

## **Gods Who Survive: Pagan Sources of John Milton and Neil Gaiman**

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### **Abstract**

In his book "Survival of the Pagan Gods," historian and mythographer Jean Seznec argues against the widely held belief that the pagan gods were "rediscovered" in the Renaissance. Seznec argues that "the gods were not restored to life, for they had never disappeared from the memory or imagination of man." In this study, I examine how pagan gods survive in the imaginations of two authors who wrote centuries apart: John Milton and Neil Gaiman. Milton's "Paradise Lost" and Neil Gaiman's "American Gods," both of which attracted attention in their respective eras, are full of pagan gods, from Mesopotamian gods listed as demons in "Paradise Lost" to a pantheon of gods drawn from Native American, Scandinavian, and Slavic mythological traditions in "American Gods." By researching their sources, I study how the texts Milton and Gaiman read before and during their writing processes inform the way they write their syncretic works with pagan figures. I examine what the Bible says about the pagan gods that Milton demonizes in "Paradise Lost," and I read the translations done by linguist John Selden, a contemporary of Milton who translated religious texts originally written in Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Using these resources, I analyze how these texts are incorporated by Milton as he creates his own Genesis narrative. I then compare how Milton uses his sources to how Gaiman uses his sources in "American Gods." I examine "Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers" by Richard M. Dorson and "Who's Who in Non-Classical Mythology" by Egerton Skyes, two of the major texts Gaiman used while writing "American Gods." By researching and comparing the texts both of the authors had read, I explore how what we read changes the way we understand and explain the world.

**Keywords:** God, Pagan, John Milton, Neil Gaiman

### **1. Body of Paper**

Pagan gods survive throughout time no matter what effort is put forth to silence them. They exist in cultures around the world and are found in operas, works of visual art, and literature. They appear in both high culture and pop culture; gods exist for everyone, no matter how common or grand a person may be. Gods survive as long as someone knows their name.

Two authors who participate in their survival are John Milton and Neil Gaiman. Milton, one of the most esteemed authors of the English language, and Gaiman, an author whose style or even intended audience cannot be adequately described, are two very different English writers who write in very different times. Despite their differences, they each made the decision to incorporate pagan gods into famous works. Milton mentions 12 pagan gods by name by line 505 in Book I of "Paradise Lost," in the portion that can be delightfully referred to as his "parade of demons." Milton mentions these gods as the fallen angels who now dwell with Satan in Hell.

In "American Gods," originally published 2001, Gaiman chooses to make the vast majority of his characters pagan gods or mythical folk. In fact, it would be much easier to name the characters that are not gods than to name those that are, but here is an incomplete list of the gods and mythical folk characters: Wednesday, Low-Key, Easter, Mr. Nancy, Czernobog, Mad-Sweeney, Mr. Ibis, Mr. Jacquel, Whiskey Jack, Johnny Chapman, the 3 Zorya sisters, Hinzelmänn,

Mama-Ji, the Queen of Sheba, and the new gods born from Gaiman's imagination. Unlike Milton, Gaiman's gods come from pantheons that span the globe instead of gods that come from a smaller portion of the world.

Although Milton and Gaiman utilize different pagan gods in their writing, they use these gods in a similar way. Both Milton and Gaiman use pagan gods as characters to further their fictional narratives in ways that represent their respective eras in the way they describe these pagan gods. What separates these two writers are the sources they use and their reasons for having chosen these gods. By analyzing these sources, we can recognize how the sources we use change the way we see the world in which we live.

Throughout this essay, the term "pagan" will continue to be used to indicate the gods described by both Milton and Gaiman. Although this term is commonly associated with a negative connotation, it is being used in this context in a neutral way to describe gods that are not a part of the Abrahamic God's pantheon. This term is being used because it indicates a wide range of gods, which is necessary because a diverse pantheon will be described in the course of this essay.

In Book 1 of "Paradise Lost," Milton lists 12 demons, all of whom hail from the ancient Middle Eastern world. The names, in order of appearance as described by Satan, are: Beelzebub, Moloch, Chemos, Peor, Astoreth, Thammuz, Dagon, Rimmon, Osiris, Isis, Orus, and Belial. Of the 12 demons, 9 of the names can be found in the Bible, and all of them are established as false deities. Belial is originally a term for a lazy or cowardly person, but is connected directly to Satan in Second Corinthians. Thammuz and Astarte are the inspiration for a ceremony of mourning in Babylonian tradition, which is then cast as an abomination in the Bible in Ezekiel; this interpretation translates to the gods who inspired the tradition being considered abominations. Rimmon, a Syrian god, is briefly mentioned as being devotedly followed by a leper in Second Kings, but that is all of the attention the Bible gives to him. Dagon, however, is depicted far more, such as in the story of Samson. The Philistines praise Dagon for delivering unto them Samson, the fellow with a reputation for violence towards the Philistines. In their effort to crush both Samson and his spirits, they take the Israelites's ark and place it in the temple next to their own. This causes Dagon's statue to fall twice and for his hands and head to be chopped off.<sup>1</sup> Chemosh is also discussed at length in the Bible, namely in Fourth Kings. The Moabites are attacked by the Israelites, who are victorious, but then leave when Mesha, the king of the Moabs, kills his own son and heir as a sacrifice to Chemosh to beg his favor with "a burnt offering [his son] upon the wall."<sup>2</sup> This is an unusual display of child sacrifice because Chemosh is not a god known for demanding human sacrifice. A god that is, however, is Moloch, the god of the Ammonites. Moloch and his demands are well known to anyone very familiar with the Bible; within 23 passages of the Bible that mention Moloch or his worshippers, 8 of them mention sons and daughters passing through fire. When the Bible mentions Moloch, the Lord makes it very clear that he will abandon anyone that associates themselves or sacrifices their children to Moloch.<sup>3</sup> Another god in the parade of demons is Baal, which is not a singular god, but something more similar to a title. Different communities within a region would have their own Baal, such as Baal-Peor, the god of the Moabite Mountains. He is arguably mentioned once in the Bible as being a false deity, but the spelling of that name makes it unclear.<sup>4</sup> Another Baal that is mentioned and is relatively familiar is Baal-Zebub, the fly god of Ekron. He is mentioned in the Bible as being a healing god that a sick man reaches out to, but is also argued to be a false deity.<sup>5</sup>

This comprehensive list of the gods found in the parade of demons does not include Isis, Orus, or Osiris, three Egyptian gods. That is because these gods are not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Instead, these gods point to other writings that Milton must have been using in order to incorporate these three. A likely possibility is that Milton was utilizing translated texts by John Selden, a linguistic scholar that lived between 1584 and 1654. Among the many languages he translated, a few were Chaldean, Samaritan, Aramaic, Arabic, Persian, and Ethiopic. During his lifetime, Selden is credited with authoring a book on the gods of the ancient Middle East called "De dis Syris," which was published in 1617. This means that Milton would have had this text available to him while he was writing. Interestingly, however, Selden does not do what the Bible does and what is reflected in Milton's writings. Where the Bible condemns these other gods, Selden remained "remarkably open" to the beliefs in multiple gods.<sup>6</sup> This perspective on pagan gods was a rarity during this time, and it contradicted mainstream belief. Because Selden's perspective was unusual, it is possible that Milton could have about these ancient Egyptian gods in Selden's unbiased way and still aligned his own opinions similarly to those found in the Bible. The Bible contributed to the popular belief of these non-Christian gods being inherently false because they contradicted Christian tradition, which made these gods comparable to demons in the popular Christian culture of the 17th century.

But if these gods are so distasteful, why does Milton mention them at all? In answering this question, we must remember that Milton is a poet and focuses on the details. It would not be enough for him, as a skilled writer, to simply state that there were demons dwelling in Pandemonium, Satan's palace. Milton creates a Hell that is far more vivid and terrifying by calling the demons by name. A massive crowd can instill fear, but zooming in on the individual faces and reputations of these fallen angels creates a more vast and intimidating cast of demons. The Christian side of

Milton explains his choice of characters in Book I of "Paradise Lost," but the poet side of Milton explains why he needs the individual names at all.

To contrast all of this, Gaiman is being motivated by a much different reasoning. Although Milton uses an admirably large cast of deities in "Paradise Lost," it is nothing compared to what Gaiman utilizes in "American Gods." Gaiman chooses gods and folk characters from Russia, Norway, West Africa, Mesopotamia, Ireland, Wales, the Americas, Egypt, India, and many more regions and traditions. Gaiman takes pieces of mythological traditions from every corner of the globe to create the pantheon found in this novel. And he doesn't settle there. He brings even more gods to the table by creating "new" gods, such as automobile gods, media gods, and gods of technology. Gaiman uses these gods in this novel to describe how gods fight to exist when people are forgetting their names and their purposes and are instead replacing them with gods of a modern age.

In order to use all of these gods in his novel, Gaiman sought out texts that would provide for him the details he needed in order to adequately describe the gods he wanted. Those familiar with Gaiman's work know that he has a special interest in Norse mythology, so that influence and the presence of Wednesday and Low-Key come as no surprise. Gaiman used sources, such as the translations of Snorri Sturlson's "Prose Edda" and Kevin Crossley-Holland's "The Norse Myths" for these details. Other sources, such as those for Slavic gods, are not as present in well-known (and, in some cases, easily accessible) literature. Gaiman used Herbert Spencer Robinson and Knox Wilson's "Myths and Legends of All Nations," as well as Egerton Sykes's "Who's Who in Non-Classical Mythology." Both of these texts also include details on other gods that were also included in the novel.

Perhaps most of all, Gaiman was inspired by the writings of Richard M. Dorson, a folklorist with a special interest in American folklore, both from Native American and immigrant traditions. His writings focus on myths and stories and how they change over time by internal and external influences. In fact, a quote from Dorson's book "American Folklore and the Historian" is included as an introduction to "American Gods."

It is clear that Gaiman actively researched before and while writing this novel. While the research he completed in is impressive, Gaiman still takes advantage of his artistic liberty while writing these characters by changing them to what he wants them to be, which sometimes results in them becoming different from how the original mythology depicted them. One such example of this is Czernobog. Gaiman does depict the Slavic god of evil, the black god, rather accurately in "American Gods." The Czernobog that Gaiman creates is dirty, rude, and often indifferent to other people and their welfare. He gloats throughout the novel about his plan to kill Shadow with one stroke of his hammer to Shadow's forehead. What Gaiman does that deviates from the original myth is makes him a dualistic god. Slavic mythology tells us that Czernobog is the black god as Bielebog is the white god, the good god. Gaiman alters this myth by making Bielebog and Czernobog the same god, but one that changes with the season. Most of "American Gods" takes place in the winter when the character is Czernobog; in the end of the novel, spring is slowly arriving, and with it Czernobog changes into Bielebog, which turns out to be very fortunate for Shadow and his forehead. Although this alteration makes Czernobog *slightly* less accurate to the original myth, it potentially makes him a more complex character within the plot.

Another example of Gaiman changing the myth to fit the story is Hinzelmänn. Gaiman perfectly describes the creation of a kobold and even uses Hinzelmänn's physical characteristics to inspire images of a goblin, the creature with which kobolds are frequently associated.<sup>7</sup> What he does incorrectly is connects Hinzelmänn with child sacrifice. Although kobolds are created through child sacrifice, there is no clear evidence that indicates that a kobold required sacrifice as a form of worship. In addition to this, in the Black Forest legend of Hinzelmänn, he is never an agent of destruction. He was a mischievous spirit that acted similarly to a poltergeist, but he never committed any harm. Gaiman contradicts this in "American Gods" when Hinzelmänn abducts one child every year, kills them, and puts them in the trunk of vehicle destined to sink beneath the surface of the lake as a payment for keeping the town small, safe, and prosperous. Although this detail is inaccurate, it does follow the subtextual mantra of the gods and mythical beings, which is spoken by Czernobog: "Some things linger, and blood lingers longest." There is a strength in blood sacrifice that keeps the gods and folk characters alive and powerful. The sacrifice of a life to Hinzelmänn may not be accurate to his mythology, but it makes him a part of the pantheon that Gaiman creates.

Gaiman and Milton are writing their narratives centuries apart with an audience that has changed a great deal over the course of time. While the popular belief during Milton's time was to condemn beliefs that did not comfort to Christian tradition, the modern audiences that Gaiman is writing for are much more diverse and curious about the myths, especially those with which they are unfamiliar. Pagan gods are not demons, but are instead unfamiliar entities. Gaiman meets the curiosities of his audience by using a wide range of sources that allow him to include details on these characters that depict them often in the way they were written to be seen. Despite a few instances of artistic license, Gaiman seems to prefer to establish a god as primary sources tell us they were seen in their cultures of origin, whether this be by their appearance, skills, personalities, or all of the above.

I believe that Gaiman does this for two main reasons. 1) Gaiman is someone that has a particular interest in mythology as a whole. He is a fiction author that pays special attention to the non-fiction and mythological or traditional details he can include in his writing. As an author, he refuses to be haphazard or ignorant, and that requires him to fully understand the references he is making. The second reason is that Gaiman is writing for an audience that expects him to have done this work diligently. We live in a time where information is endlessly available, which means that we most often expect (whether we realize it or not) information to be accurate, even in our entertainment. Gaiman recognizes this, as can be seen in his “Caveat, and Warning for Travelers.” His final sentence in this partial introduction is “Only the gods are real.” Gaiman knows that his readers want him to have done his research if he is going to attempt to create characters out of gods, and he assures them with this line and establishes his credibility as the author and researcher.

John Milton and Neil Gaiman incorporate pagan gods into two famous works in order to develop the narratives in a way that is necessary to make these works feel whole. But both authors are informed by very different sources, which lead them to write these gods for very different reasons and in very different ways. Milton primarily uses the Bible, which also provides the basic story of Genesis, the story that “Paradise Lost” has expanded upon. Because he is using the Bible, Milton is given a biased perspective on the gods he uses. He shows this bias by taking unbiased information from Selden’s translations and making them fit his existing narrative voice, which corresponded with the Bible’s condemnation of these deities. This, in turn, makes it clear that he has chosen to include these gods in his writing for their stories as the Bible tells them, as well as for their faces and bodies to include in his swarm of demons in Hell. Gaiman, on the other hand, is using unbiased sources, but that is because they are available to him on a much wider scale. Because he is writing in the late 20th/early 21st centuries, Gaiman is able to access information that much more accurately represents these pagan gods as they were seen by those within the cultures from which they come. Using more unbiased sources benefited him in the modern age because his audience expected these gods to be depicted in an unbiased form in a way that Milton’s audience did not because of the available sources.

By analyzing the sources used, it is clear to see how sources influenced the ways in which the individual authors wrote. Milton, who had few sources with the primary one being heavily biased, wrote about pagan gods in a biased way. Gaiman, who had access to ample sources, most of them being unbiased descriptions or accounts, wrote about pagan gods close to the way they are depicted in their original mythologies. Perhaps Gaiman explains it best himself. In “American Gods: The Tenth Anniversary Edition (Author’s Preferred Text),” he includes a brief excerpt in the appendix that he had hoped to include in the original text, but never did. In this excerpt, Shadow is meeting Jesus while he is tied to the symbolic Yggdrasil, and Jesus explains what it means to be a god in an interpretive world:

“It means you give up your mortal existence to become a meme: something that lives forever in people’s minds, like the tune of a nursery rhyme. It means that everyone gets to re-create you in their own minds. You barely have your own identity anymore. Instead, you’re a thousand aspects of what people need you to be. And everyone wants something different from you. Nothing is fixed, nothing is stable.”

Gods are defined by our expectations of them. It is through our lenses that we are able to view the world, and our lenses are created by our experiences and sources. This is no different for average readers than it is for poets and authors; they interpret everything, including divine beings, based on their frame of knowledge. Nowhere is that more easily seen than by noticing the way these two English authors, who wrote centuries apart, navigate their narratives and detail their characters based on the sources they use and the world for which they are writing.

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3. References found in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Jeremias, Ezekiel, Second Kings
4. Numbers
5. 4 Kings
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7. Sykes