EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF FANTASY: FOLKLORIC TRADITIONS IN GAIMAN'S AND TOLKIEN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the integration of folkloric traditions in English fantasy fiction by focusing on two iconic works: The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien and American Gods by Neil Gaiman. It examines how each author draws from mythological and folkloric sources to build their fictional worlds, define character archetypes, and address cultural and societal themes. The study employs comparative textual analysis and theoretical insights from folklore and fantasy studies. It concludes that Tolkien mythologizes the past to create a unified moral universe, whereas Gaiman uses existing myths to explore fragmentation, identity, and belief in a postmodern world. This comparison highlights the flexible role of folklore in shaping both classical and contemporary fantasy narratives.

Introduction

Folklore has long served as one of the richest sources of inspiration for fantasy literature. Rooted in oral tradition, myth, and cultural memory, folklore offers timeless stories, characters, and archetypes that continue to shape fictional worlds. In English literature, fantasy writers often draw from these traditions to build alternative realities that reflect both the values of the past and the questions of the present. Two of the most influential authors in this regard are J.R.R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) is a foundational work of high fantasy that constructs a mythic universe influenced by Norse, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon lore. His detailed world-building, linguistic creativity, and classical hero's journey structure make Middle-earth not just an imaginary setting but a full-fledged mythology. In contrast, Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) brings myth into the modern age. Drawing on global deities and folklore, Gaiman explores how ancient beliefs survive in a contemporary American context, raising questions about cultural identity, memory, and the power of belief.

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This paper explores how both authors use folkloric elements in unique ways—Tolkien by creating a structured, nostalgic mythos, and Gaiman by reinterpreting myth to reflect postmodern complexity. Through comparative analysis, the study aims to show how folklore serves not only as a creative source but also as a means of engaging with broader cultural and philosophical themes. In doing so, it highlights the flexibility and continued relevance of myth in shaping the fantasy genre and literary imagination.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative comparative analysis method, centering on close readings of two primary texts: *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. The focus is on how folkloric traditions and mythological structures are employed in narrative development, character construction, and thematic expression. The methodology integrates literary theory with folklore studies to understand the narrative function and cultural implications of myth in both texts.

The first step in the analysis involves textual identification of folkloric elements—such as mythic creatures, gods, symbolic objects, and traditional narrative patterns. These elements are examined to determine their cultural origin, adaptation, and narrative purpose. Next, the study conducts a comparative character analysis, particularly between Bilbo Baggins and Shadow Moon, highlighting how each protagonist's journey reflects different mythic structures (the classic hero's journey versus the modern anti-hero's path).Furthermore, the research investigates world-building techniques, focusing on how each author creates a believable fantasy realm influenced by traditional stories. The study also explores themes of belief, transformation, identity, and power, which are central to both texts but expressed through different folkloric models.Supporting sources include theoretical works by Brian Attebery on fantasy structure, Jack Zipes on fairy tales and ideology, and Tom Shippey on Tolkien's philological and mythic influences. The comparative approach allows for an exploration of both shared functions and stark contrasts in how mythology and folklore are employed in modern English fantasy fiction.

3. Results

The comparative analysis of *The Hobbit* and *American Gods* reveals that both Tolkien and Gaiman utilize folklore as a foundational element, but they do so in fundamentally different ways with distinct literary aims.Tolkien's Results: Tolkien uses folklore to construct a new mythology. He borrows from Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions to create races like dwarves and elves, embedding them in a linguistically rich and culturally detailed world. His narrative follows a linear quest structure, reflecting fairy-tale and epic traditions. Themes such as bravery, destiny, and humility are drawn from folkloric moral structures. *The Hobbit* is cohesive and idealistic, portraying folklore as a stabilizing cultural force.Gaiman's Results: Gaiman, on the other hand, uses folklore to deconstruct myth. In *American Gods*, ancient deities are placed in modern America, struggling to remain relevant. Gaiman presents a fragmented narrative, symbolizing the uncertain place of myth in contemporary society. He

187

reflects on how belief evolves and what happens when traditional folklore is overshadowed by modern "gods" like media and technology.Common Ground: Both authors present folklore as a living force—one that reflects humanity's fears, hopes, and changing values. While Tolkien idealizes the past and constructs mythic unity, Gaiman embraces cultural plurality and mythic decay to highlight present-day complexities.The findings show that folklore in fantasy is not fixed—it is fluid. It can serve to unify or diversify, to preserve or critique. This duality confirms folklore's adaptability and importance in understanding not only fictional worlds but also our own.

Discussion

The divergent use of folklore by Tolkien and Gaiman illustrates the evolving role of myth in literature and society. Tolkien's romanticism and linguistic dedication reflect a desire to restore mythic order and reconnect a post-war England with its imagined past. His Middle-earth is not just a fantasy realm—it is a deliberate act of cultural memory-making. The clear moral structures and heroic archetypes in *The Hobbit* mirror the classical purpose of folklore: to teach, to inspire, and to unify.In contrast, Gaiman operates in a postmodern landscape where certainties are replaced by ambiguity. *American Gods* reflects the fragmentation of modern identity and the competition between old and new systems of belief. Gaiman's gods are flawed, desperate, and human-like—representing how contemporary culture has commodified and marginalized tradition. Folklore here is not just reinterpreted; it is reimagined to reflect the broken, multicultural, and media-saturated world we inhabit today.While Tolkien's stories offer mythical escapism, Gaiman's stories provide mythical confrontation. The reader is not simply taken on a journey but asked to question belief, identity, and the nature of myth itself. Despite their differences, both authors agree on a central idea: storytelling is powerful. Folklore remains vital because it adapts to its context. Whether shaping heroic quests or highlighting existential doubt, myths endure because they help us make sense of who we are.Thus, their contrasting approaches enrich our understanding of how folklore operates in fantasy—not only as creative inspiration but as cultural commentary.

Conclusion

This study concludes that folklore plays a critical and versatile role in fantasy fiction, functioning not only as an imaginative tool but also as a lens through which cultural identity, belief, and storytelling itself are examined. The works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman illustrate the dual potential of folklore: to preserve and to transform. *Tolkien's The Hobbit* constructs a mythology that reflects an idealized, unified worldview rooted in Northern European folklore. His structured world, moral clarity, and heroic quest narrative demonstrate the power of folklore to offer stability, identity, and timeless values. Tolkien's use of myth is conservative and restorative, aimed at preserving cultural continuity.

In contrast, *Gaiman's American Gods* offers a more critical and adaptive perspective. It reflects a fragmented, multicultural society where belief is uncertain and myth competes with modern ideologies. Gaiman does not reconstruct a single mythology but weaves together many, revealing how folklore can question dominant values and embrace complexity.

188

Together, these authors show that folklore is not a relic of the past. It is a living tradition— capable of evolving, questioning, and reflecting the human condition. Whether creating new myths or repurposing old ones, fantasy writers like Tolkien and Gaiman prove that folklore remains essential in literature for expressing universal truths, cultural tension, and the ongoing evolution of human imagination.Therefore, the study affirms that fantasy literature not only entertains but also deepens our understanding of how stories, both old and new, shape the world around us and within us.

Reference

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