



Medievalis

v. 13, n. 2 (2024)

Odin, god of many names and adaptations: a comparative study of the norse deity, from the *Eddas* and *Ynglinga saga* to *American Gods*

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to conduct a comparative literary study among a selection of medieval pieces of Old Norse literature and a contemporary fiction novel. Particularly, the works of literature under analysis are: the *Eddas*, both the compilation of poems which has come to be known as the Poetic *Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, or the Prose *Edda*; *Ynglinga saga*, or the *Saga of the Ynglings*, also by Snorri Sturluson; and *American Gods*, by Neil Gaiman. The object of study here is the character Odin and his multiple incarnations in these different sources. Specifically, taking a brief presentation of said pieces of literature as a starting point, this paper delves into Odin himself and presents a comparison of the character's key traits among all sources, contrasting similarities and differences regarding his origins, physical appearance, social role, powers, motivations, and death. Finally, those similarities and differences are contemplated through the lens of the phenomenon of Vikingmania, analyzing the multiple views of the character through theories on adaptation and ideology. The central thesis is that the way Gaiman adapts Odin into "Mr. Wednesday", in *American Gods*, makes the Norse god a product of Vikingmania, both from the perspective of the plot of the novel itself and from an extra textual view of the piece as a work of literature.

Keywords: Old Norse mythology; Odin; Snorri Sturluson; Neil Gaiman; American Gods.

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é conduzir um estudo literário comparativo acerca de uma seleção de textos medievais de literatura nórdica antiga e um romance contemporâneo. Em particular, as obras que estarão sob análise são: as *Eddas*, tanto a compilação de poemas que se convencionou chamar *Edda* Poética quanto a *Edda* de Snorri Sturluson, ou *Edda* em Prosa; a *Ynglinga saga*, ou a *Saga dos Ynglings*, também de autoria de Snorri Sturluson; e *Deuses Americanos*, de Neil Gaiman. O objeto em estudo é a personagem Odin e suas múltiplas encarnações nessas diferentes fontes. De modo mais específico, partindo de uma breve contextualização acerca das obras, este trabalho se aprofunda em Odin, apresentando uma comparação entre as características chave da personagem em cada uma das fontes, contrastando similaridades e diferenças acerca de sua origem, aparência física, papel social, poderes, motivações, e morte. Por fim, traça-se uma reflexão sobre as mencionadas similaridades e diferenças através das lentes do fenômeno da Vikingmania, debruçando-se sobre as múltiplas perspectivas acerca da personagem e utilizando-se de teorias sobre adaptação e ideologia. A tese central desenvolvida é que o modo como Gaiman adapta Odin para criar sua personagem "Sr. Quarta-feira", em *Deuses Americanos*, faz do deus nórdico um produto da Vikingmania, tanto em uma visão intra textual, a partir da própria trama do romance, quanto em uma visão extra textual, observando a narrativa como uma obra literária.

Palavras-chave: mitologia nórdica antiga; Odin; Snorri Sturluson; Neil Gaiman; Deuses Americanos.

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Introdução

Since the purpose of this paper is to conduct a comparative literary study among different versions of Odin, specific pieces have been selected bearing that goal in mind. Firstly, to begin with the medieval sources, there are three of them: the Poetic *Edda*, the Prose *Edda* and the *Saga of the Ynglings* (or *Yngling saga*). As for the contemporary work of fiction, *American Gods* is on focus, by Neil Gaiman.

Before going into the texts, some brief comments on the concept of Norse Mythology are necessary. First of all, the word “myth”, when used here, must be understood as a narrative which is a collective patrimony of a given society as well as creates a common world for it, and whose legendary elements are an instrument to mediate cultural problems, provide explanations for human questions and help people organize the universe (SIQUEIRA, 1994-1995: 250). In other words, “Norse mythology” is used to name the body of narratives created and transmitted by the Norse peoples before and during the Viking Age (FAULKES, 1995: xi).

The so-called Viking Age is, of course, a constructed historical period that ranges from the 8th to the 11th century, roughly – more specifically, from the year 793 to 1066, even though those frames are debatable (BRINK, 2012: 5). The term Norse refers to peoples and cultures from what we nowadays understand as Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland. As for “Old Norse”, it is the “written language of medieval Iceland and Norway (CRAWFORD, 2015: xix), with which the *Eddas* and *Ynglinga saga* have been written. It is also often used to refer to that body of narratives.

1. The poetic *Edda*, the prose *Edda*, and *Ynglinga Saga*

In short, the name *Edda* means “great-grandmother.” However, there is a lot of debate around its origins and exact significance, as well as the reason why it was attributed to these texts.

Particularly, the Poetic *Edda* is not one book or one specific series of texts that compose one solid piece. Rather, it is a compilation of poems – to which the name was later on attributed – found in manuscripts from around the 12th century and that follow the same metrics and share the same characters and themes (KRISTJÁNSSON, 1988: 26). It is important to stress that said poems were not written by any specified author, but seem to have been copied by multiple hands, altered, edited, and some of them even have missing parts (CRAWFORD, 2015: xxi-xxii).





Also called the Elder *Edda*, or simply *Edda*, this compilation of poems deals with the gods and heroes of Old Norse narratives. It is, for the most part, derived from a manuscript called the *Codex Regius* (in Latin), or *Konungsbok* (in Icelandic), a compilation of anonymous poems written down in vellum and preserved by later Icelandic copyists (CRAWFORD, 2015: xxi-xxii). That is not the sole source, however, as some poems are likewise featured in another manuscript, called AM 748 4to. It also preserves texts that are not present in the *Codex Regius* but nevertheless follow the eddaic meter, have vital mythological lore, and are thus included in the Poetic *Edda* as well (KRISTJÁNSSON, 1988: 26). Bearing all of that in mind, the poems referenced throughout this paper are: *Voluspa*, *Havamal*, *Vafthruthnismal*, *Grimnismal*, *Harbarthsljoth*, *Lokasenna*, *Voluspa en skamma*, and *Baldrs draumar*.

As for the Prose *Edda*, it indeed receives this name, as attested by an 1300 inscription in Uppsala, Sweden, which also, in terms, attests its authorship (KRISTJÁNSSON, 1988: 25). Often called *Snorra Edda* or *Snorri's Edda*, it is a handbook of poetics (KRISTJÁNSSON, 1988: 25) and one of the most important sources of Old Norse mythological lore, written by Snorri Sturluson at about AD 1225 (CRAWFORD, 2015: xxii).

Written in prose instead of in poetry by Sturluson (1178/1179 - 1241) – a writer, poet, historian and chieftain born in Medieval Iceland, considered to be the most skilled man of letters in Medieval Iceland, if not the whole North – the Prose *Edda* is one of the most comprehensive sources of Norse mythology ever written. As counter-intuitive as that may be, however, that was not its original purpose. Instead, the Prose *Edda* was meant to be a handbook of poetry, aimed to set forth and preserve the principles of skaldic poetry, its formal devices – in particular, the *kennings*² –, and stanza structure (HOLLANDER, 2011: xv). By attempting to preserve those, Sturluson preserved some parts of the myths as well (FAULKES, 1995: xiii).

Delving deeper into its content, the Prose *Edda* is composed of three books, or parts: “Gylfaginning”, “Skaldskarpamal” and “Hattatal.” The former two are used as references in this paper. Both of them (respectively, “the tricking of Gylfi” and “the language of poetry”) reveal pieces of mythological lore, narratives about the gods, and

² An intrinsic device of skaldic poetry known to Norse poets that consists of periphrastic descriptions – a word play that consists of compound nouns and, typically, compact analogies used to illustrate something in a poetic or enigmatic way. In other words, a *kenning* is a compound word used to replace the actual noun that means what is meant to be said, with the aim of creating purposefully obscure references, which need to be deciphered, and that sometimes better fit the rhyme and syllable count of the poems (CRAWFORD, 2015).





long lists of *kennings*. On a note, there is a prologue to “Gylfaginning”, also written by Sturluson, which introduces the whole Prose *Edda* is also of relevance for this comparative study.

Again by Sturluson, *Heimskringla* is made up of the texts given to us by three manuscripts: *Kringla*, *Jgfraskinna* and *Codex Frisianus*. Of those three, *Jgfraskinna* (“Kings’ Vellum”) contains all of *Heimskringla*, and even though the original has been lost, a good copy is preserved. Regarding its name, that was given by royal Swedish antiquarian Johan Peringskjöld in his translation into Swedish – it is the combination of the first two words in *Ynglinga saga*, the first chapter of the compilation, “*Kringla heimsins*” (“The Earth’s round”). Nonetheless, even though it has stuck, a more appropriate title would be “the Lives of the Kings of Norway” (which is how it is frequently called in other Old-Icelandic manuscripts) (HOLLANDER, 2011: xxiv-xxv).

It is a compilation of sagas that starts with mythical and legendary kings who ruled in Sweden and later, moved to Norway, and continues on into real history (KRISTJÁNSSON, 1988: 168) – all in all, the accounts begin with Odin and end with the Saga of Magnus Erlingsson. Among those texts, the *Saga of the Ynglings* (*Ynglinga saga*) – the first one of them – is used in the paper.

Lastly, as a final remark, Iceland was formally converted to Christianity in AD 1000 and Norway in around AD 995 and 1020. That means that the Poetic *Edda*, the Prose *Edda* and the *Saga of the Ynglings* came into existence at least 300 years after belief in the Old Norse gods was no longer a practice in Norse society. That explains why the *Eddas* provide us with myths and general advice for living instead of religious instructions, and the prologue of “Gylfaginning” and *Ynglinga Saga* perceive the gods in face of Christianity: while the narratives do tell of characters such as Odin, Thor and Frey, details of rituals and prayers are sparse and vague, which is an indication that whoever preserved those texts did so out of antiquarian interest and driven by cultural preservation goals rather religious interest per se. All in all, the poems were copied by Christian writers and Sturluson’s texts are made of quotations (he quotes passages of the same poems present in the Poetic *Edda*) and words written by a Christian author as well, not by people who followed Old Norse religions. (CRAWFORD, 2015: xxi).

With that in mind, a critical view can be cast on those medieval texts and an explanation for their various versions of the same character, provided. Here, one can have, at the very least (and running the risk of being overly simplistic), two versions of Odin: one, a godly man figure, as portrayed in all the poems from the Poetic *Edda*, as well as “Gylfaginning” and “Skaldskaparmal”; the other, a notable human and heroic figure, as





portrayed in Sturluson's prologue to "Gylfaginning" and *Ynglinga Saga*. Those different and, at times, altogether diverging versions of Odin will be addressed in the next sections in detail, but for now, the characteristics of those texts needs to be stressed. At best, we have bits and pieces of supposedly much larger narratives and, at worst, retellings of them.

Finally, some disclaimers are necessary. Only the content of those texts has been presented here, since their form is not relevant for the thesis developed. Also, one must note that Old Norse literature is an extensive body of texts. Thus, given its far-reaching extension, it is almost impossible if not pointless altogether to employ a larger number of pieces in a paper with this purpose and of this size. To conclude, the morals of the medieval texts and the values that Odin bears must be understood as old as they actually are. Notions of right and wrong that are present in our contemporary society are not the same as those narratives portray, a thought that will be of importance for the comparative study itself (CRAWFORD, 2015: ix-xiii).

2. *American Gods*

Neil Richard MacKinnon Gaiman, or simply Neil Gaiman, is a British writer born in 1960 in Hampshire, England. His most famous works include *Sandman* (1989 - present), *Good Omens* (1990), *American Gods* (2001) and *Coraline* (2002). In particular, *American Gods* (2001) is, along with the medieval sources of Old Norse Literature detailed in the previous session, a central piece for this comparative study.

American Gods (2001) is a contemporary novel that falls under the subgenre of fantasy. In a nutshell, it follows the steps of "Shadow", a former convict who, after his release from his three-year sentence, spends his time running errands for Mr. Wednesday, a mysterious man who offers the former a job and makes the newly released man promise to hold his vigil in the case of his death. Eventually, Shadow learns (despite his resistance to believe it) that Wednesday is actually Odin.

The novel revolves around the fact that, opposed to ancient gods – like Odin –, one finds the "New Gods", those of technology, media and money. More importantly, it is people and their beliefs that create gods, as well as their forsaking of them that kills them, while sacrifices, in whatever shape they might take, are what sustain and keep the gods alive.

It is worthy of note that the novel also comprises a series of short-stories within it, under sections entitled "Coming to America": each of these sections takes place in a different time in history, in a time span as long as thousands of years ago, and includes a





seemingly independent narrative, with a beginning, a middle and an end, but which nonetheless tells of how several different peoples have arrived in America. There is such a section that narrates the arrival of the very first Norsemen in America, who brought along the Norse god Odin – thus revealing the “origin” of Wednesday. It is also valid to bring up a B.A., native American student whom Shadow meets along his journey and who tells him a quick story about Odin – a brief sequence taken from *Gautreks saga*, a foreshadowing of Wednesday’s ulterior motives.

3. Who is Odin?

Now that the texts have been laid out, it is possible to move on to a comparative analysis of them. In the same manner that Lassen points out in her comparative study – as presented in her lecture (2022), there are multiple perspectives through which Odin can be analyzed. It is important to stress that this analysis is a literary one: there are a number of ways that Odin can be studied, such as through the perspective of archeology, theology and even psychology. Nonetheless, this study is purely textual, which means that Odin is visualized as a literary character and the aspects and theories taken into account are textual.

Before going further, the first aspect that must be brought into light is the plurality of names Odin receives from himself and others in all of the literary pieces in this paper. In the eddaic poems and in Sturluson’s works, Odin’s names pile up on a long list, of which some examples are: *Alfothr* ("Allfather"), *Bolverkr* ("Evil Doer"), *Draugadrottinn* ("Lord of the Undead"), *Fjolnir* ("Spellcaster"), *Grimnir* ("Cloaked One" or "Masked One"), *Harbarthr* ("Greybeard"), *Ygg* ("Terrible One" or "Frightening One"), etc. In *American Gods*, not only are some of those names mentioned, but new ones are created – the very alias “Wednesday”, for example.

The bottom line is that regardless of the source, Odin is a character that is not only known by different people, at different places and at different times through multiple names, but that presents himself in just as many varied ways. That fact may be overlooked at first, regarded solely as a consequence of the word-play of the *kennings* – as the chief deity and one of the most prominent figures, it would make sense that he would accumulate a long list. Or even, one might attribute it to the somewhat eccentric – to say the least, or deceitful altogether, personality of the *As* (god).

However, Odin’s many names are intrinsically tied to the very core thesis of this paper, as they may be interpreted here as a “concrete proof” of his many versions. Indeed,





he has just as many interpretations and is perceived as well as acts in just as many ways as he has many names. Further, the plurality of his names shows how he is fueled by paradoxes (LASSEN, 2022). He is the all-father, the king of the *Æsir* (the clan of gods residing in *Asgard*), the cloaked-one, a wanderer, a warrior, a spellcaster, an old-man, the evil-doer, and the list goes on and into glimpses and peeks into his complex personality.

Still regarding his name, “Odin” itself comes from the Old Norse language *ódr*, meaning "frenzy", "ecstasy", a reference to his ties to magic, poetry, sex and warmongery (LANGER, 2023: 71). Still, his name has ancient roots in the Germanic “Wotan”, “Wodan”, or “Wodanaz” (DAVIDSON, 1990: 54), which roughly translates as he who “makes mad” in reference to the *berserkr* power, the magical ecstasy he would bestow upon his followers. The *berserkir* were either heroic, praised men or pariahs and monsters (depending on the source) who nonetheless were remarkable warriors, as they could willingly go into a battle frenzy called *berserkrangr* (“berserker rage”). While in this enraged state, they were nearly invincible in battle, as their aggressiveness and prowess with weapons was boosted while they feared nothing, could not tell friend from foe and were utterly resistant to damage and pain.

It is curious to think of Odin’s roots and name being tied to this relationship with warriors, especially considering how he has come to be known as a patron of warriors and war by the Germanic peoples of the North. Additionally, while berserkers were formidable fighters, they were neither immortal nor invincible, and it is not uncommon to have narratives where they would eventually wake up from their ecstasy only to find themselves mortally wounded, thus revealing yet another way Odin can be deceitful should he wish (DAVIDSON, 1990: 66-67).

Finally, the very name the character takes on in *American Gods* is not only another one that may be added to his long list, but a reference to his ancestry and ancient roots. The name of the day of the week, "Wednesday", as Gaiman (2016) himself points out in his introduction to Norse Mythology (GAIMAN, 2016: 11), is a reference to Odin and his Germanic name: from an etymological standpoint, "Wednesday" means "Wodan's day" (DAVIDSON, 1990: 56). So when Gaiman's Mr. Wednesday presents himself with this name, the character is covertly hinting at his true identity (as per his mysterious, elusive personality) and making a reference to a word in English that derives from his name as given by Germanic peoples prior to the Viking Age.

4. Origins





Analyzing the matter of Odin's origins is a difficult task when it comes to the medieval sources. That is a fact because they have slightly different to outright opposite versions of the character's background. While the *Eddas* themselves present converging versions and the same can be said about the prologue to "Gylfaginning" and *Ynglinga saga* (to some extent), when comparing the former two with the latter two, they present contrastingly different portrayals of Odin.

It is also a fact that the poems of the Poetic *Edda* are mostly untainted, if it can be so boldly claimed, or at least somewhat untainted, therefore they portray pre-Christian views of the character. As opposed to that, Sturluson's works are unequivocally tainted by said Christian perspectives, as he himself is a Christian author. Nevertheless, despite different genres and texts and the fact that Odin could have had characteristics or stories fabricated by Christian authors, the character does have recognizable traits throughout all the sources.

In both the Poetic *Edda* and Snorri's *Edda*, Odin is the son of Burr and Bestla. Burr is the son of Borr, Odin's grandfather, a "man" (in the lack of a better word) who was carved out of the ice by the great cow Audhumla, one of the first creatures to ever come into being, and Bestla is one of the *Jotnar* ("frost giants", in the usual translation). It is important to note that it is never determined exactly what is the nature of Burr, Odin's father. The *Eddas* mention different clans of gods: the *Æsir*, the *Vanir* and the *Jotnar*, which are blurrily divided. The *Æsir* are those who reside in *Asgard* and are related to Odin somehow, though whether the *Æsir* were already a clan before Odin's birth is unclear. The *Vanir* are those related to Njorth, while the *Jotnar* are the ones who are usually called "frost giants" (though they are neither made of ice nor necessarily giant – while some do possess huge sizes, their proportions vary as much as any of the others'). So it is undetermined to which clan, if any of them at all, Burr belongs to, despite the fact that it is implied that he is not a *Jotun* ("giant"). Bestla, on the other hand, is openly named as a member of a specific clan. Nonetheless, both *Eddas* present Odin as a god: in both bodies of texts he is one of the *Æsir*, their leader (king, chieftain, etc.) and progenitor, and has a divine nature.

However, in the prologue to "Gylfaginning" and *Ynglinga saga*, both by Sturluson, Odin is portrayed as a human hero. In the first one, he is said to be an Asian magician who traveled to the Norse countries and there made his home; in the second one, he is a ruler from Sweden who then migrates to Norway. In either case, the matter of who his parents are is unaddressed and he is unequivocally a human character, who tricks the pre-Christian peoples of the Norse countries into believing he is a god – or at





the very least, does nothing to demystify the reputation and worship he amasses. It is particularly relevant that Snorri treats the pre-Christian gods as not actually gods, but humans with magical abilities whom the Norse peoples were mistakenly convinced were gods. So Odin is a hero and a sorcerer/teacher of magic, who resides in *Asgard* once he is dead. In that sense, "Gylfaginning's" High, Just-as-high and Third could be interpreted as magicians who trick Gylfi into believing in them as gods – as will be debated further down this section.

In Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, Odin's nature is more complex. Depending on the perspective, he is either a god or a human, or both at once, though what the former entails is different to what it was meant by the medieval sources. In Gaiman's novel, a god is an idea. They are brought into existence by people's belief, as if a materialization of a collective faith, and are sustained by their continuous worship and sacrifice, in whatever form they take, as well as memory. As such, they can be created and destroyed, provided they are completely forgotten and neglected, as well as moved from one place to another or even re-created anew – in case a group of believers moves to a distant land and take their faith with them, thus settling in a different location and bringing their gods along. It is also possible, in the novel, that a god has more than a different version existing simultaneously at different places, as it is attested by the end of the narrative and will be further explored in this paper. In that case, those two (or more) versions can have diverging traits in the same manner that two peoples with a common ancestry but living centuries apart from each other would have evolved their thinking differently.

Odin is such a god in Gaiman's, brought into reality by people's collective belief, sacrifice and memory. Regardless of Odin's primal origins, as has been mentioned here before (he hails from the early European Iron Age, during the migration periods of the proto-Germanic peoples, when he was known as Wotan or Wodanaz), the first attested appearance of his in *American Gods* is during the chapter "Coming to America A.D. 813". During said chapter, the reader witnesses the arrival of a Viking ship and its crew on the shores of North America, who bring with them the cult of Odin. It is then, during the Viking Age and through a band of traveling warriors and sailors, that the idea of Odin arrives in America and thus, Mr. Wednesday is "born". That is the version of Odin we see throughout most of the novel.

In a nutshell, when comparing the medieval sources and the contemporary novel, we have the following origins for the character: in "Gylfaginning" and all the poems of the Poetic *Edda*, he is a god, a member of the race of the *Æsir*, son of Burr and Bestla; in the prologue to "Gylfaginning" and in *Ynglinga saga*, he is a notable human warrior and





sorcerer, born of unmentioned parents, an Asian impostor and/or an invention created by such impostors; and in *American Gods*, he is a collective idea. However, there are some final nuances that should be observed.

Firstly, what is said and what is shown about Odin in "Gylfaginning" are arguably different. If taken into consideration the information that is provided via the conversation between the three figures, High, Just-as-High and Third and the tricked king, Gylfi, then Odin is treated as god, as told by the characters of the narrative. However, if we consider that the three figures are all different incarnations or appearances of Odin, or that Odin is one of them, then it is possible to interpret that this Odin is similar, if not the same, as the Odin that is portrayed in the prologue – in other words, a human. In this text and following this logic, Odin would trick Gylfi into believing in him. He is then again both a hero and a trickster of sorts, or a magician, who is so formidable as to convince people that he is divine – which not only what happens as Gylfi is tricked and ends the narrative by being aware of the gods' existence, as a result of Odin's own discourse, but is a fact also in the prologue and *Ynglinga saga*.

Secondly, in *American Gods*, Odin's origin as a materialized idea is arguable as he is made of flesh and blood. In that sense, even though his origin is unequivocally a god's origin, in the definition that the novel establishes, he still seems and feels as human when navigating the world of humans. What is interesting about *American Gods* is that it somehow shows both visions of the character in the same text: while Wednesday both navigates the physical world and interacts with it and others as a man with supernatural powers, he is also seen, during the visions that Shadow has throughout the story, with a godly image, and his survival and long life is a testament to his godly nature. In other words, the novel presents Wednesday to the reader via a marriage of the views present in all the medieval sources, conjoining different natures. At times, he is indeed perceived (and acts and suffers as such) as a human who possesses supernatural powers and is remarkably gifted at both convincing and tricking others. At other times, he is this centuries-old idea/deity, viewed through dreams and delirious hallucinations held by the protagonist.

Lastly, it cannot be ignored that, depending on the source, Odin is as much a creator of men as he himself is their creation. In the *Eddas*, he gives humankind life by carving the first man and woman out of tree trunks, thus being depicted as men's creator and designer. However, in the *Ynglinga saga* and in the prologue to "Gylfaginning", he is a man just like his peers, but his deeds – especially after his death – are perpetuated in such a way that men's belief that he is superhuman is precisely what makes him so.





People's views of Odin are what foster his divine character here, not the opposite. In a similar fashion, Wednesday is mankind's creation rather than their creator: Gaiman takes the concept from Sturluson's narrative and extrapolates it, makes it literal instead of simply figurative, in a way that not only Wednesday's legacy, but Wednesday himself, physically and in all instances, is created by people's belief in him.

5. Physical appearance

Visual descriptions of Odin do abound in number, though not in detail in the medieval sources. He is most commonly described under his most frequent guise: donning a gray or blue cloak, along with a gray or blue hat or hood, as well as carrying his spear and accompanied by his two crows, Hugin and Munin. Nevertheless, despite the scarcity of more in-depth details about his looks and some changes among texts, some traits are stressed and repeatedly brought up along the narratives. One such trait is his hair and beard, notably described as long and gray. Another such trait is his age: never is he described as young, but rather, as a man of advanced age.

Particularly, Odin's eyes are key: the absence of one of them is a central aspect not only of his looks, but also of his personality and narrative. According to the sources, Odin gave up one of his eyes to drink from a fountain of wisdom. That act of sacrifice is a defining aspect of the character, as it demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice and his obsession with knowledge and wisdom. So much so, that regardless of being disguised or not, being one-eyed is a persistent trait that is remarkably noticed by others and used to describe his physical appearance.

Curiously enough, rarely is he described wearing armor, or warrior garments, even though he is said to be a warrior himself and to have strong ties with them. Instead, his clothes are more often than not those of a traveler: gray, battered, and inconspicuous, as he is usually found traveling, under disguise and, therefore, dressed accordingly.

As for *American Gods*, Wednesday is described in more detail. For instance, his body is said to be tall, and he is shown as a strongly built old man. Despite not being young, his physical presence is described as intimidating due to his height and strength, even though he does not engage in any physical confrontation. As for his trusted allies, his crows, they do make appearances throughout the novel, despite being almost always alone or flying above rather than systematically together with Wednesday. These traits are complementary and/or additional to those found in the medieval sources, since they do not oppose them but rather, expand them.





There are, however, diverging descriptions. His hair and beard, for instance, are not described as being long, even though he wears a full beard, nor are they entirely gray, but bear some fading shades of red. His clothes are strongly different as well, although they do follow a similar logic. In the novel, aside from situations where he is applying some con and is wearing purposefully different clothing, Wednesday wears suits and formal attire. His suits are stressed in his descriptions, as are his ties and his pins (always the same ones, in the shape of a tree, as a reference to Yggdrasil – the mythical tree where he hung himself for nine days and nine nights to discover the mysteries of the runes and magic). However, the way he dresses dialogues with the medieval sources in the manner that the colors mostly associate with him are still gray and blue, along with the fact that if the Odin from the *Eddas* dressed as a traveler because he acted as such, Wednesday from *American Gods* dresses as a man of power and elegance, with an air of mystery to him in accordance to his attitude.

His eyes are again a key point of his appearance. Wednesday too draws attention to this trait, though the reasons why he has lost one of them are only hinted at and never explained much. In any case, he does have a missing eye and it is indeed strongly suggested that he gave it up as a sacrifice, but he replaces it with a glass eye – which makes more sense for a character who wishes to lay low in a narrative that takes place in contemporary society than the description given in the medieval sources.

All in all, while Odin's appearance may have some minor differences, the overall feeling of his looks is the same. In all texts, he is a one-eyed, gray-bearded old man who wears gray and blue. Sometimes, he looks intimidating or terrifying; sometimes, he looks fragile or even harmless, according to his will and purpose; nonetheless, more often than not, his shadiness is apparent, as is his connection with ravens and magic.

6. Social role

Concerning Odin's role in both *Eddas*, he is a chieftain, warlord and king; a spellcaster; and a wanderer. All of those are social roles he assumes on different occasions: he is a ruler in the manner that he is the leader of the *Æsir* and governor of *Asgard*; he is a spellcaster in the manner that he is addressed as such and calls himself practitioner of magic – which is attested true; and he is a wanderer in the manner that he is often shown as a traveler who strides throughout different lands under multiple disguises and names.





In the prologue to "Gylfaginning" and *Ynglinga saga*, his role is very similar. Regardless of his human nature, here is a chieftain and a ruler, as he is described as a king and a warlord. However, here he is additionally perceived as a teacher of magic and rituals, a shaman, along with a sorcerer: he is not only a practitioner of magic, but also a figure that teaches it to others and who is responsible for their dissemination, the one who passes down that knowledge to the following generations. Also through a different scope, he is a pre-Christian "mistake", a social figure that is mistakenly interpreted as being divine, even though he is not.

In *American Gods*, he is stripped of most of the roles he has in the medieval sources. Rather, in the novel Wednesday is, in practical terms, a thief, an outlaw, and a grifter. He does not occupy any position as a ruler, be it among humans or among the gods (Old and New). Even though he is held in high esteem by the Old Gods (or at the very least, recognized as someone influential and cunning), he is never considered their leader, despite his attempts and moves to talk them into doing what he wants.

However, he is still a teacher of magic, somehow, despite his lack of interest in helping others in any way. Not only does he lead Shadow into the supernatural world and he himself teaches him about mystical arts, but also guides him through confrontations with other gods through whom the protagonist does some learning. To name an example, Shadow hangs himself from the tree and undergoes an enlightening supernatural experience under Wednesday's bidding (same as Odin himself hangs to learn the runes).

It is worthy of note that there is one social role that Odin overtly shares among all sources, beyond argument or doubt: that of a figure associated with war. It is neither possible nor useful to say that Odin is the "Norse god of war": that would be a tremendously colonial statement, since never do the gods in the Norse myths in the source receive such static labels but are, instead, defined by a whole myriad of traits and characteristics, much like human characters and less like allegories (as is the case with Greek-Latin deities, for instance), some of which can even overlap among more than one character and be accumulated by the same deity.

Nonetheless, Odin is indeed tied to war: be it in the godly interpretation of the Eddas or in the human, heroic view of *Ynglinga saga*, he is a warrior – and no common warrior, but the best one of them, invincible in the battlefield and in the command of his armies, practitioner of war magic (most of his spells are tied or can be linked to war), and a patron of warriors (hence the nature of Valholl and the berserker warriors). Finally, in *American Gods*, he acts similarly: although he himself does not engage in any physical confrontation, he is indeed a "patron" (or rather, "employer") for Shadow, who does the





fighting in his stead. Not to mention that he is a fomenter of conflict, as the whole plot unfolds due to his scheme to prompt a war between the gods and be fed by it.

7. Powers

Regarding Odin's powers, there are minor variations among the texts, the most tangible one of them being between the *Eddas* and the other sources. In the *Eddas*, it is mentioned that he creates humankind – regardless of who accompanies him in this feat (in Sturlusson's text, he does so with the aid of Vili and Ve, his brothers, while in the poems of the Poetic *Edda* he is assisted by Hoenir and Lodur, two shady figures who are scarcely mentioned elsewhere). Whatever the case, taking the trunks of an ash and an elm tree and partaking in the carving of them, along with their animation, giving of souls, and subsequent transformation in the first human beings is a feat that only these sources attribute to him. That is explainable, since the action of creating humankind is divine by its nature and those are precisely the texts which place Odin in said position. In contrast: in *American Gods*, while Odin may be a god, what being a god entails is different and thus excludes such a feat – he is a creation of men rather than their creator; in Sturluson's prologue and "Gylfaginning", Odin is evidently a member of humankind, not its creator (who is openly mentioned as being the Christian God). That is to say that only in the *Eddas* does Odin possess the powers to create life.

Aside from that, Odin is a spellcaster in all of the texts. It is especially interesting to note that in *Havamal*, from the Poetic *Edda*, Odin lists the 18 spells he knows, some of which are mentioned in Snorri's *Edda* and almost entirely cited (mentioned, expanded and explained) in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*. In *American Gods*, the narrator directly cites some passages from those texts: in chapter 10, Wednesday recites to Shadow the verses of *Havamal* where he explains his spells, and objectively demonstrates them through his actions throughout the entire novel.

The matter of how he got his magical powers, in the first place, is also identical among all the sources. In all of them, he hangs himself from the ash tree Yggdrasil, the one whose roots no one knows where dwell, and spends nine days and nine nights in torment, a state of trance, after which he "wakes up" having the knowledge of the runes.

Some skills are more literal in the medieval texts than in *American Gods*. For example, in the medieval sources, Odin can change his shape into that of an animal, for instance, either by actually shapeshifting or by "leaving" his own body to do so (as in *Ynglinga saga*); as opposed to that, in Gaiman's novel, he tricks people by skillfully





changing his clothes and his demeanor with such skill as to entirely and easily pass as someone else. On the other hand, spells such as the capacity to bend people's will – particularly the will of women, to persuade them to have sexual relationships, and battle boosts – are exactly the same.

8. Motivations

Next, there is the issue of Odin's personality and motivations. While superficial motivations and characteristics may vary depending on the narrative, the key points in the construction of the character are the same in all texts: Odin is a power-hungry, cunning, cultured, war-minded, mysterious wandering figure. Considering that in the medieval sources, power is wisdom, which is in turn one's knowledge of mythological lore along with awareness of past, present and future facts, not to mention the ability to speak in verse and convince others; and in *American Gods*, power is measured by the amount of worshiping and sacrifices one manages to muster for oneself, regardless of what it means in each of the narratives, Odin actively seeks it out.

In the same manner, he is considered a cunning and dangerous person. His knowledge is always tied to the fact that he can employ it to bend others' will in his favor. In *Havamal*, for example, he manages to steal the Mead of Poetry from Suttung's hall through his silver tongue and magical skills alone. In the novel, he is portrayed as an intelligent man: not a "book-smart" kind of person, but a cunning individual who easily robs banks, falsifies documents, poses as someone else, talks women into bedding him and is even compared to a politician on occasion – as he tries to persuade the other gods that his cause is justified and bring them to his side.

It is noteworthy how his shrewdness is perceived by others. In *American Gods*, Wednesday's machinations leave Shadow uncomfortable at varying degrees throughout the piece, from simple fear that he will be caught as an accomplice and sent back to jail to outright disgust and revolt, during one scene where Wednesday uses runes to bewitch a waitress so she will have sex with him.

Still about his morals, independently of which cultural framework we consider, they always seem to make him somewhat of a pariah. Of course, in the pre-Christian setting of the Old Norse religions, where the core of the narratives would have first taken shape, violence and lust are acceptable, as is his willingness to do whatever it takes to advance himself and those of his interest. Still, he is not perceived as an honorable, predictable man as is his son Thor, for instance, but as someone who has more going





underneath than lets show and thus, is not to be entirely trusted. He is, comparatively, closer to Loki in this regard – the poem *Grimnismal*, to mention an example, revolves around his deceptions against his own wife, Frigg, and well as a king he initially vouches for but then, removes his favor. The tricking of Gylfi is yet another example. It is no surprise that Gaiman places him as partners with Loki rather than any other character, Norse or otherwise.

Lastly about his personality, it is interesting that a figure with a menacing demeanor is a king or a leader of sorts. His leadership position, regardless of which text we are analyzing, is sustained by his ability to brew schemes and plots – perhaps, one could even hazard a comparison and say he has a note of the model Machiavelli has conceived for his Prince.

As for his motivations, in *Ynglinga Saga* and Sturluson's prologue to "Gylfaginning", Odin does not have one clearly defined goal. Rather, he is a notable human warrior and hero, who pursues achievements such as victories and glory in battle, conquest and annexation of lands, political power and the advancement of his own enterprises. However, in the *Eddas* and in *American Gods*, not only are his goals clearly delineated and mostly different from the saga, but they are quite similar among themselves and can be arguably interpreted as the same.

In both the poetry and the prose of the *Eddas*, the guiding motivation for Odin is averting the event of the Ragnarok. After receiving a prophecy from a dead volva (a seeress), as told in *Voluspa*, *Voluspa en skamma*, *Baldrs draumar* and "Gylfaginning", he is actively driven by his desire to find ways of averting the end of the gods and his own death at the jaws of the monstrous wolf Fenrir. It is curious that Odin seems so adamant in doing so: considering the world of Old Norse Literature, where fate is a central motif and characters systematically fail evading their own destinies, that Odin seems convinced he is able to evade his is a remarkable trait of his character, and a defining one. He ultimately dies and falls victim to his predestined end as well as all other heroes, but that he diligently acts to avert it sets him aside from all others.

That is where his motivation in *American Gods* comes in. In the novel, he announces his objectives as defeating the New Gods and ensuring the survival of his peer Old Gods as well as his own. However, his goals are to actually save himself alone. Additionally, in reality, he wishes to amass power (in the form of worship and sacrifices) all to himself (and to Loki, his con partner). The main point is that, regardless of the level of selflessness of Odin's actions, his goal is ultimately to avoid his destiny. Initially, he alleges that the New Gods threaten to kill Old Gods such as himself, appealing to Shadow





and the others as having a quest to save lives. Even though that justification is proven to be a lie further in the course of the novel, he still fears being forgotten in favor of the New Gods, even though that would not necessarily lead to his death, as well as fears losing power and influence. In the end, his goal to foment a war and gain power stem from the same basis as his motifs in the *Eddas*: controlling his own fate and achieving for himself a more favorable end than what destiny has (or seems to have) in store for him.

9. Death

The final issue that needs to be addressed is the matter of Odin's death. Despite divergences, which will be mentioned next, there is one aspect that is shared among all versions: he does die and his death is a central plot point for all narratives.

Concerning the older texts, in both *Eddas*, he is killed by the great wolf Fenrir, one of the monstrous children of Loki with the sorceress Angrboda. After having been banished by Odin himself, the creature is set free and charges into battle. The god falls in combat while fighting the beast during the event of the Ragnarok, only to be afterwards avenged by one of his sons, Vidar, who then kills the wolf.

In the prologue to "Gylfaginning", the nature of his death is unclear, except for the fact that he resides in *Asgard* afterwards. As for *Ynglinga saga*, when Odin feels he will soon die of old age, as no foe was a match for him on the battlefield, he commands that he be killed in his deathbed by being pierced with a spear, thus passing into Valholl himself. This narrative not only sets forth the tradition of sacrifices to the character by means of spear piercing, but also reinforces the idea that, in order to enter Valholl, one must be slain by iron rather than old age or disease.

In *American Gods*, Wednesday is shot in the head. This death of his is orchestrated, since his intention is to be later on resurrected, as Loki (Mr. World) dedicates the deaths of Old and New Gods to him and, thus feeding him enough power as to bring him back to life. That fails, however, due to Shadow's doings, and so Wednesday remains dead by those means. Nevertheless, as shown towards the end of the novel, Odin's Icelandic version remains alive.

On a curious note, the version of Odin that Shadow meets in Iceland seems to be the same version of the god which had been created by Old Norse narratives rather than the American altered persona of Wednesday. That is a possible interpretation because the written myths to which we nowadays have access were written in Medieval Iceland – hence, the character the protagonist meets in the end of the novel could very well be the





same one that is described in this paper as the *Eddas* / sagas version. On the other hand, Wednesday is a different incarnation, aside from that one, as he has been brought to America and thus, changed by his new home and the history of its people.

Another curious note is that if the Icelandic version of Odin that Shadow meets is indeed the *Eddas* / sagas persona, then it could be wondered whether that said version will also die at some point in the universe set by the novel. That is worthy of pondering since the Odin from the medieval sources dies during the Ragnarok; consequently, if the Odin Shadow meets is in fact that one and considering that he is alive, then the battles of Ragnarok have arguably not yet transpired.

Differences aside, the death of Odin is central in all texts here. In the *Eddas*, his death is a key point in the events unfolding during the Ragnarok – a central device in the narratives – and as such, during the subsequent obliteration / rebirth of the world that ensues. In *Ynglinga saga*, his death is what opens up the path for his heirs, which is the central focus of the narrative – the bloodline of Norwegian kings. Also, his death is what allows his deeds in life to be shrouded in mystery, as generations go by and his legend – and that of Valhool for instance – is fed by their reports of his feats. In it as well as in the prologue to "Gylfaginning", it is after his death that he takes on a divine aura – he tricks the Norse peoples into believing he is a god in life whereas in death, that narrative is passed down. Finally, in the novel, Wednesday's death lays the ground for the climax of the narrative: it is after and only because he dies that the Old Gods decide to take a stand, that Shadows holds his "vigil", that the two-man con between Mr. Wednesday and Mr. World is unveiled and the actions leading to the resolution of the conflict follow.

Not only are Odin's different deaths important, but in most of the texts, so is his fear of it. While in the saga and in the prologue it is not mentioned that he dreads dying, in the *Eddas* and in *American Gods*, that fear and anxiety are defining traits of his, as delved into detail in the previous section of this chapter. After hearing the seeress's prophecy of the end of the *Æsir*, Odin becomes obsessed with his own fate – and with ways of averting it. His thirst for wisdom and his many travels are, in substance, heavily explained by this fear. He obsessively seeks to prevent the Ragnarok and so, the stories that tell of his exploits usually concern his wandering to discover mysteries. Another example are the actions he takes regarding Loki's imprisonment and the banishment of his monstrous children, explained by his knowledge of the role they will play in the final battle. It is also a fact that in Gaiman's work, Wednesday is not actually afraid he will die – it is part of his plans, as a matter of fact. However, he does use such fear as a weapon of persuasion, both by claiming his actions and choices are out of his desperation and





concern that the Old Gods and himself will be forgotten, and by attempting to entice that fear in others and manipulate them into doing what he wants them to do.

10. Odin and vikingmania – the norse god alive among us

The matter of how Odin is portrayed in the medieval sources and *American Gods* merges with and is as important as the matter of why that is done. This is the center of the thesis of this paper: the way the novel adapts the Norse god cannot and should not be considered only in terms of comparisons among his characteristics in the selected medieval sources and in Gaiman's work; instead, it must be contemplated and inserted in a much larger scope, since the number of adaptations regarding the theme of the "Viking" (therefore, the Norse gods) abound throughout centuries of Literature and can be connected to multiple discourses and phenomena. Thus, *American Gods* does not stand alone in time, but perpetrates a timeline of adaptations and as such, must be analyzed as a constituting part of it; in the same manner, Gaiman's Mr. Wednesday is not an isolated character, but yet another figure in a long line of incarnations of Odin.

Wednesday from the novel is a "product" of Vikingmania, intra and extra textually speaking. The myths and narratives, along with the agendas and discourses that supernaturally create the god and keep him alive in the fictional universe set by Gaiman are the very same elements that surround the novel as a piece of art located in a social and historical context. In other words, Gaiman's plot unfolds based on the fact that characters such as Wednesday are created, sustained and changed by people's ideas and beliefs; that is proven to be true not only from the perspective of the narrative itself, but from a supra textual view as well. That is because Norse mythology has been invented and reinvented across the centuries as a tool for artistic expression and multiple discourses in Literature; and the fascination of the public for "all things Viking" is neither a restricted nor a recent phenomenon, but a broad and long-lasting evolution of appropriations which have, evidently so, sustained and altered characters such as Odin.

Before going further, it is important to bring the concept of Vikingmania to discussion by introducing it here. According to Oliveira (2021: 471-472), Vikingmania can be defined as:

[...] the contemporary representation of the Vikings, which arose from Romanticism in the 19th century; it is built on the plastic arts, music, literature and theater; has been later on reshaped during the 20th and 21st centuries by the movie industry, comic books, television series, and videogames; all of which provide stereotypical conceptions that have helped construct a common sense of the Viking peoples, their





looks, cultures, societies, histories, customs and beliefs, developed with aesthetical, political, social and marketing intents. This way, Vikingmania can be defined as a kind of visual, mediatic and identity culture. (OLIVEIRA, 2021: 471-472; author's own translation)

In other words, the Vikings exist as a trope in popular culture through movies, music, and literature (ŽIAČKOVÁ, 2019: 1) – a cultural myth of the contemporary world (CALDERÓN, 2007: 288). Indeed, the Norse peoples and gods have been appropriated by a huge number of hands from all sorts of backgrounds, all of which have transformed them into the most varied forms of art and political discourses.

It is important to note that this phenomenon is not exclusive to the Vikings, despite being very evident when it comes to them. The whole Middle Ages are a "myth" that permeates the imagination of people nowadays. As Calderón (2007: 287-288) points out, said time period has:

[...] captivated the imagination of the subsequent ages as they provide a convenient mirror for other historical periods whose self definitions have been built in contrast to the medieval. In Brian Stock's words: "The Renaissance invented the Middle Ages in order to redefine itself; the Enlightenment perpetuated them in order to admire itself; and the Romantics revived them in order to escape from themselves. In their widest ramifications 'the Middle Ages' thus constitutes one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the modern world. (CALDERÓN, 2007: 287-288)

Still, according to Calderón (2007: 288), the perception, reception and representation of the Middle Ages as a "land of fantasy", where the supernatural is intertwined with the banal, has prompted its appropriation and adaptation by different forms of art. Particularly, when it comes to fiction narratives (notably (pseudo)historical novels), one can categorize the works of Literature, in general terms, into the Barbarian Dark Ages and the Knightly Medieval (CALDERÓN, 2007: 289).

Among the many cultural images of the Barbarian Dark Ages, there features that of the Viking. It is an extremely popular one, one that has been drawing a lot of attention at present and has been doing so for over 300 years. If one were to draw a timeline in Literature, the figure of the Norsemen, as by Calderón (2007: 289):

[...] rises in the context of the 18th century within the revision of the Norse legacy, a cultural phenomenon fostered by the vogue of Gothicism [...] Progressively, the fierce and feared Danes of the medieval chronicles were vindicated as role-models within a process of rewriting history that presents significant connections with the Germanophilia of the Victorian Age. In this reading, the Viking was legitimated as a cultural icon since it evoked military ethics that perfectly suited the contemporary discourses of imperialism and racial propaganda. Besides, the figure of the Germanic pagan echoed the





confrontation of the Northern and the Mediterranean civilizations, later reformulated as the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism, which in the 19th century provided a relevant cultural myth of origins for Northern European nations.

In this frame, the interest in the Viking bloomed in the genre of the historical adventure novel between the 1830s and World War One. The interest of popular fiction in the Viking re-emerges in the second half of the 20th century [...] Because of its appeal to wide audiences, the stories and characters of this kind of novels were transferred to other popular media and formats such as the comic book or cinema [...] which popularized the image of the muscular viking hero. [...] (CALDERÓN, 2007: 289)

Such an influence is present even in pieces of Literature that do not openly adapt the Norse peoples, for example, but draw on their narratives to create their own fictional universes, such as C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of Rings*.

Still regarding Literature, but not limited to it, one can analyze the trope of the Viking or the fascination for Norse mythology within what Hutcheon (2006; *apud* DIEGO, 2009: 1-2) proposes: it is a ramification, a facet of adaptation. According to her, adaptations (including those of the Vikings) have an appeal due to the epistemological pleasure they provide, in which a feeling of safety increases the pleasure felt by the freshness of the new (HUTCHEON, 2006; *apud* DIEGO, 2009: 2-3). Still, according to the same author, an adaptation is not a copy, it is a piece of art in which repetition and innovation dialogue with each other (HUTCHEON, 2006; *apud* DIEGO, 2009: 3) – in other words, adaptations of the Norse gods, for instance, are no mere repetitions, but creations upon creations that give birth to several new characters within the same one. That encompasses all forms of art and includes the many adaptations to novels, movies and games, for example, that involve Vikings and the world of Norse myths.

Also of importance is the fact that this fascination for the Viking figure and Norse mythology has been operative both in the traditions of high and low culture, reaching all spheres of society and thus, rendering the Norse multi-narratives influencers of all layers of culture. Žiačková (2019: 8) explains that:

[...] the trope of the male, hyper-masculine warrior, clad in martial gear, sporting a beard, setting off on adventures exploring unknown lands, and plundering the coasts of Europe, remains perhaps the most pervasive image of a ‘Viking’ in popular culture (Whitehead 2014, 166; Jesch 1991, 1). Yet, as elucidated at length by Whitehead, this is only a part of an image that has undergone, and continues to undergo, a process of fluctuating redefinition (2014, 38–50). Arguably, one of the greatest strengths of the ‘Viking’ image has been its “ability to undergo cultural translations and modernization” (WHITEHEAD, 2014: 48; *apud* ŽIAČKOVÁ, 2019: 8).





In the same sense, the Vikings have both become a profitable source of products for the cultural industry and a suitable vehicle for modern political propaganda. That's because, according to Oliveira (2021: 471-472), Romanticism was not only responsible for the construction of stereotypes, but for the outright popularization of the vikings and their myths in the plastic arts, literature and music in such a way that this theme has been under the spotlight and has even reached countries such as the US and Brazil, inserted in theories of nationalist intent. Such stereotypes and popularization of "all things Norse" have, according to Žiačková (2019: 9), "colonial perspectives," since one evident facet of the Viking image, which is convenient, useful, and both a cause and a consequence of ideological discourses, is the one of strength and expansionism. It appealed to the German fascist movement at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as to British romantic literature that used the romantic image of the Viking hero as a parallel with and validation of British colonialism. Thus:

[...] The 'Viking Age' forms the mythical past upon which multivariate Nordic ethnogenesis can lay their foundations.

The 'Viking' image as a form of heritage is therefore navigated either through a reference to ancestry [...] a common sense of Nordic-ness encapsulated by 'Viking symbolism [...], or by non-specific historical references reminiscent of the primordial common ethnos employed by the Turistforeningen for Denmark in its brochures targeting Nazi Germany in the 1930s (Ørskov 2019, 16). Alternatively, in cases where a common ancestry is harder to establish, the 'Viking' is redefined, creating a mythological heritage that harks back to a timeless history, characterized by the recurring tropes of Viking symbolism: strength, masculinity, and whiteness. In its construction generally, and its appropriation by right-wing movements in particular, the fascist and ethno-nationalist part of the 'Viking' mythical heritage plays a formative role. It represents, in some way, the culmination of the project of the romanticized past: an invented heritage with grounding relics (i.e. archaeological objects). These discourses form the basis of the mythical cultural identity, and as such intersect with cultural memory, which finds its grounding within specific symbols which are derived from the past [...] (ŽIAČKOVÁ, 2019: 10)

It is indeed worth mentioning that even though the image of the Viking may function as a symbol for ethno-nationalism for white supremacists, opposition does exist to its appropriation by other groups. Those also use it as the foundation for their identity, but nevertheless neither share nor perpetrate discourses of white supremacism, but claim that is a misguided, inappropriate, offensive and non-allowed distortion of what a Viking is (ŽIAČKOVÁ, 2019: 1-2).

Concerning the cultural industry, Hutcheon (2006; *apud* DIEGO, 2009: 5-6) contextualizes the many appropriations and adaptations of Norse mythology within the





frame of the contemporary phenomenon, in which adaptations are a way of generating capital, both for the ones doing the adaptation and the ones consuming it. Therefore, other than being a vehicle for artistic and political discourses, the Norse myths and their never ending adaptations and appropriations configure a profitable product in nowadays capitalistic society by producing clothes, accessories, merchandising, replicas, tattoos, fashion styles, etc.

All the pieces of literature under the spotlight in this paper can be contemplated in face of these discussions. Firstly, Hutcheon (2006; *apud* DIEGO, 2009: 6) says that adaptations are a transcultural phenomenon, since the time and place where they occur inevitably imply alterations in the meaning of the narratives as well as in the narratives themselves, their content, structure, and reception. That is important because the medieval sources of Odin portray different views of the same character, influenced by their contexts; in other words, the Odin from the *Eddas* and from *Ynglinga saga* are different due to the different contexts in which these different pieces were written – considering the already exposed differences in time and the fractured nature of the texts (refer to Chapter 1). The exact same can be said about *American Gods*'s Wednesday.

All in all, the different incarnations of Odin from the different texts used in this study diverge at some times and converge at others because they are adaptations and as such, are transcultural (HUTCHEON, 2006; *apud* DIEGO, 2009: 6). The medieval texts were written at different points in History: while Sturluson authors two of them, the poems of the Poetic *Edda* can be attributed to several anonymous authors from several different places from several different years, thus making them transcultural by nature. Even more so, Gaiman wrote *American Gods* in a North- American context, presumably around 1,000 years after the "original" pieces, in a far away country.

Particularly, Gaiman's novel is largely about (mythological) identity and Wednesday is a central character in that regard. *American Gods* is about and deals with national identity and how America either lacks one or has a multifaceted one, since the novel focuses on how the US is not a single country, made up by a single people and therefore, a single god (or pantheon of gods); rather, the US is a multicultural nation which has been built by numerous peoples who came from different lands and brought along their different gods – among which figure the Norsemen and Wednesday.

In Gorman's (2018: 165-171) words:

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* presents a view on America that is messy, multi-vocal and destabilized [...] it creates a revised sense of the United States, one that is open to micronarratives as well as metanarratives and that shows how stories shape our world [...] instead





of using epic elements to create a unitary world, the epic features help to showcase multiplicity. [...]

Gaiman's fictional story takes its place alongside more dominant tales of the American national past; in so doing, he does not rewrite American history but instead opens it up [...] instead of using this formal component of epic to create a singular voice of the past, Gaiman uses this epic element to multiply the historical voices, creating additional depth to that past. [...]

[...] *American Gods* includes many plot events and theoretical positions related to Americanness and mythology. [...]

[...] in this work, there is no unified, singular American History, but rather there are many histories, both of America's people and their gods, and Gaiman grounds his development of gods in America in these very personal immigration stories. [...]

[...] As Wednesday himself claims in the novel, there is no such thing as a unified America. [...]

American Gods shows how much the national past is a story, crafted and continually revised, which demonstrates a connection to the epic genre at the same time at which the epic is transformed in relation to this new understanding of multiple national pasts instead of a singular national past. By doing so, he allows new stories to be told and for new power relationships among those stories to develop. (GORMAN, 2018: 165-171)

Indeed, *American Gods* does use mythology to talk about national identity – it is in that sense that Wednesday aligns with the multiple medieval "Odins" and the novel fits in the long line of works of literature brought about by Vikingmania. That is why, as Gorman confirms (2018: 165), "Mr. Wednesday [...] turns out to be the American version of the Norse god Odin." In other words, the version of Odin found in *American Gods* is a product of the fascination of people for Norse mythology, a result of the transculturality of adaptations, even a foundation for identity discourse (considering how white supremacism is present in nowadays US society, for example), and most importantly, a reflection of the way Norse mythology is a cultural myth.

From the perspective of the plot itself, Wednesday explains to the protagonist of the novel that the gods are sustained and fed by people's belief in them. Indeed, Vikingmania has caused the Norse myths to be perpetrated in all forms of art, political discourses, and cultural products and all of these have sustained the existence of gods such as Odin. Vikingmania has made sure that Odin remains in the collective imagination. Thus, in the universe set by the novel, Vikingmania (though evidently not mentioned as such by the author) is, in practical means, what is keeping Wednesday alive.

Moreover, it is also due to Vikingmania that Wednesday differs from the Icelandic version of Odin. If the interest for the Viking trope not only perpetuates the Norse narratives, but also transports them into varied contexts that inevitably lead to their adaptation, appropriation and resignification, which in turn irreparably results in change,





then the North- American Odin has been consequently changed this way, to the point where he has become another god altogether when compared to the "original" Odin. Wednesday is as much the same character as the Icelandic version as he is an altogether different god: just as an adaptation of Norse mythology carries the exact same narratives while simultaneously altering their nature and creating something entirely new.

That is to say that Vikingmania is an underlying phenomenon present in the novel that permeates the very foundation for the gods (Wednesday, in particular) that Gaiman lays. Brought to America by Norse seamen, the original idea of Odin took hold in the new land and has thus began to progressively change, as the new land made him a different god from the Icelandic *As*. Thus, in *American Gods*, the Wednesday we meet is as much "Odin" as are the multiple "Odins" found in the medieval sources and in other works of adaptation. Gorman (2018: 167-176) offers evidence of this by analyzing the "Coming to America" fragments in Gaiman's work, which:

[...] explain how the gods were brought to the U.S.; these stories also show how waves of immigration and conquest brought other inhabitants to this country [...]

To take one of these stories in more detail, the story of the Viking raiders is especially illuminating. In this short interruption to the broader plotline, Gaiman presents the arrival of followers of Odin to America. A group of sailors arrive at the shore, haggard and travel-worn with "teeth [...] loosening and eyes [...] deep-sunken in their sockets when they made landfall on the green land to the West" (62). They tell stories of Odin, Ymir, and Thor, and their bard "sang of Odin, the all-father, who was sacrificed to himself as bravely and as nobly as others were sacrificed to him. He sang of the nine days that the allfather hung from the world-tree" (63). On the next day, they kill an indigenous American as a sacrifice to their gods, which ultimately prompts a war band of local men to wipe out the Norse raiders, burning all the remains of this sailing band. Gaiman concludes this section by writing, "It was more than a hundred years before Leif the Fortunate, son of Erik the Red, rediscovered that land, which he would call Vineland. His gods were already waiting for him when he arrived: Tyr, one-handed, and gray Odin gallows-god, and Thor of the thunders. They were there. They were waiting" (64).

This story accomplishes a number of objectives in *American Gods*; first, it provides the background as to why Odin has developed into Wednesday in this new context. He arrived early into this new land, in the year 813 AD, as specified underneath the title of the tale (62). He has thus had time to change here, growing differently from how he was understood in Scandinavia. [...]

In the final part of the story, Shadow travels to Iceland where he meets Odin, and this meeting emphasizes how much the Wednesday in America is not the Odin in Iceland. [...]

For Wednesday, he is not Odin, even though he is an Odin figure. There is no unity of the sign and the signifieds of Odin and Wednesday [...] When Shadow travels to Iceland and meets with Odin, Shadow talks to him as though he were Wednesday and had Wednesday's experiences. Odin then says, "He was me, yes. But I am not him" (521). This





statement demonstrates the extent to which the sign of Odin may connect to Wednesday, but the sign for Wednesday does not link to Odin. (GORMAN, 2018: 167-176)

As a final thought, the manner the *Eddas* and the *Saga of the Ynglings* portray different versions of the same god reveal how Odin has been an object of adaptation since the very "original" pieces of literature. Furthermore, that an ancient character such as him proves to be fresh and relevant enough as to figure in a contemporary novel is clearly linked to Vikingmania. *American Gods* is yet another piece of art that draws on the fascination and appropriation of the Norse myths to build itself: it arises in a context where the trope of the Viking is in vogue. Such artistic as well as political discourses are, as it has been explained, rooted in a mythical past that is employed to build a foundation for today. As the novel itself points out, Odin did arrive in America, in many different ways, and with him, there came all things related to the idea of the Viking and Norse mythology.

It is worthy to mention that such a study cannot and should not be limited to this paper alone. The influence of the Old Norse Myths – and Odin – can be found everywhere: from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* and *The Hobbit*, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Marvel's comic book series *Mighty Thor*, all the way to animes such as *The Vinland Sagas*, video games such as *Skyrim* and *God of War*, and even music in the form of Viking metal and folk bands such as Amon Amarth and Wardruna. Norse mythology is an omnipresent vehicle for creativity, artistic expression and ideological discourses – and in that way, Odin is as alive among us as Gaiman would have us believe in his novel.

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