



# Sacred to Profane: Liminal Space and Carnivalesque Transformation in *American Gods*

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## Abstract

*This research paper subverts the traditional power structure and social hierarchies as presented in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. It uses Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnivalesque Theory to explore how the liminal space is reflected in the characters, thereby forming a base for the aforementioned concept. It focuses on Grotesque Realism, Profanity, Parody, and Carnival laughter in the narration to map the liminal space, which serves as a Carnivalesque zone. Furthermore, the Carnivalesque imagery critiques modern American society and Ancient deities while exploring the themes of belief and cultural adaptation. This paper reiterates how the Carnivalesque serves as a tool for questioning the Cultural shifting and power imbalance when it comes to the entanglement of high and low culture, combined with the Gods' adaptation to the Modern American lifestyle. In conclusion, this research paper demonstrates how the contemporary novel employs Carnivalesque elements to engage with public discourse and cultural transformation.*

**Keywords:** **carnivalesque, liminal space, grotesque realism, profanity, parody, carnival laughter**

## Introduction

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10)

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* is a fantasy fiction that blends mythological, cultural, and ideological disputes. This paper analyzes how Gaiman deploys carnival elements to subvert conventional power dynamics and destabilize hegemonic narratives about American identity, mythology, and belief systems by employing Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnivalesque theory. It ponders how *American Gods* serves as a Carnivalesque narrative that hinders historical and contemporary cultural authority by analyzing liminal spaces, grotesque realism, and the inversion of social hierarchies.



## Literature Review

In this paper, *Aesthetic Activism and the Carnivalesque in the Urban Social Movements*, the concept of Carnival aesthetics was proposed to explore the intersection of aesthetics and politics in urban social movements to create diversity, creativity, and egalitarianism through subversive experiences and collective memory, language, and festivity. Participants in London and Seattle used costumes, masks, and performances to create a festive atmosphere, protest, and challenge the capitalist structures and authoritarian governance. Another example is the Occupy movement in which the use of public spaces, creative signage, and participatory performance helped to articulate grievance against Economic inequality. The Gezi Park movement in Turkey serves as a poignant illustration of aesthetic resistance. In conclusion, the carnivalesque aesthetics act as a form of resistance to challenge the conventional norms of political participation by doing festivity, performance, and subversion against authoritarianism.

*Foreign carnival culture: between idiom and viral concept* explores the Modern Carnival Culture and focuses on terminology to describe the carnivalesque protest movement. The linguistic and cultural side of common terms include Laughtivism, Laughter Resistance, Strategic Humor, Humorous Protest, Protestival Clown Frontation, Tactical and Intentional Carnival, Carnivalesque Protest, and Carnivalized politics that combine laughter with serious political actions. These terms describe various protest movements such as Carnival against capital, Rebel Army of Clowns, Occupy Wall Street, Reclaim the Streets and the Bread, and Puppet Theatre. The author proposes two hypotheses by using foreign terms to characterize carnival culture as idioms whose meanings cannot be derived from lexicon construction alone, and through exaptation theory, the author combines laughter and seriousness for the evolution of carnival culture. This paper partially confirmed both hypotheses. It concludes that carnival culture is not just a playful phenomenon but a significant aspect of resistance and social commentary in modern society.

In the research paper, *Carnivalesque Inversion in the Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut*, the author examined Kurt Vonnegut's portrayal of the politically fluid landscape of modern America as a mirror of cultural self-reflection. Vonnegut expects his reader to acknowledge their persecution of society and ideology is purely illusion and recreate a better world for them. It focuses on Kurt Vonnegut's novels *Player Piano*, *Cats Cradles*, and *Slaughterhouses* for exploring the theme of technology, religion, and war through Mikhail Bakhtin *Carnivalesque Inversion for Rabelais and his world* (1965). It further demonstrates how these themes are interwoven with the cultural and political landscape of both post-war America and the present. Implementing Bakhtin's concepts of Carnivalesque Inversion and the text as a site of struggle provides a powerful framework for understanding Vonnegut's narration. It concludes that Vonnegut's works catalyze readers to reassess their ideological beliefs and conventional norms.

The research paper *The Renovation of the Self by the Other in Iris Murdoch's Carnivalesque The Italian Girl* (1964), focused on the theme of self-renewal through interaction with others in society. The other acts as a catalyst for characters to renew their identities and moral values. It employs the Carnivalesque approach of dialogism and polyphony to subvert the traditional social hierarchies and emphasize the multiplicity of voices. This paper suggests that Murdoch's work parodies conventional ideas of marriage, love, and family, which creates a new order for each character. It emphasizes that each character in the novel has the right to express their thoughts and feelings. Bakhtin's idea of literature is a space for multiple voices and perspectives, allowing characters to renew themselves through connection with others.

The article *American Gods: Debunking the Symbolic Dimension of Early American Naturalism* explored the neglected themes of naturalism as a philosophical movement marked by a repudiation of metaphysical symbolism. Secular culture plays a major role in this paper. It critiques the common perception that naturalism and religion are fundamentally opposed. The author highlights that



early naturalism was intertwined with humanism, which emerged from the Unitarian church. It further explained secular humanism with religious characteristics, highlighting reason and science over traditional religious belief.

The analysis of Carnivalesque elements in American Gods opens numerous approaches for further research. Future scholars will use Gaiman's other works like *The Sand Man Series* and *Anansi Boys* by extending the framework of Carnivalesque theory. The scholars may explore how different authors apply Carnivalesque techniques to explore societal collapse by analyzing a comparative study between American Gods and other authors' fantasy fiction. Furthermore, the scholars can examine how the T.V. adaptation of American Gods applicable to Carnivalesque elements provide insights into liminality and Carnivalistic transformation.

## Methodology

This paper focuses on the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's Carnivalesque Theory. Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian literary critic, coined the term carnivalesque and developed this concept extensively in his book *Rabelais and his world*. Carnivalesque is a social phenomenon that temporarily inverts social hierarchies, suppresses conventional norms, and challenges traditional ideas. It centers on grotesque realism, profanation, Carnival Laughter, and polyphony.

## Research Methods

This paper scrutinizes a close reading of the text *American Gods* to identify the instances of carnivalesque subversion. It examines how certain passages implement carnival elements through comparative literary analysis. It further analyses the context of the novel's engagement with American Cultural myths.

## Data Collection

House on the Rock, the roadside attractions, and Shadow's vigil on the tree are some of the sections that exemplify the carnival features during the data collection process. Recording information such as

instances of hierarchy inversion and power subversion. Mapping liminal space that serves as a carnival zone.

## Results

### Roadside Attractions as Carnivalesque Spaces

Carnivalesque spaces are a literary concept rooted in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his world*, where the conventional order is temporarily suspended and traditional hierarchies, roles, and powers are reversed. "Road side attractions: people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize the part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around,..." (Gaiman, 2017, p.130). The House on the Rock section in American Gods functions as a Carnivalesque space where the essence of existence is suspended. Mr. Wednesday (Odin, God of war) and Shadow Moon, the protagonist, arrive at the House on the Rock, a bizarre and eclectic building, to exhibit artifacts. Wednesday explained that the house is a "place of power" where people can connect with something transcendent, special, and meaningful, though it signifies the American Culture. The House on the Rock serves as a Carnivalesque Zone, where people can escape from reality for a time being. "There may be some power there, although twisted, and hard to access" (Gaiman, 2017, p.131). Though the House on the Rock is a roadside attraction for Americans, it can be viewed as an authentic power and transcendence for old Gods like Mr.Wednesday, Czernobog, Mr.Nancy, The Zorya Sisters, Bilquis, Mr.Ibis and Jacquel, Easter, Mad Sweeney, and Goddess Kali. "Everywhere was the sound of music: jangling, awkward, music, ever-so slightly off the beat and out of time." (Gaiman, 2017, p.131). It describes the ambiance of the house, where the sense of disorientation and playful chaos often characterizes a Carnivalesque space. It emphasizes the playful and surreal reality. The carnivalesque spaces like The House on the Rock blur the boundaries between different categories, like high and low class or reality and fantasy.



### **Wednesday as the Lord of Misrule**

“This is the only country in the world that worries about what it is... The rest of them know what they are. No one ever needs to go searching for the heart of Norway. Or look for the soul of Mozambique. They know what they are.” (Gaiman, 2017, p.128). This is an excerpt said by Mr. Wednesday during the time of the bank robbery scheme with Shadow. He said that America is the only country that worries about its identity. He playfully subverts the notion of national identity. His statement can be seen as a mirror of the Carnivalesque feature, where the norms and values of society are reflected in a distorted way. As the Lord of Misrule, Mr. Wednesday represents the Carnivalesque features of Chaos, disorder, and subversion. The bank robbery scene substantiates Mr. Wednesday as Odin, God of wisdom and war, transformed from sacred into profane by reducing himself to a common confidence man. He profaned his divine nature from the sacred God to thief by mocking financial institutions and gathering wealth through trickery.

The House on the Rock represents the Carnivalesque assembly, where the Old Gods from different hierarchies gathered in the same place is a perfect illustration of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival subverting the traditional hierarchies. “This is a bad place for Gods... Gods are great but people are greater, for they only worship the gods they want to. (Gaiman, 2017, p.)” This quote reflects carnival’s elevation of the common people over established authority. There, Mr. Wednesday resides as a ring leader who tamed the other Gods and Goddesses to make a war against the Technological Gods. The chapter, Vigil for Mr. Wednesday serves as a Carnivalesque ritual inversion. Carnival Death is one of the features in Carnivalesque theory, analyzed the death of Wednesday contains the seed of renewal and rebirth.

Parody is a creative work designed to imitate, mock, or comment on its subject employing satirical or ironic imitation. Wednesday’s entire recruitment of Shadow as a guard and other Gods for the war serves as a parody of religious conversion. His existence in this novel serves as a parody of the All-

Father archetype. He is depicted as a womanizer, manipulator, and con man instead of a divine, noble, and powerful figure. His name, Wednesday, is itself a parody derived from Wodan’s day, when he introduced his name to Shadow Moon in the flight

### **Shadow’s Liminal Identity**

Shadow Moon, Protagonist adopts multiple identities like Convict, body Guard of Wednesday, disguised as Mike Ainsel and son of All-Father that function as Carnival mask allowing him to get temporary freedom from his primary identity as a common man. He often suspended the societal rules in prison, with Gods, in Lakeside and during his death represents profound liminal states in the novel. “You do your own time in prison. You don’t do anyone else’s time for them. Keep your head down. Do your own time” (Gaiman, 2017, p.6). This excerpt is an interior monologue of Shadow about the prison philosophy don’t get involved in others’ problems which he internalized in prison and adopted as his personal mantra. In prison, he deliberately disconnected himself from the community around him reflects the carnival’s inversion of normal social bonds. The mantra, don’t get involved in others’ problems foreshadows Shadow’s journey throughout the novel. In the journey with Gods, he repeatedly finds himself doing time for others, particularly on Wednesday before claimed his identity and purpose of life.

In the section of the Vigil on the Tree, Shadow’s journey between life and death mirrors the carnival experience of transformation. It represents one of the most profound liminal states in the novel. “The pain in his arms and legs became, by degrees, intolerable.” (Gaiman, 2017, p.495). This excerpt explains, Shadow literally hangs between life and death and the human and divine realms. In the name of Physical liminality, shadow experiences extreme sensations of cold, hunger, and thirst. It creates a sense of disorientation and disconnection from the world. When the shadow hanging from a tree, he is suspended between life and death. His body begins to decay, indicating a carnivalesque degradation that undergoes transformation. The rope around his neck creates a literal threshold between his head (divinity)



and body (humanity). Shadow holding the vigil for nine days referred to Odin hung for nine days on Yggdrasil to gain wisdom in Norse mythology. Shadow travels between the earth and under world, where he communicates with mystical beings from other realms while his physical body remains in the earth. The elephant-headed man curled his trunk towards shadow and said, 'if you had invoked me before you began this journey, perhaps some of your troubles might have avoided' (Gaiman, 2017, p.497). It highlights the spiritual liminality of Shadow. Wednesday scheming shadows life to be a prisoner, a son, a corpse, and a vessel which becomes his identity in a fluid and uncertain state. Once he holds the vigil, he finds his identity and purpose of life in the identity liminality.

The vigil serves as a Carnivalesque transformation in Shadow's journey. Carnival's death rebirth cycle reflects Shadow's symbolic death on the tree and renewal with awareness. "Shadow no longer felt the cold, or rather, he felt only the cold, but the cold had now become part of himself, it belonged to him and he belonged to it" (Gaiman, 2017,p.498). This quote highlights the transformation of Shadow as he becomes one with nature and his experience, though he suspended the law of nature.

### **The Grotesque Realism and Metamorphosis**

Grotesque Realism is a literary concept that emphasizes the body and materialism to depict the characters whose humanity has eroded. Bilquis, ancient Saban Goddess of love and fertility, worshipped in the kingdom of Saba, present-day Yemen, represents the Grotesque body consuming the worshipper, during a sexual encounter. "Will you call me goddess? Will you pray to me? Will you worship me with your body?" (Gaiman, 2017, p.31). This excerpt represents the grotesque body that emphasizes orifices and the transgression of bodily boundaries. When the worshipper is physically consumed by Bilquis, her divine power can be rejuvenated. This bodily consumption is a form of communion or religious ritual to survive in a world where Gods are forgotten. Bilquis performs this Grotesque act, crossing the boundaries between

sacred to profane, the spiritual to grotesque realism. The completion of the grotesque transformation was shown at the end of consumption, where she lies alone on the bed, smiles sleepily, and stretches like a cat onto the pillow. Bilquis 's consumption of the worshipper's body is considered both a sexual act and a divine manifestation by connecting the physical body to cosmic power structures.

Laura Moon wife of Shadow Moon, died in a car accident with Shadow's friend Robbie involved in an infidelity with her. After her death, she was raised from the funeral by Shadow tossed the coin (supernatural power- sun's treasure) on her body, which gave her an undead (decomposing body) rather than true life. When Shadow encounters Laura in his motel room at first, she explains that the coin resurrected her from death, and it is embedded in her body. This coin creates a grotesque fusion of object and flesh that exemplifies the carnivalesque blurring of boundaries. When Laura explains her state of undead, as she is neither dead nor alive embodies the Carnival's threshold state. Laura's body smelled of embalming fluid leaks, flesh rotting, and decaying substantiates the grotesque body's refusal to obey normal biological rules. Furthermore, Laura's decomposing body is visible as her finger blackens, her skin grays, and maggots appear around her. Laura showers in Formaldehyde and applies makeup to pacify her decomposition of the body, becoming a part of a carnivalesque symbol that demonstrates death is not a mere end, but part of a continuous cycle of transformation and renewal in grotesque realism. The weakness of Laura's undeath and bodily decay becomes a strength to her by gaining supernatural power, especially when Shadow meets any danger, she protects him.

### **Carnival Time vs. Historical Time**

Gaiman documented some historical records about the immigration of people from various countries to America in the title, as Coming to America. The narration of migration captures a moment of transition, when the worshippers' belief crossed both geographical and temporal boundaries, creating threshold moments. The vignettes serve as a



carnivalesque figure who interrupts the main narrative by breaking linear progression with temporal digression. In 1721, Essie Trego brought Piskies from Cornwall to America, demonstrating how storytelling itself becomes carnivalesque time by preserving old beliefs in new settings. The multiple temporal layers of divine immigration established through Vikings coming to America in 813 C.E., the temporal collapse between ancient worship and modern sex work demonstrates collapsing centuries into a single space through Bilquis, Goddess of love and fertility.

## Discussion

The application of Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnivalesque Theory in *American Gods* deconstructs the American mythology and cultural identity in the novel. Through polyphonic narration, the novel resists singular authoritative interpretations of history and religion, where numerous ideologies are synchronized in it. The carnivalesque feature of Carnival laughter and Grotesque realism challenge traditional depictions of Gods and power, which place belief systems as inconsistent and reestablishment. This paper culminates in how *American Gods* utilizes liminal spaces to assist Carnivalistic transformations. These spaces shift the dominant belief systems, emphasizing Bakhtin's notion that carnival is both a moment of crisis and renewal.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *American Gods* is a disordered, polyphonic text that subverts traditional power structures by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnivalesque theory. The inversion of hierarchies, Grotesque Realism, profanity, parody, and liminality create a carnivalesque world that refrains from singular authority. This paper contributes a new perspective on Gaiman's engagement with mythology and cultural identity, reaffirming the novel's place within contemporary Carnivalesque literature. It provides numerous benefits to society beyond literary analysis. It offers a framework for grasping how societies evolved and progressed in

cultural transformation through the application of carnivalesque elements. Shadow's liminal identity extends new opportunities into the experiences of immigrants and marginalized groups who survived between cultural worlds. Additionally, Collective memory and national identity formation are provided from *American Gods* use of carnival spaces to reconcile historical trauma with present reality.

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