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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Tutkielmassa perehdytään englantilaisen kirjailijan Neil Gaimanin romaaneihin <i>American Gods</i> (2001) ja <i>Anansi Boys</i> (2005) sekä erityisesti niissä esiintyvän kujeilijan (<i>trickster</i>) arkkityypin vaikutuksiin teosten kuvaamassa yhteiskunnassa. Teoksissa useat hahmot edustavat eri tavoin kujeilijan arkkityyppejä sekä tähän usein liittyvää kulttuurisankarin (<i>culture hero</i>) arkkityyppejä. Molempia on alkuperäiskansojen tarustoissa käytetty mm. opettamaan yhteisön tapoja, välittämään tärkeitä perinteitä sukupolvelta toiselle sekä ylläpitämään yhteisön yhtenäisyyttä. Kirjailijan moderni lähestymistapa kujeilijaan tarjoaa kiinnostavan lähtökohdan analyysille arkkityyppien vaikutuksista länsimaiseen, erityisesti anglo-amerikkalaiseen yhteiskuntaan, joka on saanut vaikutteita lukemattomista muista kulttuureista. Väitän, että teokset tarjoavat kattavan esimerkin kujeilijan rooleista ja funktioista tasapainottavana sekä parantavana tekijänä kirjojen kuvaamassa modernissa yhteiskunnassa sekä yhteiskunnan ja yksilön vuorovaikutuksessa. Kujeilijoita tavataan teoksissa sekä sankarin että roiston rooleissa, ja molemmista eritellään ja analysoidaan kujeilijan joko yhteiskunnallisesti tai yksilöllisesti positiiviset funktiot tai positiivisia reaktioita aikaansaavat negatiiviset funktiot.</p> <p>Tutkielman johdantokappaleessa esitellään kujeilijan funktioita alkuperäiskulttuureissa, Gaimanin eri kulttuureja yhdistelevä toteutus sekä hypoteesi kujeilijan funktioista teosten kuvaamassa yhteiskunnassa. Toisessa luvussa vertaillaan <i>American Gods</i> -teoksessa esiintyviä kujeilijoita näiden esikuvina toimiviin alkuperäisiin kujeilijoihin ja etsitään kujeilijahahmojen yhteyksiä teoksessa esiintyviin yhteiskunnallisiin ongelmiin. Kolmannessa luvussa eritellään neljä tieteellistä artikkelia, jotka käsittelevät kujeilijoihin liittyviä yhteiskunnallisia sekä yksilöllisiä ongelmia teoksissa. Neljännessä luvussa vertaillaan <i>Anansi Boys</i> -teoksessa esiintyviä kujeilijoita toisessa luvussa käytetyin metodein, mutta sillä poikkeuksella, että teos antaa selvästi edeltävää teosta enemmän viitteitä kujeilijan asemasta yksilön ja yhteiskunnan vuorovaikutuksessa. Viidennessä luvussa pyritään herättelemään analyysiin perustuvaa keskustelua kujeilijan mahdollisesta merkityksestä nykyaikaisissa kertomuksissa sekä kujeilijan vaikeasti määriteltävästä syvemmästä olemuksesta.</p>		
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American Tricksters: The Contemporary Role and Function of the
Mythical Trickster in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*

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List of Abbreviations

<i>American Gods</i>	<i>AG</i>
<i>Anansi Boys</i>	<i>AB</i>
<i>Norse Mythology</i>	<i>NM</i>

1 – Introduction

Primitive societies, or social groupings, had shamans, and some of them even more recent in time. Shamans were tricksters. There was a tradition of the trickster, and the trickster was a clown, a humorous fellow. His task was to trick the gods, to humor the gods into laughing, so that there was access to the divine – because laughter is a moment when we are completely ourselves.

— George Carlin in David Jay Brown’s *Conversations on the Edge of the Apocalypse*

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. [...] He knows neither good nor evil, yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no value, moral or social [...] yet through his actions all values come into being.

— Paul Radin, *The Trickster*

Throughout history and spanning cultures all around the world, tricksters have served a vital purpose in societies. By crossing the lines of morality, they have helped define society: the stories about their antics taught the rules of society to its individual members while also offering them an outlet to participate in otherwise unacceptable behavior (see Hyde; Doty and Hynes or Babcock-Abrahams). This process helped in maintaining societal balance and functionality, two qualities that are arguably harder to find in modern society, which is structured around entities increasingly distant to the individual: governments, laws, corporations and ideologies. In Neil Gaiman’s novels *American Gods*¹ and *Anansi Boys*² tricksters play a pivotal role in restructuring the novels’ modern Western society that has become increasingly distant and out of touch from the roots of social interaction. In the novels, stories, songs and the good will of people are extremely significant to the birth of society, and without them society likely would not function or even exist. Therefore, I argue in this thesis that in Gaiman’s works these traditionally significant characters, who are one

¹ First published in 2001, and the *Author’s Preferred Text*, which is the version used for this thesis, in 2011.

² First published in 2005.

way or another representative of the prior phenomena, still have a role in reshaping and developing modern society. The protagonists, Shadow in *American Gods* as well as Charlie and Spider in *Anansi Boys*, take on the roles of modern tricksters and culture heroes, transforming themselves and the society around them to better answer the changing needs of modern times. My approach to analyzing how the tricksters transform the novels' societies is three-pronged: 1) to identify notable tricksters in *AG* and *AB*, 2) to analyze how the novels' tricksters have been adapted from their mythical origins to contemporaneity, and 3) to examine the function of these tricksters: how they reveal and repair the missing links between modern society and the individual in order to rebuild or reinforce the social aspect of society.

1.1 About Tricksters

After Gaiman had finished writing *Anansi Boys*, he was asked who his favorite gods were and Gaiman promptly answered that he loves all trickster gods (*AB Exclusive Material: An Interview with Neil Gaiman*, np.). Tricksters, gods and otherwise, are also considered a prominent part of different world mythologies and their tales can be heard around the globe from the Americas to Polynesia and from Iceland to Africa. When compared to their importance in, for example, Native American culture, today's westernized societies see the trickster, according to William G. Doty's and William J. Hynes's study on tricksters, as simply a player of tricks, because of "a Western cultural bias against allowing humor to represent serious and important cultural information" (13) whereas in Native American societies a trickster can be "the creative transformer of the world and the heroic bringer of culture" (Ricketts 327). In this thesis, I try to answer how the two novels connect the trickster already familiar in the West to these perhaps more unfamiliar ideas represented by similar characters outside of Western cultures, underlining the other functions of the trickster in addition to their humorously manifested but superficial trickiness.

Trickster tales often have multiple ways of representation and interpretation, which makes them a viable option for respectful use by authors both within and without their source cultures. However, there are universal aspects to tricksters that should be taken into consideration when representing them. *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* adapt trickster figures from e.g. American, African and Nordic cultures. As in their respective cultures, these tricksters serve a purpose in the novels: through the subversion of rules and social norms, they allow the reader to reflect on the state of society as it is presented in the novels.

Gaiman's decision to use tricksters outside of his own cultural tradition should also be addressed briefly, since appropriation of cultural capital can be considered harmful and

disrespectful. Mark Shackleton discusses this very problem in his article “The Curious Case of Coyote, or the Tale of the Appropriated Trickster”. He raises the issue of misrepresenting mythical characters, such as Coyote, who has been appropriated by several non-Native storytellers and portrayed as “the demon ‘other’, a malevolent and revengeful Indian spirit” (77). Shackleton also brings up the exception of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Buffalo Gals”, which is “the closest in tone and in spirit to traditional Coyote stories” among non-Native writers. An avid reader of Le Guin’s work,³ Gaiman attempts the same feat of portraying tricksters according to the traditions that created them. Gaiman researched the traditional stories (*NM* xiii-xix) and even turned to crowdsourcing on his website (neilgaiman.com) to assure a respectful approach to the tricksters. To that end, Gaiman’s characters are more complicated than, for example, the many portrayals of Norse tricksters we can come across in comics and films these days,⁴ showing that he has captured at least some of their characteristics that have otherwise been left unexplored.

While the status of tricksters has diminished in the globalized world, they still appear from time to time in popular culture. However, these tricksters are often only a shell of what they used to be when compared to their role in Native cultures, as revealed by many trickster studies (see e.g. Doty and Hynes). Doty and Hynes’s analysis of Paul Radin’s seminal work on Native American tricksters comments on why we might and perhaps should consider the trickster an important cultural element even today:

In comparison with the mass of narrative material in the volume, Radin's commentary and analysis are rather sparse, but they end on a note that hints that Radin found a deep personal relationship with the profoundly humorous yet culturally important figure that he presents: “If we laugh at him, he grins at us. What happens to him happens to us.” (Doty and Hynes 16)

This connection highlights the narrativity of the trickster figure: we can imagine ourselves in him and, in a way, the trickster allows us a new way to experience the narrative, which makes him the “perfect” role model. What I mean by this is that he is in no way perfect, just like none of us are, but instead the trickster offers us a perfect way to see ourselves in him and mirror our actions as they relate to others. For example, we can see the foolishness of greed,

³ In his speech to Ursula Le Guin at the 2014 National Book Awards, Gaiman said he had been reading Le Guin’s work since he was 11 years old (youtube.com, “Neil Gaiman presents lifetime achievement award to Ursula K. Le Guin at 2014 National Book Awards”)

⁴ Especially the Odin who appears in Marvel comics and films is hardly a trickster, but a benevolent god and father figure who adopts Loki as a son instead of a blood-brother. Furthermore, Loki’s mother Laufey is depicted as his biological father in the same comics and films.

gluttony and sloth and because these undesirable characteristics are shown to us in the trickster, we know to avoid them.

In her article “A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered”, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams explores this relationship more thoroughly: “Although we laugh at him for his troubles and foolishness and are embarrassed by his promiscuity, his creative cleverness amazes us and keeps alive the possibility of transcending the social restrictions we regularly encounter” (147). The restrictions we face are harder to navigate now more than ever because modern cultures are no longer defined by a relatively small group of people in a set geographic area. Instead, we can speak of societies that cover entire continents and include people from very different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, there is also a need for a trickster who addresses both the old and the new, the foreign and the familiar restrictions.

1.2 How to Adapt Tricksters? – Transculturation, Syncretism and Hybridity

To tackle this challenge of new and changing societal rules, transcultural and syncretic elements are ubiquitous in both novels. *AG* is interspersed with chapters about different people coming to America throughout the ages, testifying to the hybridity of American culture, and the titular character of *AB*, Anansi, was a mix of African and West Caribbean myths before Gaiman got anywhere near him. In the novels Anansi acquires even more syncretic and transcultural characteristics as he is influenced by American culture. Gaiman himself has also testified to the importance of syncretism in the stories that he writes: “Myths are compost. They begin as religions, the most deeply held of beliefs, or as the stories that accrete to religions as they grow [...] Anansi the African Spider God becomes Br’er Rabbit, whaling away at the tar baby” (*The View from the Cheap Seats* 60). Gaiman acknowledges that the myths he uses are not his, he simply repurposes them, as has always been done. These examples, among many others, serve to demonstrate how the societies described in the novels are a mix of different religious and cultural elements from all over the world. And to cater to the needs of a society such as this, the novels’ tricksters need to adopt those same elements to become transcultural and syncretic hybrids of different cultures.

To look at the kind of combining and repurposing of myths employed in the novels, I return to the question of cultural appropriation. Whereas appropriation is now commonly regarded as the negative effect dominant cultures have on the cultural capital of minority cultures, this diffusion of cultures can also be accomplished in a mutually beneficial way. In

1947, Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation”⁵ to describe the natural process of multiple cultures coming together to form a new one from elements of the participating cultures’ cultural capital (Ortiz 97-98). This process is unavoidable and, for the most part, uncontrollable. Of course, it would be absurd to deny the existence of influences from every culture that comes together to form a new one, or to suppress a phenomenon that is vital to the cohesion of society. The internal power relations of society, however, often lead to both artificial acculturation and deculturation. These terms suggest that there is always a winning side when cultures conflict, that is, one side losing its cultural capital and the other one forcing its own on the loser. Ortiz nevertheless suggests that this is rarely the case, since culture is always carried on within the individual. This connection between the culture and the individual is fundamental to the novels’ tricksters, because they are portrayed less like mythical characters and more like individuals,⁶ an aspect of the trickster that traditionally characterized him as an outsider of society because of his self-serving ways, but which in today’s individualized Western society is often regarded as the norm.

Syncretism, on the other hand, is used to describe a combination of different religious traditions into “new, but impure, hybrid forms” (Leopold and Jensen 2). While the term has both negative and positive connotations when used in the field of religious studies, I find the etymology pertinent: Leopold and Jensen describe the notion of syncretism as being “used proverbially [...] to warn close friends or kindred not to stay divided” (14). In *AG* and *AB*, the societies are no longer divided according to ethnic, religious or cultural differences. The former’s America is a veritable melting pot of old and new, familiar and strange, domestic and foreign. It eludes strict definitions and arguably represents today’s global society more than any other nation. The protagonist Shadow’s unclear ethnicity is a good example of how difficult it is to say that America is only this and not that or starts here and ends there. Even the center of America shifts in the novel; it is not based on geography but on what people believe it to be (*AG* 487-488). In *AB*, transculturality and syncretism are also represented by the protagonist Charlie, who is born in America, moves to England⁷ and, as the story progresses, reconnects with his Caribbean and African roots. These two characters, among other hybrids, stand as examples of the modern culture hero, who does not strictly stand for any one culture, but incorporates elements from many cultures, and transforms as cultures

⁵ I use “transcultural” and “transculturation” instead of “appropriated” and “appropriation” because of the mostly negative connotations the latter have. For a complete definition of the term, see Ortiz or Epstein.

⁶ Mythical characters in the sense that they strongly represent similar motifs in all stories (e.g. Tiger represents the evil beast or Anansi the clever trickster) whereas Charlie and Spider change over the course of the story.

⁷ Neil Gaiman’s own life is a noteworthy comparison: he is English but has lived in the US since 1992.

change. In the novels, this new type of cultural and social liminality manifests as transculturation and syncretism.

Transculturality, syncretism and hybridity are deeply connected to the changes that individuals and societies undergo over time. In effect, they all rely on the interaction between individuals as representatives of different cultures. How these changes accumulate over time and their effects can be observed in the synchronic and diachronic natures of many of the mythical characters that appear in the novels. In *AG* and *AB*, the Norse figures Odin and Loki, the Native American Wisakedjak and the West African/Caribbean Anansi are all transformed by modernity but still retain their essential characteristics. Therefore, these traditional tricksters can also be counted among the transcultural and syncretic hybrids in the novels.

However, the use of tricksters like Anansi and Wisakedjak in a work of Western literary tradition is not entirely unproblematic. When key cultural characters are taken out of their original context by a non-Native author, it begs the question of the work's cultural authenticity and the author's motives. According to Shackleton, "it is a common phenomenon that non-Natives have sought release from Western angst by returning to a supposedly purer time and society" and that "appropriators may very well be insensitive to the value placed on cultural materials by Native peoples" (76). While Gaiman undoubtedly gained economic advantage and renown with especially *AG*, his motives are decidedly different than those of other appropriators. As mentioned in the previous section, Gaiman does not present the tricksters as overtly negative or his own creations. Instead, their roles in the novels are rooted in their respective cultures: for example, the Akan Anansi is correctly portrayed as "a spider [even though] some people think he was a rabbit but that's their mistake. He wasn't a rabbit. He was a spider" (*AB* 50), and the Cree Wisakedjak is "a culture hero [and does] the same shit gods do [but] just screw[s] up more often" (*AG* 590), showing that Gaiman understands their significance also in the traditional context. Neither are the tricksters used to seek "release from Western angst" but instead, they exemplify how tricksters would navigate the Western society and handle that angst. This shows that Gaiman has a deeper understanding of the trickster: for him, they do not represent escapism from the modern Western society, but a new perspective that allows the reader to face its challenges, one of which is cultural appropriation. Finally, because modern and traditional societies and cultures are juxtaposed in Gaiman's works, transculturation and syncretism are accepted as part of the natural change. In keeping with that, Gaiman does not "invent" new Native myths, but instead re-organizes elements of old and new into a hybrid myth that considers both the history of

society as well as its current state. However, this last point is the most problematic one when considering appropriation: on the one hand, Gaiman is using other cultures' cultural capital to create stories but on the other, those cultures are also part of the amalgam of the society he is portraying in the novels. Therefore, my own interpretation is that as an Anglo-American, Gaiman wants to remind the reader that while Anglo-American culture is prevalent, it owes much to other cultures and we as the readers should not forget that. Perhaps, with the help of works such as *AG* and *AB*, it becomes possible to speak of a shared world culture that owes something to all other cultures instead of focusing on just one or two. To make sense of how this kind of hybridity can be represented, I look at transcultural, syncretic and hybrid elements in the tricksters, and how these elements both bring up issues in the novels' contemporary society and modernize the tricksters to equip them to act in said society.

1.3 The Contemporary Function of the Trickster – A Hypothesis

To summarize the tricksters' essential functions in society, I cite the study on tricksters by Doty and Hynes, who describe them as follows:

For centuries, perhaps millennia, and in the widest variety of cultural and religious belief systems, humans have told and retold tales of tricksters, figures who are usually comical, yet serve to highlight important social values. They cause laughter, to be sure, as they profane nearly every central belief, but at the same time they focus attention precisely on the nature of such beliefs. (Doty and Hynes 2)

It is this aspect of tricksters that makes them important even today and therefore I argue in this thesis that the tricksters and culture heroes (for often it is difficult to discern between the two) in *AG* and *AB* serve a similar purpose: they focus attention on the nature of our contemporary beliefs (or the lack thereof). Where *AG* revolves around how people's beliefs nowadays are everchanging and the effects that has on the surrounding world (Prosser 20), *AB* underlines how those beliefs still represent an age-old part of what it means to be human: belief in stories and how stories shape us, because whatever else myths, religion and gods are, they are also stories (Wiggins 8-10).

On the other hand, the trickster traditionally profaned everything that was sacred in society, so we must also consider what we believe to be sacred today. There is no one religion, political ideology or cultural phenomenon that is universally sacred in the globalized Western society. Instead, we are presumably free to choose our religion, ideology and culture and, therefore, this freedom represents the universal sacred belief of society today. Whereas in indigenous societies, which gave birth to many of the tricksters in this thesis, the needs of

the many always outweighed individual needs, today those needs eclipse the common good. Arguably, today's Western society no longer holds its own cohesion as sacred as the self-determination of an individual, which is indeed guaranteed by many bodies of governance, including national and global governments. Furthermore, traditional society represented the means of survival for the individual as long as they followed certain rules, but today the modern society guarantees, at least in theory, an individual's right to food, shelter and the pursuit of happiness. In traditional societies, these same things depended on individuals working for the common good and retaining their good name in society, and the trickster acted as a warning of the consequences of failing to do so.

Many modern problems also existed in traditional societies, albeit traditionally these problems either could not grow into their modern proportions or were not afforded the attention they have today. The struggles between the gods in *AG* and *AB* portray these growing problems, such as disregard of the common good for personal gain, exclusion from society, abuse of the weak and disenfranchised, general apathy, and pursuit of self-serving goals. These problems reinforced by the antagonists in the novels, however, also give rise to counteraction: by identifying the negative in their society, the novels' heroes can repair and heal what the antagonists destroyed. Both novels draw parallels between traditional, even prehistoric societies and the modern society⁸ and the problems in the latter are shown to have roots deep already in the former. Modernization, however, is often shown to be a key element in how these problems become unmanageable and, as the saying goes, modern problems require modern solutions, even though the solutions, too, rely on the existence of the traditional trickster figure.

⁸ *AG* features stories titled "Coming to America" which describe the arrival of different deities and the societies that "brought" them to America. *AB* focuses on the dawn of civilization through storytelling and traditional Anansi stories.

2 – The Trickster and Social Issues in *American Gods*

2.1 Introduction

As was mentioned above, the trickster's function in myths has often been to curb unwanted behavior in society by setting a negative example, often by overtly exhibiting the undesired characteristics, for example greed, gluttony or indolence. In *American Gods*, these characteristics are often not as blatant as they are in traditional trickster stories and the tricksters themselves are not so easy to identify. Therefore, I compare the traditional trickster with AG's adaptation to identify the trickster, analyze what is included, omitted or added and to what effect. After a short synopsis of AG, I analyze five central characters of the novel and their traditional counterparts: Wednesday and Odin, Low Key and Loki, Whiskey Jack and Wisakedjak, Mr. Nancy and Anansi and finally the protagonist Shadow, who, although loosely based on the Nordic God Baldur is not strictly an adaptation of him but rather a modern adaptation of a culture hero.

2.2 Synopsis of *American Gods*

The novel begins with Shadow a few weeks away from finishing his three-year sentence in prison. Shadow is released a few days early after his wife dies in a car accident and he ends up working for the enigmatic Mr. Wednesday, later revealed as the American incarnation of the Norse God Odin. Wednesday's mission is to recruit old gods, deities from different parts of the world who have come to America with immigrants, to fight for their survival against new gods of technology, media, and transportation among other modern phenomena. Driving a wedge in the gods' society where the old is losing its power to the new is in fact Wednesday's scheme to gain the gods' power to himself, and ultimately this division is portrayed as an arbitrary fabrication, since even the seemingly modern gods are already becoming obsolete (AG 617-620).

Wednesday uses deception and cunning to win over gods and gather resources for his side, while the equally mysterious Mr. World, who leads the new gods, acts against him in various ways. The misled and depressed Shadow helps Wednesday to secure the allegiance of some of the old gods by means of his courage, selflessness and honesty. However, Shadow can only act this way because he has given up on life after his wife's death and his mission to help Wednesday becomes his sole reason to live.

Shadow is helped by two old tricksters, Mr. Nancy (Anansi) and Whiskey Jack (Wisakedjak), among a few other old gods as well as his wife Laura, whom Shadow

accidentally turns into a living corpse looking for a new lease on life. The strangest, and seemingly the most powerful of Shadow's helpers is the buffalo-headed man, who appears to him in dreams. The apparition represents the American land and guides Shadow in restoring the balance which has been disturbed by Wednesday's bid for power. The buffalo-headed man also acts as a spirit guide on Shadow's journey to become a culture hero, telling him that in order to survive, Shadow "must believe [...] *everything*" (AG 19, original italics). Because the buffalo-headed man and his kin represent the essence of America, other gods have never been welcomed there: this leads to them losing their power and people moving on to worship something newer; the phenomenon sowing the seeds of conflict between the gods.

Wednesday's martyr-like death at the hands of Mr. World motivates the old gods to take up arms against the new gods. As Shadow and Wednesday agreed when Shadow was hired, he must perform Wednesday's vigil if he dies. Shadow, Anansi and Wisakedjak recover Wednesday's body from the new gods, and it is revealed to Shadow that his old cell mate, Low Key Lyesmith (the Norse trickster Loki), works for them. The vigil requires Shadow to be tied to "a world tree" (AG 514) for nine days, during which he dies. He enters the netherworld and is asked where he would like to go next. Shadow chooses to rest in nothingness and resign from all worldly troubles, thinking he has fulfilled his duty to Wednesday. However, he is soon woken by the goddess Easter and brought back to life. While Easter attempts to resuscitate Shadow, Wisakedjak appears to him and helps Shadow realize that Wednesday and Mr. World, who is Shadow's old cellmate Low Key in disguise, were working together all along. Their plan was to fool the gods into killing each other, a sacrifice so great that it would not only bring Wednesday back to life but imbue him and Low Key with unimaginable power, thanks to the chaos and death of the battle. Shadow figures out the truth about the war and his own death as the catalyst to Wednesday's reincarnation and chooses to live and help thwart his plan.

Laura kills Low Key but not before he can dedicate the gods' battle to Wednesday. Shadow arrives just in time to stop the massacre by revealing Wednesday's and Loki's plan to both sides. The gods leave, Wednesday fades away before he can regain his physical form and Anansi takes Shadow to his home to recover. Finally, Shadow uses the knowledge he gained when hanging from the world tree to uncover the crimes of an ancient spirit in Lakeside, the town where Shadow hid from the new gods. In the novel's epilogue, Shadow meets with the Icelandic Odin, who confirms that America, indeed, is "a bad place for gods" (AG 675), which initially led to Wednesday losing his power and trying to regain it through violence.

2.3 Odin and Wednesday – Paradoxes of Power

In the introduction to his *Norse Mythology*, Gaiman compares the Norse gods that appear in comics illustrated and written by Jack Kirby, Stan Lee and Larry Lieber to those that he read about in Roger Lancelyn Green's *Myths of the Norsemen* (NM xiii-xiv). In Wednesday, Low Key Lyesmith, and the other gods, Gaiman reinvents the contrast between the different depictions, creating yet another version of them for *AG*. Odin in particular has been reimagined and repurposed so many times that it is impossible to assign him only one immutable role, which in itself hints towards a trickster's nature. Because Odin's role as a trickster is not self-evident, I first establish what makes him one, referring to a story titled "Mead of Poets" in *NM* and following William J. Hynes's chapter "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters" in Doty and Hynes. Next, I analyze what makes Wednesday a trickster in *AG*, using similar methods as for Odin. Lastly, I compare the two analyses and draw some conclusions on how the two characters are presented in *AG* to focus attention on social issues in the novel.

The American version of Odin calls himself Wednesday in *AG*, but he is only one aspect of Odin, who explains to Shadow in the novel's epilogue that he and Wednesday both are and are not the same (*AG* 676). By this and other similar examples the nature of the American gods is explained in *AG*: they travel with whoever worships them to America and transform into something representative of their new home but retain a part of their original selves. In a sense, they are cloned and molded from the originals to fit into the novel's America and there is no going back for them. Instead, they must do what they can to survive in a place where the land itself limits their power (*AG* 490-491, 590). The gods nevertheless represent the beliefs that connect people to society, with the land as the underlying entity that connects all of them to America (*AG* 631). As one of the earliest gods to arrive, Wednesday has spent centuries in America and lost most of his power along with people's belief in him. Embittered and running out of time, Wednesday tricks the gods against each other in a makeshift war that would give him almost limitless power but destroy the loose society the gods still uphold. I discuss below how Wednesday compares to Odin, what motivates him, how his actions dismantle social connections but eventually also lead to Shadow becoming a modern culture hero to rebuild these connections.

2.3.1 Odin/Wednesday – The Trickster as Leader

In Norse mythology, Odin's role as a trickster is not evident in every story in which he appears. He does not always portray the characteristics of a trickster, and often adopts instead

the role of the all-father, ruler of gods and men. As Lewis Hyde writes in the introduction of his study on tricksters “all tricksters are ‘on the road’. They are the lords of in-between. A trickster does not live near the hearth” (Hyde np.). Therefore, Odin’s role depends on where he is: the all-father when he is in Asgard and the trickster when he is “on the road”. This division is further established in a Norse myth in Gaiman’s *NM*,⁹ where Odin’s role as a trickster is indisputable. The story recounts how Odin recovers the mead of poetry,¹⁰ a magical substance that bestows the gift of poetry to anyone who drinks it.

Odin’s part in the “Mead of Poets” begins when he leaves Asgard to recover the mead, which was made by two dwarves from the blood of the god of wisdom, Kvasir, whom they murdered. The mead was subsequently stolen from them by the giant Suttung and when Odin hears of the theft, he sets out to steal it back from the giant. Odin disguises himself as a wanderer (which he often does in order to move freely in Midgard, the world of humans, and the other worlds), tricks Suttung’s brother Baugi’s slaves into killing each other, persuades Baugi to help him break into the mountain where the mead is kept, and seduces Suttung’s daughter Gunlod, who guards the mead. Odin drinks all of the mead, transforms into an eagle and escapes. He is pursued by Suttung, also in eagle form, but Odin defecates some of the mead in flight, temporarily blinding Suttung, and spits the rest of the mead into vats prepared by the other Norse gods. The recovery of the mead subsequently grants the gift of poetry to gods and men.

Odin’s actions in the story correspond with Hynes’s mapping of trickster characteristics (33-45). According to Hynes, “the trickster appears as fundamentally ambiguous, anomalous, and polyvalent” (34), “deceiver and trickplayer” (35), “shape-shifter” (36) “situation inverter” (37) “messenger and imitator of gods” (39), and “sacred/lewd bricoleur” (42). Odin’s methods are morally ambiguous, and he does indeed appear as an anomalous and polyvalent character (he kills indiscriminately but gives the gift of poetry to gods and men), deceives and plays tricks (he tricks and deceives Baugi and Gunlod into helping him), shape-shifts (into a wanderer, a snake and an eagle) and acts as a sacred/lewd bricoleur (defecating or spitting the sacred mead). However, Odin does not act as a messenger and imitator of gods in the story (since he himself is the leader of the Aesir gods) and Hynes concedes that the

⁹ Albeit written after *AG*, *NM* is based on Gaiman’s studies on Norse myths earlier in his life (*NM* xiii-xix).

¹⁰ Mead also has a special significance in *AG*: Wednesday forces Shadow to drink three times of the mead to seal their contract. Wednesday admits that the mead “tastes like a drunken diabetic’s piss” (*AG* 42). The mead that Shadow drinks is likely the mead of poets: Wednesday calls it “the drink of heroes. The drink of gods” and Shadow finds himself atypically talkative after drinking it (*AG* 42-44). Shadow has to repeat the three sips of mead Odin takes by emptying three glasses of it. This act initiates Shadow into his role as Wednesday’s sacrifice.

trickster does not always portray all the roles listed above (33). Regardless, tricksters sometimes play the role of gift-giving culture heroes (Doty and Hynes 17) and Odin does give a significant cultural power to humanity: poetry.

Both Odin and Wednesday are devoid of any morals in their respective stories with only a single goal they seek to accomplish. While it can be argued that Odin and the Aesir have a right to the mead since it is made from their kin's blood, Odin does not seek justice: instead, he wants to steal the mead back using cunning and trickery as if to prove his superiority. Similarly, Wednesday disregards what actions are right or wrong in his self-serving plan to become more powerful than any other god. In this sense, Odin portrays more of the trickster's flair than Wednesday does: he wants to prove how smart he is compared to everyone else, whereas Wednesday seeks power, arguably something that a trickster does not care about. Once Shadow figures out Wednesday's plan, he reveals it to the other gods: "Somewhere in there – maybe fifty years ago, maybe a hundred, [Wednesday and Low Key] put a plan in motion, a plan to create a reserve of power they could both tap into. Something that would make them stronger than they had ever been" (AG 619). This kind of single-mindedness is atypical of other tricksters, who thrive on always coming up with a new scheme to give them immediate and utmost satisfaction, be it food, drink, or sex. Most tricksters also appear comical because they are childishly selfish and just as often end up shaming themselves as they do others. Because of the trickster's unique position in between gods and men, the tricksters' schemes are ultimately forgiven despite even serious consequences, something that Wednesday is denied when he is defeated (AG 615). There is nothing childish or impulsive in Wednesday's selfishness, instead he is calculating and absolutely dedicated to destroying society for his own sake.

Even though in the *NM* story Odin's role as a trickster is evident, it is one of only a few examples where the role of the trickster overtakes that of the all-father. Like tricksters often do, Odin acts alone in reclaiming the mead and keeps his plan secret from his fellow gods, only instructing them "to prepare three enormous wooden vats" (*NM* 121). However, he is forthright in his desire to act alone whereas Wednesday acts as if he fights with the old gods for their common good while he is in fact working against them (AG 161, 613), using his role as their leader to cover up his acts as a trickster. This dynamic shows the difference between Odin as the leader turned trickster and Wednesday as the trickster acting as leader. Their opposing goals further establish the importance of this difference: where Odin's is positive (to give the gift of poetry to his people), Wednesday's is negative (for everyone to die as sacrifice to him). Odin still knows a leader's responsibility over his subjects, since he is

willing to go through all the trouble to give them the gift of poetry. On the other hand, Wednesday does not consider himself responsible of the old gods even though he acts as their leader, instead, as Shadow reveals to them, to him all that “matters is that enough of [the gods] die (AG 619). The comparison portrays the duality of leadership: power over others also comes with responsibility over them, something that society should enforce, and for the old gods, the belief that Wednesday died for them is guarantee enough that he is on their side.

However, Odin and Wednesday’s actions are aligned despite their different motivations: Odin lacks any regard for the lives of the slaves. Wednesday takes this even further: he does not care about the lives of his allies or even his son, Shadow, and his own return to power is more important than their survival. Furthermore, and just as Suttung’s daughter is for Odin, young women are only a means to an end for Wednesday, using young girls and even “virgin[s]” (AG 276) just to bolster his vigor. Again, the crucial difference is connected to their traits as leaders: Odin as a leader has a mandate to act in the best interest of his society (gods and men) to give them the essential power of poetry. Wednesday’s mandate, however, is only for his own and Low Key’s benefit: his animalistic will to survive does not allow him to regard the other old gods or Shadow as anything but prey.

Wednesday’s grand scheme in *AG* relies on trickery and deception, just like Odin’s: he must convince Shadow to sacrifice himself, and in order to achieve that, Wednesday must trick Shadow into that role, like Odin tricks Baugi and Gunlod. Wednesday not only deceives others by telling lies and half-truths, he also uses disguises and transforms himself. He appears as a senile old man to avoid paying for his purchases (AG 54), a “goofy and ludicrous” security guard to con people out of their bank deposits (AG 131) and as Shadow’s uncle in Lakeside (AG 278). He is also compared to a wolf and his voice to a growl (AG 273, 278). These glimpses are focalized through Shadow, hinting at his exceptional perception as he gradually begins to see Wednesday for what he truly is: a predator, “an old wolf stalking a fawn” (AG 273), who is “not overly concerned about legality [...] as long as [he gets] what [he wants]” (AG 276). This realization causes Shadow to oppose Wednesday more, but, as Wednesday himself admits, it is his association with Shadow that made his plan possible: “You took everybody’s attention, so that they never looked at the hand with the coin in it” (AG 611). Wednesday became much more trustworthy in the eyes of the old gods than he used to be because the straightforward and brave Shadow worked for him and that trust allowed him to turn the gods against themselves in the end.

As a situation-inventor, Wednesday is indeed one of the most prolific tricksters in the novel. His whole scheme is designed to invert the power balance between the gods to his own

and Loki's favor. This would certainly be a major inversion, as it would effectively return them to the height of their power by destroying those gods who currently hold the most power. Minor situation-inversion is exemplified by how Wednesday gets Shadow to work for him by forcing Shadow into a situation where he believes he can trick Wednesday but is tricked himself (AG 40). Another example is Wednesday's false martyrdom, which convinces the rest of the old gods of the threat the new gods pose them. As opposed to the natural turnover of gods, which would continuously transfer a little power from the old gods to the new allowing them to die out in peace, Wednesday manages to incite the old gods to follow him into certain death just to hurt the new gods. This allows him to control and gain from the confusion within the gods' society: he and Low Key are the only ones who know what is actually going on. Arguably, Wednesday also acts as a "messenger for the gods" (Hynes 39), although the message is his own. Wednesday seeks out the gods he needs for his war and tries to recruit them for what he claims to be their common cause. But as is often the case with tricksters, the message turns out to be something else than what is conveyed: in this case Wednesday's need for the other gods to sacrifice themselves for him.

Hynes also describes the trickster as "a psychopomp, a mediator who crosses and resets the lines between life and death" (40), which Wednesday does, but again unlike other tricksters, who bring life and death to other individuals, Wednesday does it to himself: he himself plans both his death and rebirth. Wednesday also imitates Odin's role acting as the leader of all the old gods in his attempt to take their powers. Hynes states that "the trickster's status among the gods is equally unstable. There are numerous examples of his attempts to imitate or to usurp the powers of the gods above him" (Hynes 41), in this case the land, which is represented by the buffalo-headed man. Of course, Wednesday's scheme of resurrection and sacrifice can also be seen as a corrupted imitation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but instead of dying for the sins of his people, Wednesday's goal is resurrection itself, as he admits to Shadow: "It's not the death that matters. It's the opportunity for resurrection" (AG 496). Odin's sacrifice for power and Wednesday's sacrifice in his perverted version are also very different: while Odin gains power and knowledge through suffering, Wednesday tries to achieve the same by bending the rules of the sacrifice. Wednesday dies in order to gain power, but tricks Shadow into undergoing the actual suffering of hanging from a tree without food or water for nine days, an ordeal which Odin went through himself. Compared to this, Wednesday's "death" from a single gunshot is much easier (AG 463). Wednesday achieves his martyrdom by making his allies witness his death on TV instead of suffering like Shadow, the real martyr, does. But as is often the case with gods and tricksters, there are no shortcuts,

at least not ones that allow the trickster to permanently offset the balance to his favor (Hynes 35) and Wednesday's fate is no different.

As with Odin, the last trickster characteristic applicable to Wednesday is the "sacred and lewd bricoleur" (Hynes 42). Wednesday's lewdness is manifested in many ways¹¹ but his sanctity is absent. Arguably, Wednesday has lost it along with his waning worship, which has led to his status as a forgotten vagrant god without much power. Deprived of his former position as all-father, Wednesday is only concerned for his own survival. This brings him closer to his blood-brother Loki, who usually puts his own wellbeing first. The loss of sanctity causes Wednesday to be almost exclusively a lewd bricoleur, meaning that he transforms the sacred into the lewd but not vice versa: for example, he corrupts the sacred myth of resurrection into a tool only he benefits from. The sanctity of parenthood neither means nothing to him, and even though he laments to Shadow: "if it could have been any other way" (AG 614) he is nevertheless unable to consider "what the alternatives are" (AG 400), because they would not bring him the power he hungers for. Instead, he sees sacrificing his son as the only alternative. This inability to only turn the sacred into lewd suggests that Wednesday is not a traditional trickster but something more inimical.

2.3.2 Wednesday – The Mirthless Trickster

While Wednesday shares many of Odin's trickster characteristics as previously established, his character and motives differ from Odin's. As opposed to Odin, Wednesday is not a leader anymore: he is a forgotten god in an indifferent land, which his last true worshippers left hundreds of years before (AG 675). Wednesday must face this diachronicity as an old god among people who no longer worship him, and the changing times compel him into action. Contrary to Odin, who plays the role of the ruler when he is in Asgard, Wednesday is never "near the hearth" (Hyde np.). Instead, he is tied to the land that drains his vitality, and therefore he is ruthless in his methods to survive. However, to say that Wednesday is a trickster simply because he is "on the road" (Hyde np.) is not sufficient evidence. Instead, Wednesday is what I call a mirthless trickster: a trickster who has become disconnected from his own culture and focuses only on his own survival, which he believes, is "the hardest part" (AG 496) of existence. Wednesday cares about no one because he believes no cares about him (AG 358) and to explore the effects of his disconnection from society, I analyze the

¹¹ "Lewd" is used here as Hynes describes it "lay, not in holy orders," although Wednesday does commit other lewd acts in the usual sense of the word, e.g. in his manner: "he stared at her – it was almost a leer" (AG 272), his speech: "To us ... it shall be a pleasure-palace" (AG 276) and his animality: he is compared to a wolf, a fox and even his grin is compared to that of a chimpanzee (AG 273, 30, 25).

differences between Wednesday's function in the novel compared to the function of a traditional trickster.

I call Wednesday a mirthless trickster because of Shadow's characterization of his smiles: "They contained no shred of humor, no happiness, no *mirth*" (AG 44, my italics). Whereas other tricksters "cause laughter" (Doty and Hynes 2), Wednesday is cynical and contemptuous of anything light or entertaining, especially stories (AG 157, 159, 401) because he knows what they can accomplish: they can teach, unite people, and undermine his own subjective narrative. Tricksters in general gain their notoriety and fame from stories, so it is unlikely they would normally have such a negative attitude towards them.¹² Therefore, and as opposed to many other tricksters, Wednesday is not a creator of culture. Rather, he seeks to dismantle culture that holds society together so that he may exploit the ensuing disorder.

Doty and Hynes state that tricksters "are usually comical" (1) but Wednesday also lacks the carefree attitude of a trickster. His smile is described as having "no warmth in it at all" and he grins "like a fox eating shit from a barbed wire fence" which makes "Shadow want to hit him" (AG 22, 30, 321). While Wednesday is not comically entertaining like traditional tricksters, his negative traits do "highlight important social values" (Doty and Hynes 1-2), such as cautioning against greed and hate. The negative connotations of Wednesday's smile, for example, reveal his insincerity and his inability to feel joy. Shadow, the focalizer in the previous scenes, also senses this, which leads him to suspect "that anger was the engine that made Wednesday run" (AG 349). This anger stems from Wednesday's obsession to regain his former status as a worshipped god and his inability to do so.

Wednesday's obsession to return to the days when he was worshipped is also counterintuitive to the nature of a trickster, who, according to Barbara Babcock-Abrahams "exhibit[s] an independence from and ignoring of temporal and spatial boundaries (159). Wednesday is imprisoned both by the physical place, his past as the leader of gods, and his present as a powerless grifter. The temporal and spatial boundaries force him to try and relive his past in contemporary America. These limitations fuel Wednesday's obsession because they are rules he did not need to obey in the past; Odin could pass through worlds according to whim. This kind of obsessive behavior is not characteristic to a trickster, but it can be considered a difference between a classic trickster and a mirthless trickster.

¹² Especially Anansi, a trickster whose name is synonymous to stories in Akan storytelling tradition (Vecsey 108).

Wednesday is both ambiguous and anomalous even though for the most part of the narrative he appears as Shadow's mentor and helper.¹³ Wednesday's ambiguity stems from the seemingly conflicting nature of his motives and his actions: when Wednesday reveals to Shadow that he seeks to fight a war with the new gods to ensure the survival of the old gods, the cause seems noble and righteous, but otherwise Wednesday's actions are each more unethical and immoral than the last. For example, Wednesday seduces young women, often virgins, to sacrifice their bodies to him, and "no woman [he wants] will ever want another (AG 331). Wednesday also cheats people out of their money and justifies his crimes by telling Shadow that everyone is sinful: "They all do the same things. They may think their sins are original, but for the most part they are petty and repetitive" or by claiming that he cheats them in order to survive:

What the hell *else* can I do? They don't sacrifice rams or bulls to me. They don't send me the souls of killers and slaves, gallows-hung and raven-picked. *They* made me. *They* forgot me. Now I take a little back from them. Isn't that fair? (AG 358, original italics).

Justifying his own crimes because "they all do the same things" indicates that Wednesday has lost his faith in society, and that he believes it is his right to take what he can from it. He even believes himself to be a victim of the changing times, which is the tragic counterpart of the comedic trickster who also preserves "social order" (Babcock-Abrahams 153). However, Wednesday's self-victimization is also partly a façade: he is not actually willing to play the part of the victim that has been forced on him. As shown by the previous quote, he instead hardens himself to the plight of others to exact his vengeance. Tricksters in general rarely acknowledge their own negativity like Wednesday does. Therefore, and even though his actions are trickster-like, his motive is crucially different from other tricksters.

While the trickster is often concerned only about himself like Wednesday, he does not purposefully seek to topple society but instead "embodies the fundamental contradiction of our existence: the contradiction between individual and society, between freedom and constraint" (Babcock-Abrahams 161). He may sometimes benefit from the confusion he causes, but in the end, society is always strengthened as a result. The distinct lack of social cohesion within the gods' society, on the other hand, motivates Wednesday to exploit it: he tries to sever what keeps the gods connected and divide them into two groups, the old and new gods. While the confusion caused by the trickster is often inadvertent when he acts on behalf of the gods (Hynes 39-40), Wednesday's is intentional, which he admits to Shadow

¹³ Wednesday's actual plan and his role as the novel's antagonist are revealed only at the end.

when the battle is ongoing: “I’m a ghost, and [Low Key’s] a corpse, but we’ve still won. The game was rigged” (AG 615). “Rigging” the game depended on the other gods and Shadow believing that Wednesday would not have any personal stake in the battle after his death, but they failed to consider that gods are, as Low Key puts it “the magnified essence of [themselves]” (AG 505), the personification of what they represent and Wednesday represents and feeds on “death that is dedicated to [him]” (AG 614). Therefore, as long as there is someone Wednesday can sacrifice for himself, he survives, but when Shadow prevents the gods’ massive sacrifice, he is defeated.

Wednesday’s failure is something that other tricksters (as opposed to the mirthless trickster) would never suffer, because they have something that Wednesday lacks: the ability to escape the surrounding society. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams argues for the term “picaresque” to be used instead of “trickster” because it “combines with the notion of trickery and roguish behavior the idea of the uncertain or hostile attitude of an individual to existing society and an involvement in narrative focused on movement in and beyond that society” (159). Wednesday’s movement in and beyond society in *AG* is limited by that very society: any attempt to settle down in one place or leave the society would drain his last strength and “kill” him, so he is forced to keep moving, collecting what little power he can from hustling people out of their money or seducing young girls into bed. This difference is in the heart of what defines a mirthless trickster: Wednesday is trapped in a society that does not tolerate him. While on the other hand his presence is still tolerated by the land (the buffalo-headed man, *AG* 631), it is also severely limited because his people have left that land, leaving him behind. Wednesday’s resentment towards the land becomes evident when he brings up the point of America being “the only country in the world [...] that worries about what it is” (*AG* 136). However, near the end of the novel it becomes clear that Wednesday is mistaken about America. The situation is actually quite the opposite: the land is a stable and sovereign entity and its omnipotence makes Wednesday’s view of himself problematic (*AG* 631). He is no longer Odin the all-father but regardless he refuses to be forgotten. Instead, Wednesday tries to imitate Odin in his quest to rally the gods in what could be characterized as his own version of Ragnarök, the Norse end of the world, but in doing so, he breaks the rules of the land. Wednesday becomes an outlaw of sorts, a picaro who can no longer be tolerated, acting in the margins of society but unable to cross the border that would afford him independence.

Regardless of Wednesday’s extremely antisocial tendencies, he is nevertheless an important agent in reconnecting Shadow to his society. Without him, Shadow could never have saved the other gods, the land, or even himself. Therefore, Wednesday’s actions

nevertheless lead to the strengthening of society, because without him, Shadow would not have known of the war between the gods let alone be able to stop it. Wednesday inadvertently guides Shadow by his negative example, which often leads to Shadow taking the moral high ground to protest Wednesday's actions. In this way, Wednesday portrays the common paradox of the trickster: his actions are both necessary for his plan to succeed but in the end cause it to fail. Specifically, Wednesday's insensitivity to anything positive makes him blind to Shadow's inherent virtue: he is unable to recognize that the same honesty that gave Wednesday's plan "an air of credibility" (AG 496) turns against him when Shadow learns of his betrayal.

In this, Wednesday portrays another paradoxical effect of the trickster: he acts antisocially but social cohesion is improved exactly because his wild behavior calls for an equally powerful response from society (see e.g. Babcock-Abrahams). However, tricksters are known for their antisocial tendencies but seldom become permanent victims despite their behavior because, according to Hynes, they are notoriously immune to divine punishment (40). Wednesday, on the other hand, is forgotten by his society and "dies" permanently when Shadow prevents his resurrection. His own plan turns against him but the punishment is more severe than anything a trickster would normally suffer: Wednesday is completely forgotten.

2.3.3 The Asymmetry of Odin, Wednesday and the Land

As I have shown, Odin and Wednesday share some similarities but are essentially very different, for one crucial reason in particular: Odin is centered within his own culture as both a leader and a trickster, and he is accepted in both these roles by the other gods as well as the people who worship him. Wednesday, however, is not accepted in either role any longer and is driven to a desperate act to place himself as the center of worship in America. That center is and has always been the land itself, which is why the physical center (or at least what in the novel is referred to as the center) of the land is a place where the gods have the least influence (AG 490-491). The center is the essence of America, where the belief in the land and all that it represents are the strongest; it has no place for other beliefs.¹⁴ However, the center of America is a desolate, forgotten place: "a tiny run-down park, an empty church, a pile of stones, and a derelict motel" (AG 488). In a way, this is also part of the critique aimed

¹⁴ Wisakedjak later elaborates the representation of the land as "a great spirit," "the church" and "the religion" (AG 590), which corresponds with some Native American beliefs. The buffalo-headed man also refers to these beliefs when he tells Shadow how the land was born (AG 282).

at the novel's depiction of American culture: the people have become so enamored with whatever is new that they have forgotten the land, which represents what is unique and constant in America.

Part of Wednesday's dilemma is that he also sees himself as somewhat representative of America, but he forgets that the land was there even before him. Moreover, the land as a single entity is something Wednesday has not even considered:

'It's almost hard to believe that this is in the same country as Lakeside,' [Shadow] said.

Wednesday glared at him. Then he said 'It's not. San Francisco isn't in the same country as Lakeside any more than New Orleans is in the same country as New York or Miami is in the same country as Minneapolis'. (AG 348)

Wednesday thinks that America is a fractured, corrupt and unholy place, only good for whatever he can get out of it. Therefore, Wednesday feels justified to wage war against modern culture and its infatuation with new phenomena, which is represented by the ever-changing cadre of gods. This is referenced by Shadow when he convinces the gods that they cannot be divided into "old" and "new gods," because every one of them suffers the same fate sooner or later: to lose their influence slowly until they are completely forgotten (AG 71). Wednesday's mistake, however, is to try to fight against this natural phenomenon, one that the land itself seems to tolerate much better, although the buffalo-headed man hints that it is only "because it suits [him]" (AG 631) that gods and people are allowed on the land. Thus, there always exists a greater power than humans or even gods that makes establishing a society possible, e.g. the land itself, which gives its inhabitants "salmon and corn and buffalo and passenger pigeons" (AG 590) and other prerequisites of life.

2.4 Loki and Wednesday –The Value of Independence and the Abuse of Loyalty

Loki is represented in AG by Low Key Lyesmith (Loki's epithet is Lie-Smith), whose true identity as the god of chaos is revealed only after Shadow says the name out loud and realizes the obvious homonym (AG 504). Low Key's agenda and motives are also obscured for the better part of the novel and, as his name suggests, he mostly works in the background. Low Key is later revealed as Wednesday's accomplice in his scheme to use the other gods as sacrifice, which would also empower Low Key with the chaos of the battle. Low Key is first presented as Shadow's cellmate but his true purpose in prison is to prepare Shadow for his task as sacrifice to Wednesday. Low Key acts as Shadow's friend and demonstrates his mastery at deception by hiding in plain sight, subverting Shadow's actions, and ensuring that

Shadow stays on the path Wednesday has set for him. Compared to Loki, Low Key uncharacteristically refrains from causing chaos that would interfere with Wednesday's plan. Whereas Loki often acts impulsively,¹⁵ Low Key's every move is almost as calculated as Wednesday's, and his function is to reinforce Wednesday both as an antagonist but also as the catalyst for Shadow's heroism.

Loki and Low Key both have special relationships with Odin/Wednesday in *NM* and *AG*, respectively. However, in *NM* Loki almost always acts independently whereas in *AG* Low Key follows Wednesday's plan for him. For this reason, I begin by comparing Loki and Low Key not only as tricksters in their respective narratives but also by their relationships with Odin/Wednesday. Drawing on the findings of the previous subchapter on Odin and Wednesday, I establish the effects each of their relationships with Loki/Low Key have on the characters, and which party in each case is more affected by it. Next, I analyze Low Key's function in *AG* and last, I explore how Low Key acts as a herald of Wednesday's Ragnarök.

2.4.1 Loki – The Independent Outsider

As a much-researched character in Norse mythology, Loki is well established as a trickster, or at the very least a character portraying many of the trickster traits suggested by Hynes. To keep things simple, I consider Loki as a trickster as many of the arguments about him support mainly this characterization (de Vries; Frakes; von Schnurbein etc.) and he is portrayed as such in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* as well as Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*. In both *Prose Edda* and in Gaiman's retelling, Loki deceives the gods as often as he helps them, plays tricks, disguises and transforms himself, and even takes on the role of a culture hero when he invents the fishing net, accidentally teaching gods and men to fish (*NM* 238-240).

Even though Loki lives in Asgard with the Aesir, he is still mostly considered an outsider among them. However, Loki shares a deeper relationship with Odin, who calls him "blood brother" (*NM* 8, 236). Loki sometimes accompanies the gods and helps them on their adventures but also just as often acts against them until he is finally cast out, hunted down, and punished for the death of Odin's son Baldur. Odin fails to bring Baldur back to life after Loki, disguised as a giant, refuses to mourn for him. This, along with Loki's insults against the gods, deepens the rift between Loki and the Aesir, and Odin's influence as the leader of the Aesir is weakened because of his connection to Loki. In *NM*, Odin is not present when the Aesir hunt down and imprison Loki, and only shows up at Ragnarök to die in battle against

¹⁵ For example, in *NM* Loki cuts Sif's hair because "it was funny" (36) and attacks an eagle out of frustration (167).

Loki's child, Fenrir. The relationship of Loki and Odin is furthermore complicated because their motives often collide: while both are related to the giants against whom the Aesir constantly fight, Odin always acts against them whereas Loki's allegiances are more fluid. For example, Loki has children with a giant, helps a giant to steal the apples of immortality from the Aesir and eventually fights on the giants' side in Ragnarök (*NM* 78, 168-172, 256-262). The nature of their relationship has also been a contested topic in academia for decades. Jerold C. Frakes brings up many of the points about their relationship, and about Loki in general in his article "Loki's Mythological Function in the Tripartite System". According to him, Loki has been described as "a hypostasis of [Odin]" (Ström qtd. in Frakes 473 and von Schnurbein 112-113) challenging Loki's status as a god in his own right. Loki's function in the tripartite system of deities has also been questioned, and this notion can in turn be expanded to include the function of other tricksters in the system (Dumézil qtd. in Frakes 474). Even though it was only in 1959 that Jan De Vries put forward the theory that Loki is a typical trickster figure¹⁶ (qtd. in von Schnurbein 113) who assumes "a Satanic form" in his role in Baldur's death (qtd. in Frakes 475, my translation) all the preceding studies offered similar evidence about Loki. Einar Haugen suggested that Loki is actually a negative replica of Odin with meaningful relationships with the other gods as well (qtd. in Frakes 477-478), which Frakes considers an important but insufficient point about Loki, which nevertheless leads to a solution regarding his function. According to Frakes:

Loki embodies certain aspects of the (functional) gods to the extent necessary to caricature them; he undermines their functional roles through diversion, theft, opprobrium, and ultimately destruction. His mischievousness like his Satanic nature, his habits as a thief, and his murderous deceits all arise out of his nature as an anti-function. (478)

Loki's function, then, is to subvert the functions of the other gods, and often enough this puts him at odds with Odin, whose goal ultimately is to prevent Ragnarök. In this way, Loki is chaotic and therefore, he can also be described as the counteraction to the order that Odin tries to impose on the world.

All the preceding points are also applicable to the Loki in *NM*. Loki is characterized in the introduction of *NM* as "more cunning, subtler, trickier than any god or giant. Not even Odin is as cunning as Loki" (8). Loki is the only one in Asgard who dares to question Odin's sovereignty and acts repeatedly against Odin's will. Loki introduces chaos in Odin's kingdom

¹⁶ Although De Vries already seems to think this way in his 1933 study "The Problem of Loki".

much the same way Odin did for the giant Suttung in “The Mead of Poets”. However, in *AG*, chaos could be detrimental to Wednesday’s plan that relies on secrecy and precise execution. Therefore, Wednesday keeps Low Key under his influence to deter any independent action that could jeopardize his plan. This way, Wednesday saps Low Key’s independence and turns him from a free-wheeling agent of chaos into a tool that only he knows how to use. Low Key complies to this because of Loki’s wish to be accepted as one of the Aesir: whereas Odin refused Loki, Wednesday sees the benefit of granting that wish and he gains a loyal companion in Low Key, who carries out his will with the promise of shared power. While Low Key believes that with Wednesday’s help, he can achieve the same chaos that Loki does in Ragnarök, their motivations are, again, what make them essentially different: as an anti-function, Loki fights against the gods and through Ragnarök restores balance between the two competing forces. After Ragnarök, the surviving gods and humans can start again, with the opportunity to build a better world (*NM* 263-265). Low Key, on the other hand, disturbs societal balance in *AG* by supporting Wednesday, and his role is discussed further below.

2.4.2 Low Key Lyesmith – From Odin’s Anti-Function to Wednesday’s Ally

Low Key’s and Wednesday’s relationship bears some resemblance to that of Odin and Loki in *NM*. However, where Loki’s function in Norse mythology is to subvert the gods, Odin among them, in *AG* this role is overseen and partly taken over by Wednesday, and forgoing this autonomy weakens Low Key’s role as a trickster. Where Loki is independent, ambiguous, and chaotic, Low Key follows Wednesday’s will, and he must curb his chaos-making ways not to interfere with Wednesday’s plan. In this section, I examine the reasons for this change in their dynamic by comparing Low Key’s functions in *AG* to those of Loki in *NM* as well as how Wednesday manipulates him to want the same power he wants. For this, Low Key trades off the most essential part of himself: his role as the anti-function.

Wednesday is able to manipulate Low Key because he knows what Low Key wants: not only power but also acceptance with all his flaws; something that Odin could never give to Loki despite their blood brotherhood (*NM* 236). As a result, Low Key is willing to betray the other gods for power and even condones Wednesday’s filicide. This dynamic calls attention to a dangerous phenomenon: the more influential party accepts the flaws of a disenfranchised one, which leads the latter to lose its own perspective. Wednesday exploits Low Key’s loyalty and Low Key is unable to fulfill his role as an anti-function, which, in *NM*, was what eventually led to dethroning the gods and restored balance.

Nevertheless, Low Key does not only enforce Wednesday's negative functions, but also his positive ones: he is instrumental in teaching Shadow some of the tricks he needs to survive in the world of the gods. He also acts as Shadow's friend when he needs one, and even though his motive is to fool Shadow, he also helps him survive: "Prison friendships are good things: they get you through bad places and through dark times" (AG 504). Ultimately, it is the same paradox of the trickster that ruined Wednesday's plan that seals Low Key's fate: Shadow's wife Laura brings him the spear he needs to dedicate the gods' battle to Wednesday but also kills him with it (AG 607). Like Wednesday, Low Key becomes a permanent victim of the trickster's paradoxical function of acting against society and being defeated by its champions, Shadow and Laura.

2.4.3 Low Key's and Wednesday's Ragnarök – The Two-man Con

While Low Key and Wednesday are perfect partners in crime in AG, it is difficult to imagine Odin and Loki finding so much common ground with each other: Loki's chaotic nature often clashes with Odin's need to control. Pushed to the sidelines and abandoned by their own people, Wednesday and Low Key adapt to work together going from one con to the next. The life of a con-man leaves Wednesday hungry, whereas Low Key seemingly gains at least some sustenance from the chaos they cause. Wednesday's plan for supplying them both, however, is dependent on Low Key being onboard. Therefore, it is in Wednesday's interest to make Low Key dependent on him, which he does by manipulating his need for acceptance. Eventually, both Low Key and his mythic counterpart suffer similar fates because of Wednesday's and Odin's need to control others. However, there is a significant difference in these fates: in Norse mythology, Odin tries to uphold society and Loki tries to destroy it, whereas in AG, Wednesday uses Low Key to try and overthrow the status quo.

In addition to the role of Low Key Lyesmith, the American incarnation of Loki has another role in AG: Mr. World, the leader of the new gods. He is the caricature of globalization according to Wednesday and Low Key, representing a faceless and vague faction where global powers lie. They created him to have a villain to take the blame for Wednesday's murder and in doing so ignite the war. Mr. World is unknown to most of his allies and all his enemies; his features and voice are indistinguishable even to Shadow, who knew Low Key in prison. The deception works because Mr. World represents globalization and what it can lead to: everyone becoming so alike that no one is indistinguishable. Arguably, this is the opposite of Loki, who knows everyone's imperfections; what makes them unique, and how he can hurt them (*Lokasenna*). Mr. World, on the other hand, lacks a

deeper personality exactly because he is only a disguise designed to fool anyone who tries to find out what his true motivations are. He, too, knows how to hurt the other gods, but keeps the information to himself, unlike Loki, whose hurtful words can be considered a fair warning that the Aesir fail to heed.

Odin's role as the all-father and Low Key's role as Mr. World also provides a significant comparison for the two. As previously mentioned, Odin has two roles in Norse mythology: the leader and the trickster. Similarly, Low Key's role as Mr. World, the leader of the new gods is reminiscent of Odin's as the leader of the Aesir. This recreates the familiar setting of Ragnarök: Low Key as the head of the perceived evil against Wednesday leading the perceived good. However, Low Key's anti-function to Wednesday is part of their deception and instead of an anti-function against Wednesday, Low Key functions as a crucial part of his plan.

In both Ragnarök as well as Wednesday's and Low Key's scheme, only the leader¹⁷ is knowledgeable of what is going to happen: Odin prepares for Ragnarök and Low Key/Mr. World plans a bloodbath where his followers will be sacrificed for his own and Wednesday's sake. Their goal is also somewhat reminiscent of Ragnarök: to overthrow the current gods so violently that the whole world returns to a primeval state. In *NM*, however, Ragnarök is essentially destruction leading to new creation: almost all the gods and monsters die in Ragnarök and a new, balanced world is created in the aftermath. Wednesday and Low Key pervert this aspect of Ragnarök in *AG*. Their objective is not balance but to consolidate all the power of the gods to just themselves. The problems of this kind of change are evident in the novel: it would regress society to a time where blood was spilled in Odin's name to satisfy his thirst for sacrifice (*AG* 494-496).

An even bigger issue is present in how Wednesday and Low Key manage to generate conflict where there is none by simply enforcing the perceived distinctions between two groups: the old and new gods. The same issue is arguably present in *NM*'s Ragnarök, albeit there the distinctions are more accidental than planned: the conflicting ideologies of Loki (chaos) and Odin (control) both grow too strong and cannot co-exist any longer. The novel's society is much more complex than the one depicted in *NM*, and, as Rut Blomqvist argues, the categories of good and evil only seem to be mutually exclusive (5): the old and new gods have adopted the same individuality present in modern society, and both are at the time of conflict afraid of their survival. Exploiting this fear, Wednesday and Low Key instigate the

¹⁷ Since at this point of the novel Wednesday is dead and it is unclear what he does or does not know.

conflict between progressive and conservative ideologies, as Shadow shows in his speech that ends the battle (AG 618-620). As he says, the whole thing is a con; even Wednesday's and Low Key's roles as the leaders of the opposing sides are a lie, and it shows motives are always suspect if the instigator stands to gain more than the follower from the latter's sacrifice.

Nevertheless, the will to survive and the fear that they might not is not enough to lead to self-sacrifice. For that, Wednesday and Low Key need to breed hate among their respective parties. While the Ragnarök in AG is not actually the end of the world as it is not really an end of the world in NM either, the gods' subjective realities are in danger of ending and Wednesday and Low Key are able to convince both parties that the other threatens their survival: Wednesday acts as the martyr and Low Key as the executioner to rile the gods into battle. In the mix of rage and fear the gods fail to consider the consequences of the massive battle: neither the old or the new gods realize that they can be forgotten regardless of the battle's outcome. The inevitability of battle is questioned only by Technical Boy, the god of technology, who asks Low Key could they not just wait for the old gods to be forgotten and become extinct. Mr. World reveals to him that in truth he needs the slaughter (AG 583) to reorder their society's power structure in his and Wednesday's favor. Considering how Wednesday and Low Key manage to blind the gods with rage and fear to effectively sacrifice themselves for their sake, the chain of events clearly suggests how misleading hate and fear can be. In the next section, this misdirection is explored among other negative societal phenomena exemplified by two traditional tricksters, Anansi and Wisakedjak.

2.5 Anansi and Wisakedjak – Regression of the Trickster

In West Africa and the Caribbean, Anansi is the creator and owner of all stories. Thoroughly a trickster, his stories often feature him taking on the much stronger Tiger and managing to trick or humiliate him. At times, however, for example when trying to trick his own family, he himself ends up humiliated, as is the case in the Tar Man story featured in *Anansi Boys*. Similar to Anansi, Wisakedjak is an essential trickster, a culture hero, helper and teacher of humankind in Cree and Algonquin lore. Like his African counterpart, he occasionally causes trouble great and small both accidentally and on purpose (see Native-languages.org), as tricksters are wont to. In AG, both Anansi (also referred to as Mr. Nancy) and Wisakedjak (also referred to as Whiskey Jack) act as guides and helpers to the protagonist Shadow, rather than as tricksters in their own right. However, their trickster past catches up with them and at times breaks through their seemingly cynical and fatigued disposition. In this section, I look

at these two trickster figures and how they are represented in *AG* as older versions of their mythical counterparts. The first section examines Anansi as a trickster who, led astray by Wednesday's ideas, has lost his morals and identity in the modern world. The next section focuses on Wisakedjak and why he fails or refuses to act against Wednesday's plan regardless of being one of the few who sees what Wednesday's ulterior motive is. The last section examines the critique suggested by how these characters are portrayed.

2.5.1 Anansi – The Misguided Trickster

In West African and Caribbean traditional storytelling Anansi the spider is a charismatic and lively trickster, whether he is coming out on top in his contentions with his usual nemesis Tiger or getting caught in a web of his own making. In *AG*, however, Anansi's American aspect, the old Mr. Nancy, has lost a part of the traditional Anansi's liveliness even if he still has his charisma. In this section I compare traditional versions of Anansi to the novel's Mr. Nancy, analyze what aspects of the West African and Caribbean Anansis are combined in the *AG* version, and how Mr. Nancy's regression from a trickster into Wednesday's pawn and the eventual reclamation of his trickster status call attention to the effects of misinformation, losing loved ones, and lacking a sense of community.

The novel does not reveal how Mr. Nancy came across Wednesday and his war with the new gods, but when Mr. Nancy is first mentioned, he has already agreed to help Wednesday. He is vastly different from the Anansi Christopher Vecsey characterizes in his essay "The Exception Who Proves the Rule: Ananse the Akan trickster." He argues that "Ananse is not a culture-hero. [...] He fosters disharmony in the group and in his family; he eats others' food, his actions contradict the ideal solidarity expressed by the Akan" (Vecsey 117-118). Mr. Nancy, on the other hand, genuinely believes Wednesday is trying to save the old gods' society and even tells a story to rebuild solidarity among them (*AG* 157-159). The Anansi Vecsey describes would find Wednesday's plan to trick all the other gods into killing each other tempting, but in the novel Mr. Nancy is among the gods that Wednesday tries to trick. On the other hand, the Caribbean version of Anansi is different from the West African one in that instead of warning people away from over-indulgence,¹⁸ he stands for resistance against slavery and new opportunities (de Souza 344-345), quite the opposite of what Wednesday's plan is aiming at. In *AG* and *AB*, Mr. Nancy outwardly resembles more the Caribbean Anansi

¹⁸ Which he does, but not as much as the West African Anansi (see de Souza or "The Anansi Syndrome").

(AG 144-145) but does not always act accordingly, and his role and function in the novels are rather a mix of the West African and Caribbean Anansi.

The Mr. Nancy introduced in *AG* fulfills at first glance Hynes's characterization of a trickster. His appetite (Hynes 42), for example, is equal to that of Anansi in the *Tar Man* story (*AB* 133-136). When introduced, Mr. Nancy is "eating an enormous, many-scooped ice-cream sundae" and "drinking a supersized mug of coffee" (*AG* 144). Mr. Nancy also makes a lewd remark regarding offerings he used to receive in his days of glory: "But there still ain't nothing out there in the world for my money that can beat a big old high-titty woman" (*AG* 145). Mr. Nancy also demonstrates the tricksters' affinity for seeking immediate pleasure: "you never say no to the opportunity to piss, to eat, or to get half an hour's shut-eye" (*AG* 146). Therefore, Mr. Nancy at least superficially ticks off many trickster traits. However, he is also fooled by Wednesday's scheme of setting the old and new gods against each other. Mr. Nancy's recurring references to his old age (*AG* 144-147, 154, 621, 629) bring to question his state of mind. Of course, it is also in the trickster's nature to fake injury or infirmity.¹⁹ Another possibility is that Mr. Nancy is only fooling Wednesday by saying he will follow him to war. But while Nancy retains his carefree demeanor throughout the novel, he also persuades other gods to join their cause (*AG* 157-159) and is prepared to fight to the death (*AG* 620), demonstrating his stalwart belief in Wednesday's plan. The Caribbean Anansi often takes the side of the underdog, and in keeping with this tradition, Mr. Nancy takes the side of the overwhelmed old gods. Both Mr. Nancy and Anansi personify the power of stories and what makes for a better story than the underdog triumphing against all odds? However, Mr. Nancy's power as the owner of all stories (*AB* 53) is clearly weakened because he is easily caught in Wednesday's fabricated narrative about the threat of the new gods and he loses sight of the greater scheme of things: following through Wednesday's plan is a desperate move, and tricksters never act out of desperation. Even when the situation calls for it, tricksters always have a trick to play or a scheme to get ahead of their opponents and even death for them is never permanent (see e.g. Doty and Hynes or Babcock-Abrahams).

What, then, could be the reason for such a drastic lapse in judgement for the otherwise cunning Anansi? None of the reasons that usually cause Anansi's plans to fail are present in the novel, such as greed, over-enthusiasm or overconfidence and, if he is considered a trickster, then old age is hardly a sufficient one.²⁰ Only thing that his elderly appearance and

¹⁹ For example, in the "Tar Man" tale (*AB* 133-136), Anansi fakes illness and death to eat more.

²⁰ Tricksters can often appear young or old according to their whim (Doty and Hynes 48).

taste for elegance of a bygone age speak for is a disconnection to the modern world. While trying to restore the old gods to their former glory might serve as reason to ally with Wednesday, the Mr. Nancy we meet in *AB* has a very different and much more subtle approach to reconnect with the modern world, and therefore this reason also seems unlikely. On the other hand, the things that seem to affect most of the other gods joining Wednesday, namely fear, envy, hate and ignorance, are also not sufficient for a trickster to abandon his philosophy. While Mr. Nancy complains a little about how he does not receive as many offerings as he used to, he is clearly better off than many of the other gods that hesitate to join Wednesday's army (*AG* 145). As none of the things mentioned above are sufficient to convert the old trickster to Wednesday's cause, the real reason must be speculated based on what Mr. Nancy experienced before joining Wednesday.

Before the events of *AG*, Mr. Nancy lost contact with his sons (*AG* 634) due to events that are narrated in detail in *AB*.²¹ In short, his first son, Charlie, cut all ties to him and magic kept his other son, Spider, away from Mr. Nancy's home in Florida. Arguably, the loss of his family is the only sensible reason for Mr. Nancy's decision to ally with Wednesday: he is afraid for his sons, who are his blood and might therefore be prey to the new gods. Additionally, Mr. Nancy comes to consider Shadow as his son, whom he feels he must initiate into the world of gods. Shadow's loyalty to Wednesday also reinforces Mr. Nancy's dedication to Wednesday's cause, even though he calls Shadow big and dumb and compares Shadow to a son of his, likely Charlie, "who bought his stupid at a two-for-one sale" (*AG* 146). Despite this, Shadow and Mr. Nancy soon gain respect for each other, and form a bond that Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky likens to one between a father and a son (58). While still critical of Shadow, Mr. Nancy is also proud of Shadow's selfless actions, and fears for Shadow's life (*AG* 519). Clearly, old age has not only had an adverse effect on Mr. Nancy, since it is hard to imagine the traditional Anansi displaying such emotions. While Shadow steps in as a temporary replacement for Charlie and Spider, Mr. Nancy reciprocates by fulfilling the role of the father Shadow never knew. It is just as momentous for Mr. Nancy to have Shadow stand in for his son as it is for Shadow to have a positive father figure. Both are reminded of what is expected from a son or a father: Mr. Nancy realizes he must repair his relationship with his sons and Shadow sees that a son does not need to sacrifice himself for his father, like Wednesday expects, but instead must surpass and defeat him, if it is required.

²¹ Gaiman had the idea for *AB* in 1996 before writing *AG*, so it is possible he already had the idea about Mr. Nancy and his sons before finishing *AB* (Lawless np.).

Shadow's victory over his father reveals the true nature of Wednesday's plan to Mr. Nancy, who would have likely become a mirthless trickster if not for Shadow's intervention: when Wednesday dies for the first time, Mr. Nancy reacts by saying: "It's hard to find the jokes these days. Wednesday's dead" (AG 499). At this point, Nancy is driven by vengeance against the new gods. This attitude of focusing only on what is lost (his leader) instead of what he has gained (a son and a protégé in Shadow) focuses on a key theme that recurs in *AB*: life is full of negative and positive events, it is up to the individual to decide how to face them. In Mr. Nancy's case, Shadow helps him see that his loss was ultimately not as significant as he thought, and this arguably helps Mr. Nancy to reconnect with his sons in *AB*.

After saving the gods, Shadow indeed observes Mr. Nancy regaining some of his vitality when he sings karaoke and receives applause from the audience, witnessing his subtle change back to a lively trickster. (AG 628-631). For a brief period, Shadow shows Nancy what life would be like if he was still involved with his sons. This, in combination with Mr. Nancy's realization of the mistake he almost made with Wednesday, can be considered as the preface for *AB*, where Nancy wants to introduce tricksters back into society but does not feel that he himself is adequately connected to the modern world. Instead of taking on the task himself, he guides his sons in it, making the best out of a bad situation. This discussion, however, continues in the chapter focused on *AB*.

2.5.2 Wisakedjak – The Bystander

Wisakedjak is the trickster of Cree and Algonquian storytelling and he is often described as a benevolent Manitou, a Native American spirit, who helps or teaches humankind in one way or another (Native-Languages.org). He is also responsible for causing the great flood that destroyed the previous world, after which the Great Spirit tasked him to create the current world (The Canadian Encyclopedia.ca). In *AG*, Wisakedjak has mostly given up on being a trickster and has retired to live among the Lakota, his nephew's people in South Dakota (AG 387, 405). Nonetheless, Wisakedjak is not as easily misled as Mr. Nancy. He indicates to Wednesday that he knows what Wednesday's real plan is and tricks Wednesday to exchange his car for a worse one, so that Wednesday and Shadow can avoid capture by the new gods. This may not seem like much, but it too shows Wednesday that Wisakedjak is not as easily tricked as Mr. Nancy.

When Wednesday arrives to recruit Wisakedjak (or Whiskey Jack as Shadow mishears his name) and John Chapman (the legendary Johnny Appleseed), Wisakedjak refuses him outright, simply stating that "[the new gods] will win" (AG 399), referring to the way the

modern world works: anything old and obsolete is replaced by new until that in turn becomes old and obsolete and so forth. This phenomenon once pushed the old Cree trickster to the sidelines of society to merely observe how it develops and changes, which he later admits: “So now I’m living here in the north. Long way from white man’s diseases” (AG 589). Wisakedjak himself stays true to the old ways and lives as he has always lived: the land as his companion, not concerning himself about other people. Instead of becoming embittered by the changing times like Wednesday, Wisakedjak has chosen to live apart of society as a hermit trickster. While he no longer has a culture that reveres him as they once did, he is still very much a trickster when the situation calls for it, and he proves this by tricking Wednesday and helping Shadow.

Wisakedjak and John Chapman argue that Wednesday’s war with the new gods will not go well and state that Wednesday is not even aware of “what the alternatives are” (AG 400). The alternatives are unimaginable to Wednesday, because, one way or another, they all require him to give away whatever power he still has left and forfeit his plans of ever regaining his powers of old. Unable to accept this, Wednesday is “beyond help” (AG 401) and Wisakedjak turns his attention to Shadow, offering him advice in the form of a story about the fox and the wolf:

Fox was here first and his brother was the wolf. Fox said, people will live for ever. If they die, they will not die for long. Wolf said, no, people will die, people must die, all things that live must die, or they will spread and cover the world, and eat all the salmon and the caribou and the buffalo, eat all the squash and all the corn. Now one day Wolf died and he said to the fox, quick bring me back to life. And Fox said, No the dead must stay dead. You convinced me. And he wept as he said this. But he said it, and it was final. Now Wolf rules the world of the dead and Fox lives always under the sun and the moon, and he still mourns his brother. (AG 401)

The story is a metaphor of what Wednesday’s true purpose is: to gain power and live forever. Wolves are connected to both Odin, who is often pictured having his two wolves by his side and Wednesday, who is often described in the novel as having wolf-like features. Wednesday and Wolf will not accept that their time has passed, and both try to convince their companions to help them turn the tables. Wisakedjak in turn is likened to the fox by his alleged nephew, Harry Bluejay, who claims that he is “not the old fox’s nephew” (AG 406). Wisakedjak also seems immortal like Fox, and refuses to help Wednesday, because he knows that helping Wednesday would disrupt the balance of the land. While Wisakedjak does not directly tell Shadow what that plan is, he guides Shadow to learn the things he needs to know

himself. Unlike Wednesday, who tells Shadow what to do by revealing as little as possible of himself and his plans, Wisakedjak knows the value of learning the truth independently and he is fighting against ignorance as much as he is trying to subvert Wednesday. The subtle difference between knowing too little and knowing just enough to figure out the truth is what helps Shadow in the end to vindicate himself.

Later in the novel, Wisakedjak comes looking for Shadow in his resting place in the nothingness. He tells Shadow that America “is not a good land for gods” and that he is not a god but “a culture hero” (AG 590), encouraging Shadow to take on this same role and prevent Wednesday’s plan. Wisakedjak tells Shadow that “we [culture heroes] do the same shit gods do, we just screw up more and nobody worships us. They tell stories about us, but they tell the ones which make us look bad along with the ones where we came out fairly okay” (AG 590). Wisakedjak instructs Shadow to be humble and grateful to the land, the things that have allowed him to exist in harmony with it throughout history (AG 592). Wisakedjak discreetly guides Shadow to remake this connection to the land as a representative of both gods and people, passing on the title of culture hero. Wisakedjak knows, like Mr. Nancy, that his time has passed and now he must help a new culture hero in his mission; a hero who is more representative of modern culture and society than he is and can solve the modern problems of the novel’s America.

2.5.3 Anansi and Wisakedjak – The Trickster Redeemed

While both Anansi and Wisakedjak are traditionally among the most significant characters in their respective cultures, in *AG* their status as tricksters is diminished: they are too old or too different compared to the mainstream American culture that values new trends over old tradition. Even the permutations of Anansi’s and Wisakedjak’s names speak for this: Mr. Nancy and Whiskey Jack are both “Americanized” versions of the names, referring to the weakened connections to their roots as much as for the fact that they are immigrants.²² Yet, both tricksters accept this, because they realize that they must tolerate the change. For the same reason, they ultimately want to help the society that rejects them by supplying Shadow with the knowledge he needs to become the new culture hero.

Mr. Nancy exhibits a lack of critical thinking and the ease of following a strong leader, which results in growing inequality and polarity between different social groups (i.e. the old

²² “Nancy” is also a woman’s name in addition to being used as an insult for homosexuals, which refers to Anansi’s fluidity regarding gender: he is sometimes portrayed as an old woman called Aunt Nancy (Courlander 136; *AG* 457). Whiskey in Wisakedjak’s name on the other hand refers to problems caused by alcoholism among Native Americans (*AG* 399).

gods and the new gods). The almost senile Mr. Nancy places his faith in Wednesday to put things right, but just as the loudest voice does not always make the most sense in modern politics, Nancy realizes that Shadow, not Wednesday, speaks with the voice of reason.

Wisakedjak, in turn, stands initially in the sidelines, observing the world he once knew heading towards disaster in Wednesday's wake. The critique is aimed at the idolatry and disconnectedness from the land that are portrayed in the novel, both of which Wisakedjak refuses to take up by turning Wednesday away and living alone in the wilderness. He also personifies the loss of faith in a society that refuses to uphold morals over pursuing other goals like power, wealth, or comfort. When Wisakedjak meets Shadow, he sees an alternative that he did not expect: to teach what he knows to someone more in tune with the modern world; someone who can make a difference.

2.6 Shadow – The Culture Hero Reimagined

While often utilizing tricks from the trickster's arsenal, Shadow, the protagonist of *AG*, cannot by rights be defined as one. The illusion of trickiness that is conveyed by his prestidigitation and fluid transformations between different personae is countered by his naïveté and stoicism. His relative inexperience in the world of tricksters, however, allows him to learn from them and gain valuable knowledge that he can use for the benefit of the gods as well as the people in the novel by beginning to rebuild the severed social connections. This journey of learning and personal growth defines him as one of the traditional characters in cultural myths alongside the trickster: a culture hero. Traditionally, a culture hero "teaches religious rules and ceremonies and establishes the community's institutions and traditions" (Leeming 89). In the modern society, however, the task is more complicated: society is no longer ordered by rigid laws set by one culture. Instead, many cultures come together and transform society into an everchanging hybrid of cultures.

In this section, I look at how Shadow transforms into a new culture hero molded by and suited for the novel's society, which is comprised of many different cultures, gods and people. This transformation is influenced by the different tricksters presented in the previous sections as well as many other characters in the novel. They are representative of the different cultures and all of them teach Shadow things he needs to know in order to become a culture hero. I begin with a section about Shadow's connection to the Nordic god Baldur, Shadow's apparent equivalent in Norse mythology (Key 32). In the next section, I analyze the three stages of Shadow's development into a culture hero. I examine what Shadow is like in the beginning of the novel, a character without an agenda of his own and a rather

indistinguishable and uninteresting personality; his transformation at the hands of Wednesday and Low Key into a tool they can use to fulfill their plan; and lastly what molds Shadow into a culture hero capable of making his own choices and countering Wednesday's manipulative scheme. At the end of this section, I discuss the meaning a culture hero has for the novel's society and how it benefits from Shadow's actions.

2.6.1 Shadow and Baldur – Culture Hero and God

The connections between Shadow and Baldur are most evident in Neil Gaiman's novella "The Monarch of the Glen" which takes place immediately after the events of *AG*. In the novella, Shadow's given name is revealed to be Balder, an alternate spelling of Baldur, the Norse god of light, beauty, and peace. He was Odin's son and the most beloved god among the Aesir, whose blind brother Hod Loki tricked into killing him (*NM* 223, 271). Even before the events of the novella, Shadow's connections to light and the sun are clear: he is referred to as a sun-god, he receives a gold coin from the sun's "hoard", and he is resurrected by sunlight (*AG* 536, 52, 593-594). Neil Gaiman has also said in an interview that Shadow's story "is meant to be [...] the classic Sun God story" (White np.).²³

In addition to the connections with light and the sun, there is another similarity between Shadow and Baldur: Loki/Low Key is involved in both their deaths. As with Baldur (*NM* 219-222), Shadow willingly enters a life-threatening situation without all the knowledge he needs: neither he nor Baldur could imagine that Loki (as Low Key and under Wednesday's orders in *AG*) plots their deaths. Both deaths also herald the coming of Ragnarök, but with one crucial difference: Baldur returns from the dead after Ragnarök that led to the deaths of almost all of the other Aesir, whereas Shadow returns to prevent Wednesday's makeshift Ragnarök, saves many of the old and new gods and helps to return the balance that Wednesday disrupted.

Despite their similar parentage and names, Shadow is much less like Baldur than Wednesday is like Odin or Low Key is like Loki. Where Baldur is often described in extreme terms ("best," "whitest," "wisest" *Prose Edda* 37), Shadow is described very little and based on his description he looks nothing like Baldur. Furthermore, in Gaiman's *NM*, Odin is deeply affected by the loss of Baldur following Loki's conspiracy to murder him (223-225, 230) which finally drives a wedge between him and Loki, who is exiled. In *AG*, the dynamic

²³ The Sun God is responsible for upholding light and warmth in the world and when they are taken away or lost, the Sun God must go on a mission to return them. This corresponds with Shadow's task to return balance to the novel's society by introducing the metaphorical "true spring" (*AG* 670).

between the three characters is a mockery of Odin's love for Baldur: Wednesday plots with Low Key to ruin Shadow's life and kill him. Regardless, or even thanks to this, Shadow rises from the dead, unlike Baldur who stays dead despite Odin's best efforts to bring him back. In both cases Odin and Wednesday fail in what they are trying to do, even though their goals are opposite. The depth of Wednesday's betrayal also opens Shadow's eyes to how much the gods depend on people's sacrifice to them. After returning from the dead, Shadow rejects becoming a god, adopting Wisakedjak's role of a culture hero instead. Baldur, on the other hand, basks in the fame afforded to him by his beauty, and his death is the catalyst for Ragnarök in *NM*. The comparison between the two points to what Shadow discovers at the end of the story. Whereas Baldur was the most loved of the gods, he died because Loki wanted to bring him down and show that even the best among the Aesir is not perfect, but Shadow endures exactly because he is not perfect but because he is *human*. Baldur is defined by the love the gods feel towards him, but Shadow defines himself by standing apart from gods and proclaiming that he "would rather be a man than a god" (*AG* 620). Shadow is made stronger exactly because he never received admiration or validation from others. Instead, the pain from the deaths of his mother and his wife as well as his experiences in the novel taught him the empathy needed to rebuild society. In this, Shadow is elevated beyond the selfish gods, into a valuable part of society, something that he could inspire others to, should he choose to do so.

2.6.2 Shadow – An Empty Portrait of a Hero

Very little of Shadow's personality can be analyzed by comparing him to Baldur, and throughout his journey Shadow develops into a more complex character than Baldur ever was. In the beginning of the novel, Shadow, however, is a blank slate. According to Gaiman "[Shadow] has no personality unless he's with somebody. At which point he will adopt a personality, or occasionally mirror them" (White np.) When Shadow is first introduced in the novel, his description is mostly about his physical attributes, though even those are very vague. The reader knows that Shadow is a big man and that he loves his wife (*AG* 3), but not much past that. He has no real hopes or dreams for the future except staying out of trouble (*AG* 5). Shadow even got the name "Shadow" because he was constantly following his mother or another adult around and not playing with other children (*AG* 350). For most of his life, it seems, Shadow has had someone to follow, be it his mother, Laura, his old boss Robbie, Low Key or Wednesday.

The novel focuses on Shadow's relationship with Wednesday, which is at first that of an employer and an employee, but at times Wednesday has to overstep those boundaries to keep Shadow alive.²⁴ Wednesday tries to limit Shadow's actions by controlling him and Shadow feels obligated to obey Wednesday, but not blindly. Wednesday is proud of Shadow when he manages to secure Czernobog's loyalty and eventually Shadow even begins to care about Wednesday and see him as a father-figure (AG 332, 615). Shadow's rebellious attitude towards Wednesday is one of the first signs of his emerging personality and it defines their relationship: by rebelling against Wednesday's lack of morals, Shadow rediscovers his own morality which allows him to realize that he does care about how others view him and Wednesday, and more importantly about doing the right thing. Right from the beginning of their journey Shadow is willing to put his body and life at risk for Wednesday, for example, by fighting another one of Wednesday's henchmen, Mad Sweeney, or by staking his life to recruit Czernobog. However, seeing Wednesday seducing young or even underage girls or shortchanging a waitress (AG 276, 356) forces Shadow to question Wednesday's morals and he begins to think critically of his employer's actions, as well as his own.

Despite questioning Wednesday's morality, Shadow is still loyal to him, because his own morals do not allow him to go back on their contract. But when Shadow moves to Lakeside to hide from the new gods, the buffalo-headed man appears to him in a dream and forces Shadow to acknowledge his own worth (AG 283).²⁵ As a result, Shadow begins to reconnect with society, building a life for himself and getting to know the people of Lakeside. The change is significant for Shadow, because he has not had a home for a long time, going from prison straight to Wednesday's service. Some signs of Shadow reconnecting with society are already present when he works for Mr. Jacquell and Mr. Ibis in Cairo, Illinois for a few weeks, but even there he mostly deals with gods instead of real people.

A part of the reason Shadow feels like he belongs in Lakeside is that the townspeople welcome him with open arms and help him get settled. The reason for the townspeople's cordiality is disclosed only towards the end of the novel: the town is looked after by a kobold called Hinzemann, who each year kills one child as payment for his help. His power keeps the town and its people happy, but at a terrible cost. He is the first to welcome Shadow to the new town with the specific instructions from Wednesday to keep him hidden from the new

²⁴ For example, by trying to prevent Shadow from challenging the Slavic god of death Czernobog to a game of checkers with his life at stake.

²⁵ In Lakeside, Shadow also adopts the notably foreshadowing name of Mike Ainsel i.e. my own self, as in the English and Scottish fairy-tales.

gods. However, Hinzemann protects Shadow only as long as he has to. Once he figures that it is too dangerous to keep him there any longer, he orchestrates Shadow to be arrested. The town, however, has already had a permanent effect on Shadow, further reconnecting him to society.

2.6.3 The Modern Culture Hero

When Shadow is forced to leave Lakeside, he takes on himself the task of holding Wednesday's vigil, as he agreed to do when he started working for Wednesday (AG 515). Even though the conditions of the vigil are deadly, Shadow does not hesitate: he is once again able to think for himself even though there is no reason to undertake the deadly assignment as Mr. Nancy and Czernobog attest that it makes no difference who holds the vigil. Regardless, Shadow makes the decision to take the risk and faces death. He takes on the quest and eventually because of it becomes "whole and knowledgeable" (Owens 99), a culture hero who returns from a deathlike experience with important information for his people (see Leeming).

The gods that Shadow met in the physical world guide him in the underworld to Mr. Jacquiel (Anubis), who shows Shadow every shameful thing he has done and forces him to face his guilt. This process purifies Shadow and his visit to the underworld is reminiscent of many other culture heroes' journeys (see Leeming). After Shadow is judged favorably by Anubis, Shadow is offered the choice of letting Thoth, Anubis and Bast choose an afterlife for him or make the choice himself (AG 558). Again, Shadow demonstrates his newfound determination and chooses to rest in nothingness, believing he has acted righteously in helping Wednesday. Soon after, Wisakedjak arrives and shows Shadow how he was mistaken about Wednesday and Low Key by telling him that their end game is "not going to be a war [...] It's going to be a bloodbath" (AG 591). Shadow suddenly sees what their plan is, "stark in its simplicity" (AG 591). This knowledge is the peak of apotheosis for Shadow: armed with it, he finally overcomes his apathy and decides to reveal Wednesday's and Low Key's deception and save the gods. Shadow's newly gained knowledge helps him stop the gods from killing each other and make them realize that both sides are powerless to fight against natural change. In Shadow, the burden of thinking independently is connected to the ability of determining one's own identity and it is exactly because Shadow observes and learns from everyone he meets, that he is able to think for himself and become as persistent and human as he is at the end of the novel. Shadow opts for humanity instead of divinity because "we [humans] don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do"

(AG 620). Shadow says that he does not “need anyone to believe” in him, but in the end, he follows the buffalo-headed man’s advice and believes “*everything*” (AG 19, original italics), including in himself. This ability, above all, helps him see the novel’s society as it is but also what it could be if he rebuilds it with his newfound wisdom.

In the end, Shadow’s individual reconciliation with his past begins when he is able to come to terms with Wednesday’s actions through a proxy. He and Mr. Nancy go drinking and Shadow admits to Mr. Nancy as well as himself that despite everything he misses Wednesday. Shadow discusses his final debt to Czernobog but realizes that he still has knowledge he must use for the benefit of society: Shadow returns to Lakeside to stop Hinzelmann and reveal his crimes before resigning to his fate. However, Czernobog shows mercy and expresses gratitude to Shadow, revering him as the culture hero who saved both gods and humans. Shadow’s personal journey, however, is not over even though he could use his newfound knowledge for the good of his people. Therefore, I find a clear distinction between societal and individual roles, with the former more pronounced in *AG* and the latter, as will be discussed later, in *AB*.

2.6.4 Do We Need a New Culture Hero?

As shown in the previous sections, the novel’s criticism has been connected to modern phenomena that have displaced important social structures and values that tricksters cultivate in traditional societies. The novel suggests it is not possible to migrate a traditional trickster of a certain culture to a society such as the novel’s America, because that trickster would not represent the different cultures that have come together to form said society. Therefore, there is a need for a new type of social unifier, a mix of the many different cultures that have come together in America, guided by the land that they all live on: Shadow. In *AG*, these two interact for the continuity of society: the land instructs Shadow of what must be done, and Shadow performs the actions to secure the future of the land and the people who inhabit it.

However, Shadow exhibits reluctance to completely take on the mantle of culture hero. After preventing the war between the gods, he initially refuses to return to his people, which is what a culture hero usually does so that their tribe can fully benefit from their newfound knowledge (Leeming np.). Therefore, it remains to be seen whether Shadow completes his journey and returns to “his tribe” (AG 587), as Wisakedjak hopes he would. Based on Shadow’s ambivalent ancestry, his tribe is quite clearly alluded to be the people of America, who, according to Wednesday, do not really know who they are (AG 136) and need Shadow to show them. Shadow’s later adventures in the postscript of *AG* as well as the short stories

“The Monarch of the Glen” and “The Black Dog” suggest that to do that, Shadow first has to find his own reasons for returning.

2.7 Chapter Conclusions

In this chapter, I aimed to show the different roles the tricksters in *AG* fulfill. Ranging between active and passive participants in Wednesday’s war as well as performing immoral and moral actions, the tricksters in the novel were analyzed based on these factors. A comparison with Odin as he is portrayed in *NM* classified Wednesday as a mirthless trickster: a trickster with a single-minded focus instead of enjoying life as tricksters usually do. Wednesday focused solely on accumulating power, embittered by the loss of his former status as a revered god and, as opposed to Odin, Wednesday found little joy in playing tricks, entertaining women or teaching his son, Shadow. Instead, he felt almost no remorse in sacrificing his own son as well as the other gods for his own gain. Nevertheless, Wednesday was important in reconnecting Shadow to the novel’s society and make him care both about himself and others.

Like Wednesday, Low Key Lyesmith tried to trick the other gods to sacrifice themselves for him but as shown he was not completely mirthless. The comparison between Low Key and Loki showed that despite their status as tricksters, their functions in their respective narratives were very different. Low Key lost the independence that Loki retained when he pledged his loyalty to Wednesday and instead of following Loki’s role as an anti-function to the other Nordic gods, Low Key reinforced Wednesday’s function as harbinger of Ragnarök, in redeeming the dejected Shadow, and forcing him into action.

The next two characters analyzed in this chapter retained their roles as tricksters to a degree, but with lesser cultural influence than their traditional counterparts. Mr. Nancy was defined as a misled and somewhat senile version of the Caribbean Anansi. The incompatibility between him and the modern society as well as a more concrete loss of connection with his son were shown as the reasons for his less influential role. With Shadow’s help, Mr. Nancy was set back on the right track to reclaiming his trickster abilities and reconnecting with his sons. Wisakedjak was used as another example of a trickster ousted by the modern culture. As with Mr. Nancy, Shadow’s intervention helped Wisakedjak to reconnect with and even care about society again.

Lastly, Shadow was identified as a modern culture hero, albeit one whose journey is not yet complete. The knowledge he gained from the tricksters as well as other characters in the novel was used to stop the conflict between the old and new gods, but Shadow did not, at

least not yet, create culture. It remains to be seen whether Shadow completes his journey by finding “his tribe”, which is alluded to be the American people, and would share his knowledge in helping them find themselves.

The societal issues that were explored in *AG* were at least partly left unsolved because, while Shadow managed to broker peace between the gods, the reasons for their plight were still present. The ending saw Shadow begin to reconnect with society with many of the requirements for social behavior re-emerging in him, for example, upholding morals and the will to act for the benefit of others. It was nevertheless clear at the novel’s end that Shadow needed answers before returning home and helping to rebuild society in America, even though he had already “made peace” and “took [the land’s] words and made them [his] own” (*AG* 631). The ending of the novel underlines the fact that peace is only the minimum prerequisite for society: it is the starting point after which the process becomes increasingly harder. Shadow initially believed his work was done and there was “nothing to go back for” but realized “as he said it [...] it was a lie” (*AG* 676). Brokering peace took everything Shadow could give, and therefore he must first find something “to go back for”, preferably the thing that makes society worth having, whatever it might be for Shadow, before he returns to his role as the culture hero and rebuild of society. Even though *Anansi Boys* does feature any more of Shadow’s story, it nevertheless thematically touches on the connections between society and the individual and, when severed, tricksters can help reconstruct that connection by exploring the liminal places between the two.

3 – Critical Reviews of *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*

Where *American Gods* focused on serious society-wide issues like inequality, abuse of power and war, *Anansi Boys* emphasizes the importance of individuals. It is a humorous novel about serious things, including death, depression, abuse, murder, and injustice. In his review of *AB* titled “The trickster Ananse redux,” William Doty argues that “in academia, humor studies are often suspect, tricksters being treated on the margins of literary disciplines” (np.)

Arguably, the same can be said of the popular reception of *AB* when compared to that of *AG*. The latter was edited into multiple versions (including a new, author’s preferred text edited by Neil Gaiman himself), two of which have been made into audiobooks, was translated into over thirty languages, has received numerous awards, and was adapted for television, whereas *AB* has received considerably less attention. However, I see *AB* as of equal, if not of more importance as it pertains to my arguments exactly because of its humorous approach to serious matters: rolling with the punches of everyday life is easier with a little laughter on the side. Where *AG* shows the reader the revolution of order (of the gods, and through them, human society), *AB* is concerned with renewing individual lives. Thematically, *AB* stresses that societal improvement is not possible without the improvement of the self, in other words, societal balance requires individual balance. The placement of this phenomenon in the background in *AG* and bringing it to the fore in *AB* connects the two works thematically. Of course, both novels also take place in the same storyworld where gods live among normal people, but otherwise the similarities are few. To illustrate the link I make between the two works, I draw on four articles that analyze the interplay between society and the individual in *AG* and *AB*.

In her article “Imagined Nation: Place and National Identity in Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*” Siobhan Carrol analyzes the dichotomy between old and new in the construction of national identity. Carrol’s “America” is not found in any one place, but in Shadow’s journeys across America. The liminal spaces where the trickster so often dwells are the answer to constructing a national identity and the tricksters can help, as they help Shadow, to come to terms with the impossibility of pinpointing a permanent place for that identity. Considering how society reflects national identities, Carrol’s findings about their instability connects to my argument about tricksters’ function as balancing agents in society: the lack of a coherent national identity (or “a center,” as the identity is concretized in the novel) demands a trickster’s fluidity to avoid society’s plummet into chaos.

In her article “The Road of Our Senses: Search for Personal Meaning and the Limitations of Myth in Neil Gaiman’s *AG*,” Rut Blomqvist explores a similar dilemma: she questions whether the Western culture in *AG* falsely believes itself to be secular and “seeks salvation and coherence in whatever is at hand” (11) in its search for a new “center”. While *AG* does not offer meaningful centers for culture,²⁶ it offers a way to alleviate the anxiety: again, the tricksters in Gaiman’s novels also function as agents who ease the need for coherence and teach others to act in an imperfect world. Blomqvist uses Shadow’s journey as an example of mastering cultural anxiety: Shadow’s physical and psychological journeys allow him to begin asking the pertinent questions regarding his own role as a culture hero. His journey, or his story, is supposed to teach the truth, as it does at the end of the novel, but that truth is not nearly as important for Shadow himself as it is for the gods. Blomqvist argues that “a successful myth corresponds with humanity’s search for clear answers and epistemological satisfaction” (11) and Shadow, on the other hand begins to question the search itself: the theme in both novels is learning from others and when those lessons are internalized, the ones listening can go on to make their own stories to take the lessons further, and so the revolution of individual to societal and back to individual is born.

To describe how Shadow goes through this revolution, Blomqvist draws on Jacques Derrida’s findings on “the notion of a center” (7) which leads to a belief that “anxiety can be mastered” (Derrida 352). She describes the society in *AG* as seeking for this new center but in the novel, it is, as Derrida says, only a notion, a place of “negative sacredness” (*AG* 491), the knowledge of its existence more important than being in that place (*AG* 488). Seeing the desolate center represents Shadow’s disillusionment which allows him to become a symbol of the novel’s new center for America, an individual who has seen the different aspects of America in his journeys and made peace with them, mainly the old and the new. Blomqvist explains Shadow’s transformation from Wednesday’s dutiful servant into an empowered individual with a will of his own. However, like for Shadow in the novel, I argue that this process is not instantaneous or simple, and requires a trickster’s *bricolage* (Derrida 360); a method that allows the trickster to make use of whatever is at hand to survive and even thrive. As mentioned before, Shadow begins as a blank character and picks up the knowledge and skills he needs along his journey. In this sense, he could represent anyone and the only defining characteristic that he needs is the ability to learn from his experiences and apply that knowledge.

²⁶ Other than drugs and roadside attractions, as Blomqvist notes (11).

While Shadow's growth is central to *AG*, his emotional balance and happiness are not further discussed in how the novel ends. In *AB*, the two brothers, Charlie and Spider, however, reach a conclusion, a "happy ever-after," and therefore, they can be used as a better example in what could be termed as the individual-societal circle, where the balance of individual lives affects societal balance and vice versa. The balance in *AB* is also brought up in several scholarly articles about the novel. In the conclusion of his essay "Changing, Out-of-Work, Dead, and Reborn Gods in the Fiction of Neil Gaiman" on Gaiman's *Sandman* comics, *American Gods*, and *Anansi Boys*, Andrew Wearing postulates that "the divine [Charlie and Spider as demigods] is neither eradicated nor eclipsed; rather as it is no longer opposed to the profane [Charlie and Spider as humans], it is given a new lease of life as the quality that enhances the ordinary and infuses the everyday with magic" (246). To Wearing, the conclusion of *AB* is the acquisition of the divine for Charlie and Spider in their rebirth as tricksters. The balancing of the profane and the divine is dependent on accepting that there could not be one without the other, and when Charlie and Spider accept this, they find the magic in the mundane. And arguably without this magic, there would hardly be a society: no one would believe that their actions towards the good of others could benefit themselves, an idea that the villains Grahame Coats and Tiger stand for in *AB*.

Danielle Russell brings up the connection between individuals and community in her comparison of *AB* to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.²⁷ According to Russell, the protagonists of both novels "must discover an authentic voice in order to achieve a complete life" (Russell 53). Both Janie, the protagonist of *Their Eyes*, and Charlie have to attain balance in their lives so that they may use their stories to improve society. Both characters strive to make their society more accepting of what they themselves represent, and to do this they must defeat a powerful antagonist who is backed by the norms of society. In the process, they, too, are transformed. In this sense, both novels are about transforming one's self and through that the surrounding society. In the next chapter, I focus more on this aspect of transforming the self by examples from *Anansi Boys*.

²⁷ Gaiman himself also acknowledges Hurston's influence on *AB* in a footnote to the novel's foreword.

4 – *Anansi Boys* and the Return of the Trickster

4.1 Introduction

Anansi Boys continues with the theme of disturbed societal balance that was left unresolved at the end of *American Gods*. Shadow's journey to prevent Wednesday from permanently upsetting the balance of the novel's America is followed by a comical tale of two brothers, Charlie and Spider, reuniting after the death of their father, the trickster god Anansi. The equilibrium that these two novels achieve even as examples of different genres underlines the importance of the negative and the positive in life, such as the villains' negative actions giving rise to heroes countering them with positive actions. The replacement of tragedy with comedy is not the novel's only change compared to *AG*: *AB* focuses on the small scale, and instead of preventing a disastrous conflict, the main theme of the novel is gaining the ability to live one's own life to the fullest by reconciling with the past. Both Charlie and Spider need this reconciliation before they can contribute to their society as tricksters. The novel's lessons about reconciliation take many different forms throughout the story but ultimately, they prove to be just as if not more important for the individual than Shadow's epiphanic journey in *AG*.

In this chapter, I argue that the novel proposes a new coming of the trickster, which is represented by Charlie and Spider's development to fulfill this exemplary role. Much like their father at the dawn of civilization, they are tasked with rearranging the power structure of society that is centered around norms that can be abused by people such as Grahame Coats, one of the novel's villains. What I also seek to establish are the tenets by which the novel combines old and new into a modern, transcultural trickster figure that teaches how to navigate the complex modern society.

I begin by looking at the Anansi stories inserted in *AG* and *AB* as well as their significance in the two novels. In the following section, I continue with a synopsis of *AB* and the key features of the novel that relate to my arguments about transculturation, social criticism, and the chapter-specific argument of the return of the trickster. Similar to chapter two, the rest of this chapter is divided into sections that each examine a character or characters in *AB*, and how they relate to tricksters as critics and transformers of modern society depicted in the novel, as well as teachers who teach how to embrace both the negative and positive in life. First, I return for a closer look at Anansi and his function in *AB* and compare the differences between the Anansis in traditional Anansi tales, *AG* and *AB*. Next, I analyze Grahame Coats as a villain who is able to turn Anansi's tricks against the heroes of the novel, and Tiger as Anansi's adversary in the traditional Anansi stories as well as in his

role in *AB* as a trickster's antithesis. Then, I return to look at the two new tricksters, Charlie and Spider, and how they can be compared with each other and with Shadow. Lastly, I compile the analyses of this chapter into a conclusion on the effects that the tricksters have on the novel's society.

4.2 The Anansi Stories

The inset Anansi stories in *AG* and *AB* teach the reader unfamiliar with tricksters about them and offer a base for comparing the main narrative to these stories. Because both in the novel and in traditional storytelling Anansi is actually synonymous with stories, these stories must be regarded as a separate but important part of his character, which, I believe, justifies a thorough study of them. Indeed, the Akan of West Africa call all their folk tales "Anansesem, that is, Ananse tales" (Vecsey 108; see also Tekpetey). The inset Anansi stories also familiarize the reader with the complexity of Anansi's personality: at one time cunning and righteous, at another greedy and foolish. All these stories introduce a slightly different version of Anansi, and there are slight variations to the stories as well, depending on what lesson or idea is being conveyed. However, Anansi's mischievousness and hedonism, two common trickster characteristics, are present in all these stories.

In *AB*, the theme of social and individual balance is historically connected to stories and how they must be used for the right purpose, as Anansi stories are primarily used to teach others how to act in society. The novel's Anansi is the right person to tell these stories, because he represents what is fundamentally human in everyone: "In the old stories, Anansi lives just like you do or I do, in his house. He is greedy, of course, and lustful, and tricky, and full of lies. And he is good-hearted, and lucky, and sometimes even honest. Sometimes he is good, sometimes he is bad. He is never evil" (*AB* 213). Anansi's humaneness compared to his adversary Tiger's viciousness is evidence of how stories can be used for good as well as for evil, based on who is telling them. The connection between the spider-god Anansi and storytelling as the defining characteristic of what makes us human might seem like an odd one, but in making that connection the novel pays homage to the traditional Asante belief that humans are descendants of spiders (Werner, introduction to *Jamaican Song and Story*, xxx) and serves as an example of the diachronic themes in the novel.

The stories' synchronicity also ties together the past and the present. The theme of reconciling with the past is driven throughout the novel by longstanding communal experiences, such as small acts of kindness, singing and telling stories. They create the feeling of community and kinship, which are necessary for both Charlie and Spider to gain

the will and the strength to rebuild society. According to the novel, songs are tantamount to stories: “Songs remain. They last. The right song can turn an emperor into a laughing stock, can bring down dynasties. A song can last long after the events and the people in it are dust and dreams and gone. That’s the power of songs” (*AB* 4). On more occasions than just this one, the importance of songs and stories is connected to the creation and preservation of society and civilization.

The metaphorical meaning of songs and stories in *AB* also signifies the shift in power relations from the strongest to the smartest. This idea is also represented by Tiger, Anansi’s adversary in *anansesem*, and his connection to “the darkness” before “the light of civilization”. Anansi introduces light²⁸ to the world ruled by Tiger. The grievance that the physically powerful Tiger has against the clever Anansi reflects that shift:

Anansi gave his name to stories. Every story is Anansi’s. Once, before the stories were Anansi’s, they all belonged to Tiger [...] and back then the tales were dark and evil, and filled with pain, and none of them ended happily. But that was a long time ago. These days, the stories are all Anansi’s. (*AB* 51)

Simply put, Anansi stole Tiger’s power when he stole the stories for himself. The stories’ significance for society and the individual is a constant theme throughout the novel and it shows how essential they are to basic humanity: the stories tell us who we are by cultural knowledge passed down for thousands of years in oral traditions.

Three traditional Anansi stories are inset into *AB* and one into *AG* to portray the diachronic change Anansi has wrought as a creator of culture. For example, the story about Anansi stealing Tiger’s testicles, featured in *AG*, represents an important theme in *AB*. The story tells how Anansi the Spider and Brother Tiger go swimming, and, while Tiger is swimming, Anansi has to guard Tiger’s testicles. Instead, Anansi puts them on and goes to town to boast about them. Tiger is left with the Spider god’s much less majestic pair, while Anansi sings the story of how he stole “Tiger’s balls.” Monkeys pick up the song, and Anansi manages to pin the blame on them, invoking a lasting animosity between Tiger and monkeys, and making fun of Tiger in the process. The story serves as an example of Anansi’s brain over Tiger’s brawn: Anansi’s wit encourages the weaker animals to laugh at Tiger, which strips away his power. The thematic link to *AB* is the lesson that those who rule by causing fear only have power when one is afraid; laughter destroys the fear and takes away the power from the one who caused the fear.

²⁸ “Light” meaning both well-lit as well as humorous and carefree.

In the first story that appears in *AB*, Anansi is introduced as the god who gave his name to stories. The story tells of Anansi tricking a shopkeeper into believing he killed Anansi's already dead grandmother, whom he is taking to be buried. The shopkeeper bribes Anansi to keep quiet, but Anansi decides to trick Tiger by telling him that he got all the shopkeeper's goods by simply showing him the dead grandmother. Tiger does not have a grandmother, so he kills his wife's mother, and parades her corpse all over town asking people who would like to buy a dead grandmother. Of course, no one is willing, Tiger is laughed at, and his now motherless wife makes him wish "he's never been born" (*AB* 53). Here, Anansi is at his cleverest: he manages to trick both the shopkeeper for his own benefit and Tiger for the entertainment of all. Again, Tiger's menacing traits are diminished by laughter and the weaker animals are brought together by it.

AB's second inset Anansi story tells how Anansi tricked his family that he was terminally ill. After faking his own death, Anansi had them bury him next to a pea patch Anansi's wife had planted so that he could dig his way out of the grave and feast on the peas every night. Soon, Anansi's wife and sons wonder why the peas are disappearing and look for answers in the stories Anansi told them. The sons go to the tar-pits, buy some tar, and mold it into a man-shaped lump. The following night Anansi climbs out of his grave and picks a fight with the tar man thinking it is a thief who has come to steal his peas. Anansi hits, kicks and bites the tar man getting more and more stuck, and by morning, Anansi's wife and sons find him dead. The story concludes with the words "They weren't surprised to see him like that. Those days, you used to find Anansi like that all the time" (*AB* 136). Here, Anansi's failings are not really all that bad. Anansi is punished for his greed and arrogance, but initially they are merely moments of weakness that everyone has at times. Only by repeatedly indulging these negative habits does he get himself killed: eating from the pea patch once or hitting the tar man once would not have brought such a fate for him. The same applies for Grahame Coats in the novel: both he and Anansi eventually suffer the consequences of their actions.

The third inset Anansi story tells how Anansi tricked Bird. Anansi builds a fire in the bottom of a pit, puts a cookpot on the fire and fills it with water and herbs. Then he shouts how good he feels after bathing in the water. Bird comes down and Anansi tricks her into having sex with him in exchange for a bath. Afterwards, Bird gets into the cookpot, Anansi covers it with a lid and a stone, and cooks Bird alive. The ending states that because of Anansi's trick, birds and spiders have never gotten along, and "birds eat spiders every chance they get" (*AB* 216), but also that in some versions of the story, Bird manages to talk Anansi into the pot and they both end up getting cooked alive. Of note is that the alternative endings

convey different messages to the reader or listener. The first ending has a similar lesson to the one in the previous story: Anansi is punished for his greed which earns him and his kin the lifetime enmity of birds.²⁹ The alternative end, on the other hand, warns of desperate measures: Bird has nothing to gain from getting Anansi into the pot except vengeance, but Anansi is too foolish to see this. A similar connection exists between the villainous trickster Grahame Coats and Maeve Livingstone, a woman he murders before escaping London: Coats lures Maeve into his hidden vault, where he murders her, but Maeve turns into a duppy, a benevolent ghost in Jamaican folklore. Like Bird in the Anansi story, Maeve has nothing to gain except vengeance by haunting Coats, but it ends up ruining all of Coats's plans. These stories connect the events of the main narrative to the lessons taught in them. In the next section, the same lessons are analyzed more closely as they appear in the main narrative.

4.3 Synopsis of *Anansi Boys*

The main narrative begins with a creation story of how everything was sung into existence. The song of creation is paralleled with Anansi's, or Mr. Nancy's, karaoke performance which ends up killing him (although not permanently, as this is another of Anansi's tricks). The comparison of the song of creation with a karaoke song later reveals the occasional absurdity of assigning greater importance to some things and less to others. Both ultimately prove to be important and it is only in retrospect that such things are revealed. Anansi's "death" sets off a chain of events, beginning with his son Charlie flying to Florida to attend his father's funeral. Charlie has had a difficult relationship with his father, whom he only knows as Mr. Nancy, a lazy and unemployed old man. Charlie feels that his father's only mission was to embarrass him at every turn, which resulted in a debilitating fear of public embarrassment. Charlie is forced to face his conflicted past, which he has run away from into a dead-end job, an unloving relationship with his fiancée Rosie despite her inherent goodness (*AB* 19), and a dreary life in London. Before returning home, Charlie finds out that his father was actually the trickster god Anansi, and that he has a brother named Spider, who, unbeknownst to Charlie, inherited their father's trickster abilities. This causes a change in Charlie: suddenly, he wants to reconnect with his past and he contacts Spider. However, he is not yet ready to accept his past, as is soon after shown by his wish to get rid of Spider.

Spider visits Charlie, escalating the conflict in Charlie's life: Spider impersonates Charlie at his work, causing Charlie's boss, Grahame Coats, to frame Charlie for his own crimes.

²⁹ In the main narrative Bird Woman takes the opportunity to get her revenge against Anansi and his sons.

Spider also sleeps with Rosie (again, pretending to be Charlie) while magically preventing Charlie from returning home, and refuses to leave Charlie's apartment. Spider's antics force Charlie to take charge of his own life, showing that anger can be a powerful motivator. Anansi appears to Charlie in a dream, seemingly trying to appease him, and enigmatically says to him "*Starfish [...] When you cut one in half, they just grow into two new starfish*" (AB 129, original italics), hinting at the fact that Charlie and Spider were actually two halves of one whole, but have begun to grow into two separate wholes. Charlie's anger at Spider as well as their father, however, prevents him from thinking through his actions.

The confused and angry Charlie decides to get rid of Spider and returns to Florida to ask for help from his old neighbors, a group of elderly ladies who have supernatural powers. They send Charlie to the realm of gods, but most of the gods have been tricked by Anansi repeatedly and believe that this too is a trick of some sort and decline to help. Only Bird Woman agrees to help Charlie in exchange for "Anansi's bloodline" (AB 207-208) and gives him a feather to seal their agreement. Blinded by his anger, Charlie accepts the Bird Woman's deal without thinking of the consequences.

Bird Woman attacks Spider, and Charlie reveals that he made a deal with her in order to get rid of Spider. Charlie sees his error and takes responsibility for his actions and he and Spider resolve to work together to annul the deal Charlie made. In order to do this, Charlie tracks the feather he gave to Mrs. Higglar, his old neighbor, to Saint Andrews, a small fictional island in the Caribbean. Unbeknownst to Charlie, Grahame Coats has escaped to the island and is holding Charlie's now ex-fiancée and her mother prisoner. Spider is trapped by Bird Woman, who was tasked by Tiger to bring him Anansi's bloodline. Spider manages to fend off Tiger's attacks while simultaneously keeping Coats, now heavily under Tiger's influence, from hurting his prisoners long enough for Charlie to arrive and free him. The resistance is enough to sow doubt in the weaker Coats, who hesitates to kill his prisoners and Tiger has to possess Coats's body so that he can attack Rosie and her mother (AB 414-415). The ghost of Maeve, Charlie and Spider act together to defeat Tiger and Coats in the latter's house. Ultimately, Charlie having to rely on himself and Spider having to rely on Charlie's help are formative experiences for both of them: Charlie gains the courage to be himself and Spider learns that caring for others is not a weakness.

Charlie and Spider return to the gods' realm in order to defeat Coats and Tiger once and for all. Charlie sings a song "of names and words, of the building blocks beneath the real, the worlds [sic] that make worlds, the truths beneath the way things are; he sang of appropriate ends and just conclusions for those who would have hurt him and his. He sang the world"

(*AB* 435). All of the gods with the exception of Tiger dance to the song, and Tiger states that the songs do not belong to Charlie. Charlie responds by singing about Tiger, once again making him the butt of the joke. Charlie brings back harmony to the gods as well as his kin through song, and shows that discords, such as greed, violence, and domination, will receive their just deserts.

4.4 Anansi the Spider

As previously discussed in chapter two, Anansi is a trickster god who plays different roles in West African and Caribbean folklore. The Anansi that appears in both *AG* and *AB* is arguably based more on the latter, as shown by his appearance, speech and a geographical connection in both novels to the Caribbean and Florida. Gaiman's own characterization of Anansi also applies more to the Caribbean version: according to him Anansi is "all about the revenge of the weak" (*AB Exclusive Material*, np.). The Caribbean Anansi was historically a symbol of resistance against the slavers, with his brain often winning over Tiger's brawn, who represented the brutal slavers (de Souza 345). The West African Anansi, on the other hand, was used as a negative example that warned about the consequences of overindulgence, greed and dishonesty (see Vecsey or Marshall's "Liminal Anansi").

Nevertheless, Anansi's role in the novels is more in line with his role in West African storytelling as a stabilizing agent in society instead of one of defiance as he appears in Caribbean stories. Even though the novel's Anansi stands for the weak, he does not seek to topple society, but instead seeks to mend its flaws. However, neither role can be completely ruled out because of a trickster's polyvalence and liminality (see Babcock-Abrahams) with which he can easily transform into a revolutionary agent should the need arise.

As a liminal being, Anansi is in the rare position to affect a change from both within and without the novel's society. In *AB*, he often prefers to observe and guide his sons from beyond the grave, as opposed to his presence in *AG* as an active participant in Wednesday's war. As argued in chapter two, Anansi eventually realized the huge mistake of taking part in the war. This is a possible cause to prefer a lighter hand in guiding his sons in *AB* and the benefits of this approach are discussed below.

4.4.1 The Trickster Anansi

As mentioned, the two traditional Anansis served different purposes in their respective cultures: where the West African Anansi strengthened the society by showing what actions are not tolerated, the Caribbean Anansi encouraged slaves into resistance against their

masters and served as an example of fighting the powerful not with brute force but with cunning (“The Anansi Syndrome” 128-129). The novel combines elements of both these Anansis into its own version that embodies both roles to a degree. While at times this version feels confusing and contradictory to the reader,³⁰ I argue it also highlights what makes Anansi human: he can play different roles depending on which one is needed. The novel includes the mention that “Anansi stories go back as long as people been telling stories [...] That was how they made sense of their worlds” (*AB* 50-51). This notion can be decoded in three ways: first, the West African Akan used Anansi to uphold order and balance in their society by using him as a negative example for all levels of their hierarchy to make their society “sensible” as in functional. Second, slaves in and around the Caribbean used Anansi as a symbol for hope, humanity and resistance against slavery; in other words, to make sense of what little was left for them instead of being subsumed by the madness of slavery (see Marshall “Liminal Anansi” or James). Last, in *AB* Anansi and his sons show how we can make sense of our modern world. This last argument is mostly my own but parts of it can be traced back to the essays by Wearing, von Czarnowsky, and Russell discussed above.

These three different roles, and the ease with which Anansi is adapted to them, express the temporal liminality of Anansi. This leads to the conclusion that Anansi stories can be interpreted very differently depending on the listener or reader.³¹ For example, Emily Zobel Marshall argues that Anansi stories in particular could be used to “vent frustrations or upset in a manner that was considered appropriate and legitimate by the Asante Kingdom”³² (“Liminal Anansi” 33). In this way, instead of a revolution, Anansi provides for a subtler and more peaceful change to take place in society, similar to what the tricksters and culture heroes pursue in *AG* and *AB*. When faced with the slaves’ need for a symbol of revolution against their masters, Anansi is rather easily adapted to fit their needs as well (see “Anansi

³⁰ E.g. Anansi eats all the peas on his family’s pea patch (*AB* 133-136) but shares the boiled bird with his family (*AB* 214-216).

³¹ This is also evident in how the stories are conveyed to the listeners: the Akan people told Anansi stories always beginning with noting “that the story is not true” (Vecsey 108) in order to ensure that the teller will not evoke the gods’ ire, since Anansi stories do not always show the gods in the best light. In Caribbean Anansi stories, the storyteller ends the story with the phrase “Jack Mandora, mi nuh choose none”, telling heaven’s gatekeeper, Jack Mandora, that nothing was added to or omitted from the story (Morris np.). The function is similar: the storyteller does not wish to seem to agree with Anansi’s more questionable actions and be punished on this account: rather, the story is presented simply as an honest record of Anansi’s antics. Gaiman discreetly performs the same act of avoiding the storyteller’s responsibility in *AG*: “None of this can actually be happening. If it makes you more comfortable, you could simply think of it as metaphor” (*AG* 585). For Gaiman as well as the storytellers of Anansi stories, it is important to maintain that what is being read or listened to is a *story*.

³² The Asante Kingdom was a subgroup of the Akan (Wikipedia). Marshall uses the Asante as a specific example of the Akan because of their prevalence among the different Akan subgroups.

Syndrome”). In *AB*, the society is at least theoretically equal, and Anansi transforms again to enforce that equality on an individual level: by acting through his sons, he ensures a chance for happiness and a just punishment to the deserving.

How the different Anansis came to own their stories also highlights a noteworthy difference in their societal functions. In his article on Anansi, Christopher Vecsey relates the story of how the Akan came to call their stories *Anansesem* or Anansi stories:

[Anansi] wants the stories to be about himself instead of Nyame. In order to accomplish this, he makes an agreement with Nyame: he will exchange a number of wild animals or nature spirits for the stories. [Anansi] uses trickery to capture hornets, a python, a leopard, and other animals according to different versions, and brings these to Nyame. (Vecsey 113)

Here, the noteworthy aspect is the original owner of the stories: in *AB* and in the Caribbean tradition Anansi won the stories from Tiger in a similar fashion: Tiger, in his hubris, gave Anansi the seemingly impossible task of capturing Snake, which Anansi managed by tricking Snake to agree to be tied to a bamboo (Morris np.). To the Akan and the Caribbean slaves who told Anansi stories, Nyame and Tiger represented very different things: Nyame is the god of the Akan, “the creator, the sky-god, the inexhaustible being, the eldest deity, the giver of rain, sunshine, and help” (Vecsey 108). Tiger, on the other hand, represents the beast, the slave master, and is always defeated by Anansi in Caribbean stories. He represents the power that must be challenged and repelled. Anansi functions as a wily con man in the former and a clever underdog in the latter, demonstrating his ability to transform based on what the situation calls for.

In *AB*, Anansi nevertheless represents social transformation, even though this transformation no longer necessitates revolution. In his essay “West African Tricksters: Web of Purpose, Dance of Delight”, Robert D. Pelton argues “that the work of transformation lies at the heart of the trickster’s meaning” (124). Pelton uses Anansi’s battle with an authoritarian figure named “Hate-to-be-contradicted” as an example of this: “[Anansi] destroys ‘Hate-to-be-contradicted’ by composing images of the world apparently more absurd, but in fact more faithful to human reality, than those of his rival” (124). In this example, Anansi allows for the cultivation of the mind and flexibility that society depends upon instead of the rigid order his adversary represents. Pelton’s description of Anansi also

sets him irrevocably on the side of humanity, similar to Anansi's role in Caribbean tales.³³ The stories where Anansi himself does something wrong and is punished are nevertheless more common in Asante and other Akan storytelling (Marshall "Liminal Anansi"; see also Rattray or Vecsey) but despite that, he is the catalyst for change in society as well as for his sons in *AB*.

What is then the possibility of societal balance if Anansi only brings about change? The balance of being is, however, different to balance as stability (represented by the authoritarian figure in the example above) which rejects change, whereas the balance of being requires it: Charlie and Spider, for example, achieve a balanced life exactly because their extreme and rigid conditions are mitigated by other characters. Anansi's attitude towards his son when his personality is split in two is also a good example. Instead of simply undoing what Mrs. Dunwiddy did to Charlie, Anansi allows both Charlie and Spider to grow as individuals, and the three are eventually reunited because of these changes. Pelton goes into detail on how "Anansi's style is gleefully oxymoronic" (125). He quotes Victor Turner according to whom Anansi symbolizes the liminality of human beings, which leads to "radical openness to new forms of being", like the "two wholes" Spider and Charlie grow into. Pelton continues that "the dialectic Anansi embodies insists that to be human is to possess liminal openness" (125), to allow for unexpected or even unwanted growth like Charlie and Spider eventually do, instead of the static existence they are stuck in at first.

This growth is surprisingly also connected to the language used in the novel, which is also an important factor in considering Anansi's transformation from the traditional stories to *AB*. In her paper "Searching for Anansi," Cynthia James discusses the impact Anansi stories have had on the development of indigenous cultures in the Caribbean. She mentions the concern of many older adults in these communities that children without the influence of these stories "are growing up deprived of important indigenous moral, cultural, and spiritual values" (1). The dominant position of the English language is also a major factor in the upholding of the oral tradition. However, Constanza Rojas-Primus argues that "the real fact is that several ethnolinguistic groups have maintained, either consciously or unconsciously, significant elements of their oral traditions" (4), which are largely comprised of Anansi stories. In this sense, Gaiman's novel with Anansi at its center can be viewed as a transcultural work that connects the readers ethnically as well linguistically. Gaiman thanks the Jamaican-born

³³ Emily Zobel Marshall connects the Anansi stories of fighting against oppression to the need for Jamaican slaves "to become experienced actors and devious manipulators of the system" to resist their inhuman conditions ("Anansi Syndrome" 128).

author Nalo Hopkinson for her help in recreating the Caribbean way of speaking into literary form, and thanks to this, Danielle Russell dubs *AB* “a speakerly text,” a term coined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. to signify a narrative style representing that of oral narration (Russell 53; Gates 174). The novel’s style acknowledges the oral tradition which has kept Anansi alive and ever-changing to this day. Russell argues that this style is also essential to the story: Anansi helps Charlie to “discover an authentic voice in order to achieve a complete life” (Russell 64), something that many disenfranchised groups need help with even today. The novel’s English-speaking Anansi also retains his Caribbean inflection and syntax, and this is shortly referenced in *AG*: “There was a faint twang in his voice, a hint of patois that might have been West Indian” (*AG* 145). In *AB*, the Caribbean characteristics of Anansi are emphasized even more: he sings the Haitian song *Yellow Bird* and mingles with people from the West Indies (Charlie’s mother, for example, is from the imaginary island of St. Andrews in the Caribbean). Yet, he is also American: he speaks English, sings *What’s New, Pussycat?*, lives and dies in Florida and tricks his son into dressing up as president William Howard Taft to school for President’s day. To add to all this, his African roots are also present in the inset Anansi stories and the realm of the gods Charlie visits. Therefore, in addition to his temporal liminality, Anansi defies spatial boundaries as well: language, geography and culture merge and transform Anansi in a continuous fashion. This trait and the resulting realization of Anansi in *AB* is explored in the next subsection.

4.4.2 The Transformation of Anansi

The Anansi of *AB* is more restrained compared to the Anansis that appear in folk tales: the novel’s Anansi, or Mr. Nancy, as he sometimes goes by, plays tricks and lies, for example when he convinces Charlie that “it’s the law on Presidents’ Day [that] the kids who go to school dressed as their favorite president get a big bag of candy” (*AB* 8) and acts lewdly hitting on women “young enough to be his daughters” (*AB* 23), but he seldom causes any permanent harm. His trickiness is nevertheless overshadowed by the meaningful moments when he reconnects with Charlie throughout the novel and guides him from beyond the grave. To that end, the novel caters more to the modern reader, empathetic but also ignorant of the hardships of indigenous humans and African slaves, who told Anansi stories to overcome those hardships. In those stories Anansi was the protagonist: he defended the weak from a stronger oppressor using his wits and punished him accordingly. In *AB*, Anansi instead acts as the guide for both his son Charlie and the reader into the modern function of the trickster. To elucidate this point, I draw on Emily Zobel Marshall’s article “The Anansi

Syndrome”, where she argues that the traditional “Anansi has survived a cultural and historical metamorphosis and undergone his own form of globalization” (127). Her article takes part in the debate whether or not to ban Anansi as a folk hero in Jamaica because of the example Anansi stories set to children. I argue that the novel’s Anansi is a part of Anansi’s “globalization” which in *AB* also appears as transculturation. According to Marshall, the more traditional Anansi divides the opinions of many Jamaicans: to some he is an important part of the Jamaican cultural heritage and should be left as he is, whereas others see Anansi as too radical for contemporary society. The novel’s Anansi could be used as a premise to solve the debate: he is no longer as radical as the traditional Anansi but nevertheless guides others to keep alive the important lessons that Anansi has taught. This is also evident in the way the novel’s Anansi is able to face his own diachronicity: he has fathered two sons, grown old and died; no longer the radical trickster he once was. Passing on the trickster’s torch (or the hat, as it so happens in *AB*) to Charlie and Spider symbolizes the changing of the times. In this sense, Anansi’s sons embody Anansi’s spirit when he himself is no longer able to stay with the times.

However, this fate, like any other when it comes to Anansi, is not permanent and he plans to return when he feels like it (*AB* 445). The possibility of return, on the other hand, speaks for Anansi’s synchronicity with culture, which he explains by recounting the birth of culture:

[Anansi] took [the stories] from Tiger, and made it so Tiger couldn’t enter the real world no more. Not in the flesh. The stories people told became Anansi stories. This was, what ten, fifteen thousand years back. ‘Now, Anansi stories, they have wit and trickery and wisdom. So, all over the world, all of the people, they aren’t just thinking of hunting and being hunted any more. Now they’re starting to *think* their way out of problems – sometimes thinking their way into worse problems. They still need to keep their bellies full, but now they’re trying to figure out how to do it without working – and *that’s* the point where people start using their heads. Some people think the first tools were weapons, but that’s all upside down. First of all, people figure out the tools. It’s the crutch before the club, every time. Because now people are telling Anansi stories, and they’re starting to think about how to get kissed, how to get something for nothing by being smarter or funnier. That’s when they start to make the world. (*AB* 340-341, original italics)

Anansi narrates how he became to symbolize the trickster in all humans, building up culture and society by what can be imagined, working together instead of abiding by the survival of the fittest. The importance of stories is in that they allow humans to imagine and conceive of

new things and initiate and sustain the human need to improve their lives. The ability to imagine and then produce something that does not yet exist corresponds to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's concepts of "modeling of" and "modeling for" (93), which Brian McHale applies to literary fiction. McHale argues that the former "involves manipulating signs in order to capture a pre-existing reality" and the latter "involves manipulating reality in order to bring it into line with a semiotic template" (21). Arguably, the combination of these two concepts exists at the heart of all stories, in both traditional folklore and *AB*. The constant interplay of ideas in stories allows for both creation and *re*-creation. McHale pursues a similar idea to how *AB* represents stories in combining the past and the future of human knowledge: "In one sense, then, modeling involves recycling and *re*-cognition, the already-known and already-read; in other sense, it involves projection and at least the potential of *new* recognition (21). Both advocate for the use of existing knowledge to create new knowledge, a cornerstone of social and cultural development.

The combination of all these different elements highlights the essence of Anansi: to entertain and give meaning to life. The common purpose of the novel's Anansi, as well as all other Anansis, according to Pelton "is to show that the passage to new life is a story that never stops being told, a story delightful at its very core" (125). Anansi's temporal, spatial and literary liminalities all show that every Anansi story is part of the story that never stops being told, the story of us. Of course, not everyone in the novel's society is willing to accept that the story should go on as it has since Anansi won it to himself, and the opposition is mainly represented by villains from two very different eras: Grahame Coats and Tiger.

4.5 Grahame Coats and Tiger – The Diachronic Villain

The negative forces in *AB* are represented by Tiger, Anansi's adversary in traditional Anansi stories, and Grahame Coats, whose motives for villainy can be compared to Wednesday's in *AG*. All three share a mutual goal and pursue it in similar ways: they seek power over others and disregard the value of community, are devoid of empathy and remorse, and predatory in their methods. Eventually, Grahame Coats and Tiger work together towards disrupting the balance of society and returning to an existence in which the strong rule the weak. Before this, both were already defeated once by tricksters: Anansi stole the stories away from Tiger and repeatedly made him the laughing stock among the other animals, and Spider, Charlie, and Daisy (a police officer and Charlie's romantic interest) uncover Coats's crimes and force him to hide from society. These acts chip away at the villains' power: in Tiger's case he can no longer rule by fear once Anansi makes fun of him, and likewise Coats can no longer

manipulate and lie to people under his influence once his crimes are revealed. This gives them a motive to seek vengeance against the tricksters, at times even becoming one body, “partly Grahame Coats” partly “a great cat” (*AB* 409, 414). However, their differences are also marked: where Tiger is a representation of brute force, Coats represents cunning. Tiger killed indiscriminately when the strong ruled the weak, but Coats has to cover up Maeve’s murder and obstruct the investigation. These differences also mark the change in society that is attributed to Anansi’s stories in the beginning of the novel.

Just like Wednesday and Low Key, the two villains in *AB* are, at least to a degree, products of their environments. Tiger’s environment is merciless nature, where the strongest will survive, and he embodies that nature. Coats’s environment is the modern society, where actions are regulated, and these regulations are taken as reality and Coats also reflects this aspect of society: he circumvents the regulations to serve him, because people take them as immutable realities. An example of this is how Coats only chooses clients “with very little sense of money” (*AB* 169) and “keep[s] the turnover of staff at the Grahame Coats Agency fairly constant” (*AB* 111). Both his clients and staff falsely rely on him to act according to the regulations set by society (e.g. to pay the correct amounts of royalties and keep his staff on as long as they do their work well). In this way, the villains, too, represent the changing of times just like the tricksters. Therefore, Coats and Tiger must be compared as two different types of villains: Coats as a villainous trickster and Tiger as Anansi’s primeval antithesis. The former has managed to turn Anansi’s tricks to his own benefit³⁴ and the latter represents what the trickster opposes in the novel: strict ordering of society based on a single characteristic, in Tiger’s case, physical strength.

Coats and Tiger, just like Wednesday, are not inexplicable evils. Like their personalities, their motives are also affected by their environments, and I draw on Terry Eagleton’s arguments regarding inexplicable evil to show how these villains are motivated to continuously make morally wrong choices. Tiger has transformed from the inexplicable being of evil and darkness he was in ancient times to something that can now be explained thanks to society: he, like Wednesday, represents a predator, who is allowed to prey on the weak, and it is this same attitude towards others that corrupts Coats, who, instead of killing others for food and fun focuses on accumulating riches, the modern means of survival. The villains eventually end up strengthening the novel’s society because their increasingly negative

³⁴ For example, Coats manages to fool his clients out of their money like Anansi managed to fool his family to eat their peas (both act only in self-interest) and Coats lures Maeve into his secret vault like Anansi lured Bird into the cooking pot.

actions also give rise to increasingly positive actions in Charlie and Spider, who, respectively, counter Coats's immorality with morality and Tiger's physical strength with mental fortitude.

4.5.1 Grahame Coats – The Trickster as Villain

Coats cannot be considered a full-fledged trickster according to much of the same evidence that was presented for Wednesday: both are more pitiful than humorous and are unable to feel joy, laugh at themselves or create culture. However, whereas Wednesday was the villain of a tragedy, Coats is definitively the comedic villain. Instead of chasing his lost glory, like Wednesday does, Coats simply believes that “the best things in life [...] could all be bought and paid for” (*AB* 172). Coats does not have any creativity either: for example, when he needs to intimidate Rosie and her mother, he thinks how “it was almost comforting how many clichés already exist for people holding guns” (*AB* 406). This lack of creativity sets him further apart from both Wednesday, whose scheme is arguably a work of art in its complexity, but also from tricksters in general, who often as bricoleurs rely on creative solutions.

Coats does however portray other trickster traits in the novel according to Hynes's categorization (33-45) and his acts as the villainous trickster also reveal some shortcomings of modern society. Coats is able to deceive his client Maeve Livingstone by stealing her late husband's royalties because she falsely believes that society's laws deter him from any wrongdoing and that threatening him with the police will set him straight (*AB* 230). Coats is also able to trick Maeve into a hidden closet where he can murder her because she trusts that he would not resort to such extreme means since she is only asking for her due. Furthermore, Coats is able to escape by simply having passports under different names without the need to alter his appearance (*AB* 168, 333). The simplicity of a few pieces of paper as his disguise comments on the need for convenience in modern society: for example, to have to prove one's identity with anything more complicated when crossing national borders is considered too troublesome for Westerners. Lastly, Coats is able to keep up appearances in St. Andrews by donating large sums to the island's police force, who refuse to believe that Coats could be capable of any crime (*AB* 390). Here, money has replaced the idea of upholding laws or morality for the police, and this is one of the clearest critiques toward the portrayed society: the concept that any individual could be above the law simply because they are rich.

Furthermore, Coats exhibits the brutality and viciousness sometimes found in tricksters such as Coyote or even Anansi³⁵ and like many other tricksters' schemes when taken too far, Coats's own also turns against him. Grahame Coats shows the reader an example of what happens when the Anansi stories of old fail to teach their lesson. When considering, for example, the story where Anansi gets stuck in the tar and dies because of his greed, the reader can draw parallels with the fate of Anansi and that of Coats because both become victims of their own greed. In Coats's case, Charlie and Daisy represent the pillars that uphold society's ideals and step in to punish him. However, there are obvious shortcomings in the novel's society that Coats abuses, for example the island of St. Andrews has no extradition treaty for foreign criminals (*AB* 267) to surrender Coats, a murderer, to the UK. To rectify these abuses of societal shortcomings, *AB* suggests that society needs exceptional individuals, like Charlie and Daisy, to challenge the abuser and teach him the consequences of his actions.

While the plans of both Coats and Wednesday are dependent on secrecy, Coats's motives are exposed early in the novel while Wednesday's are only revealed towards the end of *AG*. Since the novel is more comic than tragic, it is important to let the reader know they are allowed to laugh at Coats's stupidity since he is a villain (similarly as the reader can feel sympathy for Charlie and admiration for Daisy). Nevertheless, Coats's role as the comic relief is not as straightforward as that of tricksters' when their plans turn against them: Coats is a cold-blooded murderer and thinks nothing of killing others to secure his own wellbeing. Then again, cannot this be said of other tricksters as well? Anansi murders Bird and Coyote murders ducks for lavish feasts. Coats murders to secure a luxuriant life for himself and Wednesday murders to regain his power. While the proportions of the acts are different, the results are similar: all four benefit from the deaths of others. Since acting in a way that gives benefit from others' suffering is unarguably evil, could not all these characters be identified as evil? Herein lies the novel's central idea regarding villains and tricksters: they are only acting out the parts that their surroundings set out for them, so instead of real evil, there is only the choice between right and wrong. The motivation to make the selfish, often evil choice, is deep-set in Coats's psyche: he, like Wednesday, cannot even imagine any other way of doing things except securing his own survival and wealth. In this way, Coats is only extremely selfish, which in turn makes him appear evil and what makes Coats and Wednesday villains is their disregard for morality for their own benefit. Tricksters, such as Anansi and Coyote, on the other hand, at times try to make a moral choice, like helping their

³⁵ Coyote murders ducks (firstpeople.us) and Anansi boils Bird alive in "Anansi and Bird" (*AB* 214-216).

fellowman.³⁶ The novel stresses that life sometimes requires selfish acts but when they are balanced by altruism, happiness can be achieved. On the other hand, Coats's and Wednesday's focus on solely acting selfishly eventually turns them into villains.

Indeed, in the two novels there seems to be no such thing as evil for evil's sake, an idea argued by Terry Eagleton, according to whom the statement that "people do evil things because they are evil" is "a tautology or a circular argument" (4). In both *AG* and *AB*, the villains' motives are revealed and none of them are simply the evil that Tiger represented in *anansesem*. What is underlined in both the villains and the tricksters is the continuum of choices: the villains always make the wrong moral choice, but the tricksters' choices can be either right or wrong or even both, since the motive and the result can be conflicting.³⁷ In this way, the tricksters' choices are not motivated by a plan that requires others to die for them as with Coats and Wednesday. Coats and Wednesday suppress or cannot even feel emotions other than greed for power or money, placing them somewhat further towards the side of evil than Anansi and the other tricksters, but even the inability to feel positive emotions and or commit positive actions is not enough to brand them as inexplicable evils. Eagleton argues regarding characters such as these that "you might always claim that people like these, who consciously opt for evil, must already be evil to do so" (6) and therefore the novels show *why* they "consciously opt for evil": Wednesday, as discussed in chapter two, is desperate to regain his former power but Coats's motives are not as clear. As discussed above, he is enabled to act selfishly by a society which relies on abstracts as immutable realities, but what made him first abuse them? There are few clues about Coats's personality in the novel, but they suggest that he is delusional to think Maeve would sleep with him (*AB* 229), paranoid enough to murder her (*AB* 233), and even sociopathic: "It did not bother [Coats] to have killed. It felt, instead, immensely satisfying" (*AB* 268), and as Eagleton argues, these are traits that actually redeem seemingly evil characters (4-5). In the end, Coats becomes what he probably feared the most: a victim (*AB* 443), and that fear may very well have been what first induced his antisocial tendencies (Glenn et al. 2). However, this conclusion represents more an "eye for an eye" punishment than resolving the problems that led to Coats's insanity, and shows that society is unequipped to deal with such problems. Because Coats is always the villain and never the hero, he is an imperfect version of the comic trickster, and he is defeated

³⁶ E.g. Anansi helps his neighbor move but ends up giving away all his possessions and Coyote helps free the buffalo for his village to hunt (Native-languages.org).

³⁷ Charlie's choice to betray Spider to Bird Woman is morally wrong but, in the end, strengthens the bond between them.

to show that even the worst example of antisocial behavior created by an imperfect society can be defeated, although perhaps not yet in an optimal way. However, revealing these imperfections is nevertheless the first step to correcting them.

Therefore, the mission of the novels' heroes is not only to expose these villains that abuse the rules, but the societal structures that instigate, enable and even victimize them. This is perhaps truer for Shadow in *AG* than for the heroes of *AB*, but the novel's approach to Coats reminds the reader that his power is based solely on the ability to circumvent the social and communal rules in secrecy: Coats is vulnerable to society's judgement as soon as his secrets are revealed and he must disguise himself and escape his home to avoid it. Once his true nature is revealed, all his power vanishes and only his comicality and pathos remain, and he becomes Tiger's victim as Tiger becomes his. The revelation, however, only shows where the problems begin instead of giving a straightforward answer to them. Charlie's punishment for Coats is just, but it does not help to solve the problems that made him what he is.

4.5.2 Tiger – A Trickster's Antithesis

Tiger, as opposed to Coats, represents ruling by displaying his strength openly and oppressing the weak, which symbolizes what the laws of nature were before Anansi stories gave birth to culture and society. Tiger, as he appears in the novel, represents the idea of the beast, symbolizing how people's lives "began in tears" and would "end in blood" (*AB* 340). This fear gave Tiger his power and prevented the prehistoric humans from thinking about anything else than "hunting and being hunted" (*AB* 340). Contrary to Coats, Tiger did not need to use tricks to hide his actions because there was no society to stop his brutality. Therefore, I propose that Tiger is the antithesis of the trickster, or more precisely Anansi, who represents culture, community and justice for the weak; the very things that defeat Tiger and which he seeks to destroy.

As stated above, stories play a significant role in the power dynamic of Anansi and Tiger representing their struggle for control of humanity's "soul".³⁸ Tiger losing to Anansi for the first time is only the beginning of his humiliation and was the turning point when humans no longer relied on brute force but began to create culture and live in societies. Tiger's return, on the other hand, represents the danger of society's regression back into chaos, where only individual survival is important. While this is a danger that society cannot ever be completely

³⁸ The term "soul" can be considered as representing the choices between good/evil, solitude/community, self-sacrifice/self-preservation, creation/destruction, etc. with Anansi able to act along the whole length of the continuum and Tiger restricted to only the societally negative choices.

rid of, it must be kept in check whenever it returns. Partly, it is exactly the struggle against the dangerous influence of Tiger and everything he represents that creates the novel's society, and without Tiger, Charlie or Spider could not rise to their roles as tricksters whose heroic actions counter the villains' evil ones. The challenge for them is to find out *why* society exists, which Anansi must remind his sons of in order to turn them into tricksters.

However, just because Tiger's actions are evil, it does not mean that he, in the modern perspective, represents evil any more than Coats does: his choices are arguably motivated by exaggerated self-preservation just as Coats's and Wednesday's are. Tiger nevertheless fails to realize that him losing the stories to Anansi leads to a shift in natural order and, much like Wednesday, he is left behind by the changing world which he seeks to re-establish by working through Coats. The critique in Tiger is aimed at the inability to see the mistakes and injustices of the past and wanting to return to a time when society was ruled by the strong, when there was no room for weakness or diversity; ideas that are untenable for the progression of modern society.

In a similar sense, the meaning of evil has also transformed with the needs and capabilities of society and culture, and in the main narrative of *AB* it means something else than it does in the inset Anansi stories. Where in the latter Tiger represented evil, plain and simple, without needing any explanation for it, in the main narrative this is not so. This can be explained by looking at the changing attitudes towards self-interest in societies: traditionally putting one's own needs ahead of society's was considered criminal, even evil, but in the modern context that is no longer the case and it is allowed up to a point. However, in its representations of Tiger and Coats, the novel shows how selfish acts can still be considered evil when they affect others too negatively.

4.5.3 Tiger and Coats – The Societal Effects of Villainy

Tiger and Coats become one at the end of the novel, merging into a negative power that has the strength and the knowledge to circumvent and abuse the rules of society, a risk more severe than anything that the novel's society could face on its own. Alone, neither of them could do much against Anansi, a symbol for the birth of culture and society which he brings about by stealing the stories away from Tiger, but together they threaten to bring back the "dark" that humans endured before culture (*AB* 340).

In their own way, Coats and Tiger both benefit from the "dark": in the beginning of the novel, Coats is able to commit his crimes unperturbed, but once Charlie, Spider and Daisy shed light on his actions, he is forced to flee. Tiger hunts "in the darkness" (*AB* 400-404) and

rules by the fear he is able to evoke in his prey when they cannot see him, but once Anansi, Spider or Maeve show that he is vulnerable and does not need to be feared, Tiger retreats in “shame and defeat” (*AB* 418). The allegory of light and dark is connected to knowledge and secrecy: when the secret is made known, it becomes manageable. Revealing Tiger’s or Coats’s true nature becomes their undoing and when the heroes know what they are dealing with, they respond accordingly: Charlie acts morally against Coats’s immorality and, through his mental fortitude, Spider resists the fear Tiger tries to induce by his physical strength. In this sense, the villainous actions are highly contrasted with Spider and Charlie’s heroic ones: the former are societally untenable, rely on society not becoming wise to them, and benefit the individual more than the society; the latter ones are societally sustainable, counter the villainous actions by revealing them to society and ensure they are also punished. In Tiger’s and Coats’s case, however, this last phase is the hardest, because the heroes have to act against societal preconceptions: they have to convince with indisputable evidence that a rich individual such as Coats is capable of crimes, which based on repeated findings of corruption is more the rule than the exception in modern society. In the next section, I analyze what other factors than acting against Tiger and Coats motivate Charlie and Spider to become tricksters.

4.6 Charlie and Spider – Tricksters’ Equilibrium

In the beginning of both *AG* and *AB*, the novels’ protagonists are de-centered in their lives and inhibited from reaching their full potential. As shown in the previous chapter, Shadow’s depression over the loss of his wife and her betrayal of him allows Wednesday to manipulate him and only death gives Shadow the clarity to see through Wednesday’s scheme. In the beginning of the plot of *AB*, Charlie also undergoes a traumatic experience when part of his personality is taken away at a young age by a spell. As a result he loses his passion for life and, out of this and other characteristics vital to a trickster, Charlie’s brother Spider is born. This leads to Charlie becoming a meek and unassuming accountant, whose greatest fear is public humiliation. Spider, by contrast, lives a glamorous and carefree life that his trickster powers permit him. When the brothers are reunited, they force each other out of their contrasting familiar grooves to find a common ground, representing the balance of human existence. Through reconciliation, the two brothers both transform into tricksters, a change that is essential to reintroduce balance to the novel’s society. As opposed to Shadow, however, they achieve this balance through relatively small acts of kindness and heroism: a

song, a joke, or an encouraging word at the right time are what eventually cumulate into actions that save them and their loved ones.

Unlike Shadow in *AG*, Charlie and Spider are not portrayed as reincarnations of mythic gods but instead simply as Anansi's sons. Before Charlie was split into two, one of Charlie's neighbors in Florida, Mrs. Dunwiddy characterized him as being "full of [him]self, all mischief and backtalk and vinegar" (*AB* 318). Splitting Charlie also led Mr. Nancy to try and embarrass his son in order to build his character and to rouse his anger so he may regain his lost spirit. Therefore, I argue that the duality of Mr. Nancy's parental and godly roles is integral to his sons' development into modern tricksters, each in his different way. To analyze the relationship between Mr. Nancy and his sons, I draw on Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky's essay about the parent-child relationships in *AG* and *AB* and make some further conclusions based on her findings. For her, Mr. Nancy is the opposite of an authoritative father: instead, she describes him as a "joyful father who is obsessive with regard to his involvement in his children's life" (von Czarnowsky 52). I agree with her argument that *AB* can be read as Charlie's coming of age story, however, she omits Spider, the other "Anansi Boy", from her analysis. I propose that the same logic can be applied to him: because he lacks the formative experiences that embarrassed Charlie, he develops into an immature egotist. This grants him independence from society but also excludes him from it. Spider, like Charlie, needs to grow up to find his own place in society.

In this section, I look at how the two brothers transform throughout the novel and reach a state of equilibrium in their lives gained by their status as tricksters. The first subsection focuses on Spider, looking at how he regains a connection to society through the people around him, mainly Charlie and Rosie. The next subsection is dedicated to Charlie as his character develops from feeling sorry for himself to a confident and fulfilled individual. The last subsection analyzes the influence these two characters have on each other; though very different in the beginning of the novel, they end up resembling each other more and more at the end.

4.6.1 Spider – The Redeemed Trickster

In the beginning of the novel, Spider is focused on enjoying life carefree and alone, not giving a second thought to how his actions might affect other lives, such as Charlie's or Rosie's. His powers afford him impunity from any crime or moral digression, but this is also a part of his tragedy: like a child who is never punished for his wrongdoings, Spider cannot

see the boundaries within which he must find his own place and be accepted as part of his community.

Because Spider was driven away from his childhood home by Mrs. Dunwiddy (*AB* 318) and forced to rely only on himself and his trickster abilities, he resembles Peter Pan, a boy-who-never-grew-up type of trickster, not living up to his potential because he refuses to see that he does not belong “anywhere” (Valentova 736). This also prevents him from finding any fulfillment in his life. In this sense, Spider is only a trickster superficially. While always liminal beings, tricksters are still a part of society and will always have a role to play in it (see Babcock-Abrahams). Spider, as he appears in the beginning of the novel, only takes from society without giving back anything, bearing a close resemblance to an antisocial or even a mirthless trickster. Before visiting Charlie, Spider’s liminality is limited to spatial movement: he can go anywhere he likes, but because he is not temporally liminal, his actions do not amount to anything. Temporality is forced on both Charlie and Spider when they meet and the interaction between the two leads them to act first against and later help each other.

Indeed, at first Spider acts more like the antagonist than the helper: he terrorizes Charlie by sabotaging his personal and professional relationships. The catalyst for change in Spider is his love for Rosie and he even reflects on this: “But Rosie... Rosie was different. He couldn’t have told how she was different. He had tried, and failed. Partly it was how he felt when he was with her: as if, seeing himself in her eyes, he became a wholly better person” (*AB* 220). Where Peter Pan fails to grow up because he cannot reciprocate Wendy’s romantic feelings for him (see Valentova), Spider finds a deeper meaning to life in risking his own life for others. Spider eventually seems to contract some of Rosie’s inherent goodness, which later on guides his actions. Without it, it seems improbable Spider would have made the morally correct choices when faced with such.

However, Spider’s love for Rosie is only the catalyst that begins to change him and eventually having to face real pain, loss and suffering takes over his transformation. Like many other tricksters, his father Anansi among them, Spider is at first seemingly immune to insult and injury. Charlie’s pact with Bird Woman, however, renders Spider physically vulnerable while his affection for Rosie leads to giving up deception and trickery against the people he cares for. This vulnerability not only exposes Spider to danger, but also makes him dependent on the help of others. As a trade-off, Spider relinquishes his trickster powers and he is ultimately made happier and stronger through his bonds with others, after he is saved by Rosie’s love and Charlie’s courage.

All of Spider's communal experiences are very normal in their nature: e.g. he falls in love, meets his loved one's mother, helps and is helped by his brother. In describing what helps Spider, and Charlie as well, to grow into persons with happy and fulfilled lives, the novel underlines the importance of these relatively normal experiences that form the roots of every society: anything that makes people care about each other. Like the reverberating strands of a spider's web, these connections to his immediate surroundings show Spider that the web of connections stretches beyond himself. Spider is even motivated to save Rosie's mother from dying, even though he admits that "given time, I'm sure I would have really, really disliked her" (AB 432). Because everyone he comes to care about also has people they care about and so on and so forth, Spider is connected to the society that extends through everyone in it. As Charlie helped Spider in coming into contact with the people around him, he in turn helps Charlie to rebuild these meaningful connections.

4.6.2 Charlie – The Emerging Trickster

In the beginning of the novel, Charlie can hardly be characterized as a trickster: he is easily embarrassed, dispassionate, meek and apathetic. Charlie fails to realize that he has become too dependent on both his job and his relationship with his fiancée while neither fulfills his life in any meaningful way. Charlie lacks the passion to do anything to improve his situation, but this lack is a direct consequence of the curse that separated Spider from him when he was a child. Events, in part set off by his father and partly by himself, force Charlie to face his problems. At first, Charlie believes Spider to be the source of all his troubles but fails to see his own responsibility in bringing Spider into his life. Trying to get rid of Spider, Charlie is willing to resort to desperate means, almost sacrificing Spider to Tiger. Realizing his mistake, Charlie summons the will to correct it, even putting himself in harm's way to save Spider. Danger and risk play a significant role in teaching Charlie that nothing in this world is certain and living life without a little risk and danger is not that interesting.

As opposed to Spider, Charlie has developed an oversensitivity to breaking societal norms because of his father's cavalier behavior. For Charlie, Mr. Nancy serves as a negative example of how to live: he embarrassed Charlie, abandoned his mother (or that is at least how Charlie sees the situation), lives off others instead of working, and left Charlie to fend for himself when Mrs. Dunwiddy separated Spider from him (AB 318). Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky argues that Charlie's embarrassment about his father "is not permanent and reconciliation with the joyful father is on the horizon once the child grows up" (52-54). However, she focuses more on Anansi than Charlie and leaves out how, exactly, he grows up.

To explore this, I propose that Charlie must undergo a rite of passage,³⁹ which is represented by his journey into the realm of gods to ask for their help. Charlie undergoes the first two phases described by Van Gennep and Turner (Turner 94): separation, when he leaves his life in London and margin (or *limen*) when he enters the realm of gods. However, the rite of passage is not consummated until Charlie sees the consequences of his actions and rectifies them. Through Charlie's passage into adulthood, the novel shows that even doing the wrong thing can be better than doing nothing, as long as it teaches something: realizing that one has made a mistake gives a reason to act and morality can guide in trying to correct that mistake.

What then teaches Charlie morality? It is clear that not everything his father did to him had only negative consequences: being embarrassed time and again has developed Charlie's moral sensitivity, but it is not enough to give him the will to act. Morality and the will to act are the two significant forces in play for both Charlie and Spider, but they need the help of others to apply them correctly. Where Rosie acted as the moral guide for Spider, Charlie needs Daisy to give him the will to act. Compared to Rosie's inherent goodness, which acted as Spider's moral compass, Daisy is spirited and assertive. These qualities make her perfectly suited to help Charlie rid himself of his indecisiveness in challenging situations. For example, when Coats threatens Daisy with a gun in the hotel's restaurant, Charlie is offered only one chance to save both himself and Daisy, but it requires him to risk being embarrassed. Charlie manages to defeat his fear and sings to a room full of people, proposes to Daisy and saves both their lives (*AB* 374-378). Charlie tries to solve the situation first by asking himself "what would Spider [or their] dad do" (*AB* 376). By thinking of them, the trickster within Charlie emerges when it is needed, because all it requires is the confidence to act. However, the act of singing is not only based on how Charlie thinks his father would act: in the novel it is hinted more than once that Charlie likes to sing, the only thing that is stopping him is his fear of public embarrassment. Therefore, singing is Charlie's way of actualizing Anansi's confidence. In this way, Charlie makes this act of a trickster his own and shows that it can be helpful to take risks when pursuing one's passion in life. Additionally, saving Daisy and Spider shows Charlie that other people need him, and it connects him to his surroundings in a new, more reciprocal way. Charlie no longer feels only dependent on people, like he did with Rosie and Grahame Coats, but sees that he himself also has a lot to give to society. Creating these connections have the same effect as they did for Spider: they show Charlie his place in the surrounding society and that he, too, deserves happiness.

³⁹ For a complete description of the different stages of *rites de passage*, see Turner.

4.6.3 Charlie and Spider – The Modern Tricksters

In *AB*, Charlie and Spider reach maturity by finding out that what was once lost can be regained: their family. They not only find family in each other, but in everyone who helps them face their problems. Anansi, Rosie, Mrs. Noah, Daisy, Charlie's neighbors in Florida all guide them and give them the courage and the will to act. This allows them to see themselves as part of something larger, a crucial difference to Grahame Coats and Tiger, who are solitary predators. To reach this interconnected existence, both Charlie and Spider are forced to come to terms with their pasts and act selflessly to make amends for their mistakes.

Even though Charlie and Spider began from very different places, they both end up in the same border the tricksters so frequently like to cross, move or break; balancing their individual needs with the needs of society. This liminality is at the very heart of both tricksters and humans, who both can be occasionally good, occasionally bad, but never actually evil. As both the novel and Eagleton suggest, inexplicable evil is hard to find in humans and everything has a reason, however mad or unimaginable it may be. Even for Coats to become a villain, he must shed his humanity, and even that is not enough to make his actions inexplicably evil. To show the depth of humanity that a trickster can portray, the novel portrays the two protagonists as much human as trickster. And even though Spider and Charlie begin as incomplete individuals, both only a part of the human they once were, their individuation begins when they are re-united as brothers and at the same time their nature as tricksters begins to actualize.

The novel's psychological framing is focused on this duality: what is split cannot be made whole without the other, whether it is the duality of Spider and Charlie or human and trickster. As Anansi predicts in the novel, Spider and Charlie help each other in becoming two new wholes instead of returning to the status quo of them as one individual. To further illustrate my argument, I draw on Kwasisi Tekpetey's research, where he equates Anansi "with the Freudian notion of id, embodying instinctual, repressed, or antisocial desires" (74), the same traits that other tricksters also embody. However, within him, Anansi also holds the potential of the superego because "both the *anansesem*'s and Kweku Ananse's value emerge in the articulation with the audience's normative ideas of right behavior" (Tekpetey 78). Tekpetey nevertheless acknowledges that analyzing Anansi through psychoanalysis is not strictly plausible because Anansi is "a being with infinite personalities" (78), representing a society more than any one individual.

While I agree with Tekpetey that Anansi's personality is difficult to fathom, the novel offers the needed information about Spider and Charlie. Spider represents the traits of the id in the beginning of the novel, where he roams aimlessly enjoying the freedom his powers grant him. Using the same logic, Charlie can then be considered as the representation of Freud's superego: he abhors any kind of disruption to his organized life and is paralyzed by even the remotest chance of embarrassment. Charlie cannot see the benefit of having Spider as a part of his life because he cannot enjoy the childish and carefree style that Spider introduces him to. Charlie does not allow himself any of the impulsive emotions that can be found, for example, on a night out drinking to his father's memory, waking up next to an unknown woman, or spontaneously taking the day off. What can be gathered of their time as one person (before Spider was separated from Charlie), Charlie was a lot like Anansi: clever, carefree and unapologetic.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is easy to look at Charlie and Spider starting as two halves of a whole, but as Mr. Nancy tells Charlie, "*Starfish [...] When you cut one in half, they just grow into two new starfish*" (AB 129, original italics). Whereas Charlie teaches Spider to care for others and connect himself to the surrounding society, Spider shows Charlie that it takes courage to take what he wants, and it is sometimes worth taking a risk. In the brothers' development into full-fledged tricksters, the novel shows how they complement each other and would not grow into individual wholes without each other. As Tekpetey suggests, no one can know exactly what it is to be Anansi, neither can Charlie know what it is like to be Spider and vice versa. It is only after accepting their differences that Charlie and Spider are able to learn from each other.

These developments, however, are reflected on the novel's society only on the level of the individual. Because the scope of the adventure is much smaller in scale than that of Shadow's in *AG*, it shows the reader how the smaller changes happening closer to the individual can be much more significant than a larger shift in social order. At first, Charlie is inhibited by his lack of passion in his work, love life, and family, and Spider is overwhelmed by his constantly shifting passions, which prevent him from achieving anything meaningful in his life. Both examples represent lives without deeper meaning: the former is all work, the latter all play, but one without the other is meaningless. In the end, both Spider and Charlie achieve balance between the two, but it is left unclear whether society as a whole is changed. The lives of the protagonists along with the lives of their loved ones are made better, but what

⁴⁰ Mrs. Dunwiddy admits to pulling out "all the tricksiness", "wickedness" and "devilry" out of Charlie when he was young (AB 318).

about everyone else? Do Charlie and Spider fail in what Anansi succeeded at when he introduced stories to humans? The novel does not provide the reader with a definite answer, but simply implies that society is made a little better by the protagonists' actions. All Spider and Charlie do is seal away Tiger's influence on people for a while. This change can then echo throughout society, like Charlie's final song (*AB* 434-437), and balance out the wrong with the right. Nevertheless, once the song fades, the fight against what Tiger and Coats represent must be taken up again so that society may continue.

Once the balance is eventually reintroduced into society and their own lives, Charlie and Spider no longer need to act as the balancing agents they transformed into. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that they stop being tricksters, so perhaps it is better to say that they take up other roles; those of a husband, a father, a singer, a cook, or an obstinate son-in-law (*AB* 445-451). Anansi's sons, just like all people, play the roles they need to play, and will undoubtedly embrace their trickster role should the need arise. This opportunity of changing roles, such as exemplified by Charlie and Spider in the novel, is, however, only possible if one understands the liminality of human existence. The power to decide what they are emancipates Charlie and Spider, and Charlie extends this power to everyone else by singing "of names and words, of the building blocks beneath the real, the worlds [sic] that make worlds, the truths beneath the way things are" (*AB* 435). By doing this, Charlie fixes "the world" (*AB* 434) and his final act as a trickster also reveals the final thesis of the novel: to fix the world, everyone needs to feel that they have the power to determine their own existence and in an ideal society no person or law needs to inhibit this right. The tricksters' liminality between the seemingly normal and the fantastic roles is a testament to the liminality in all humans, to be both an individual and a part of society; at one time the trickster and at another just a normal person. In this way, Charlie and Spider are arguably also culture heroes, who, by their examples, give the humans the quintessential power of self-determination.

4.7 Chapter Conclusions

The focus of this chapter was to establish how the traditional trickster is used and transformed into different roles in *AB* to elucidate the delicate balance on which the novel's society hangs. This was approached through the connection between the individual and the society; how Anansi became to symbolize culture and society through stories and songs that in turn represented the will "to make the world" (*AB* 341). The novel's Anansi was compared to two different traditional Anansis in West African and Caribbean storytelling and was

found to incorporate elements of both: his role as a stabilizing agent and a platform for social critique from the former; his appearance, speech and role as an affirmative agent in society from the latter.

The villains of the novel, Tiger and Grahame Coats, were analyzed side by side to look at how evil can be challenged. The notion of evil was considered from the point of view of self-interest that is taken so far that it affects other lives negatively. Tiger and Coats were driven by an overwhelming sense of having to see themselves in relation to others and constantly trying to get ahead, which ultimately proved to be an unfulfilling and tragic obsession. Tiger managed to further his own interests with impunity because he was the strongest of his society, while Coats had to act in secret, but nevertheless managed to subvert societal constructs for his own benefit. This showed that the novel's society was not yet in any way perfect, the negative aspects giving individuals like Charlie and Spider cause to act against them.

Charlie and Spider grew into their roles as tricksters first by competing with and finally helping each other. Compared to the tricksters in *AG*, the transformations of Charlie and Spider in *AB* were teleological: their trickster nature reached a highpoint which reintroduced balance into society. After this point, Charlie and Spider pushed their trickster role into the background, instead adopting normal social roles to uphold the balance. The focus on the individuality of Charlie and Spider connected to the shift in the wider societal focus from the collective to the individual: where before Anansi stood for the individual's role in working together for the good of all, at the end of *AB* Charlie and Spider played a more reciprocal role, where they could fulfill their own lives according to their wishes and in so doing rebuild society.

5 – Final Discussion: The Significance of Tricksters

In her article on tricksters, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams argues that “the question of what role or function [a trickster] narrative plays in society remains to be answered” and concedes that “the various explanations [...] are all necessary but none of them is a sufficient and complete answer to the question of the social role of narrative in general, or trickster tales in particular” (182). While I have argued in this thesis that the tricksters in *AG* and *AB* draw attention to several aspects of the novels’ societies, and how they do so, the question of *why* is more complicated. Babcock-Abrahams and Victor Turner posit that by their mere presence, the trickster can “startle one into fresh views of his contemporary reality” (Babcock-Abrahams 185) and the trickster’s “liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and more than that, as a realm of pure possibility” (Turner 97). By the examples of this thesis, the novels’ tricksters exhibit this type of behavior in the two novels, which is the trickster’s vital function: to question *why* the society and culture are the way they are. They also suggest what other possibilities exist, keeping our imagination and creativity at work. In short, the tricksters help us rebuild ourselves.

However, when comparing Gaiman’s two novels with mythical trickster tales, one should be aware that their social functions are different. Whereas traditional cultures revolved largely around the trickster and his adventures and relied on their functions as educators, critics, and entertainers, Gaiman’s works are almost exclusively only the last. Nevertheless, reading the novels as entertainment calls attention, as suggested by this thesis, to the nature of tricksters: even though they might not work anymore as educators and critics, perhaps they should. What I believe the novels suggest most of all in their adaptation and recreation of tricksters and myths is returning society to a state where such characters are a part of everyday life, instead of, as Wednesday puts it, forgetting them (*AG* 358) and what they stand for.

In *Anansi Boys*, education and criticism happen just like this: inside the trickster stories, and by continuing to tell those stories in *AG* and *AB*, they set off the chain reaction that is described in the novel:

Maybe Anansi’s just some guy from a story, made up back in Africa in the dawn days of the world by some boy with blackfly on his leg, pushing his crutch in the dirt, making up some goofy story about a man made of tar. Does that change anything? People respond to the stories. They tell them themselves. The stories spread, and as people tell them, the

stories change the tellers. Because now the folk who never had any thought in their head but how to run from lions and keep far enough away from rivers that the crocodiles don't get an easy meal, now they're starting to dream about a whole new place to live. The world may be the same, but the wallpaper's changed. Yes? People still have the same story, the one where they get born and they do stuff and they die, but now the story means something different to what it meant before. (AB 341)

Our lives are still the same: we get born, we do stuff and we die, but once again the story means something different than before. For now, we lack something that the stories can give us: reasonable communal means to criticize global phenomena that affects us all, such as corporations, governments, science and industry that rule the Western way of life as represented by the modern gods in *AG*. Arguably, society has become too large to show us what makes us similar, and as a result we focus on what makes us individuals. The ambiguity of the novels' tricksters and their stories, however, makes this once again possible, and by following their example we gain the ability to think for ourselves, as well as the capacity to think of ourselves as part of a community.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to the answers provided in these characters: even though they are an amalgam of different cultures, the main influence in both novels' protagonists is Anglo-American. On the other hand, the Anglo-American culture is probably the most influential culture at this moment in history, so, arguably, it makes sense to use it as the primary source and vessel for the narratives. Second, the novels' tricksters are not nearly as ambiguous as tricksters of old: Shadow, Charlie and Spider are heroes whereas Grahame Coats and Tiger are the villains. Wednesday and Low Key, on the other hand, are somewhat fluid in their roles: both begin as Shadow's helpers and allies but end up as villains.

Unfortunately, neither has the potential to retain their trickster ambiguity after *AG* because they die, and simultaneously lose their chance at redemption, which the trickster always keeps at hand but never takes. Compared to, for example, Anansi or Wisakedjak in their traditional tales, the character development of the novels' tricksters is unidirectional: heroes become more heroic and villains more villainous. This narrative choice disregards what it means to be human: at times strong and righteous, at other times weak and selfish.

Nevertheless, the novels' tricksters are not inherently good or evil: it is their actions that position them so strongly to either side and even the heroes have their weak moments.

As I have come to realize in this thesis, the role and function of the mythical trickster is still difficult, even impossible, to accurately determine, and he is still the "tolerated margin of mess" that Barbara Babcock-Abrahams dubs him. Even though the challenges of

contemporary society are different from those of the societies that gave birth to the trickster, the nature of his function in Gaiman's works is still what it has always been: to show what we are capable of and caution either for or against it. The novels only ask us to look and see "the hidden Indians" (AG 591); the different elements of society that work all around us, at times to our benefit, at others, to our detriment. Whatever those "hidden Indians" are depends on the individual, but, like Shadow, everyone needs to discover them in order to situate themselves in relation to the surrounding society to better understand it. Lastly, and because the tricksters traditionally played the same role, we could look up to them and see society for what it is: an incomplete construct to make what sense we can of our existence.

I began this thesis with a quote from the late great George Carlin about trickster figures in primitive societies. I want to close this work with a quote from another comedian, arguably a contemporary benign version of the traditional trickster figure, about the nature of stories; a quote which closely represents why I think comedy, stories, and the trickster are perpetually intertwined in each other. Hannah Gadsby says about stories: "Laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine." And this notion is something that even George Carlin in his brilliance apparently missed: laughter does not only make the divine accessible, it also makes the *human* accessible. The trickster is the vessel to access this divine humanity: he holds the stories within a shell of laughter, and we need that laughter to access the human that is the story.

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