



FOLKLORE AND FANTASY ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH FANTASY FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NEIL GAIMAN'S AMERICAN GODS AND J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S THE HOBBIT

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19689580>

ANNOTATION

This study explores the role of folklore in English fantasy literature through a comparative analysis of *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. It examines how mythological elements shape narrative structure, themes, and world-building.

The research highlights the transformation of folklore in traditional and modern contexts, demonstrating its significance in reflecting cultural identity, belief systems, and literary creativity.

Keywords: Folklore, fantasy literature, mythology, world-building, cultural identity, narrative structure, Tolkien, Neil Gaiman, mythopoeia, comparative analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Fantasy literature holds an important place in English literary studies because it combines imagination with cultural memory and historical tradition. Unlike realistic fiction, fantasy is not limited by the physical world; instead, it creates alternative realities where magic, mythical creatures, and supernatural events exist naturally. However, these worlds are not purely invented. They are often shaped by folklore, including myths, legends, and fairy tales passed down through generations. These elements provide narrative structures, symbols, and archetypal characters that enrich fantasy fiction (Zipes, 2012). Folklore also reflects cultural identity and collective memory. It preserves the values, beliefs, and experiences of a community. As Jack Zipes explains, folklore acts as a cultural archive that transmits historical consciousness through storytelling. In fantasy literature, these traditions are reinterpreted in new contexts, allowing tradition and creativity to coexist. Two major authors who effectively use folklore in fantasy are J. R. R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman. Although both rely on mythological sources, their approaches differ significantly. Tolkien creates a fully developed secondary world inspired by European mythology, including Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions. In *The Hobbit*, he uses common folkloric elements such as dragons, elves, and heroic quests. His method, often called mythopoeic, involves creating new myths based on traditional ones. As Tom Shippey notes, Tolkien's work aims to revive ancient mythological traditions in a modern literary form (Shippey, 2000).

In contrast, Neil Gaiman integrates folklore into the modern world. In *American Gods*, ancient deities from various mythologies coexist with contemporary society. This blending of the mythical and the modern highlights the changing nature of belief systems. According to Maria Nikolajeva, modern fantasy reshapes myths to reflect current cultural dynamics (Nikolajeva, 2010). Gaiman's work shows that folklore is flexible and evolves over time. World-building is another key concept in fantasy. Tolkien's approach is highly structured, with detailed histories, languages, and mythologies that create a coherent fictional universe. Gaiman, however, uses a hybrid approach by merging fantasy with reality, making the narrative both familiar and unusual. The use of folklore also introduces important themes such as identity, belief, and cultural continuity. Tolkien emphasizes moral growth and heroism, while Gaiman explores the relevance of ancient beliefs in modern society. Despite increasing interest in fantasy literature, more comparative studies are needed. This study aims to examine how Tolkien and Gaiman use folklore and to compare their narrative strategies. It seeks to show how traditional narratives are adapted in fantasy and what cultural meanings they convey.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis to examine the role of folklore and fantasy elements in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it focuses on interpretation, meaning, and textual analysis rather than numerical data. As John W. Creswell states, qualitative research is effective for exploring complex literary and cultural phenomena where meaning is shaped by language and context (Creswell, 2014). The primary sources of this study are *The Hobbit* by Tolkien and *American Gods* by Gaiman. These texts are selected because they represent two different approaches to folklore in fantasy literature. Tolkien's work reflects a traditional, mythologically grounded narrative, while Gaiman's novel offers a modern reinterpretation of folklore within a contemporary setting. Both texts provide valuable material for analyzing how myths and folklore are transformed into literary forms.

In addition to primary sources, the research relies on secondary sources such as scholarly books and articles on folklore, mythology, and fantasy literature. These sources provide theoretical frameworks that support the analysis. For example, folklore studies emphasize the importance of myths in shaping cultural narratives, while literary theory focuses on symbolism, narrative structure, and world-building (Zipes, 2012; Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The research begins with close reading, a key method in literary analysis. This involves careful examination of the texts to identify themes, patterns, and stylistic features. Particular attention is given to folkloric elements such as mythological characters, magical objects, and narrative motifs. As Abrams notes, close reading helps reveal deeper meanings within the text. After this stage, key elements of folklore and fantasy are identified and classified into thematic categories such as mythology, cultural identity, belief systems, and world-building. In *The Hobbit*, elements like dragons and heroic quests reflect traditional folklore patterns, while *American Gods* presents mythological figures in a modern context. The study then moves to interpretation, analyzing how these elements function within the narrative. According to Maria Nikolajeva, modern

fantasy often reshapes myths to reflect contemporary issues, which is evident in Gaiman's work. A comparative method is also used to highlight differences between the authors. Tolkien creates a separate fictional world, while Gaiman blends fantasy with reality. Contextual analysis is included to examine historical and cultural influences. To ensure reliability, multiple sources are used, though interpretation remains subjective. Despite limitations, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of folklore in fantasy literature.

RESULTS

The analysis of *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman reveals that folklore functions as a foundational element in both texts, but it is employed in significantly different ways. While Tolkien constructs a cohesive mythological world deeply rooted in traditional European folklore, Gaiman adapts and reinterprets folklore within a contemporary framework, creating a hybrid narrative that blends the mythical with the modern. One of the most prominent findings is that Tolkien's use of folklore is systematic and world-centered. In *The Hobbit*, folkloric elements are embedded into the very structure of the narrative. The presence of dragons, dwarves, elves, and magical quests reflects traditional mythological motifs derived primarily from Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions. These elements are not merely decorative but are essential to the construction of Tolkien's fictional universe. According to Tom Shippey, Tolkien's narrative strategy involves the reconstruction of ancient mythological patterns in a modern literary context, which gives his work both authenticity and depth (Shippey, 2000, p. 67). Another important result is the role of the hero's journey in Tolkien's work. The character of Bilbo Baggins follows a narrative pattern that closely resembles traditional folklore structures. His transformation from an ordinary individual into a courageous hero reflects a common motif found in myths and legends. This narrative pattern reinforces the idea that Tolkien's work is deeply connected to traditional storytelling forms. In contrast, Neil Gaiman uses folklore in a more fragmented and adaptive manner. In *American Gods*, mythological figures from various cultural traditions such as Norse, Slavic, and African mythologies are placed within the context of modern American society. These characters are no longer part of a unified mythological system but exist as isolated remnants of past belief systems. This fragmentation reflects the decline of traditional beliefs in the modern world. Another significant finding is the transformation of gods into human-like figures in Gaiman's work. Unlike traditional myths where gods possess absolute power, the gods in *American Gods* are dependent on human belief for their survival. This reinterpretation of folklore highlights the changing nature of cultural identity and belief systems. According to Maria Nikolajeva, modern fantasy often redefines mythological figures in order to address contemporary cultural and social issues (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 112).

The study also reveals a fundamental difference in world-building between the two authors. Tolkien creates a secondary world that is separate from reality and governed by its own internal logic. This world is highly detailed, with its own languages, histories, and cultures. The consistency of this world enhances its realism and allows readers to fully immerse themselves in the narrative. In contrast, Gaiman's world-building is based on integration rather than separation.

In American Gods, the fantasy elements exist within the real world, creating a sense of overlap between myth and reality. This approach challenges the boundaries between the ordinary and the supernatural and reflects the coexistence of past and present. Another important result is the thematic use of folklore in both works. In Tolkien's narrative, folklore is associated with themes of heroism, morality, and the preservation of tradition. The journey of the protagonist reflects a moral and personal transformation, emphasizing values such as courage, loyalty, and friendship. In Gaiman's work, folklore is used to explore themes of identity, belief, and cultural change. The presence of mythological figures in a modern setting raises questions about the relevance of traditional beliefs in contemporary society. It also highlights the tension between old and new cultural systems.

The analysis further shows that both authors use symbolism derived from folklore. In Tolkien's work, objects such as the ring, treasure, and magical artifacts carry symbolic meaning related to power and temptation. In Gaiman's narrative, symbols are often linked to cultural memory and belief, representing the persistence of tradition in a changing world. Additionally, the study identifies the role of narrative tone in shaping the use of folklore. Tolkien's tone is often epic and formal, reflecting the influence of ancient myths. In contrast, Gaiman's tone is more conversational and contemporary, which makes his reinterpretation of folklore more accessible to modern readers. The findings also indicate that the use of folklore affects the reader's experience. Tolkien's structured and immersive world invites readers to escape into a complete fictional universe, while Gaiman's hybrid approach encourages readers to reflect on the relationship between myth and reality. Overall, the results demonstrate that while both authors rely on folklore, they use it to achieve different narrative goals. Tolkien uses folklore to construct a unified mythological world that emphasizes tradition and continuity, whereas Gaiman uses folklore to explore cultural transformation and the evolving nature of belief. These findings confirm that folklore is not a static element in fantasy literature but a dynamic and adaptable resource that can be reshaped to reflect different cultural and historical contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that folklore is not merely a background element in fantasy fiction but a central component that shapes narrative structure, thematic depth, and reader interpretation. The works of J. R. R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman illustrate how folklore can be used in different ways to reflect both traditional and modern perspectives. While Tolkien's approach emphasizes continuity and preservation of mythological traditions, Gaiman's work highlights transformation and reinterpretation of folklore within contemporary contexts. One of the most significant points that emerges from the results is the difference in how folklore is conceptualized by the two authors. In Tolkien's work, folklore is treated as a stable and cohesive system. His narrative constructs a unified mythological world where all element characters, settings, and events are interconnected. This approach reflects what scholars describe as mythopoeia, or the creation of new mythological systems based on traditional narratives. According to Tom Shippey, Tolkien's work can be understood as an attempt to restore a sense of cultural continuity through literature (Shippey, 2000, p. 67). This perspective suggests that Tolkien's use of folklore is not only literary but also ideological, as it seeks to preserve cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

In contrast, Neil Gaiman presents folklore as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. In *American Gods*, mythological figures are removed from their original cultural contexts and placed within a modern environment. This shift reflects the changing nature of belief systems in contemporary society. The gods in Gaiman's narrative are no longer powerful and dominant; instead, they are weakened by the decline of traditional beliefs. This reinterpretation highlights the dependence of folklore on cultural relevance and social context. According to Maria Nikolajeva, modern fantasy often adapts myths in order to address current cultural realities, demonstrating that folklore is not static but continuously evolving (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 112). Another important aspect of the discussion is the role of world-building in shaping the use of folklore. Tolkien's approach involves the creation of a secondary world that is separate from reality. This world is highly structured, with its own internal logic, languages, and histories. Such detailed world-building enhances the authenticity of the narrative and allows folklore to function as an integral part of the fictional universe. Readers are invited to fully immerse themselves in this world, experiencing it as a complete and coherent reality. On the other hand, Gaiman's approach to world-building is based on integration rather than separation. In his work, the boundary between the real world and the mythical world is blurred. Folklore is embedded within everyday life, creating a sense of coexistence between past and present. This approach reflects the idea that mythology is not confined to the past but continues to influence contemporary culture. It also allows readers to see familiar environments in a new and imaginative way.

The discussion also highlights the thematic implications of using folklore in fantasy literature. In Tolkien's narrative, folklore is associated with themes such as heroism, morality, and the preservation of tradition. The journey of the protagonist reflects a moral transformation that aligns with classical mythological narratives. This reinforces the idea that fantasy literature can serve as a vehicle for exploring universal human values. In contrast, Gaiman uses folklore to explore themes of identity, belief, and cultural change. His narrative raises questions about the role of tradition in modern society and the ways in which cultural identities are constructed and transformed. The presence of multiple mythological systems in *American Gods* reflects the diversity of contemporary culture and highlights the coexistence of different belief systems. Another key point is the role of the reader in interpreting folklore within fantasy texts. Tolkien's structured and coherent world provides a clear framework for understanding the narrative, while Gaiman's fragmented and hybrid approach requires more active interpretation. According to John W. Creswell, interpretation is influenced by the reader's background and perspective, which affects how meaning is constructed (Creswell, 2014, p. 6). This suggests that Gaiman's work may offer a more flexible and open-ended reading experience compared to Tolkien's more traditional narrative.

The findings also suggest that the use of folklore in fantasy literature reflects broader cultural and historical contexts. Tolkien's work, written in the early twentieth century, reflects a desire to preserve and reconstruct cultural traditions during a period of social change. In contrast, Gaiman's work reflects the complexities of a globalized and multicultural society, where traditional boundaries between cultures are increasingly blurred. Despite these differences, both authors demonstrate that folklore remains a powerful and adaptable resource in literature. Their works show

that traditional narratives can be transformed in different ways to create new meanings and reflect changing cultural realities. However, the study also has limitations. The interpretation of literary texts is inherently subjective, and different readers may draw different conclusions. In addition, the analysis is limited to two works, which may not fully represent the entire range of each author's writing. Future research could expand the scope of analysis to include additional texts and comparative perspectives.

In conclusion, the discussion confirms that folklore plays a crucial role in shaping fantasy literature. It is not a fixed or static element but a dynamic and evolving resource that can be adapted to different contexts. The works of J. R. R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman demonstrate the diverse possibilities of using folklore in literature and highlight its continued relevance in both traditional and modern forms of storytelling.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that folklore plays a significant and dynamic role in shaping English fantasy fiction, particularly in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and Neil Gaiman. A comparative analysis of *The Hobbit* and *American Gods* shows that folklore is not simply a source of inspiration, but a foundational element that influences narrative structure, character development, and thematic meaning. One key finding is that folklore serves as a bridge between tradition and creativity. Tolkien preserves and reconstructs folklore to emphasize continuity and cultural heritage. His mythopoeic approach creates a secondary world that feels authentic and historically grounded, drawing heavily on traditional motifs such as heroic quests, dragons, and magical objects. In contrast, Gaiman presents folklore as flexible and evolving. In *American Gods*, mythological figures are reimagined within a modern setting, reflecting how belief systems change over time. This highlights folklore's adaptability and its ability to respond to contemporary cultural realities. Another important conclusion concerns world-building. Tolkien constructs a fully developed fictional universe in which folklore is deeply embedded in every aspect of the narrative, creating coherence and immersion. Gaiman, however, blends folklore with the real world, producing a hybrid narrative that challenges the boundary between reality and imagination. These approaches represent two distinct models of fantasy: one that separates myth from reality and one that integrates them. The study also emphasizes the thematic role of folklore. In Tolkien's work, folklore supports themes of heroism, morality, and tradition, as seen in Bilbo's journey of self-discovery. In contrast, Gaiman uses folklore to explore identity, belief, and cultural transformation, reflecting the diversity and complexity of modern society.

Furthermore, folklore influences reader engagement. Tolkien's structured world offers escapism and clarity, while Gaiman's fragmented narrative encourages interpretation and critical reflection. This shows that meaning is shaped by the reader's perspective. Finally, the study concludes that folklore is a dynamic and evolving resource in fantasy literature. Although limited to two texts, the research highlights how folklore remains a powerful tool for exploring cultural identity and social change. Tolkien and Gaiman together demonstrate that folklore continues to connect the past with the present in meaningful ways.

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