare for the possibility of nothingness, the end of their earthly existence. Laura, being under thirty years old when she dies, is desperate to be alive again: being dead feels numb to her. On the contrary, Shadow is tired of his life. He feels like he lost everything with the car crash that took the lives of his wife and best friend; he has suicidal thoughts throughout the book and yearns to finally have the rest he believes death will bring him. In my thesis I will examine how the presence of death (or the absence of it) affects the characters in *American Gods* and their actions. I am also interested in examining whether *American Gods* portrays immortality as a warning example not to deal with supernatural powers, or as a state that should be pursued.

According to Tony Walter, during the last three or four decades death has undergone a “revival” (6) and, as Bryant notes, there is “an increasing awareness of death, a trend that shows no signs of abating, death occupies an ever-larger amount of cultural space” (Bryant 1034). Death is nowadays in the news every day: school shootings, forest fires, terrorist attacks, and most relevantly, the ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 virus. Due to the nature of death being something that we cannot really know, as “[t]here is no conclusive knowledge about death to report, certainly not conclusive knowledge that is satisfying or welcome” (Lambek 643), this thesis does not examine the nature of death in closer detail. Instead, the thesis focuses on how the characters in Gaiman’s novel react to its presence – or absence, in some cases.

My thesis thus contributes to the discussion of death in fantasy literature, and especially in speculative fiction, where death can be shown in various forms and which has fewer constraints as a genre. Most of the studies on fantasy literature and death focus on children’s literature or literature aimed at young adults (see Douglas; Kokorski). Immortality has been studied much less as well as the consequences of humans getting what they arguably

want; an eternal life – or at least a very long one. With my thesis I hope to show that examining fantasy literature can tell us more about ourselves and our society with scenarios that could not possibly happen in real life. Regarding fantasy literature only as escapism denies us the possibility to examine our own feelings otherwise unknown to us. According to John Timmerman, the goal of fantasy literature is “to lead the reader to a keener understanding of himself and his world” (91).

2. Immortality and Fantasy

One essential objective of the death narratives then is to act as subliminal ways of naturalizing the fear of death and dying. (Kundu 10)

This chapter will first examine how death and immortality have been addressed in fantasy literature before and how that differs from other literary genres, notably science fiction, which is a genre most often juxtaposed with fantasy fiction. I will contemplate the importance of death in literature in making it more familiar. Next, I will concentrate more on immortality and its meaning to ordinary people, as well as various kinds of immortality, with the help of Stephen Cave's immortality narratives. After the immortality narratives I will examine death in American society and how it is still seen as something un-American and unimaginable, despite the abundance of violence and horror in media. However, before I will examine death and immortality in fantasy literature and real life, I will briefly introduce the terms *death anxiety*, *mortality paradox*, and *terror management theory*, all of which deal with the psychological effects that thinking of death has on people and how they manage these thoughts in their lives. My main objective is not to contemplate on the psychology of the characters in *American Gods* but explaining these terms will help analyze their motives for either avoiding death or embracing it.

Death anxiety, i.e. fear of death, *thanatophobia*, can be defined as “emotional distress and insecurity aroused by reminders of mortality, including one's own memories and thoughts of death” (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*). Ernest Becker, the author of Pulitzer Prize winner *The Denial of Death* (1973), maintains that “of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (Becker 11). Thus, death anxiety is a main reason why immortality narratives exist – people have anxiety and need a way to deal with that anxiety so that it does not consume their whole lives. Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason argue there are three direct determinants of death anxiety: past-related regret, future-related

regret, and meaningfulness of death (346). According to their model of death anxiety, a person experiences death anxiety when they perceive that their life is lacking something meaningful and that they are afraid they are going to die before they have achieved peace (346).

There are multiple theories about death anxiety, and one of the most popular ones is by Sigmund Freud. He claimed that the fear of death was only a symptom for something else, disguising real problems. He posed that our “unconscious” knows nothing of death, thus we have no instincts that believe in death (Kastenbaum 102). We are unable to comprehend our own mortality. Freud argued that we should not “yield” to fears of death but think of them as something that point to hidden issues. In *American Gods*, especially with the old gods, yielding to their fears forces them to make impetuous decisions that lead to negative outcomes. For example, seeing their leader die makes most of the gods that are uncertain of their participation make the decision to fight, which leads to battle that could have been avoided. Ernest Becker’s solution is to “acknowledge our anxieties and contemplate death if we intend to live as an enlightened and self-actualized person” since “the repression of death-related thoughts and feelings requires too much effort, drains too much energy” (Kastenbaum 105). On the one hand it is wise to contemplate death but on the other, too much contemplation leads to anxiety and stress.

To put it simply, the mortality paradox means that we are aware that we all must one day die – yet we cannot imagine our own deaths. Cave proposes that “On the one hand, our powerful intellects come inexorably to the conclusion that we, like all other living things around us, must one day die. Yet on the other, the one thing that these minds cannot imagine is the very state of nonexistence; it is literally inconceivable. Death therefore presents itself as both inevitable and impossible” (16). This paradox, Cave argues, gives shape to both our immortality narratives and civilization itself.

According to Cave, the knowledge that we must all one die one day defines us as mortals and “[l]ife is a constant war we are doomed to lose” (18). The second half of this paradox, however, tells us that our death is impossible. We cannot imagine our own deaths: whenever we try, we are only there as an observer. “It is not possible for the one doing the imagining to actively imagine the absence of the one doing the imagining” (Cave 18). Thus, the paradox stems from two different ways of viewing ourselves (the objective and the subjective) and how these views force us to develop stories that prevent us from being paralyzed by our anxiety of death. According to Cave, the stories that help us make sense of our existence are the immortality narratives (Cave 21). These narratives are also used by speculative fiction writers when they wonder how to prolong the life of their characters, and I will examine them in greater detail in the section 2.2.

The terror management theory was developed by U.S. psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski and expanded in their 2015 book, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. It is based on the writings of Becker who, as mentioned before, argued that “fear of death is at the root of all our other fears”. Becker also claimed that “much of what we call civilization consists of a desperate attempt to keep our death anxiety under control” (qtd. in Kastenbaum 137). Robert Kastenbaum claims that “[t]he prospect of symbolic immortality through our enduring social institutions helps to insulate the individual from the fear of personal annihilation” (137). The theory was first introduced by Adrian Tomer in 1994, as he observed that many studies claimed there is a negative correlation between self-esteem and death anxiety, and many studies have since been conducted on the basis bearing the same results (Kastenbaum 138). Thus, our own feelings of self-worth are reflected on our anxieties about death.

Kastenbaum claims that many people “find death ‘interesting’ when it occurs in ‘interesting’ ways to people who are not close to us” (98). This explains the fascination

towards violence and death in popular culture. However, when death is too close and personal death anxiety arises: people try to distance themselves from death because thinking about it makes them fear the unknown. Throughout history people have organized their lives by separating the dead from the living by making “carefully boundaried burial place[s]” (Kastenbaum 99), so that the living do not have to confront the dead in their everyday lives, but it is interesting how this aversion is not present in popular culture and fiction. Outi Hakola agrees that “the practically compulsive repetition of death ... proclaims the continued cultural need to encounter death and dying” (3). Thus, I argue that people have the need to experience death in a controlled environment, like speculative fiction, without the actual danger of death in their own lives. In my analysis section, I will examine the strangehold that death has on people and how it can control even characters who are usually depicted as being above mortal problems.

2.1 Death and Speculative Fiction

Death has always been a major theme in speculative fiction; it offers us ways to imagine our own mortality and death in general, as death in speculative fiction is not always the end. In the novel, Neil Gaiman argues for the importance of literature in surveying the death of (imaginary) others: when Mr Ibis, the Egyptian god of wisdom and writing, narrates stories of how people and the gods arrived in America in *American Gods*, most of the stories are full of suffering and pain. He claims that reading these horrible stories offers a safe way to experience what it may be like to die: “Fiction allows us to slide into these other heads, these other places, and look out through other eyes. And then in the tale we stop before we die, or we die vicariously but unharmed, and in the world beyond the tale we turn the page or close the book, and we resume our lives” (*American Gods* 347). Being able to imagine the death of

imaginary others without being harmed can help us deal with death anxiety. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that “to witness a death not only always implies that the observer’s consciousness persists beyond the spectacle of death but that he survives as an observer of an image of death” (102). Kastenbaum has researched fantasy literature and discovered that there has been a tendency to visualize Death as a person throughout history (Kastenbaum 142). In fantasy literature there can, for example, be a skeletal figure in a long robe; popular fantasy fiction author Terry Pratchett describes death as a tall skeleton wearing a black robe and a scythe. Death has an hourglass-shaped timer for every person in Pratchett’s *Discworld* series, and when all the sand in their timer flows to the bottom, he collects their souls. Even though his appearance is frightening, he is described as having a sense of humor and “being kind to kittens” – overall, a very human character, who is not cruel or judging (Butler 24-29). Presenting death personifications in positive light gives the actual death more of a positive light as well; if someone like *Discworld*’s Death is the one greeting people after they die, perhaps death is not as bad as imagined? While speculative fiction allows the personification of death, it also allows the absence of death altogether, which is what I am interested in examining in my thesis.

Science fiction and fantasy offer us both positive and negative examples of what happens when the absence of death is a real possibility. In science fiction, immortality is usually a result of “investigations into the workings of the human body and of experimentation with machinery and/or drugs to make that body work forever” (Collins 29). When it comes to fantasy, there is usually no concerns on *how* the immortal is immortal in the first place, but what *consequences* there are for human societies (Collins 30). In *American Gods* the gods are immortal because there are people who believe in them, ergo, they cannot die while there are people who remember them – how that actually works is not explained, it just is. While there is usually at least a partially credible explanation to immortality in science

fiction, there is no need for that in fantasy fiction as it “can simply assert the existence of immortals and immortality” (Collins 34). In other words, fantasy fiction may demand more suspension of disbelief from its readers when it comes to immortal beings. This is not to say that fantasy fiction does not deal with real subjects or that it distances itself from the real world. Deborah O’Keefe claims that fantasy fiction “doesn’t arouse the same expectations as most other fiction” and that it “doesn’t seem to insist that readers should behave in a certain way” (O’Keefe 12); however, I would have to disagree with this notion. Fantasy literature is sometimes accused of being just escapism, avoidance of the everyday life, but Terri Apter argues that fantasy is “essential to the author’s various purposes, which must be understood not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it” (Apter 2). This is one way we can examine how immortality works in, for example, *American Gods*: not as something distant and irrelevant to the society surrounding us, but as exploring what might happen if we achieved immortality. One way that Gaiman, as well as many other speculative fiction authors, utilize immortality in their novels is by borrowing characters from different, already existing mythologies. The characters are somewhat recognizable to many readers, which arguably makes them something that is familiar, even if the world these characters inhabit is not.

Such intertextual use of existing mythologies as part of the story is not a new phenomenon. Suzanne Bray argues that authors have used existing myths in various ways; they have “either retold the old, familiar myths of the past so that they carry a new message to the author’s own generation or created their own, new myths as modern vehicles of traditional truths” (Bray et al., “Introduction” viii). Gaiman uses the existing myths and modernizes the characters in them to make statements, for instance, of the status of death in the modern society, especially the modern society of America in *American Gods*. J.R.R. Tolkien, while constructing his own mythology of *Silmarillion* (1977, published

posthumously by his son), borrowed from old Germanic and Gaelic mythology (see Jeffrey) as well as Finnish mythology (see Flieger) because he thought it was a pity that England did not have any existing mythologies, so he was adamant in creating his own. Similar to England, “the U.S.A. had no residual folklore of its own; the folklore imported by immigrants from Europe had been set aside with other redundant aspects of the European heritage” (Stableford 22). Gaiman, unlike Tolkien who used various existing mythologies and folklore to invent his own pantheons (see Chance), uses characters from already existing mythologies and brings them to America from their original countries in the minds of the immigrants, who do not stop practicing their own religions and worshipping their own gods once they have arrived at their destination. For example, the character of Odin in *American Gods* (“Wednesday”) is a copy of Odin Allfather in Norse mythology, brought to America by the Vikings who first sailed there many centuries ago.

Science fiction and fantasy also offer possible outcomes for immortality. In science fiction, people who gain immortality are not always happy about the consequences: often the moral lesson is not to play god and try to prolong our lives with unnatural methods. For example, Mary Shelley’s short story *The Mortal Immortal* (1833) tells a story of a man named Winzy who drinks an immortality potion, which leads to a lonely and often suicidal existence, having outlived the people he loved (Cope 122). In fantasy literature, however, where immortality is considered more natural and not a result of a man messing with something he should not be messing with, it is usually seen in a more positive light. For example, the sorcerers in David Eddings’s fantasy novels are seen as helpers and wise advisers of rulers. They are immortal but their immortality does not make them any more miserable than ordinary humans. Nevertheless, these are generalizations of the two genres, as there are exceptions that break the rule. I am going to argue that *American Gods* is one of these exceptions, in a sense that the gods who are immortal are not in any way happier than

the mortal beings. The gods of *American Gods* are naturally immortal: they might have been ordinary people once (for example Hinzemann) but people's beliefs changed their status and they became godly beings that lived because people believed in them, sacrificed for them, and told stories to their children about them, and thus immortalized them. In the next section I will examine the various ways people have tried – and sometimes succeeded – to immortalize either themselves or their legacy for the next generations.

2.2 Immortality and its Different Forms

Our own death is just a scenario, as it involves the end of consciousness, and we cannot consciously stimulate what it is like to not be conscious. (Cave 19)

Stephen Cave introduces what he calls “immortality narratives” in his book *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives a Civilization*. These immortality narratives are called *staying alive*, *resurrection*, *soul*, and *legacy*. They all have their own allures, but also their problems when it comes to hypothetical real-life situations – and because some of the problems are indeed very hypothetical and almost absurd, people hardly have use for them outside speculative fiction. However, they can manifest as real problems for characters in fantasy literature, and therefore I argue there is a good reason for examining them, as some even manifest as real problems in *American Gods*. I will introduce the narratives shortly and offer examples on how these narratives are being used in fantasy literature and why the allure of immortality is so relevant a theme in fiction. As the first narrative, *staying alive*, is not greatly connected to my main material I will only briefly introduce it and then move on to the other three, which are more prominently present in *American Gods*. The reason for the *staying alive* narrative not working well with is that the gods in *American Gods* have never been alive or have died at least once to gain their status, so they are not trying to *stay alive*.

What they are trying to do I will examine more in the analysis; I argue that even though they are not trying to stay *alive*, they are trying to exist as long as they can. Laura is already dead and only wants to gain her former life back, and Shadow is not actively trying to stay alive either, instead accepting that his death is coming sooner or later (and mostly wishing it would be sooner).

The first narrative, staying alive, depends on magic or science to keep death away. The idea is to postpone death by any means necessary, whether by a miracle elixir of life or by scientific measures. This is what most of us are trying to do right now in order to remain youthful and as far away from our graves as possible: we are exercising, taking vitamins, trying to eat healthier, dyeing our hair. Even when we are getting older, we do not necessarily want to *look* old. This scientific approach to the problem of death is called the *Engineering Approach* to immortality, “the belief that death is a set of solvable problems” (Cave 61), and is often used in science fiction to prolong life. It has also produced real results in real life: because of science, life expectancy made a significant leap in the twentieth century compared to the life expectancy of the previous century.

One of the problems with this narrative is the so-called *Tithonus problem*, which means that even though we might be successful in our avoidance of death, we are still not successful in our avoidance of all the illnesses that come with old age. Tithonus was, according to a Greek legend, a youth who was granted eternal life by the god Zeus. He was granted an eternal life, but he was not granted eternal youth; thus, he grew old and weak, but was not able to die. Finally, his lover, Eos, turned him into a cicada, “forever alive but calling for death” (Cave 67). In speculative fiction, Tolkien’s elves or Eddings’s sorcerers belong to this category: they are immortal in a sense that they do not die of old age, but they are not invulnerable, as they can die if someone for example stabs them. Dorian Gray prolonged his

life in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by making his portray age instead of him, with disastrous consequences.

The second narrative, the resurrection, focuses on what happens after we die. The popularity of this narrative is mostly owed to a man who was crucified and, according to the legends, rose from his grave and transformed his sect into one of the major religions today. Christianity is not, however, the only religion that has gods die and rise again: the Egyptian god of afterlife, Osiris, is “murdered, only to be put back together and resurrected, thereby opening the way to immortality for his people” (Cave 89). The goddess Demeter in Greek mythology, in pursuit of her daughter Persephone, has been visiting the underworld and then brought back to life (Cave 93). The resurrection narrative is found in so many religions that Cave argues that “it might seem obvious that religion has, at least in part, arisen to satisfy our will to immortality” (89).

Cave identifies three major problems with the resurrection narrative. He calls these the *Cannibal problem*, the *Transformation problem*, and the *Duplication problem*. These problems seem absurd and not something we will ever have to deal with, but for the sake of fantasy literature where these problems may arise – and indeed some of them do even in *American Gods* – I am going to briefly explain the three thought experiments Cave introduces in his book. The Cannibal problem means exactly what it says: if I am eaten, can I be resurrected? If part of my atoms are part of someone else, who can fully assemble me after my death? The Transformation problem deals with the age the person is resurrected. Most of the people would not want to be resurrected in their old bodies but would rather be young again. If this were the case, would that resurrected body be really them since it is not the same body they died in? The Duplication problem deals with the hypothesis that an identical version of a person could be created after they die: is that an identical version of them or just a duplicate of them, even with their memories and feelings? What if there was some sort of a

mistake, and one was created before they died? Which one would be the real one? As the gods in *American Gods* struggle with these problems, I will return to these problems in more detail in my analysis section. I argue that these problems are perhaps one of the reasons for death anxiety in American culture. Even if a resurrection was a possibility after death, the idea of resurrection does not appeal as much if a part of the person dies anyway, or if the resurrected person is not the same as before their death.

The resurrection narrative has often been used in science fiction as well as fantasy literature. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a prominent example of this narrative: a hideous creature is created by Victor Frankenstein from human body parts. Shelley also had her own immortality narratives, for example *The Last Man* (1826) (Kilgour 5) and multiple other short stories that feature immortality (see Marino). In Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* (1989) Father Paul Duré is infected by a parasite that resurrects him multiple times during a period of seven years.

Popular culture also relies on this narrative: zombies, reanimated human corpses, are a very popular theme especially in horror movies. Most of the zombies depicted in popular culture are nothing but creatures that only hunger for human brains to eat, yet there are some exceptions. For example, *In the Flesh* was a British television series (2013-14) in which after a rising of the dead a scientific solution was found that allowed the undead to reclaim their memories and identify as their former selves before their death. However, even when the dead were reintroduced to the society, they had to take injections to get them from relapsing back to their former, dangerous selves. Most of the undead narratives seem to suggest that raising the dead is always a terrible mistake. Laura from *American Gods* is a curious example of an undead risen from her grave: she does not hunger for human flesh and she seems to have her human intelligence intact.

The third narrative, the soul, is based on a hypothesis that humans have souls that are immortal and after the death of our bodies the souls continue their existence. According to Cave, “the soul hypothesis has proven intellectually and emotionally satisfying for countless cultures across the globe” (143). Undeniably, it is pleasant to imagine that our loved ones are not rotting in their graves forever, or at least until someone summons them to live again, which would be the base of the Resurrection narrative. According to Cave, the idea of the soul is “ancient and intuitive”; “It claims that there is some part of you that is spiritual or immaterial in nature -- and that this part is the *real* you” (144). That is, even if our bodies are subject to decay and destruction, our souls can move on to the next life and immortality.

One of the problems with the soul narrative is the location of the souls after death. “Souls, if they are to live forever, must live forever *somewhere*, but it is not at all easy to say where” (Cave 158). This problem is called *the Copernican revolution* since Earth was thought to be the center of the universe before proved otherwise (by Nicolaus Copernicus, hence the name). If the human souls exist and are important, there must be a place where they go after death. The second problem Cave sees with the soul narrative is Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection, which questions our place in the universe: are we really just one species which has been “picked out to live forever” (Cave 159)? If the human soul exists, is it the only one continuing the existence after death? Some speculative fiction stories address the question of the existence of souls and where they go after death: in Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* (2008), the souls of the dead live in the graveyard they are buried in, as ghosts, invisible to everyone except the other ghosts.

In *American Gods*, the gods do not appear entirely corporeal. They do have bodies and can greatly weaken when someone harms them (for example, Loki shoots Wednesday and kills him, albeit temporarily). They seem to be a curious mix of both the soul narrative and the fourth of the narratives, the legacy: they are living in people’s memories and can die

if they are forgotten, but they still have something that keeps them tethered to this realm of humans even if their bodies are harmed.

The fourth narrative, legacy, is different from all the previous narratives mentioned. Instead of the survival of a person's body, mind, or soul, it concentrates on the survival of the person's *memory* through their relatives or the concrete things they create during their life. In other words, what they leave behind when they die. The problem with this narrative lies in the questions Cave asks on page 207: "What good is eternal glory to a corpse? Is a famous dead person any less dead?" For the Gods in *American Gods* this narrative is important for it keeps them corporeal. Gods in *American Gods* want people to remember them, to mount statues, devote sacred places, and to pray for them so they will not disappear. The belief that they are real is what keeps them existing, but for many that existence is not worth it. They both want the eternal glory and exist as long as possible. It is arguably what many people want from their lives as well, to live as long as possible and to be remembered after they die. This is what I am going to examine next: how American society deals with death anxiety and how they have searched for immortality with many means throughout history.

2.3 American Death Anxiety and Search for Immortality

Although the United States is a death-denying society, Americans may be said to have an obsessive fascination with dead and death-related phenomena. (Durkin 43)

As mentioned before, fantasy literature reflects reality. As the events of *American Gods* are mostly set in the beginning of the twenty-first century America – excluding the minor chapters dealing with stories of the immigrants traveling to the country dating from 14 000 BC to the more recent decades – I will examine in this part how the contemporary American society deals with death anxiety and how they have searched for immortality throughout

history. Kastenbaum argues that attitudes towards death and dying are sociocultural and vary between countries (98) which is why I am only concentrating on American society. In my analysis chapters, I will explore how these attitudes are reflected in *American Gods* through the immortality narratives that I examined previously in my thesis. I will not delve deep into psychology as I am more interested in what is being done to avoid death as long as possible and how it affects the lives of mortals (and immortals in case of *American Gods*). I am not interested in examining the exact nature of death, as it would be impossible to know what happens to us after we die, but as the avoidance of that unknown is a major force that affects our lives tremendously (according to Becker), I will concentrate on actions that are done to keep that unknown as far away as possible – from the American citizens in this section and from the characters of *American Gods* in the analysis chapter.

Lawrence Samuel offers a comprehensive overview of death and dying in America from the 1920s to the twenty-first century in his book *Death, American Style: A Cultural History of Dying in America* (2013). The author himself wonders in his introduction to the book how it can be possible it has taken this long for a book like this to be published about the subject. Certainly, books about death and dying had been published before, but not quite as inclusive. For example, Jessica Mitford wrote about dying in America in her classic book *The American Way of Death* (1963, rev. ed. 1998), but her work concentrated mostly on the American funeral industry instead of how Americans felt about the subject and how it affected their daily lives. *Existential and Spiritual Issues in Death Attitudes* (2007) published by Adrian Tomer et al., however, offers a more psychological view of the subject. Although the object of this thesis is to only examine how the Americans perceive death today and how it may be reflected in literature, I think it is also useful to consider why Americans feel about death the way they do today. I will first briefly go through the history of death and dying in

the United States, and then I will examine how this history has affected contemporary views of the matter with the help of Samuel and other works connected to the subject.

Death has always been a problematic subject in America, and nowadays it has even replaced sex as the primary taboo. It is seen as something unnatural, “un-American” according to Samuel, and something that can be solved with science. Samuel states that America’s current attitudes could be said to have formed in the late nineteenth century after the Civil War (1861-1865). Between the two world wars, in the 1920s and the 1930s, there was an “increased interest in mortality”: even serious scientists were interested in spiritists séances as a way of contacting persons who had died, as there was a firm belief that death could not be “the ultimate end of life”. Dream and hypnotism were believed to help us gain glimpses of the other side of death. In addition, the “dying well” movement was also gaining ground. By the end of the 1930s, however, death had become “unacceptable”, and scientists were trying to solve the mystery of death and considering whether it was possible to obtain physical immortality. The average life expectancy in the 1930s was sixty years; almost twenty years less than nowadays. Before World War II, death was not found in American literature (there were of course some exceptions) and it had become “a stranger”, according to Samuel (25), as the traditional ways of dying disappeared from the American scene. Most Americans then died in a hospital instead of home, and the mortician was taking care of the dead body instead of the relatives of the dead. (Samuel 2-25)

World War II, especially the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “forever altered the culture of death in United States” (Samuel 29): death became a looming presence over Americans. Because of how many men were at war, there was a new problem concerning death and children: how should a mother tell her children that the father had passed away? This was a serious concern for many, as death was something not discussed even between adults. During the war, Sigmund Freud’s ideas about death gained popularity; he had claimed that

Americans had “a neurosis about death”. Howard Gossage claimed Americans were “highly superstitious people when it came to death and dying” as they avoided confronting it, instead using euphemisms like “passed on” instead of “died” (qtd in Samuel, 76). As I mentioned before, the death of others is easier to imagine but the thought of a personal death is almost impossible. Samuel claims that “despite the loss of hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens”, Americans still struggled with “the idea and practice of death” (Samuel 40).

After World War II, in the 1950s and the 1960s, there was a great debate over how to handle the loss of a loved one. Death was seen something sinister, a threat to domestic life. At the same time, scientists were declaring war on death and dying, the aim being to prolong the human lifespan even further than it was. For example, cryobiologists were contemplating the idea of freezing human bodies in order to conserve them to the future, where the cure for our mortality could possibly be obtained. Alan Harrington also published his book *The Immortalist* in 1969, where he argued that “given how much of life was really about death ... we as a society should seriously begin to consider the possibility of immortality” (Samuel 75). Harrington was convinced that our constant worrying over death while not able to confront it directly was hindering our ability to fully enjoy life. The ordinary Americans at the end of the 1960s were still very superstitious when it came to death and dying, even though more attention was being paid to the grieving process of individuals –a new literature genre, death and dying memoirs, had emerged. The Americans seemed to have a great interest in reading about the grief of others, while still not being able to confront the thought of themselves dying in the future. (Samuel 53-77)

When the 1970s began, death remained a troublesome topic. It had even “surpassed sex as America’s ‘most forbidden topic’”, according to David Belgium, a professor of religion and medicine. At the same time, the Vietnam War (1955-1975) pushed death to forefront in media, increasing its fascination. Discussions about “death with dignity”,

euthanasia, were common, as well as psychedelics (especially LSD) were being used to help the terminally ill find some peace before dying. America had become somewhat divided; Americans tried to avoid seeing death in person, but “sure liked to see violent and tragic death on television” (Samuel 97). Television and a new generation of filmmakers were “making death more visible and visceral” (Samuel 102) during the last couple of decades. By the end of 1970s, death had become an “integral and passionate part of the national zeitgeist” (Samuel 101), partly because of the ongoing Vietnam War.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, death was slowly becoming “mainstream”: baby boomers were reaching the age where their parents were dying, and this was for many the first real contact with death they had ever had. AIDS was also becoming more widespread, which caused the whole medical community to wage an active war against death and dying. All of this acceptance (or rather, ignorance and denial once again) of death meant that it emerged as a big theme in popular and consumer culture. Americans at least acknowledged its presence even if they could not accept its full consequences. (Samuel 103-04) Afterlife became a new discussion topic, which caused elevated interest in near-death experiences. AIDS and the increase of youth suicides caused schools to start “death education”: death was being taught as a legitimate subject in thousands of public schools across the country. The longer life spans in the West also shifted attitudes toward death (Samuel 118). Consumer and popular culture were full of death, and it seemed that the more gruesome the better; by the mid-1990s, death had become “a principal theme in American pop culture” (Samuel 126). However, in the academia death was not studied much: for example, Robert Kastenbaum wonders about how the discipline of psychology seemed to be resistant to acknowledge death in the twentieth century, even though the century had “experienced war, genocide, epidemic, and starvation on epic scale” (Kastenbaum 1).

The new millennium and especially the event of 9/11 in 2001, which was sometimes referred as “a collective near-death experience” (Samuel 146), made Americans feel more vulnerable, forcing them to confront the fact that they were indeed mortal. Americans were, however, still mostly terrible at dying well. Not many of them spent much time planning for their own deaths, which according to Samuel supports Freud’s theory that imagining the death of others’ was understandable but one’s own death was something unimaginable, which meant that Americans in the new millennium were “seriously pursuing immortality or something close to it, doing whatever they could to live well beyond one hundred years” (Samuel 151). For some, radical life extensions were “antithetical to basic humanism” (Samuel 152). The problem of death is still not solved, and its psychological, philosophical, and spiritual consequences are something Americans are still trying to accept (Samuel 153). Kastenbaum argues that in the twenty-first century death has been dealt with more understanding in academia, but there are still some who consider it to be a taboo: “[t]here are still academic and professional education strongholds in which ‘never say die’ continues to reign” (Kastenbaum 2).

One way to examine immortality today is what Samuel calls *technological immortality* (and what Cave calls *symbolic immortality*). Jeffrey Bennett and Jenny Huberman examine this growing trend of digital memorialization and argue that the term “symbolic immortality” is from Robert Lifton and Eric Olson’s study entitled *Living and Dying* (1974). In their study, Lifton and Olson claim that symbolism is “humankind’s only means for achieving a sense of immortality which, in turn, provides a central strategy for coping with the anxiety of death” (Bennett and Huberman 340). Nowadays one way of coping with this anxiety is trying to leave a mark on social media that might survive after the individual is gone. Symbolic immortality is what terror management theory is also using to mitigate the fear of death: it argues that people “characteristically defend against death

anxiety through conformity to mainstream values, or even ‘heroic’ accomplishments that buffer their self-esteem and promise a kind of symbolic immortality through identification with cultural worldviews” (Tomer et al., 2).

Americans, as well as rest of the world, have always tried to prolong their life expectancy as the thought of dying – or the unknown that might come after – terrifies them. However, even though the thought of themselves dying is horrifying, the idea of others dying – who are not well known and usually fictional – can even be entertaining. In addition, seeing death in popular media can help accept our own deaths and reading death in speculative fiction can help with the notion that death is a sinister thing that people need to be scared of. In my analysis chapter I will examine how death is represented in a novel located in America and how this representation might depict the attitudes of American people.

3. Immortality and its Consequences

This chapter is divided into three parts, as I will look at the attitudes towards death and immortality from three different perspectives: those of the gods, Laura, and Shadow. The gods are mostly extremely anxious about people forgetting them and thus ending their existence. They are essentially immortal, but once no-one remembers them anymore, they stop existing: this is a fact that makes most of them miserable. In America, these gods who came from all over the world are not worshipped like the new gods, i.e., the goddess of media, et cetera. The future of the new gods is also the cause of their anxiety: they have almost replaced the old gods from the minds of people, but who says they cannot be replaced too? The animosity between the gods is the key that lets Odin almost get what he wants, which would lead to the destruction of if not all then most of the gods. He plays the insecurities of the old gods against them with Loki to lengthen their own existence and gain more power at the other gods' expense.

Laura, Shadow's late wife, finds herself dead before her thirtieth birthday due to a car accident, after which Shadow accidentally reanimates her with the leprechaun's golden coin. This is not the ideal kind of immortality: her brain is functional, but her body is decaying. Laura spends majority of her time being undead and following Shadow in hope that he would find a way to resurrect her for good. In the end, even though Shadow finally thinks he can restore her life for her, she accepts that she is meant to be dead.

Shadow believes he is a mortal man and he eventually accepts death. In prison he meets people who have accepted their death and have even developed humor to deal with their situation: "that's when you remember the jokes about the guys who kicked their boots off as the noose flipped around their necks, because their friends always told them they'd die with their boots on" (4). Humor is a way of dealing with death anxiety because it distracts from the fear of the unknown. It is also a way of speaking of death with euphemisms instead

of confronting it directly, which is something Americans do, according to Gossage (see 2.3). Shadow himself deals with the looming death by learning coin tricks. The losses in his life – Laura, his mother, his job – help him becoming more acquainted with the idea of eternal rest.

Ibis, the Egyptian god of writing and magic, tells Shadow that “[y]ou people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories” (523). In *American Gods*, death is not the end, and some of the characters appear to be both alive and dead at the same time (notably, Laura who died but was resurrected and the gods who are not really alive as normal human beings). Ibis also claims that “life and death are different sides of the same coin” (523), which strengthens his previous claim of life and death being mutually non-exclusive. This comparison is particularly appropriate with the gods, and also with Shadow who loves coin tricks: he is playing with the coins the way he plays with both the life and death. In Laura’s situation, it is difficult to say if she is really alive or dead. I argue the metaphorical coin is standing at its edge: it is possible to see both sides by changing the point of view.

I will examine these three different expectations towards death – denial of death, yearning for a normal life, and acceptance – and how they affect the lives of the aforementioned characters. I will start with gods and their obsession with immortality, then move on to Laura and her search for an escape from her body. Finally, I will examine the protagonist Shadow and his journey with the gods, trying to find peace for himself.

3.1 Death as a Problem

“Have you thought about what it means to be a god?” asked the man. He had a beard and a baseball cap. “It means you give up your mortal existence to become a meme: something that lives forever in people’s minds, like the tune of a nursery rhyme. It

means that everyone gets to re-create you in their own minds. You barely have your own identity any more. Instead, you're a thousand aspects of what people need you to be. And everyone wants something different from you. Nothing is fixed, nothing is stable.” (*American Gods* 504)

One of the thriving forces of almost all the gods in the novel is their reluctance to give in. They have been around for so long that they are scared of the unknown, hanging on to their lives as long as possible – even though their lives are miserable and some of them are barely even existing. The people who believed in them are dying of old age, and soon there will be no one who even remembers them anymore in America. In this section I will examine the problems with the gods and their immortality – their powers waning and not being able to leave the country – and what immortality narratives they seem to be attending. As mentioned in section 2.1, fantasy literature is not generally interested in *how* the immortality works, only in what consequences there might be for both humans and society (Collins 30). However, because immortality is a major motivation for the gods in most of their acts in *American Gods*, it is important to also examine what rules there are for immortal beings in the novel.

Most of the gods in *American Gods* are already dead (i.e. they have been alive once and have died as normal people before attaining their status as gods) or have never been what is considered *alive*, but I will continue to refer to their possible demise as death, since it is the most accurate term to describe the occurrence. As there are problems in trying to define death and when a person can be identified as dead⁴ and as Hakola argues, death is “more than just the biological processes of dying: it always has cultural, social, religious and philosophical dimensions” (3), I will use her description. She also argues that the living death films, through a “systematic use of death events”, offer a model to both the dying process and the

⁴ I.e., whether a person is dead when their circulatory and respiratory systems work but their brain has ceased to function or vice versa: see Kellehear 2008.

experiences related to it (32). There are three different types of death in this “standardized narration of death”: transformative, social, and final, which I will examine in more detail later in the analysis section 3.2 with Laura. What the gods go through in the novel can be called transformative death since “transformative death is not death as such, but rather a birth of something else” (33-34). This also alludes to the idea of life and death being different sides of the same coin: transformative death is like turning the coin around to see the other side. The coin is the same, but the sides look different.

The gods in *American Gods* also calls the occurrence that happens to the gods “death” and many indeed die in the novel: Mad Sweeney dies and he is given a wake; Wednesday is shot through his skull, and Mr Anansi asks whether Shadow knows this: “‘You heard about Wednesday?’ ... ‘He’s dead.’” (443); Bilquis is run over by a car and her remains are called a “road kill” (406). However, not all of the gods that die stay dead: Mad Sweeney continues talking to Shadow even when his body is in the funeral parlor and Wednesday appears as an incorporeal voice after Shadow holds a vigil for him. Some, like Bilquis, do not appear again. I argue that because she was not remembered by the American people, she died definitively.

This death of belief is a major theme in the novel. Wednesday is urging the older gods to fight for their existence because he claims they are being replaced by the newer gods of technology in America. I argue the lesson seems to be that people do have space for both in their lives, and there is no need to eradicate one to enjoy the other: the war between the gods is a hoax. Shadow stops the gods from destroying each other by telling them the truth: “[t]he battle you’re here to fight isn’t something that any of you can win or lose” (583), referring to the idea that no god lasts forever in America, as every one of them is most likely going to be replaced eventually. He pities the gods for their fear: “[t]hey were afraid that unless they kept pace with a changing world, unless they remade and redrew and rebuilt the world in their image, their time would already be over” (581).

Shadow wonders about the gods and their nature after being resurrected and learning the truth about himself:

People believe, thought Shadow. It's what people do. They believe. And 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. (580-81)

Thus, the gods, both old and new, are entities imagined and worshipped by people, who disappear if people stop believing in them. The gods are also called "mutations":

"Evolutionary experiments. A little hypnotic ability, a little hocus pocus, and they can make people believe in anything" (474). Bast, the Egyptian goddess of protection who greets Shadow in the afterworld, encourages him to call the gods "symbols": "'We're the dream that humanity creates to make sense of the shadows on the cave wall'" (519). Their exact nature is not important, however, but what they do in order to continue their existence.

The gods are capable of dying, even if their deaths differ from the deaths of ordinary human beings. When Wednesday tells Shadow that organizing gods is difficult and they might as well give up or "cut their own throats", Shadow tries to solace Wednesday: "'Well if you do cut your throat ... maybe it wouldn't even hurt'" (416) but Wednesday answers that it would be painful:

"Even for my kind, pain still hurts. If you move and act in the material world, then the material world acts on you. Pain hurts, just as greed intoxicates and lust burns. We may not die easy and we sure as hell don't die well, but we can die. If we're still loved and remembered, something else a whole lot like us comes along and takes our place and the whole damn thing starts all over again. And if we're forgotten, we're done" (416).

Wednesday's description of the gods does not differ considerably from ordinary humans: they can die and it hurts, and if they die they transform into something different: either they disappear or they are resurrected into another version of themselves. Indeed, the gods do have the hope they can be resurrected, but as Wednesday tells Shadow, they might not come back as themselves (e.g. as they were before they died). This is one of the problems mentioned in section 2.2 when Cave considered the possible challenges with the resurrection narrative. Thus, I argue that Cave's immortality narratives described in my theory section can be used when analyzing the gods in *American Gods*. Killing them is harder, and they can be resurrected, but their anxiety and avoidance of death are similar to the American citizens in the twenty-first century America.

The death anxiety the gods have is shown concretely when the man in Shadow's dream – whom he cannot see, but who speaks to him in a “precise voice, fussy and exact” (64) – shows him two halls full of statues of forgotten gods: “He was walking through a room bigger than a city, and everywhere he looked there were statues and carvings and rough-hewn images” (64). The first of the two halls has statues of gods who have been forgotten but can still be found in stories; “[t]hey are gone, all gone, but their names and their images remain with us” (65). Each of the statue has a name burning on the floor in front of them. The second hall, even vaster than the first, contains statues of gods that have been forgotten by everyone; the voice tells Shadow that “[t]he people who worshiped them are as forgotten as their gods. Their last priests died without passing on their secrets” (65). The statues are standing but their names have vanished. This fear of vanishing from existence forever is what I argue drives the old gods in their decisions regarding what to do with Wednesday's plead for help. For the newer gods, this same fear exists, even if they are not in immediate danger of being forgotten.

The newer gods, for example the goddess of media and the god of technology, are more powerful than the older gods. However, they fear that something will take their place,

as they have taken the place of the older gods in people's minds. Whiskey Jack tells Shadow that America is "not good growing country for gods" (556), meaning that gods do not survive well there. Kali tells Wednesday she will not join him, as she has seen gods rise and fall numerous times: "'They worshiped railroads here, only a blink of an eye ago. And now the iron gods are as forgotten as the emerald hunters'" (152). The gods know their existence is limited, as humans know that they will die eventually – even though not many want to contemplate the subject. As mentioned in the theory section, Americans want to avoid confronting death directly, and the gods have inherited this habit for living amongst the Americans (for multiple centuries in some cases). The gods are separate entities of their previous (or even simultaneous) manifestations in the origin countries of the immigrants who believed in them and brought them to America, and have never lived anywhere else. Thus, it is reasonable to treat them as Americans and recipients of Cave's immortality narratives.

The staying alive narrative does not work as it is with the old gods since most of them have either already died once and then achieved their status as immortal beings, or they have been imagined into existence by people who have started to believe in them (and thus have never been truly alive). I argue the narrative can also be interpreted as "staying existing", i.e. keeping the status a person (or a god, in this case) has right now. Thus, the narrative works with the gods too. The gods are desperate to retain their status quo, as if they die, they are not sure they would remain themselves when resurrected. Most of the older gods have multiple manifestations of themselves; in the epilogue of *American Gods*, Shadow meets a version of (or even the original) Odin in Reykjavik who recognizes Shadow as his son but has no recollection of what has happened to his duplicate in America. "'He was me, yes. But I am not him'" (634). This would indicate that there is the original version of every god and what people have brought to America and worshiped there is a separate entity. The Duplication problem introduced earlier in this thesis is one of the reasons the gods are afraid of

disappearing. They are afraid of not returning the same person they were before they died, even if they are resurrected. It is a possibility they are not returned as the same, as they themselves are only duplicates of their original manifestations. Their destination after death might also be the hall of forgotten gods where the statues dedicated to every living god are deteriorating.

Most of the old gods live in poor conditions and they are doing everything just to survive. Some, like Bilquis, “the Queen of Sheba” and an ancient goddess of love (*American Gods* 400), have found new ways of getting people to worship them; she is selling her body in order to gain strength: “Will you call me goddess? Will you pray to me? Will you worship me with your body?” (31). A jinn, a supernatural creature from Islamic mythology who is said to grant wishes, is driving a taxi in New York City, lamenting to his customer Salim how people have forgotten about them: “‘People know nothing of my people here,’ says the driver. ‘They think we grant wishes. If I could grant wishes do you think I would be driving a cab?’” (203). Czernobog, a slavic deity of darkness and death, and his relatives - in a sense that they all belong to the same pantheon – Zorya Utrennyaya, Zorya Vechernyaya, and Zorya Polnochnaya, the slavic guardian goddesses, all live in a small apartment in Chicago. The sisters try to earn money by telling fortunes while Czernobog does not work anymore. Czernobog laments that “[i]n the old country, they had nearly forgotten me. Here, I am a bad memory no one wants to remember” (86). When he came to America he worked “in the meat business” as a “knocker” (86), which means he was the one who killed the cows. He is extremely proud of how efficient he was in killing animals when he recounts his days in the factory to Shadow: “He mimed putting a metal bolt through a cow’s head. ‘It still takes skill.’ He smiled at the memory, displaying an iron-colored tooth” (86-87). Czernobog and the three women agree to accommodate Shadow and Wednesday for one night, but Zorya Vechernyaya asks money to buy food: “I am proud, but I am not stupid. The others are

prouder than I am, and *he* [Czernobog] is the proudest of all” (83). She is the only income they have, as she says her sisters only tell the truth and that “is not what people want to hear” (83), so they lose their customers. As mentioned in section 2.3, Americans usually do not want to be confronted by the thought of their own death. Zorya Vechernyaya, who does not force them to do so, is more popular than her sisters, who are not going to lie if they sense death and misery in the future of their customers.

Easter, who lives in San Francisco, is doing well. She claims that everyone still worships her: ““On my festival days they still feast on eggs and rabbits, on candy and on flesh, to represent rebirth and copulation”” (332). It is not surprising that the goddess of rebirth is popular in a country obsessed with immortality narratives. She is content and does not want to join Wednesday’s war. However, Wednesday challenges her by claiming that people who worship her do not know who she really is or what her real name – Eostre of the Dawn – means: “[t]hey mouth your name but it has no meaning to them”” (334). She agrees to join them after Wednesday pleads for her to be on their side, knowing she is powerful and wanting that power to himself. Ironically, Easter is the one who resurrects Shadow with the help of Horus, thus ruining Wednesday and Loki’s scheme.

Wednesday uses the death anxiety of the newer gods to draw them into a battle against the older gods. He never really wanted to eradicate the newer gods, he just wanted a war. This death anxiety i.e. the fear of the unknown of most of the gods, the older as well as the newer, is thriving them against each other in a desperate attempt to continue their existence as long as possible. As Wednesday tells Shadow, the gods “feed on belief, on prayers, on love” (309), but some also feed on deaths that are dedicated to them. Some, like the Norse trickster god Loki, feeds on chaos and turmoil – and the war would have brought him plenty of both. Wednesday and Loki use Shadow as their pawn in persuading the gods that the opposite side is getting stronger, thus making the older gods weaker, and their only

chance is to attack before they perish. Wednesday orchestrated his own death as a way to deceive the other gods to join the war: many of those who hesitated to join Wednesday, did not hesitate anymore when they heard he had been shot by the newer gods. His death showed them the opposing side was serious: Alvisson son of Vindalf tells Shadow “[t]hey betrayed him. They killed him. I laughed at Wednesday, but I was wrong. None of us are safe any longer” (456). Nancy believes the newer gods want them all dead and thus approves of the war as a form of self-defense: if they attack first, they might survive (464). The staying alive (e.g. staying existing) narrative compels the gods to try to survive any way they can, even if that means a war with the newer gods.

The legacy narrative is not popular amongst the gods, but for them it seems unnecessary since they have unnaturally long existence and thus do not need an offspring to continue their legacy. Even though Wednesday is Shadow’s father, he was created only for the purpose of being a diversion and holding a vigil for Wednesday when he is killed. However, as mentioned earlier, the legacy narrative has another side; that of leaving behind something that reminds people that they have existed. For the gods, they are places where they are worshiped. While transferring Wednesday’s body to the tree where the vigil is to be held, Czernobog wants to visit a meadow he was worshiped in a hundred years ago. Nancy explains to Shadow: ““They made blood-sacrifice to him, libations spilled with the hammer. After a time, the townsfolk figured out why so many of the strangers who passed through the town didn’t ever come back. This was where they hid some of the bodies”” (463-64). I will examine Czernobog’s transformation that happened after he returned from the meadow in the next section, as I will now concentrate on the legacy narrative and the sacred places in *American Gods*. One of the most important one is the Lookout Mountain in Georgia, and on top of it is Rock City, “the biggest tourist attraction of all” (*American Gods* 529). Wednesday tells Shadow that roadside attractions are places of power in America, built by people who

recognize that “there was some focusing point, some channel, some window to the Immanent” (*American Gods* 130). Lookout Mountain is important because wars were fought on that mountain; the Cherokee lived on that mountain until the Indian Relocation Act in the 1830s when they were forced to abandon their home. It was also a site of a battle in Civil War. “For whoever controlled Lookout Mountain controlled the land; that was the legend. It was a sacred site, after all, and it was a high place” (*American Gods* 528). That is why it was chosen as the location for the battle between the older and the newer gods.

When Czernobog comes back from the meadow he was worshiped in, his hair and moustache are darker. This implies he became more powerful, which is symbolized by making him appear younger, and arguably more afar from death than before. Most of the gods appear as older people: the more powerful the god, the younger their manifestation. Easter, who is still powerful, has her age described by Shadow “to be somewhere between twenty-five and fifty” (329) while Wednesday, Anansi, Czernobog, and multiple other gods Shadow meets are mostly described as old. Jacquell and Ibis, who are in the funeral business, are not described by their age, only that Jacquell is “a very tall, dark-skinned man” (213) and Ibis wears “a sober brown hat that matched his sober brown face” and that he “was well over six feet in height, with a crane-like stoop” (209). Ergo, as they are not described by their age, they look middle-aged or their ages are hard to identify accurately. Technical boy, who is the new god of technology, is a “fat young man ... he appeared barely out of his teens” (83). When Media appears to Shadow on the television screen, she resembles Lucille Ball on *I Love Lucy* television show: “I’m the idiot box. I’m the TV. I’m the all-seeing eye and the world of the cathode ray. I’m the boob tube. I’m the little shrine the family gathers to adore” (189). This implies that people worship technology and media more than the mythical gods who appear older and powerless. America is clearly not a great place for the gods to be, but they have no other choice since they cannot leave, as the novel points out.

Wednesday complains to Shadow after his plan has been discovered that “‘I’ve been trapped in this damned land for almost twelve hundred years’” (577), which means that the gods cannot leave America on their own. People who believe in them tie them to the place: “‘*They* made me. *They* forgot about me’” (336). People do not believe in them enough to make them powerful but the gods have no choice, since they cannot move; and if the people who believe in them would travel, the manifestations of the gods in the new place would probably be different ones than in America, as the gods that arrived in America are not the same as in the countries of their origin. Mad Sweeney, after accidentally giving Shadow the wrong coin and thus making himself even weaker, desperately wants to escape. When he hears Shadow gave the coin away, he turns suicidal, pleading Shadow to give him money to get away: “‘You got a few bucks? I don’t need much. Just enough for a ticket out of this place’” (236-37). After giving him twenty dollars, Shadow finds him dead the next day when the police calls the funeral parlor: “‘He squatted down and looked at the bottle in Mad Sweeney’s lap. Jameson Irish whiskey: a twenty dollar ticket out of this place’” (239).

Mad Sweeney is the only god in the novel who is clearly suicidal – not including Shadow – but not every other god in *American Gods* fear the thought of death: for example, Mr Jacquel and Mr Ibis are Egyptian gods who have a funeral parlor in Cairo, Illinois. They are originally Anubis, the god of embalming and death, and Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing. Ibis tells Shadow that “‘[t]he Lord gave my business partner dominion over the dead, just as he gave me skill with words ... [w]e used to be morticians, and before that, undertakers’” (209). Shadow works for them for a couple of weeks after escaping his abduction. When Shadow asks Ibis whether he believes humans have souls, he answers: “‘Depends. Back in my day, we had it all set up. You line up when you die, and you answer for your evil deeds and for your good deeds, and if your evil deeds outweighed a feather, we’d feed your soul and your heart to Ammet, the Eater of Souls’” (222). This passage does

not explain where souls go if the feather outweighs the “evil deeds”. Ibis also says “back in my day”, implying that the idea of an afterlife does not exist in the American culture nowadays. If this is the case, the death of belief makes sense: if there is no afterlife, believing in gods is arguably irrelevant, as you are not awarded with eternal life after you die. It is possible that not even the gods know where the souls are going after death. They do not have the hope of something else after they die; they know they will either be resurrected or forgotten, as Shadow was shown in the halls of forgotten gods. “In the god business ... it’s not the death that matters. It’s the opportunity for resurrection” (470). However, most of the gods arguably do not believe in their resurrection since they are trying to avoid dying as long as possible. Odin’s resurrection takes nine days of Shadow suffering and dying, so the process is not an easy one.

American Gods does not personify death, but it does have multiple gods associated with death or dying, who are not afraid of death per se but are still apprehensive of it. When Shadow first confronts the gods and starts to believe in them, seeing them in their real forms, he describes Kali – a Hindu goddess of creation, power, and destruction – as “a naked woman with skin as black as a new leather jacket, and lips and tongue the bright red of arterial blood. Around her neck were skulls, and her many hands held knives, and swords, and severed heads” (151). She disguises herself with the figure of an old woman. She tells Mr Wednesday and Shadow that “[s]ome of us do better than others, I agree. I do well. Back in India, there is an incarnation of me who does much better, but so be it” (151). She claims not to be envious of the success of her incarnations and does not want to join Mr Wednesday in his war, as she has seen many gods rise and fall before. However, she does arrive at the Lookout Mountain with the other gods and is anxious to begin the battle: “[t]he lady Kali, with her ink-black skin and white, sharp teeth, said, ‘It is time’” (552). She changed her mind because Odin’s death brought the thought of her own death closer and more tangible.

Bilquis is one of the older gods who has adapted her old customs to a modern era. Instead of being “worshiped even when she was alive, worshiped as a living goddess by the wisest kings” (400), she sells her body for cash and power. She swallows her customer whole, as the man sacrifices himself in exchange for a short moment of pleasure. After Odin’s death she is seen walking the streets of West Hollywood, Los Angeles, lamenting her existence: “It’s been a long night. It’s been a long week, and a long four thousand years” (401). She has adapted to the modern era by leaving invitations to various escort sites instead of only waiting for customers on street corners. However, she tries to avoid paper trail and does not keep “souvenirs” of the men she kills. She has adapted but she is not living comfortably. Her fear of being noticed and possibly killed is keeping her from enjoying life.

Bilquis’s prudence does not prevent the newer gods from killing her. Technical boy hits her with a limousine after telling her “[t]here’s only so much belief to go around” (404), implying that there is a limited amount of power in America for gods. What is left of her on the road is “the smeared red meat of road kill, barely recognizable as human, and soon even that will be washed away by the rain” (406). We do not know whether she is ever resurrected or forever forgotten. Her death was painful, and she was scared; it is described how the car runs over her multiple times. She had not chosen to join Odin’s side and was only killed because the newer gods did not want to share the belief of humans, for example power, with her. This is the same reason Odin and Loki do not want anyone else to know their plan: if there are only two of them, they gain more power from the death of the other gods.

While most of the gods are living miserably and their powers are waning, Hinzelmann is an exception: He has built himself a system that works for him. He kidnaps and kills one child a year for exchange of security and good harvest for the people who live in Lakeside. He argues with Shadow that “I figured this country is hell on my kind of folk. It eats us. I

didn't want to be eaten. So I made a deal. I gave them a lake, I gave them prosperity'" (609). No one has noticed the pattern of the missing children until Shadow arrives in town, with orders from Wednesday to stay hidden. Hinzelmann is one of the first persons Shadow meets in the town: Hinzelmann wants to examine each person that comes to his town and assess whether they are a threat to him. He cannot explicitly drive Shadow away because of the command from Wednesday, but he manages to lure people from Shadow's past to come in town, ending with Shadow's arrest. Hinzelmann arrived at the United States in the mind of Viking explorers and was forced to stay, even after the first explorers died violently. Many of the gods arrived in the same way, in the minds of their worshippers who then either died or did not teach about them to the next generation.

Hinzelmann remembers his life as a human being and he also remembers what dying feels like. To him, it is not something unknown or unimaginable. He suffered a violent death and became a kobold, long before arriving in America. Death was a traumatic experience for him, as Shadow witnesses – or Hinzelmann lets him see – before his demise. He is battling for his existence by “sacrificing” one child every year to himself by kidnapping them, putting them in the trunks of old cars, driving them in the middle of a lake in winter, and making people in Lakeside bet when the car will go down the next spring. It all seems a part of the ritual of keeping him in enough strength to go unnoticed throughout all the years he has been living amongst the town people, pretending to be their friend but killing their children. He is at the same time surviving at the expense of others as well as damaging their future: continuing his existence by destroying the legacy narratives – the children – of the people in Lakeside. As it is mentioned in *American Gods*, thoughts have power. All the people in the town thinking about Hinzelmann and his “klunker”⁵ and when they wish it to sink makes him

⁵ “The klunker was an old car with its engine and fuel tank removed, which would be parked out on the ice for the winter” (315).

powerful. In the end when Shadow exposes him, he seems almost like wanting to give up: “[Hinzelmann] bent down, as if resigned” (614). This indicates that he is either tired of pretending to be something he is not or he is ready to die. He did save Shadow from drowning, even though he was the only one who knew the truth. Hinzelmann himself says to Shadow it is because he owed Odin a debt, but I argue he had done it so long he was becoming numb and bored. Before Shadow learns of the truth, Hinzelmann used to entertain people by telling them wild stories from long ago: he enjoyed being around the people and arguably felt pride when his town prospered.

As Hinzelmann died horribly while trying to survive as long as possible, many of the gods almost perished only because they were threatened by the thought of their possible demise. Instead of living their lives as well as possible, they waste it while trying to prolong it: much like ordinary people in America and elsewhere who spend their whole lives trying to find means for living unnaturally long. While trying to exist as long as possible, immortality does not bring the gods happiness. On the contrary, concerning some of the gods, their immortality causes major unhappiness. They cannot leave America nor their “life” via suicide, which makes them trapped as long as someone still remembers them.

The gods in America, both the old and the newer, suffer because of their obsession with immortality. Even those who are happy, like Easter, are forced to take a side in a war that has no winners. The death of belief causes them great anxiety since they cannot know when their time to disappear comes. The gods behave like mortal American people, trying to follow immortality narratives and failing to enjoy their lives, or even destroying their possible future by making terrible decisions while anxious.

3.2 *Death as Something to Overcome*

Laura looked up at him with dead blue eyes. “I want to be alive again,” she said. “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. It’s weird, you don’t think you can feel it, the blood, but believe me, when it stops flowing, you’ll know.” She rubbed her eyes, smudging her face with red from the mess on her hands. “Look, it’s hard. You know why dead people only go out at night, puppy? Because it’s easier to pass for real, in the dark. And I don’t want to have to pass. I want to be alive.” (*American Gods* 166)

In this section, I will examine Laura, who is dead but wants to be alive. She is reanimated after her death to the same body she died in with the help of a magic coin. I will look at her reasons for wanting to be alive again, her current life as a zombie-like creature, and her final death (as far as we know) and its significance to both her and Shadow. I will compare her to other undead creatures from various sources in order to analyze her better. I will also analyze her with the help of Hakola’s *Rhetoric of Modern Death in American Living Dead Films*, since Laura is a good example of Hakola’s standardized narration of death in living dead films and its three stages. Even though *American Gods* is not a living dead film, I agree with Rebecca Shillabeer on her notion that “art in all mediums influence each other” (106) and I argue that narratives in films and literature do not differ from each other considerably to hinder the analysis between the mediums. However, I will first introduce the term *body horror*, as it will help with analyzing the character better.

There is a subgenre in horror film that began to emerge in the 1970s, which has often been referred to as body horror (Jancovich 112). It deals with a crisis of identity – and a fear of aging which brings death closer – through a concentration on processes of bodily disintegration and transformation. This is also what happens to Laura in *American Gods*. She

is portrayed as having a body that is decaying, and she can feel worms moving inside of her: “something wriggled and fell into her nasal cavity” (533). Shadow calls her “a walking corpse” when he first sees her in his hotel room, after her funeral and accidental resurrection (67). Jancovich states that David Cronenberg, the Canadian filmmaker who is considered one of the principal originators of the body horror genre, has claimed that “the process of transformation can be read as a metaphor for aging” (117). Laura’s body is arguably turning into what we are afraid happens to us when we grow old: we are afraid of losing the control of our bodies and that we turn into something undesirable. Alternatively, as Laura is already dead when all of this decaying happens, it can be read as a horror of getting an eternal life after death but not the desirable one with both our mind and body in good condition – like Tithonus in the Greek myth who was granted eternal mind but not an eternal body. I argue that Laura is an example of immortality’s negative effects. If Laura is what happens to us when we are resurrected after death, would we want to live in that state where our bodies are slowly deteriorating? Laura does not, so she asks for Shadow to help her gain her former life back, saying, “I want to be alive” (166). She firmly believes Shadow can make it happen.

Laura is not a zombie in the most traditional sense (a mindless creature hungry for human flesh). Kevin Boon argues that there are nine classifications of zombies (“The Zombie as Other” 57-60), all with their differences, but what they share is “the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves ... the soul, the mind, the will, or, in some cases, the personality” (Boon, “And the Dead Shall Rise” 7). The reanimated Laura is lacking something that makes her the woman Shadow married; he only allows himself to mourn her after she visits him after being reanimated: “It was time to mourn. He turned the lights out, and lay on the bed, and thought of Laura as she was before he went to prison” (73). He realizes that even though he accidentally brought her back, she is not the same woman he knew as Laura. Boon also argues that zombies usually do not have the same volition they did

when alive (“And the Dead Shall Rise” 7). That volition to Laura is her need to follow Shadow. She describes how she can always feel where Shadow is and tells him “[y]ou shine like a beacon in a dark world” (165). Once she describes the need to see him as “hunger” (395), though not for his flesh. She tries to resist following him, and at times she does not know where he is (for example when Wednesday hides him in Lakeside) but is still sensing the pull towards him. Before she died Laura did not have such a strong devotion to Shadow, as she would not have cheated him with his best friend if that was the case.

There are also other differences between Laura and most zombies in popular culture. Laura is one zombie, not a horde. She wakes up because of magic, not because of an infection. She does not want to infect others or is incapable of doing so; when she saves Shadow, she kills the captors, and they stay dead instead of returning as the living dead later in the book. Her memories and intellect are also intact, though Shadow comments how she has become more discourteous, not caring how hearing about her cheating on him with his best friend affects Shadow’s feelings. Shadow himself is scared when Bast seduces him and tells her that “[m]y wife, Laura. She will kill you” (229), implying that Laura had strong feelings about cheating before she died. Or, as Laura did indeed cheat Shadow herself, she was a jealous person. She does want to protect Shadow even after her death, telling him that “[n]othing’s gonna hurt you when I’m here” (508).

As noted above, Laura does not fit in the traditional zombie narrative, but there are some zombies like her in popular media. For example, Dominic Mitchell’s supernatural drama series *In the Flesh* has sentient zombies: “[i]nstead of hordes of mindless, flesh-eating zombies, we are presented with conscious, sentient individuals who in their treated state are known as a Partially Deceased Syndrome Sufferer (PDSS)” (Moore 300). The zombie comedy film *Warm Bodies* (2013) has a zombie protagonist that turns more human by eating his victims’s brains, receiving their memories and thus learning emotions; at the end of the

film, zombies are assimilated into human society. Arguably you cannot have a zombie character who does not kill anyone, and Laura is not an exception to this rule, as is seen when Shadow is hurt.

Shadow is kidnapped after he learns of Wednesday's real identity and is kept in a small room in an abandoned train, tortured for information about Wednesday's plans. When Laura saves him, Shadow is horrified that she killed his captors. Laura claims it is not a "big deal" to her, as "[i]t's easier to kill people, when you're dead yourself" while Shadow tells her it is still a "big deal" to him (164). Likewise, she does not show remorse when she kills Mr Town on her way to the Lookout Mountain. All the people she kills have either hurt Shadow or have plans of hurting him. She does not have any desire to kill or hurt those who are not opposing Shadow.

Hakola argues that the standardized narrative of death in the living dead films has three stages: transformative, social, and final. In the first stage, a person transforms into something else i.e. they die. "[W]hen a person dies, an unknown otherness (often understood as monstrousness) is born, which is a new beginning and a distinct narrative turning point" (34). In the living dead films, according to Hakola, the process of the transformation is usually detailed in a way that it dehumanizes the dead (Hakola 34): "[t]he death scenes allow the viewer to witness the process ... culminates in the transformative death, which makes the changes in body and personality irreversible". In *American Gods*, the process is not shown. Laura dies and becomes a body, and then, by magic, she transforms into something that is able to move around. Laura is dehumanized because she is described as not having blood circulating in her and worms crawling through her nasal cavities, as well as having a different personality as when she was alive. Seen through Shadow's point of view, she appears more human. Shadow is trying to deny her changes as long as possible. Laura's death was not real to Shadow until he saw her being undead, even though he saw her body lying in a casket in

her funeral: “[It] was his Laura and it was not: her repose, he realized, was what was unnatural. Laura was always such a restless sleeper” (53).

Following transformation in Hakola’s narrative of death is the social death. In many immortality narratives this is the most common negative side-effect of living longer; either the society rejects the immortal for being different or they outlive their friends and family. In this stage, Laura’s transformation is recognized by others; Shadow admits to himself that she is dead and mourns her. At first Laura is able to deceive other people as she applies for a night shift at a gas station (“I hope you don’t mind dealing with the weirdos. Because they come out at night” (411)) but is soon dismissed as people complained about her: “I told them I was sick, and they said they didn’t care” (508). She tries to conform to the norms of ordinary humans but she is not ordinary. She needs to return to her status as a living human to be accepted as a part of the society again. Laura yearns for her life before the accident as she watches her family spend Christmas together: “Outside in the darkness, that was where Laura was, unable not to look” (275). She is confident that Shadow will find a way for her to be alive again – thus, for most of the novel, she stays close to him. Another reason for Laura’s closeness is her volition to protect him, and she does indeed save him, first from the abductors and later at the Lookout Mountain.

The final stage of the narrative of death is the final death. In her final moments Laura says, “I dedicate this death to Shadow”, driving a stick through both her and Loki’s chests – thus giving Shadow more power to stop the gods from finishing their war. When Shadow arrives at the Lookout Mountain and sees her, her demeanor is calm. Shadow thinks he might be able to grant her life back, but she does not want it anymore. Despite the circumstances, Laura’s final scene is peaceful:

“Did you ever figure out how to bring me back from the dead?” she asked.

“I guess,” [Shadow] said. “I know one way, anyway.”

“That’s good,” she said. She squeezed his hand with her cold hand. And then she said,

“And the opposite? What about that?”

“The opposite?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I think I must have earned it.” (586)

Laura claims that she has *earned* death and she accepts that it is her time to go. She is not feeling anxious about her final death, since she feels her death is meaningful now: she gave her strength to Shadow. As she was seeing Shadow hang from the tree at Odin’s vigil, almost dead, she says to him: ““You are the nearest thing I have to life. You are the only I have left, the only thing that isn’t bleak and flat and gray”” (507). She wanted to help him then but Shadow refused as he wanted to finish the vigil. Sacrificing herself to his cause allowed Laura to claim her death to herself. When she died the first time, it was sudden and violent: a truck hit the car, and even though the rescue crew was at the scene very soon after, Laura and Robbie were both dead before they arrived at the hospital after their car accident. This time Laura is choosing how she dies and makes it mean something, exemplifying Tony Walter’s claim that “[i]n a culture of individualism that values a unique life uniquely lived, the good death is now the death that we choose” (Walter 6). Shadow reluctantly agrees to Laura’s wish and takes the gold coin from her neck and makes it disappear by taking it between his hands and blowing on it, like a magician performing a magic trick.

It is important to note that every meeting between Shadow and Laura is depicted from his point of view: Laura’s feelings are being told to us through Shadow, even her (final) death scene when Shadow confronts Odin and Loki about their plan. Because Shadow still loves his late wife very much, I argue his judgement of her emotions and actions are not always reliable. Laura has, however, her own long scenes written from her point of view, and one particularly important scene is the one where she arrives at the farm Shadow is giving the vigil for Wednesday at the tree. She drinks the water given to her by the women taking care

of the farm, which makes blood run in her veins again: “When Laura woke in the empty farmhouse room, she was shivering, and her breath actually steamed in the morning air. There was a scrape on the back of her hand, and a smear of blood on the scrape, the red-orange of fresh blood” (535). She is still dead – it is mentioned that the “water of time, which comes from the spring of fate, Urd’s Well, is not the water of life” (535). The water does not resurrect her, but it restores her circulation and body. When she arrives at the Lookout Mountain in search of Shadow, Loki comments on her appearance: “[Y]ou are looking lovelier than you have any right to look. Shouldn’t you be further along on the whole road to rot and ruin business by now?” (568) After hearing about the water from Urd’s Well, he says it will not last, as it was only “a little taste of the past” (569).

Hakola argues that there are two positions of “modelling and experiencing” death through the characters. The first is through the undead, “who both embody death and represent the existence and the threat of death” (23). Laura, as mentioned before, is a threat to the reader since she represents a dead person, who logically cannot exist in a way Laura does, but somehow still does. Her decaying body is a reminder that whether we like it or not, we will all one day die. However, Hakola’s second position – through the living, “whose relationship relationships to the undead reflect multiple attitudes towards death” (23) – argues that the monstrous depends also on other characters’ points of view. To Shadow, Laura is not a threat, and this affects the reader as well: maybe death – and dead people – is not always something that needs to be kept at a distance, banished to the edges of the society. As Shadow has many happy memories of Laura – although, most of them tainted by the thought of her cheating on him – the reader is inevitably affected. For example, Shadow recalls how Laura had loved to dance and how Laura called him “puppy” (10). As Laura is seen through Shadow’s thoughts most of the novel, she does not, ultimately, appear as a monstrous creature. This mitigates the effects of Laura’s monstrosity, but does not remove them

altogether. When Shadow saw Laura the first time after her funeral, he was terrified. It took a long time for him to realize that the dead Laura was fundamentally the same Laura he married.

Laura is not happy being back from the dead, describing her status to Shadow as “bleak and flat and gray” (507). It is hard to say whether she thought about her death much before she died, but I argue she was scared to die, at least apprehensive of it. When she comes to see Shadow after her funeral, she asks for a cigarette; Shadow mentions that “I thought you gave them up” to which she answers “I’m no longer concerned about the health risks” (66). This implies that she was worried about possible complications regarding the risks associated with smoking, most common being having a disease that leads to an early death.

Common theme in zombie narratives is the fear of the dead returning. This seems to be in contradiction with the hope that when we die it is not the end, but I argue the difference is in what state the dead returns. If the dead return in Laura’s state, it is possible not many would want to return: she represents the negative outcome of receiving another chance after death. Society rejects her for being different, for looking unwell, as she cannot keep her job and is forced to hide from people. She cannot eat anything as her body does not function, and she states that she is always cold, for blood does not circulate in her veins. Laura does not like her status and the price for being able to come back from death might be too steep for an ordinary mortal person.

Laura was an ordinary American citizen who was resurrected to her original body, but not with the same personality. She is different from majority of the other zombie characters in movies and television, but also similar in that she does kill and is shunned for being different. She is both monstrous and lovable, seen through Shadow’s point of view. Most of the novel Laura is either waiting for Shadow to do something, following him around in hope of finding

something meaningful to do, or remembering with fondness the time she was truly alive. She accepts death when it comes the second time, having learnt that death can be a restful sleep one earns after a lifetime of anxiety.

3.3 Death as a Rest

A defining feature of heroic figures is their similarity and proximity to the gods, with whom they are intimately but ambiguously connected. Numerous myths detail the relations of heroes and heroines with gods who are their parents, lovers, or protectors, and not infrequently their enemies. (Lyons 69)

In this section, I will focus on Shadow and his thoughts about death and his yearning for a rest, a peace of mind in the middle of his journey with the gods. He even contemplates suicide to escape the life that feels overwhelming. Even his dreams are full of gods, and most of the time he cannot be sure what is real and what is not. I will examine his reluctance to continue his life, his dreams of gods that haunt him, and his time in the underworld. His vigil for Odin and dying grants him the peace for a moment, and his resurrection feels to him like waking from a peaceful dream. His attitude towards death is what separates him from the gods and grants him the knowledge of how to end the war without a major bloodshed and death of the majority of the gods.

In order to make it easier to follow my argumentation, I will briefly go through Shadow's journey and the major points in the novel concerning him. At the beginning of the novel, Shadow is in prison due to violence towards his accomplices after a bank robbery. He is released a couple of days early of his three-year prison term because his wife dies in a car accident. He agrees to work with Wednesday after he learns that he has nothing else left to do, but only after he attends his wife's funeral. He travels with Wednesday across America to

visit the older gods in order to persuade them to fight on their side on the coming war. After one of the meetings, he is kidnapped by the newer gods, and saved by Laura. Wednesday tries to hide him from the opposing side, first at the funeral parlor of Jacquel and Ibis, and then at the peaceful town of Lakeside. However, the newer gods manage to kill Wednesday, and Shadow is forced to leave Lakeside. Shadow promises to hold Wednesday's vigil and is tied to a tree for nine days until he dies. He arrives at the purgatory-like place where he learns hard truths about himself and his life, and is rewarded with nothingness. Meanwhile, the gods are gathering at the Lookout Mountain for a battle. Easter manages to resurrect Shadow before the battle begins and he stops the gods from killing each other by telling them how pointless their war is.

Shadow's in-betweenness is a major theme in the novel. The most startling scene is when Laura visits Shadow in Lakeside and says to him: "You're not dead ... But I'm not sure that you're alive, either. Not really" (396). Shadow insists that he is alive – "look at me" (397) – but Laura is not convinced, resulting in a quite humoristic sentence "[t]hat's not an answer," said his dead wife". Indeed, Laura knows what it is like to be dead. Laura's comment on Shadow being neither alive nor dead is true, as Shadow later learns that Wednesday is his father, which makes him a demi-god. He is half mortal, half immortal, in-between life and death.

When Shadow is waiting for his judgement after his death, Ibis tells him that "life and death are different sides of the same coin" (523). Shadow plays with both life and death and in the end, becomes a master of both: he is neither entirely alive nor dead, like the gods. Unlike most of the gods, however, he accepts his death – which leads to him learning about his past, and to his resurrection: the new life he receives is a more peaceful one.

Shadow is the protagonist of *American Gods*. When the novel starts, he is in prison because of a bank heist gone wrong. He is to be released after three years due to his good

behavior. However, due to his wife being killed in a car accident, he is released a couple of days early. From that moment on, he feels out of place and searches for something that would give him peace and rest. Meeting with Wednesday and becoming his bodyguard introduces him to a world of immortal beings and magical creatures and pushes him out of his comfort zone. It takes him a long while to start trusting his eyes: “Shadow was not superstitious. He did not believe in anything he could not see” (7). He is struggling with what the gods are telling him, and what he sees in his dreams: a large man with a head of a buffalo telling him tales of dead and forgotten gods, and giant mythological birds with the power to raise the dead.

In prison Shadow feels like he is taking a time-out of real life: “He did not awake in prison with a feeling of dread; he was no longer scared of what tomorrow might bring, because yesterday had brought it” (3). This implies that Shadow has always been an anxious man. His time in prison is a time of rest, and if he keeps himself out of trouble, it is only temporary; “if you just hang in there, some day they’re going to have to let you out” (5). This anxiety manifests in his memories from his childhood, when he was a shy teenager who ran away from his bullies.

Shadow is not dead but not quite living either, but in an in-between state, both mentally and physically, later in the novel, when he dies and wakes in a purgatory-like space. When he is released from prison and starts working with Wednesday, he yearns for that rest and feels like death could bring it to him. After he learns the gods are real and is captured, he imagines stopping, sitting down and never getting up again. Initially, after meeting Wednesday, he feels so anxious that he does not want to continue the journey with him anymore, and instead of continuing with a plane he chooses to drive the rest of the journey to Eagle Point, to his wife’s funeral. His anxiety before he went to prison has returned, as he has left the in-between and stepped into the society and gained responsibilities. When he meets

with Wednesday in a bar, he finally agrees to be his bodyguard, as his earlier job is not available to him anymore. In that bar Shadow also receives the magical golden coin from Mad Sweeney as a prize for winning a fight against him. Unfortunately, he puts that coin on top of Laura's coffin as a parting gift the next day at her funeral.

Shadow enjoys most all the quiet moments when no one is demanding him to do anything. Shadow describes his stay in Ibis and Jacquel's funeral parlor as "a temporary reprieve" (247), and when Wednesday comes to retrieve him, he goes with him reluctantly, because of duty. It is interesting that Shadow refers to his stay in prison with the exact same words: "[P]rison was, at best, only a temporary reprieve from life" (4). He also greatly enjoyed his stay in Lakeside, especially when walking alone:

If he walked, he discovered, he did not have to think, and that was just the way he liked it; when he thought, his mind went to places he could not control, places that made him feel uncomfortable. Exhaustion was the best thing. When he was exhausted, his thoughts did not wander to Laura, or to the strange dreams, or to things that were not and could not be (389).

Shadow is trying to escape from the reality he is faced with – the reality he did not believe in, as he "did not believe in anything he could not see" (7) – but even in his dreams he is not able to avoid the gods. His suicidal thoughts can be seen as a way to permanently escape the oppressing situation. He has no other means to forget that he has promised to act as a bodyguard to a god, his wife has returned from the dead, and the other side wants to kill him. His only escape is his coin tricks, which I will examine later in more detail. However, working for Odin is also one of the few things that gives his life purpose after the car crash that took away his wife, best friend, and job. His life was uprooted and everything he believed in is replaced. It is no wonder Shadow imagines death would be a blessing. He does not think that life could offer him anything more.

Shadow feels suicidal for most of the novel. The death of Laura and losing his job at the same time have uprooted his life and he does not feel attached to anything anymore. The facts that he is thrust into a world of supernatural creatures he is not sure he believes in makes him feel like he is not in control of his life anymore. Even when he sees Laura again when she appears at his motel room, he does not feel like she is the same person he married and does not feel anything for her – at least anything sexual. “Laura’s tongue flickered into Shadow’s mouth. It was cold, and dry, and it tasted of cigarettes and of bile. If Shadow had any doubts as to whether his wife was dead or not, they ended then” (70). After Laura leaves, he mourns for her, cries himself to sleep, and finally admits to himself that she is gone forever. He does care for her enough to agree to find a way to resurrect her, and his memories of her are mostly happy.

Shadow’s yearning for a rest is one of the most striking character traits he has. It is not clear whether he had this trait even before prison or did the long break from his normal life change him. When he escapes from his kidnappers, by help of Laura killing the people guarding him, he is trying to avoid being detected and feeling ready to end it all: “[H]e was numb: heart-numb, mind-numb, soul-numb. And the numbness, he realized, went a long way down, and a long way back” (170). Shadow almost kills himself at Ibis and Jacquiel’s funeral parlor when he is shaving: “And then, as if someone else were holding his hand, he raised the straight razor, placed it, blade open, against his throat” (218). He considers it an easy way out: “No more Laura. No more mysteries and conspiracies. No more bad dreams. Just peace and quiet and rest forever. One clean slash, ear to ear. That’s all it’ll take” (218). He is interrupted by the goddess Bast in feline form; seeing her on the door he closes the razor and goes to dress himself for the day, later even wondering if he really were considering cutting his throat. This divine intervention is only one of the many moments where the gods

intervene with Shadow's will; the most important is his resurrection, which I will examine later in this section.

As I mentioned, Shadow's dreams are not an escape for him from his anxiety and the looming thoughts of death. Instead, they appear as real as anything else he experiences. Often when he dreams, there is no definite boundary between dream and reality: when he is working in the funeral parlor he dreams of having sex with Bast, the Egyptian cat goddess of protection and cats, and when he wakes up all his bruises he received from his captors have vanished, as well as the bruise Mad Sweeney gave him. "His face was clear and unmarked. His sides, however, and his back (he twisted to examine it) were scratched with what looked like claw marks" (231). Once after having a nightmare, Wednesday calls him and claims that every god heard him, as he "raised a ruckus" (326). Not only do Shadow's dreams seem very real, but the opposite is also true: everything that has happened to Shadow since he was released from prison has "felt so much like a dream" (99) – or, he at least unconsciously hopes that everything, including Laura's death and his journey through Northern America with Wednesday, has just been a bad dream and once he wakes up, everything will return back to normal.

Shadow's life does not return to normal, but he does die and is temporarily at peace. He holds Wednesday's vigil when he dies – seemingly killed by the opposing side – and hangs from a tree for nine days, slowly going mad by the thirst and the pain. Finally, he dies: "The darkness that he entered this time was deep, and lit by a single star, and it was final" (509). He arrives in some sort of in-between place between death and his final destination, called "nothing" (526). Shadow travels the path of "hard truths" and sees his life as it was before he died; the bank robbery, his mother's death, his mother meeting his father, eventually arriving at the place of his judgement. Shadow's heart is weighed and it balances with the feather: "It was a heavy feather, but Shadow has a heavy heart, and the scales tipped

and swung worryingly. But they balanced, in the end, and the creature in the shadows skulked away, unsatisfied” (526). As the feather balances, Shadow chooses his place of destination: “I want to rest now ... That’s what I want. I want nothing. No heaven, no hell, no anything. Just let it end” (526). Shadow finally receives the rest he has been wanting for a long time.

However, Shadow is resurrected by Easter and Horus because they need him in the last battle. He returns to his old body which – despite hanging in the tree for weeks – is in good enough condition for Shadow to immediately start moving around. He resents being alive again: “I was done. I was judged. It was over. You called me back. You dared” (560). Later, almost drowning in the lake while investigating the case of the missing children, he seems almost angry at the thought of dying again (604). This time he has unfinished business: bringing justice to the kids who have died by the hands of Hinzelmännchen every year since Lakeside was founded. He cannot die before Hinzelmännchen is brought to justice. Fortunately, this happens without Shadow dying.

Throughout the novel there are hints of Shadow being more than an ordinary mortal man before he learns the truth. Wednesday asks him to think of snow on their way to Chicago: “Concentrate on making those clouds ... bigger and darker. Think gray skies and driving winds coming down from the arctic. Think snow” (119). Shadow does, and real snow starts to fall from the sky. He correctly guesses what Sam, a young girl he meets while on his way to Ibis and Jacquelin, is studying – “I figure you’re at school ... [w]here you are undoubtedly studying art history, women’s studies, and probably casting your own bronzes. And you probably work in a coffee house to help cover the rent” (181) – which makes Sam uncomfortable. Shadow also correctly guesses the exact time Hinzelmännchen’s car sinks down, thus winning the bet (602). When Shadow dies and sees memories of his life, he also sees the moment his mother and father – whose identity he did not know before – meet, realizing he is Wednesday’s son and thus not an ordinary human he had always thought he was.

Shadow is not a mortal man, but because he believes he is, his vigil is even more powerful, as he believes that he cannot ever be resurrected. His hanging in the tree is a suicide that brings his father back. Everyone else but Wednesday believes Shadow to be a mortal man makes them curious of him. Wednesday admits of using him as a distraction: ““You took everybody’s attention, so they never looked at the hand with the coin in it. It’s called misdirection”” (575). Wednesday uses him to gain victory and takes advantage of his sense of duty. It is not clear how long Wednesday and Loki have schemed to deceive the other gods, but at least before Shadow was even born.

While Shadow is not afraid of his own death, confronting the death of others is uncomfortable to him, even those not familiar to him. When Shadow is desperately trying to search for a solution that would help Laura, he learns that he is not ready for anyone or anything to die in order to make that happen. He asks Wednesday for a way to make Laura alive again: ““She wants to be really alive. Not one of the walking dead, or whatever she is. She wants to live again. Can we do that? Is that possible?”” (309). It is interesting that Shadow thinks that he could do anything – he is specifically asking if *they* can do anything – for her since at this point of the novel he believes he is an ordinary human being. Wednesday claims he cannot “make her live again” and steers him into another direction: ““What you do in your own time is your own affair, of course ... I can’t stop you from hunting eagle stones or thunderbirds”” (311), giving him hope for a possible solution to Laura’s predicament. Indeed, Shadow begins to search for more information about eagle stones and thunderbirds. Hinzelmann points him towards the Lakeside library, and Shadow finds a promising book called *Native American Beliefs and Traditions* that tells him that thunderbirds were “mythical gigantic birds who lived on mountaintops, who brought the lightning and who flapped their wings to make thunder” (317) but finds nothing that could help him resurrect the dead. Instead, he meets a real thunderbird after being resurrected and learns that in order to have

the immortality the birds possess, the bird has to die: “[T]hey came to us to cut the stones from our heads, to give their dead our lives” (571).

Before meeting the thunderbird and learning the truth about their powers, Shadow dreams of climbing a huge spire of old skulls: “He was hundreds of feet above the ground, clinging to the side of the tower of skulls, white flashes of lightning burned in the wings of the shadowy birds who circled the spire” (325). When Wednesday and Shadow meet Easter, she asks whether Shadow knows whose skulls he was climbing in his dreams. Shadow answers that a voice told him in the dream that they were old skulls of his, “[t]housands and thousands of them” (335). This implies that the dream is only trying to scare him from discovering more about thunderbirds or Shadow has lived and tried to find thunderbirds before, ending in his demise – or Shadow is unconsciously scared of pursuing the idea that thunderbirds might be the answer he needs for helping Laura. Whiskey Jack tells Shadow that he “felt the echoes” (379) of his dream of thunderbirds and warns Shadow that resurrecting Laura is not a good idea: “If you hunt the thunderbird you could bring your woman back. But she belongs to the wolf, in the dead places, not walking the land” (380). After being resurrected by Easter, Shadow is carried to the Lookout Mountain by a giant thunderbird who tells him the secret to their immortality, but trusts him not to take advantage of this knowledge. It is not clear whether Shadow would have traded the thunderbird’s life for Laura’s, since she denied the possibility of being resurrected, but I argue he would not have done it. Throughout the novel Shadow has been described as a big man who does not want to hurt anyone; he does not even want to look at the young naked girl at Jacquel’s autopsy table because he wanted to give the dead girl “privacy” (215). The only instances he is forced to fight, the consequences are unpleasant for him: when their bank heist goes wrong and he is “beating the living crap” out of two of their accomplices who decided to keep the money for themselves (514) and when Wednesday forces him to fight Mad Sweeney to prove he is loyal

to his new employer (45-47). The first fight leads him to prison, and after the second he receives the coin that he uses to reanimate Laura.

As mentioned earlier, people try to distance themselves from death because thinking about it gives them anxiety. When Shadow is working for Jacquiel and Ibis at their funeral parlor he reflects on how “[d]eath had vanished from the streets of America, thought Shadow; now it happened in hospital rooms and in ambulances. We must not startle the living, thought Shadow” (239). This fits the general idea I examined in section 2.3, that American society is trying to distance itself from the dead. Shadow himself has no trouble working in a funeral parlor and seeing dead people - he transfers a body to a mortuary table from the gurney even though Jacquiel mentions that he does not need to do it since he has a transfer board: “‘Ain’t nothing,’ said Shadow ... ‘I’m a big guy. It doesn’t bother me” (224). He is, however, averting his gaze when Jacquiel performs an autopsy to a young girl, but not because of disgust: “Shadow found himself looking away, not from revulsion, as he would have expected, but from a strange desire to give the girl some privacy. It would be hard to be nakeder than this open thing” (215).

For Shadow, his big stature is a way to protect himself from the world and the anxious thoughts. When he was a child, he was small and bullied, and he spent a lot of time “shadowing” his mother – he even tells Easter everyone calls him Shadow because he followed adults around because he did not know how to behave with other children (330). Once he starts to grow bigger he starts to use his appearance as a shield against the world. When he is in underworld walking the road of hard truths, he sees himself as a teenager: “In the hospital bed his mother was dying again, as she’s died when he was sixteen, and yes, here he was, a large, clumsy sixteen-year old with acne pocking his cream-and-coffee skin, sitting at her bedside, unable to look at her, reading a thick paperback book” (515). When Shadow was young, the thought of confronting death of someone close to him was unbearable: one of

Shadow's greatest regrets was escaping into a book while his mother died. After her death, "he had more or less stopped reading. You could not trust fiction. What good were books, if they couldn't protect you from something like that?" (516) As I mentioned in my theory section, stories can decrease the anxiety of death by offering positive examples. Books were Shadow's protection against the anxiety of death when he was young, and after his mother's death he rejected them because they did not work; instead, he starts to work out and even works in a gym before the bank robbery and prison.

Another way Shadow keeps thoughts of death out of his head is by learning coin tricks. He started when he was in prison and his cellmate transferred, leaving him a book of Herodotus with coins hidden in the pages: "two quarters, a penny, and a nickel" (7). The coins were hidden from the guards in case they were confiscated: "Shadow didn't want a weapon; Shadow just wanted something to do with his hands" (7). He carries the coins in his pockets and whenever he feels anxious, he takes the coins and practices new tricks. When he is abducted by the opposing side and kept prisoner in an empty room, he has no means to entertain himself except his coins. Doing coin tricks calms him down: "The thing about coin manipulation was that it took all Shadow's head to do it; or rather, he could not do it if he was angry or upset, so the action of practicing an illusion, even one with no possible use ... calmed him, cleared his mind of turmoil and fear" (158). He does coin manipulations in his cell until he thinks whether his capturers are going to kill him, his hands tremble and he loses concentration and cannot do it anymore; avoiding thoughts of dying is not possible any longer. The capturers beat him after asking questions about his employee Wednesday, but do not kill him.

Later when Shadow is hiding in Lakeside, he is trying to teach coin manipulation to his neighbor's son, Leon, in hopes of leaving a legacy. He seems to enjoy teaching: "if I show you how, you have to remember that a master magician never tells anyone how it's done"

(419). After he is resurrected, Shadow is distressed about not having the coins anymore: ““It was good to have the coins ... [t]hey gave me something to do with my hands” (566). He is not always even conscious of the fact that he is playing with the coins: “Shadow realized that he was palming the cold coin, moving it compulsively from a back palm to a front palm to a Downs palm, over and over. The weight was reassuring in his hand” (52). He gives that cold coin to Laura as he says goodbye to her at her grave, giving her something that offers him peace.

Shadow differs from the ordinary American person defined in section 2.3. as “death-denying” (Durkin 43). He is instead at times even searching for death so that he could finally rest. His in-betweenness – being half mortal and half immortal means he is neither alive nor dead – means that he can look at both sides of the coin. He chooses nothingness when he dies, and is upset to be resurrected against his will. To him, death is not a horror but a chance to rest. As a child, books offered him a way to deal with his anxiety, until his mother died and he turned away from stories. Later, learning coin manipulation soothed his mind whenever he was feeling anxious. Shadow does not adhere to any immortality narrative as immortality is not something that interests him, which makes him peculiar in American society.

4. Conclusion

American Gods reflects the values of the American society at its time in the beginning of the twenty-first century: more time has been spent in trying to find solutions for how to live longer than just living, in the case of the gods. They are afraid of being forgotten and agree to a war because they are worried their time will soon be over, even though nothing lasts forever in America, not even gods and myths. Their war is unnecessary but death anxiety forces the gods to act in self-defense.

Laura represents both the horror and the joy of the dead returning. She is monstrous but still loved by Shadow, who is trying to find a way to make her alive again. She tries to blend in with the American population, but is rejected for looking abnormal. In the end, she chooses to die instead of becoming alive, claiming that she has earned rest.

Shadow, however, represents well the sentiment that if there is unfinished business, a person usually grips tighter on life – and death is more than welcome if there is nothing to live for anymore. He is not afraid of death and is instead wishing for it after he loses everything with the car crash that kills both his wife and former employer. He eased his death anxiety with stories as a child, and with coin manipulation as an adult. Ibis tells Shadow that “[y]ou people talk about the living and the dead as if they were two mutually exclusive categories” (523). Death belongs to life, and speculative fiction is way to ease our anxieties of the subject. *American Gods* does not necessarily ease our anxieties about our own incoming death, but it does offer hope that everything will turn out positive: Laura’s second death is peaceful, and Shadow enjoys his time in the afterlife, his yearning for a rest finally achieved.

In the theory section I mentioned that in science fiction immortality is usually seen as negative, and in fantasy fiction immortality is usually seen as positive. *American Gods* is an exception to this rule, as it offers both negative and positive outcomes for immortality. The kind of immortality the gods possess is more like a curse than a gift, for their existence depends

on whether people believe in them. In Shadow's case, however, the immortality is positive since it offers him a chance to save the gods from a certain disaster. Laura's resurrection also helps Shadow in his journey by her saving him from the hands of the newer gods after his abduction.

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