MYTHIC NARRATIVE AS A STRUCTURE OF SACRED CONSCIOUSNESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL-HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF *AMERICAN GODS*

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OFFICIAL MEMORANDUM

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Peace be upon you, and Allah's mercy and blessings.

After reading, reviewing, and providing necessary corrections and suggestions, we hereby state that the thesis of:

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We kindly request that the above-mentioned thesis or final project be scheduled for a thesis defense as soon as possible. Thank you for your attention.

Peace be upon you, and Allah's mercy and blessings.

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AUTHENTYCITY AND PLAGIARISM-FREE STATEMENT

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hereby declare that this undergraduate thesis is entirely the product of my own research and intellectual effort, except where specific references are duly acknowledged. I affirm that this work is free from any form of plagiarism. Should it be proven in the future that this thesis is not my original work or contains plagiarized content, I am prepared to accept any sanctions in accordance with the prevailing academic and legal regulations.

Yogyakarta, August 13th, 2025
Author,

Muhsin Nuralim

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DEDICATION

To those who taught me that questions are as sacred as answers—
to my beloved family; mother, father, brother, and sister, whose faith in me never
wavered,

to my friends, whose laughter and encouragement carried me through,
to my mentors, who guided my thoughts toward deeper truths,
and to every seeker who walks the thin line between the known and the unknown.

This work is for you.

MOTTO

"Myth is an extremely complex cultural reality, which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary viewpoints."
-Mircea Eliade

"Semua pertanyaan selalu berpasangan dengan jawaban.
Untuk keduanya bertemu, yang dibutuhkan cuma waktu"
— Dee, Partikel

"Menjadi kuat bukan berarti kamu tahu segalanya. Bukan berarti kamu tidak bisa hancur. Kekuatanmu ada pada kemampuanmu bangkit kembali setelah berkali-kali jatuh. Jangan pikirkan kamu akan sampai di mana dan kapan. Tidak ada yang tahu. *Your strength is simply your will to go on.*"
— Dee, Partikel

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This thesis began as an academic task, yet became a journey of faith, reflection, and rediscovery. Hermeneutics opened my eyes to the art of interpreting the hidden depths within texts, while phenomenology taught me to see how human beings reconstruct their consciousness in the face of change. I once carried a quiet question in my heart: *"How could the sacred within the myths of the past vanish?"* Through *American Gods*, I found not an ending, but a revelation; humanity never truly let go of the sacred; it reshapes it, weaving new meanings to survive in an ever-changing world.

To my beloved parents—your love and prayers have been my fortress. Every success I have is woven from your sacrifices, patience, and blessings. To my siblings, who show care in their own unique ways, I pray your dreams find their way to reality.

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And lastly, to *myself*, thank you for not giving up when the road was unclear, for embracing the nights of doubt, and for continuing the search for meaning even when the answers were hidden.

I know this thesis is far from perfect. Yet, if there is any truth, goodness, or benefit in it, may Allah accept it as *sadaqah jariyah* for all who have supported me. And if there are shortcomings or errors, they are mine alone, and I ask Allah's forgiveness.

May this work be not only the closing of a chapter, but the opening of many more journeys: in knowledge, in service, and in devotion to the One who is the Source of all meaning.

ABSTRACT

Mythic Narrative as a Structure of Sacred Consciousness: A Phenomenological-Hermeneutic Study of *American Gods*

In an increasingly secular and fragmented world, modern individuals continue to seek meaning, direction, and transcendent experiences—even beyond the framework of formal religious institutions. Myth, once a sacred narrative shaping collective consciousness, has migrated into the realms of fiction and popular culture. Engaging with *American Gods* is not merely reading fantasy, it is tracing how spirituality survives, transforms, and re-emerges in the language of our time. This study addresses two central research questions: (1) How do the myths presented in *American Gods* reflect the Sacred in the modern world? and (2) What are the roles and functions of the myths depicted in *American Gods* in the religious life of modern society?

This study is a library-based research that analyzes *American Gods* as a literary object using Mircea Eliade's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach. Eliade's structural hermeneutics provides the theoretical framework for interpreting symbols, characters, and narrative structures as forms of *hierophany*—manifestations of the Sacred within profane reality. The method emphasizes the symbolic and experiential dimensions of myth, treating fiction not merely as narrative but as a vessel of religious consciousness.

The findings reveal that myth in American Gods functions as a living structure of sacred consciousness. Old gods such as Odin, Anansi, and Kali represent displaced spiritual traditions, while new gods like Media, Technology, and Mr. World embody modern belief systems rooted in consumption, connectivity, and control. Through their symbolic conflict, the novel illustrates how myth continues to serve as a medium for meaning-making, identity formation, and spiritual reflection in postmodern society. The study concludes that myth in fiction can substitute formal religious structures by offering sacred experience that is symbolic, adaptive, and personal. It recommends that religious studies engage more openly with fictional texts as meaningful spaces for spiritual interpretation in modern life.

Keywords: *Myth, Sacred Consciousness, Structural Hermeneutics, American Gods, Modern Spirituality*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Human beings, as *homo religiosus*, possess an awareness of the existence of the Sacred.[1] This awareness leads them to question the nature of existence, the meaning, and the essence of life itself. "Where do we come from? What is the purpose of living? Is there a specific reason for our existence in the world?" Such questions about meaning and existence occupy a central place in the realm of phenomenology, a study concerned with human experience and consciousness.

At a certain point, every human being will, or already has, encountered the Sacred within their sphere of consciousness, though the exact moment may differ for each individual. When this encounter occurs, they construct a unique interpretation of their experience with the Sacred. Even when the object of the encounter is the same, human experiences remain inherently subjective and distinct from one another.

When consciousness and the Sacred begin to interact, the field of philosophical phenomenology alone is no longer sufficient to fully explain the construction of such experiences. This is where the phenomenology of religion emerges, offering a solution. The phenomenology of religion seeks to understand the structure and meaning of religious phenomena through a non-reductionist approach, focusing on the uniqueness of religious experience, thereby distinguishing it from other methods used to interpret data[2].

In the past, the Sacred exerted a profound influence over every aspect of communal life. It was present in all layers of society, from the smallest to

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[1] Mircea Eliade, The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).

[2] Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion; Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions* (Great Britain: Mounton Publishers, 1978), p. 37.

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the largest, shaping decisions about where to live, the construction of homes, rituals, customs, and storytelling. One could say that the Sacred was deeply manifested in the everyday life of society.[3] Mircea Eliade, a phenomenologist and scholar of religious studies, states that being religious does not necessarily mean believing in the existence of God, gods, deities, or other supernatural beings, but rather refers to human experience of the Sacred itself *(the experience of the sacred).*[4] This is why humanity is considered *homo religiosus*. And because of such experiences, the Sacred is inherently and inseparably linked to existence, meaning, and truth. Consider, for instance, that in every corner of the world, humans have their own gods and goddesses that represent the Sacred. In the Nordic region, they know Odin, Thor, and the Valkyries; in India, Brahman, Kali, Indra, Vishnu, and Shiva; in Greece, Zeus, Poseidon, Medusa, and many others. This demonstrates that every culture projects the Sacred into specific figures. The purpose of such projection is to enable people to comprehend reality and the life they live, so that humanity does not exist in chaos, but instead lives within an ordered structure.

Human consciousness in the past was manifested through various traditions, architectural structures, ideologies, and narratives, serving as a cultural repository for present-day society to understand life in earlier times. Narratives about the Sacred were not merely bedtime stories; rather, they functioned as guiding truths, enabling people to emulate the lives of gods or heroes as moral exemplars. However, change is inevitable. Myth—once a guiding framework because it contained stories of the Sacred—has, for some, shifted into something regarded as implausible, perceived as a form of irrationality within the modern scientific paradigm.[5] Contemporary humanity no longer seeks to understand the world through stories of gods

[3] Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Belief* (Berkeley, Los Angles: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1996), pp. 130–1.

[4] Eliade, The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion, p. i.

[5] Bernard Yack, "Myth and Modernity: Hans Blumenberg's Reconstruction of Modern Theory", *Political Theory*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Sage Publications2111 West Hillcrest Drive, Newbury Park, CA 91320, 1987), pp. 244–61, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0090591787015002005, accessed 23 Apr 2025.

and goddesses to make sense of events; instead, they rely on observation, data, and scientific knowledge to explain phenomena in an objective manner.

Changes in ways of thinking and advances in scientific knowledge have ushered humanity into the secular era, in which religious values and norms have begun to lose their authority and influence. As a result of this shift, myth is no longer regarded in the same sacred manner as in the past. Consequently, myths or narratives of the Sacred are no longer the exclusive domain of religion; they have also become the subject of cultural studies, folklore, and ideology.[6] Because myth now moves within a freer realm due to societal changes, contemporary humanity lives in a postmodern era, one of whose defining features is the collapse of many dualistic perspectives that have become irrelevant. This collapse has been further dramatized by the intervention of popular culture in spiritual values. Imaginative texts such as *Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, The Passion of the Christ*, and *Left Behind* present religious symbols and ideas, such as the figure of the savior, sacrifice, and creation myths, that convey a strong sense of the sacred, even without claiming literal truth as in the case of scripture or the church.[7]

The question that now arises is whether the progress of time and scientific knowledge has also contributed to the separation from the Sacred. Has the Sacred gradually *disappeared* from the consciousness of modern society? Or has the advancement of science in fact strengthened ideas of the Sacred? In what forms does the Sacred manifest itself within modern society? Such questions regarding the shifting meaning of the Sacred in the modern world are particularly intriguing to explore in contemporary literary works, such as *American Gods*, which presents myth within a postmodern narrative. It would be overly simplistic to assert that the dimension of the Sacred has been abandoned or has vanished from the consciousness of modern humanity.

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[6] Andrew Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[7] Em McAvan, "The Postmodern Sacred", *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2010), pp. 7–7.

Eliade argues that the Sacred is an integral part of the structure of human consciousness, as it is inherently connected to human existence and meaning. In other words, humanity cannot live without seeking meaning in its own existence. When human beings become aware of their own being, that they are created and are mortal, they are led to think that something Sacred has brought them into existence. Awareness of human frailty and mortality is conveyed through myth, which in turn provides religious meaning to human life. In this sense, myth serves several functions: first, it offers a religious framework to distinguish between what is true and false, real and unreal; second, it possesses a *redemptive power* by teaching people to emulate the sacred actions of gods, goddesses, or heroes; and third, the meaning assigned by humanity originates from consciousness itself, wherein myth ultimately shapes how humans understand life and their responsibility toward the world.[8]

Although modern humans may reject myth, they still continue to seek meaning. This implies that as long as modern humanity remains interested in discovering the nature of its own existence, the Sacred will remain an essential element guiding them through life. Modern individuals may no longer refer to their new models as myths and may reject older myths, yet the models, whether in the form of novels, films, or music, still perform the same function, according to Eliade: they provide direction, values, and a structured meaning to human life. Today, sacred rituals and narratives may have changed—partially or entirely—but the awareness of the Sacred remains present, embedded within the very structure of human thought.

Eliade holds a particular view regarding *creative works* such as novels, films, or poetry. For him, the aesthetic and the religious dimensions intersect at the point of their respective uniqueness. This uniqueness lies in the fact that their deepest meanings can only be revealed through a non-reductionist approach, within their *own distinctive plane of reference*.[9] This means that each will disclose its most profound significance only when viewed from

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[8] Mircea Eliade, "The Sacred in the Secular World", in *Cultural Hermeneutics* (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 101–13.
[9] Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

within its own reality, without reducing it to secondary aspects or other contexts.

In today's postmodern life, human encounters with the Sacred differ significantly from those of the past. The roles of technology, science, media, and other aspects of modernity have transformed these experiences. We could hardly have imagined, for instance, a robot leading a religious ceremony, as is the case with Mindar in Japan.[10] Imaginative texts such as novels, poetry, and film, as products of popular culture, also play a role in narrating and disseminating this shift in the Sacred.

One popular novel that has contributed to explaining the phenomena of modernity is *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. The novel depicts a clash between old myths embodied in deities such as Odin, Anansi, Kali, and Bilquis, and the gods of the present such as Mr. World, Technology, Media, and Globalization. The novel seems to suggest that "although the old gods have long disappeared or are gradually being forgotten, we have new gods to worship, trust, or depend upon."[11]

The interweaving of myth, religion, and fictional narrative in *American Gods* demonstrates that religion and myth actively participate in shaping the story and its characters. This aligns with Anton Bierl's assertion that: "...Religion is not the hidden superstructure of the romances but is intrinsically intertwined with them… the fictional and erotic text is not derivative of religious discourses but rather *functions* in conjunction with them as an effective aesthetic and poetic medium."[12]

Through this lens, *American Gods* illustrates how the old gods coexist with modern gods (such as Media and Technology), reflecting the intersection between ancient beliefs and contemporary life. The novel's narrative does not treat religion as an object that is "sacred and set apart,"

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[10] *Meet "Mindar," the robotic Buddhist priest in Japan - NZ Herald*, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/meet-mindar-the-robotic-buddhist-priest-in-japan/JZEVY2LDF65SOY25YGADXG3KUU/, accessed 11 May 2025.

[11] Susan Gorman, *Neil Gaiman's American Gods : A Postmodern Epic for America*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2018).

[12] Anton Bierl; Marilia P. Futre Pinheiro; Roger Beck, *Intende, Lector; Echoes of Myth, Religion and Ritual in the Ancient Novel* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

but rather as part of *a symbolic reality* and *an evolving popular culture*. In Gaiman's narrative, seemingly ordinary realities—such as television—are portrayed as possessing the power to reprogram what modern humans perceive as real or unreal.

Here we are faced with the question: is what appears to be fiction entirely detached from religious meaning? Or, rather, is it within fiction that symbols and rituals find their *new form*? The relationship between myth, symbol, and structures of meaning in fictional narrative, forming the central theme of this study, opens a space for interpreting *narratives* of the Sacred. One relevant approach to uncovering such answers is the structural hermeneutics proposed by Mircea Eliade, which views myth as an expression of sacred experience that continues to live in the modern world through symbolic forms.[13]

Naturally, hermeneutics plays a significant role, especially in the history of religion. If one were merely to record what religious people do (for example: praying, making offerings, building temples), the result would be nothing more than ordinary social history—empty data if its meaning is not interpreted. As Eliade notes: "Without hermeneutics, the history of religion is just another history – bare facts, special classifications, and so on. With the problem of hermeneutics – meaning – we see that every manifestation of the sacred – symbol, myth, ritual – tells us something…"[14] In other words, hermeneutics does not merely interpret texts, but seeks to understand the structure of meaning behind human religious actions—rituals, symbols, myths. For Eliade, it is not enough to know *what* people do; one must also grasp *why* they do it.

In this context, the study of fictional narratives such as *American Gods* becomes increasingly relevant for religious studies. Unlike canonical religious texts, fictional works offer a dynamic and imaginative space where spiritual questions are explored outside institutional boundaries. They reflect how modern individuals engage with sacred symbols, myths, and

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[13] Livia Durac, "Mircea Eliade: the hermeneutics of the religious phenomenon", *4th International Conference on Human Being in Contemporary Philosophy* (Volgorgad, 2007).

[14] Eliade, "The Sacred in the Secular World".

rituals in everyday life, often unconsciously. By analyzing such texts, scholars can uncover how religious meaning is reconfigured in secular and postmodern contexts, revealing dimensions of belief, identity, and transcendence that might be overlooked in formal theological discourse. This approach not only broadens the scope of religious studies but also affirms the continuing role of myth in shaping human consciousness and cultural imagination.

B. Research Questions

Based on the above background, the author formulates two main academic problems:

1. How do the myths presented in *American Gods* reflect the Sacred in the modern world?

2. What are the roles and functions of the myths depicted in *American Gods* in the religious life of modern society?

C. Research Objectives

Referring to the research questions above, the objectives of this study are:

1. To examine how the myths presented in *American Gods* reflect the Sacred in the modern world.

2. To identify the roles and functions of the myths depicted in *American Gods* in the religious life of modern society.

D. Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Benefits

   Theoretically, this research is expected to enhance our understanding of myths contained in *literary works* and the relationship between religious studies and literary studies. In addition, it views myth as a religious manifestation in the modern world, offering a new perspective within the field of religious studies. Finally, the aim of this research is

to integrate Eliade's hermeneutical phenomenology framework into the analysis of a literary work, thus enabling future scholars in the field of religious studies to apply a religious studies perspective when analyzing different literary texts.

2. Practical Benefit

Practically, this research is expected to promote intercultural dialogue by showcasing the diversity of mythologies and providing the public with a new understanding that religious and spiritual values are not always expressed through formal religious forms, but also through symbols, stories, and popular culture closely connected to everyday life. In the socio-cultural context, this research highlights how myths, rituals, and experiences of the Sacred continue to live in new forms within modern society, including through literary works such as *American Gods*. Thus, this research can raise awareness of the continuing function of myth as a guide to life's meaning, identity, and religiosity in more fluid and contextual ways, as well as encourage society to be more open to the diverse ways humans interpret the world and the transcendent within it.

E. Literature Review

To facilitate identifying the research gap between this study and previous research, the Literature Review will be organized thematically, referring to the approaches and research methods employed by other scholars. Broadly, there are three main lenses: first, *American Gods* through the lens of Literature and Linguistics; second, *American Gods* within the scope of Cultural Studies; and finally, *American Gods* from the perspective of Folklore and Sociology.

1. *American Gods* through the lens of Literature and Linguistics

Literature and Linguistics can be considered the most relevant disciplines for examining a novel such as *American Gods*, as uncovering the deeper meaning of a literary work requires its own distinctive approach. However, this does not preclude the possibility that *American*

Gods can also be studied from other perspectives, such as Mircea Eliade's Structural Hermeneutics.

The first study is by Irina Rata, *"The Role of Intertextuality in Neil Gaiman's American Gods"* (2012), which discusses the role of intertextuality based on structuralist theory. For Rata, intertextuality in American Gods successfully illustrates "what America is" because of the complexity of its identity and its intricate depictions. In short, intertextuality symbolizes a complex America, composed of various cultures, ethnicities, and languages—*a melting pot of cultures*.[15]

In *"Modern Day Myths in Neil Gaiman's American Gods"* (2021), Mikhail examines the plot using Joseph Campbell's monomyth as the analytical framework. The findings show that the main character's journey follows Campbell's three stages: departure, initiation, and apotheosis. This study also proposes the idea that the novel, as a contemporary story, can be categorized as a mythic narrative in the modern era, though this remains open for further discussion or critique.[16]

Susan Gorman's *"Neil Gaiman's American Gods: A Postmodern Epic for America"* (2018) focuses on the aspect of genre, the type of text. The novel presents America from a postmodern perspective, meaning it does not offer a singular or unified narrative of America or its history, but instead merges multiple perspectives infused with doubt, irony, and playfulness in meaning. Furthermore, the epic form in American Gods is highly unconventional, unlike traditional heroic epics of the past. Each character, narrative, and traditional element is reconstructed in new forms that suit modern American conditions.[17]

Finally, a thesis from a linguistic perspective by Makkawaru (2018), *"The Stylistics in Neil Gaiman's American Gods",* shows that stylistics plays a significant role in shaping the novel's narrative.

[15] Irina RAŢĂ, "The Role of Intertextuality in Neil Gaiman's American Gods", *Journal of Literature, Cultural Studies and Linguistics*, vol. 3 (2015), pp. 103–12.

[16] Syed Mikhail Bin Mohamed Roslan, Rohimmi Bin Noor, and Hardev Kaur, "Modern Day Myths in Neil Gaiman's American Gods", *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2020), pp. 370–85.

[17] Gorman, Neil Gaiman' s American Gods: A Postmodern Epic for America.

Gaiman's stylistic choices also help reinforce the story's context, making it easier for readers to understand the characters' lives, while enhancing the overall appeal of the narrative.[18]

Each of these literary-focused studies complements the others—covering intertextual meaning, genre, plot, and language style. These elements are naturally suited to literary approaches, as they are fundamental building blocks of storytelling.

2. *American Gods* **within the scope of Cultural Studies**

Cultural Studies examines a wide range of aspects within human culture. Central themes or key concepts in cultural studies include culture and signifying practices, representation, articulation, power, ideology and popular culture, text and audience, subjectivity, and identity[19]. Accordingly, the studies discussed below fall into the category of Cultural Studies, even though the researchers employed theoretical frameworks from other social sciences in their analyses.

The first study addresses the concept of national identity, specifically American identity in a political context. Siobhan Carroll, in *"Imagined Nation: Place and National Identity in Neil Gaiman's American Gods"* (2012), concludes that storytelling and geography (place) are closely intertwined in the construction of national identity. However, in *American Gods*, readers are also led to understand national identity as a communal fiction, one that is continuously revised. Identity is not fixed; rather, fiction, place, and nation continually shape one another, and this construction is never stable.[20]

The second study deals with the cultural clashes symbolized by the great war between gods, as explored by Naya Fuazia in *"The Clash of Culture in Neil Gaiman's American Gods"* (2018).[21] Another relevant

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[18] Makkawaru, "The Stylistics in Neil Gaiman's 'American Gods'" (Alauddin State Islamic University of Makassar, 2018).

[19] Chris. Emma A. Jane Barker, *Cultural Studies; Theory and Practice*, 5th edition (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016).

[20] Siobhan Carroll, "Imagined nation: Place and national identity in Neil Gaiman's American Gods", *Extrapolation*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2012), pp. 307–26.

[21] Naya Fauzia Dzikrina and Achmad Munjid, "The Clash of Culture in Neil Gaiman' American Gods", *Lexicon*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2018), pp. 139–51.

work is Mark Hill's dissertation, *"Neil Gaiman's American Gods: An Outsider's Critique of American Culture"* (2005), which argues that Gaiman highlights the polarization of American identity by contrasting a romanticized past with contemporary realities. Hill critiques the ongoing search for new beliefs and stresses the importance of preserving core American values such as courage and justice. Meanwhile, the novel's focus on immigration stories underscores the vital role immigrants have played in shaping American culture.[22]

Lastly, the investigation into American identity has also been undertaken by Lisa Kjærsgaard Nielsen in *"American Gods: An Examination of the American Identity"*. This study explores how American identity is shaped by its status as *a melting pot of cultures* and the widespread ideals of the American Dream. According to Nielsen, the complexity of American identity manifests in diverse forms and continues to evolve through the convergence of multiple cultures and the ongoing pursuit of the "American Dream," which promises both personal and communal transformation. Through the lens of mythology and immigrant experience, Nielsen offers a fresh perspective on what it means to be American, emphasizing adaptability and the perpetual quest for new beginnings.[23]

3. *American Gods* from the perspective of Folklore and Sociology

Lisa's master's thesis is one of the few studies that delve deeply into the aspects of myth and religion. Her research not only addresses the concept of American identity, as described earlier, but also employs a socio-historical approach to explore myths, making her work an especially interesting subject for discussion. In American Gods, myth plays a crucial role in portraying the complexity of American identity. Myths brought by immigrants, such as Odin from Norse mythology, Anansi from African folklore, and Czernobog from Slavic mythology,

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[22] Mark Hill, "Neil Gaiman's American Gods: An Outsider's Critique of American Culture" (University of New Orleans, 2005).

[23] Lisa Kjærsgaard Nielsen, "American Gods: An Examination of the American Identity" (Aalborg Universitet American, 2019),

symbolize the blending of cultures and adaptation to new environments. The presence of these ancient myths underscores their continuing influence on American culture.

In her analysis, Lisa categorizes the slogan "American Dream" as a powerful myth representing belief in opportunity, prosperity, and success through hard work. This belief motivates individuals to seek a better life in America. Furthermore, American Gods also critiques the commercialization and consumerism that characterize American society. The new gods—such as Media and Technology—thrive because of the "worship and attention" they receive from contemporary society, resulting in ongoing conflicts of values and identity, where traditional values are replaced by new ones. These new gods are depicted as myths that threaten the old gods, making inter-god conflict inevitable.[24]

Based on this argument, the present study aims to examine the myths narrated in American Gods from the perspective of Religious Studies as a reflective analysis of the modern myths that have emerged. Here, Mircea Eliade, one of the key figures in myth theory, connects myth with the expression of the manifestation of the Sacred in the form of *hierophany*.[25]

This raises questions such as: What makes something considered sacred by a society? How is something categorized as sacred? Can technology, media, or globalization, as depicted in American Gods, be considered sacred, or at least reflect sacred values? If so, for whom?

Therefore, this research seeks to explore in greater depth the concepts of the Sacred and the Profane as described by Mircea Eliade, viewing the "new gods" in American Gods as modern mythological figures, something that clearly distinguishes this work from previous studies.

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[24] Lisa Kjærsgaard Nielsen, "American Gods: An Examination of the American Identity"

[25] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1987).

F. Theoretical Framework

The complexity of literary works often makes it difficult to determine the position of a study, whether it falls within the domain of literature, linguistics, or other social sciences. In this research, however, the position is clearly within the field of Religious Studies, employing phenomenological hermeneutic approaches. The researcher is interested in exploring the religious meaning embedded in literary texts, not as doctrine or dogma, but as manifestations of human experiences of the Sacred.

Experiences of the Sacred can be narrated through myths, which take the form of stories depicting reality and serve to help humans understand the external world while offering references for actions to be taken in certain situations. Over time, and as social and cultural contexts change, the term *myth* can also refer to a story that is not entirely true or is even mistaken. For example, someone might say to a friend, "Don't wear that gemstone just because you think it will bring you good luck, that's just a myth or superstition!" This statement reflects how, in society, gemstones are often associated with expectations of good fortune, something that is, of course, not factually accurate.

The increasingly broad use of the term *myth* in various contexts makes it important to clarify its meaning within this discussion. As a crucial note, regardless of its context, a myth is always a story, but not every story qualifies as a myth.[26] The key point lies in the *story* itself. But what kind of story? How is that story told within a society? To what extent does such a "story" shape human understanding of reality? Therefore, before proceeding, it is necessary to first clarify the definition of myth in the context of Religious Studies.

1. The Nature of Myth in Religious Studies

The term *myth* comes from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning "word," "speech," "story," or even "fiction."[27] In academic contexts,

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[26] Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Belief*, pp. 134–5.

[27] . Jonathan Z Buxton, R. G.A. , Bolle, . Kees W. and Smith, "Myth: Definition, History, Examples, & Facts", *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024), https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth, accessed 16 May 2024.

however, myth does not simply mean any ordinary story; rather, it refers to a narrative of truth that contains sacred values. Such stories depict humanity's continual struggle against disorder (*chaos*); in order to achieve a harmonious and ordered life. According to Robert A. Segal, the central figures in myth must be gods, goddesses, or heroes who are engaged in bringing order to the world. In this sense, myth differs from folklore, superstition, or other types of narratives circulating in society[28].

For Mircea Eliade, myth is a complex cultural reality. He defines myth as a creation story—an account of how something first came into existence within the structure of reality, whether it be the world, death, ritual, or humanity itself. Myths explain how all things came to be: Why does death exist? Why is there day and night? Why must certain rituals be performed? This is why myths are considered "sacred stories" and "true histories," for they narrate the irruption of the Sacred into the profane world. Such events ultimately give life meaning and structure.[29] Thus, myth is not mere fiction or entertainment, but a form of sacred history believed to reflect profound spiritual and cosmic truths. For traditional societies, myths explain the origins of the world, the social order, and even the meaning of life.

In addition to explaining origins, Eliade emphasizes that myths possess authority because they are considered exemplary models for human behavior. They do not simply recount events of the distant past but establish paradigms that guide ritual, morality, and social order. As he notes, "Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of realities, of what really happened, of what was fully manifested"[30]. In this sense, myths reveal the sacredness of their content: "they describe the irruption of the sacred into the world"[31] . Because of this, myths are

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[28] Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.
[29] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).
[30] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963)., p. 6.
[31] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963)., p. 20.

believed to provide models that humans can repeat and reenact through ritual, thereby connecting ordinary life to the primordial moment of creation. Thus, myth functions not only as a story of beginnings but also as a living framework that confers meaning, legitimacy, and sacred order to human existence.

But how do other scholars define myth, especially when understood from a modern human perspective? Is it still considered "sacred" because it contains supernatural figures, or has it shifted toward something profane?

Andrew Von Hendy offers a critical, interdisciplinary history of how the concept of myth was shaped. In his view, the concept of myth was not formed in ancient times, as many believe, but reinvented during the 18th century. Although numerous theories of myth exist—whether ideological, folkloric, or structural—they all share one major idea: a romantic or transcendental origin, the belief that myth comes from a pure, sacred, and "authentic" past. Working within a diachronic, genealogical, and axiological framework, Von Hendy categorizes myth theories into four groups: Ideological, Folkloric, Constitutive, and Transcendental Original.[32]

a. **Ideological** – Myth is seen as a tool of power or propaganda. This perspective treats myth as a construct used to reinforce certain ideologies, often to maintain social or political structures. Karl Marx's Marxist ideology is a prime example. In this view, myth is not sacred, but a means of producing meaning shaped by power.

b. **Folkloric** – Myth is understood as part of oral tradition, legend, and folk culture. Jacob Grimm, for instance, considered myth to be one genre of oral storytelling. In this perspective, the function of myth is to understand the form, function, and spread of stories within culture.

c. **Constitutive** – Myth not only reflects reality but also shapes human consciousness. In this sense, it is a structure through which

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[32] Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, pp. xi–xvii.

people understand reality itself. Mircea Eliade's ideas fit here: myths such as those of death and resurrection—evident in the stories of Osiris or Christ—express fundamental human perceptions of time, life, and cyclical renewal.

d.   **Romantic / Transcendental Origin** – Myth is regarded as a remnant of something sacred. This is not a distinct theory but rather the root of the previous three approaches. All three, according to Von Hendy, are grounded in the belief that myth originates from a noble, sacred, and pure past.

Given the variety of academic theories about myth, it would be mistaken to dismiss myth as mere fiction without meaning. Instead, myth is a symbolic narrative passed down from the past, continually relevant in expressing the condition of each era. In *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman does not simply retell old myths; rather, he reconstructs their forms and functions to fit contemporary culture. By introducing new gods such as Media, Technology, Mr. World, and Globalization, myth becomes a living and dynamic symbolic structure.

2.   **The Concept of the Sacred and *Homo Religiosus* in Mircea Eliade**

Mircea Eliade believed that the Sacred is an inherent part of human consciousness. The awareness of one's own existence inevitably provokes deep questions: Why are we present in the world? Am I living my life in the right way? What if I had never existed at all? These existential questions drive human beings to continuously seek meaning in life.

For Eliade, this search arises because humans live within the duality of the *sacred* and the *profane*. This dual state is never stable. It represents two distinct modes of being in the world—not merely two ways of thinking, but two existential structures shaping how humans experience and interpret reality.[33]

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[33] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1987).

Archaic or traditional humans lived with an acute awareness of the sacred: everything carried symbolic and spiritual meaning. Eating, engaging in sexuality, building a home, planting a tree—all could be understood as rituals or sacraments that brought the Sacred into the world. In contrast, modern humans tend to experience these same activities in a profane way—as purely biological or technical acts, stripped of spiritual significance. As Eliade describes, the gulf between the sacred and the profane forms an *abyss* that distinguishes these two modes of human consciousness throughout history.

The Sacred, in Eliade's thought, is not a metaphysical entity existing independently, but rather an experience—or even a mode of interpreting reality. The presence of the Sacred is revealed through symbols, myths, rites, and narratives. Eliade calls each such manifestation a *hierophany*: the moment when something ordinary (such as a stone, a mountain, a span of time, or a particular place) becomes a medium through which the Sacred is made present. Consequently, religious experience is not the sole property of institutional religion, but a dimension embedded in the very structure of human consciousness.

In the modern world, encounters with the Sacred may no longer take the form of traditional religious rituals, but can appear in new forms—in literature, popular culture, or even technology. This makes Eliade's approach highly relevant to works such as *American Gods*, which depicts the conflict between the old gods and the new gods in a secular world. The novel illustrates how the Sacred can be reinterpreted and manifested symbolically within the consciousness of modern society.

3. **Structural Hermeneutics: Meaning within the Structure of Consciousness**

Mircea Eliade was not only a historian of religions but also a phenomenologist who sought to develop a method for interpreting religious experience. Eliade asserts that the task of the scholar of

religion is not merely to describe symbols, myths, or rites found within a tradition, but to interpret their deeper meaning. As he states: "Without hermeneutics, meaning, we see that every manifestation of the sacred—symbol, myth, ritual—tells us nothing."[34] This indicates that hermeneutics, for Eliade, is essential to uncovering the hidden religious structures embedded within symbolic forms.

The hermeneutical method he developed is described by Douglas Allen as structural hermeneutics. This approach seeks to reveal the fundamental structures of human religious experience *(structures of consciousness)* that are symbolic and universal. These structures emerge in recurring patterns of myth, ritual, and *hierophany* found across different cultures and historical periods. However, Eliade's method does not limit itself to the formal study of structure. He also leaves space for creativity and diversity in interpreting sacred experience, making the method not purely formalistic but also existential and cultural in scope.[35]

In his view, the religious structure of human beings is revealed in how they give meaning to space, time, and their own existence. A certain location becomes a sacred space because it is the site of a manifestation of the Sacred *(hierophany)*. Likewise, time becomes sacred time when humans re-enact mythological events or archetypal rites. For Eliade, myth is not a fairy tale, but a "true story" of sacred history because it explains how the world was first ordered by divine powers—and how humans, by imitating those primordial acts, maintain the order of the cosmos.[36]

Through structural hermeneutics, Eliade invites readers to see that religious symbols in myths or narratives cannot be understood literally; they must be interpreted in terms of their structural patterns. This means looking for recurring motifs, archetypal markers, and symbolic

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[34] Mircea Eliade, "The Sacred in the Secular World", in *Cultural Hermeneutics* (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 101–13.
[35] Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion; Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions* (Great Britain: Mounton Publishers, 1978).
[36] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

relationships within the context of sacred experience.[37] Symbols such as the cross, the mountain, the tree, or acts of sacrifice are not merely physical objects or events—they are media through which the Sacred manifests itself.

This method is particularly relevant for analyzing fiction such as *American Gods,* where ancient myths are reimagined in a modern context and new gods are introduced as symbols of contemporary ideological forces. Reading the novel through Eliade's structural hermeneutics allows us to uncover how experiences of the Sacred persist within the structures of modern consciousness, even as their forms change. In this way, Eliade's hermeneutics provides a way of grasping the religious dimension of narrative texts—not as doctrinal statements, but as expressions of a spiritual consciousness that moves within the space of culture.

G. Research Methodology

The research methodology refers to the operational steps taken by the author in conducting the research process in order to address the research questions. This study aims to examine how myth in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* reflects the sacred in the modern world, and how these myths function within the religiosity of contemporary society. The methods used are described in the following points:

1. Type of Research

This study is qualitative in nature, as its primary focus is to interpret the meaning of symbols and narratives within a literary text. The aim is not to measure numerically, but to understand the religious meanings embedded in the story[38]. The approach employed is **Hermeneutic-**

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[37] Adriana Berger, "Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade", *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 2 (1986), pp. 141–56.

[38] Chad; Ruben Dupertuis; Jenny Olin; Gregory Young Spiegel, "Collecting Data and Analyzing Data", in *Undergraduate Reseach in Religious Studies; A Guide for Students and Faculty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 41–55.

Phenomenology. The phenomenological approach is used to explore human experiences of the Sacred as manifested in symbols and narratives. Hermeneutics is employed to interpret the structural meaning of these human experiences, as formulated by Mircea Eliade in his concept of structural hermeneutics.

2. **Type of Data**

   This research utilizes literary data, as all data are drawn from written materials, both fictional and non-fictional. In this context, the text is the primary object of study. Within the field of religious studies, "text" is not limited to sacred scriptures, but also includes literary works such as poetry, prose, sermons, mystical writings, novels, and more. As one scholar notes: *"…The reality is that in the context of religious studies, virtually anything containing words that can offer insight into a particular religious individual or community is considered a text…"*[39]

3. **Data Sources**

   a. **Primary Data**

      The main source of data is *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman — the Indonesian translation published by PT Gramedia in 2011, and the original English edition published by HarperCollins Publisher 1st ed.

   b. **Secondary Data**

      Secondary data are drawn from various books, journals, scholarly articles, and other references that support the theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on the works of Mircea Eliade as the primary theoretical foundation.

4. **Data Collection Techniques**

   Data were collected through documentation, which involved reading, taking notes, and classifying symbols, characters, and narrative elements in the novel that are relevant to Eliade's structural hermeneutics.

5. **Data Processing Techniques**

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[39] Chad; Ruben Dupertuis; Jenny Olin; Gregory Young Spiegel, "Textual Study", in *Undergraduate Reseach in Religious Studies; A Guide for Students and Faculty* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 84–90.

Data analysis and interpretation were carried out in several stages:

a. First, symbolic elements in the novel—such as characters, space, time, and actions—were analyzed to understand how these elements contribute to the work's overall meaning.

b. Next, the symbolic meanings embedded in the novel were interpreted using Mircea Eliade's structural hermeneutics, focusing on the concepts of *hierophany*, the sacred–profane dichotomy, and myth as sacred history. This interpretation sought to reveal how myth operates within a modern narrative and how sacred and profane elements interact to construct meaning.

c. Finally, a pattern of understanding was developed to examine how myth is re-presented in modern form and its roles and functions in shaping contemporary spirituality. This ensured that the research not only uncovered the symbolic structures within the literary work, but also demonstrated their relevance to modern life.

H. Research Outline

This research is organized into five chapters, arranged logically and argumentatively to address the research questions posed—namely, how myth in American Gods reflects the sacred in the modern world, and the roles and functions of such myth in the religious life of contemporary society. Each chapter plays a functional role in building the overall argument of the study.

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter presents the initial framework of the research. It discusses the background of the problem, research questions, objectives and significance of the study, literature review, theoretical framework, research methodology, and the outline of the thesis. The aim is to establish the research context, underscore the urgency of the problem under investigation, and present the tools and approaches used to examine the research object systematically.

Chapter II: The Narrative Context of *American Gods* and The Author's Imaginative World

This chapter provides an overview of *American Gods*, the background of its author, and the structure and symbolism embedded in the narrative. This section is crucial because the hermeneutic approach employed in the study requires an understanding not only of the text, but also of the author and his symbolic universe. In this approach, meaning is shaped not solely by theory or the reader, but also by the world constructed by the author. Consequently, understanding the characters, plot, and religious symbols in the novel serves as a vital foundation for the deeper analysis that follows.

Chapter III: Interpreting The Sacred Through Symbol and Myth in *American Gods*

This chapter constitutes the core of the symbolic analysis, applying Mircea Eliade's structural hermeneutics. The analysis focuses on the representation of characters, settings, and events in the novel as manifestations of the Sacred *(hierophanies)*. By tracing how the narrative structure reflects sacred experience in the modern world, this chapter addresses the first research question: how myth in *American Gods* reflects the sacred within a profane and secular context.

Chapter IV: Myths in the Spirituality of Modern Society: Reflections from *American Gods*

Building on the previous chapter's findings, this section examines the function and role of myth in modern religious life as represented in the novel. Here, myth is understood as a structure of consciousness that continues to live through new forms in contemporary society. The analysis centers on how the old gods and the new gods shape postmodern spirituality, and how the offerings and rituals depicted in the novel reflect shifting religious practices. In this context, Eliade's reflections on homo religiosus are tested against the realities of the modern world.

Chapter V – Conclusion

The final chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the analysis, along with the theoretical and practical implications of the study. It also offers

recommendations for future research, particularly for the development of religious studies on literary texts as spaces for religious interpretation that remain relevant to modern human life.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how myth in *American Gods* reflects the Sacred in the modern world and to examine the roles and functions of myth in the religious life of contemporary society. Drawing on Mircea Eliade's structural hermeneutics, the analysis reveals that myth continues to serve as a symbolic structure through which human consciousness engages with the Sacred—even in a secular and postmodern context.

The first research question—how myth reflects the Sacred in the modern world—is answered through the symbolic reading of characters, places, and narrative structures in *American Gods*. Figures such as Mr. Wednesday (Odin), Mr. Nancy (Anansi), and Mama-Ji (Kali) are not merely literary constructs but hierophanies: manifestations of the Sacred within profane reality. Places like the House on the Rock and the World Tree function as sacred centers (axis mundi), while Shadow Moon's journey reenacts mythic patterns of death, sacrifice, and rebirth. These elements demonstrate that the Sacred persists—not through institutional religion, but through symbolic experience embedded in narrative.

The second research question—regarding the roles and functions of myth in modern religiosity—is addressed by examining how *American Gods* reconfigures myth as a spiritual medium. The novel shows that myth continues to provide existential orientation, moral reflection, and communal identity. The "new gods" (Media, Technology, Mr. World) embody modern belief systems, while the "old gods" represent displaced traditions. Through their conflict, Gaiman illustrates how myth adapts to cultural shifts, offering new rituals (such as digital engagement or media consumption) that mirror traditional religious practices.

Theoretically, this study affirms Eliade's claim that the Sacred is a structure of consciousness rather than a fixed theological system. It also aligns with Hans Blumenberg's view that myth helps humanity confront the "absolutism of reality" by transforming chaos into symbolic order. Em McAvan's concept of the postmodern sacred further supports the idea that popular culture has become a new space for spiritual expression, where fiction functions as a medium for re-sacralization.

Ultimately, *American Gods* demonstrates that myth remains central to the human search for meaning. In a world shaped by technology, pluralism, and fragmentation, myth continues to perform its ancient function: to guide, to orient, and to connect humanity with the transcendent—even if the forms have changed.

B. Suggestions

1. Theoretical Suggestions

This research encourages scholars in religious studies to expand their analytical scope beyond canonical texts and institutional frameworks. Fictional narratives—especially those rich in mythic symbolism—offer fertile ground for interpreting contemporary spiritual consciousness. Eliade's structural hermeneutics proves to be a valuable tool for uncovering religious meaning in literary texts, and future studies could apply this method to other genres such as film, graphic novels, or digital storytelling.

Moreover, interdisciplinary engagement between religious studies, literary theory, and cultural studies can deepen our understanding of how myth operates across different media. By recognizing fiction as a legitimate site of religious meaning, scholars can better grasp the evolving nature of belief in the modern world.

2. Practical Suggestions

Practically, this research highlights the importance of myth as a bridge for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In an increasingly pluralistic society, recognizing the spiritual dimensions of popular

culture can foster empathy and mutual understanding. Educational institutions, cultural organizations, and religious communities might consider using myth-based narratives to explore shared values and existential questions.

Furthermore, this study invites readers—both academic and general—to reflect on their own symbolic landscapes. Whether through novels, films, or digital media, the myths we consume shape how we perceive reality, identity, and the Sacred. By becoming more aware of these symbolic structures, individuals can engage more consciously with the spiritual dimensions of everyday life.

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