

## Disability in Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology*

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**Abstract:** Disability is a theme that can be used from folklore to children's literature. There are disabled characters with unusual features in all classical literature. This paper explores disability in Norse Myth with special reference to Norse Mythology by Neil Gaiman. The characters who are cursed with such disabilities all seem to alter the narrative in a peculiar manner. This disability, especially in gods in myths have a different implication than in ordinary fiction. The modern civilization might be looking at people with disabilities with contempt, but when disability is common, one can note that these disabled people may have received something more in exchange just as Odin had insight in sacrificing his own pupil.

**Keywords:** Disability, Mythology, Norse Mythology, Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman has become an important writer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the sheer amalgamation of genres. He has written books for both adults and children and both seem to enjoy his fiction immensely. This is because of his understanding of good fiction. He seems to innately understand good stories and how to tell them. *Norse Mythology* is the only work in which he rewrites an epic myth in a novel format. These stories have been around for over two thousand years. Neil Gaiman has taken these age old stories and narrated them in his own whimsical way so the ancient stories could be enjoyed by both adults and children.

Myths are often believed to be untrue. This is not necessarily the case. In fact every myth is based on some ancient event which with the passing of time became a great story. The Scandinavian myths that is explored in this paper is universal in many ways. Even the days of the week are named after them. The era in which *Norse Mythology* was well known was during the romantic period. Many works were translated from Scandinavian language. By the end of the 18th century translations of the eddic poetry began to appear in almost all the major European languages. By this time *Norse Mythology* was in vogue and many romantic poets and writers took these inspiration and made poems and drama from the myth. Presently in the modern days *Norse Mythology* is known to people by Marvel movies such as Thor, Thor Ragnarok and Avengers.

Disability is a theme that can be seen right from myths to children literature. In all the classical literature there are disabled characters with peculiar characteristics. The *Hunchback of Notre Dame* is an example of a disabled characters. Even in grand narratives one can see many disabled characters. In *Mahabharata* namely DasiManthara and Shakuni are such characters who play an important role in the epic. Similarly in the Greek epic Hephaestus is considered lame, but uses his resources well to get back to Olympus. Disability studies is always done in the context of political; aesthetic and ethical point of views. In *Norse Mythology* like in all myths and grand narratives disabled characters can be seen. They also seem to hold immense power in the narrative.

As in all myths two forces are at war with each other. In the case of *Norse Mythology* a general term for God is used to describe people who took pain to keep order during chaos. Similarly, there was another group called the Giants. These wanted to create chaos during order. The Great War between these sections is the main theme of *Norse Mythology*. There are myriad stories between both the groups.

This paper, however, does not concern with *Norse Mythology* in general. It is particularly concerned with characters who are disabled. Neil Gaiman has certainly retold the legend in a humorous and lively fashion. But the seriousness of the myth is intact without disruption. Only certain gods suffer from disability. In this myth however one can see voluntary disability. To achieve something profound the Gods sacrifice their body parts. The first God to voluntarily give up the body part is Odin. He is often referred to as the all-father who wants to gain wisdom and knowledge about the future. He is the God of poetry, wisdom, hosts, and the dead. The reason he is called all-father is because he is the head of the pantheon. The poem of Odin is the first to appear in the Poetic Edda, and this clarifies that he is the head, and leader of all the gods. In the opening chapter one can see Odin leading his people and how he finds his dynasty. As already mentioned Odin wants to gain wisdom, and to gain wisdom he must self-sacrifice. This is best described in Poetic Edda:

I know that I hung  
On the wind-swept tree  
Nine entire nights,  
Wounded with a spear,  
Given to Odin  
Myself to myself,  
On that tree,  
Of which no man knows  
Of what roots it runs.(138)

He goes to Mimir's well and this is in the land of the giants. The well is wisdom and he does not give wisdom easily. He goes to Mimir and asks him for a single drink from the well. Mimir however does not easily acknowledge his request. But Odin is stern and asks him to name a price. Mimir replies that Odin's eye is his price. Odin takes a knife and cuts out his pupil and places it in the pool. Then Mimir allows him to drink from the well.

The water was cold. He drained it down. Wisdom flooded into him. He saw farther and more clearly with his one eye than he ever had with two. Thereafter Odin was given other names. Blind, they called him, the blind god, and Hoare, the one-eyed, and Baleyy, the flaming-eyed one.(*Norse Mythology* 26)

The greatest God in *Norse Mythology* is a disability. When one imagines God one sees them as all powerful, but here one can see the great Odin is blind. But this blindness is a strength to God rather than a weakness. Odin seems to know the benefits of such a sacrifice.

The next God is Hod and he is a blind one. Odin is his father but his father did not have only one eye, but he was born blind. Hod however plays an important role in the myth. Odin as already mentioned is all wise and can see further into the future. He unfortunately knows his son Balder will be killed. He doesn't tell anyone except his wife, Friggs. She is a very practical goddess and so she moves around the world and makes a truce with the sun, moon, plants and every creature that they would not hurt Balder at any cost. But she forgets to make a truce with the mistletoe as she considered it an insignificant thing. Odin asks the seeress and she replies,

Hod will bear the high praise-tree[Baldr] thither.  
He will be the death of Baldr  
And Odin's son he will deprive of life. (Poetic Edda 11)

Days pass by and Balder cannot be hurt by anything. The gods make a point of throwing stuff at him but nothing would harm him. He was literally invincible. During this time however, Loki the mischievous and villainous son of Odin plans to murder Balder. Hod, the blind brother in all this merriment is forgotten. Blind Hod once stood to one side and

listened to the merriment and the shouts of joy and of course astonishment coming from from the green and he sighed. During this time Loki comes near him and says that he looks sad. And for that Hod replies, "It's hard, Loki. Everyone is having such a good time. I hear them laughing. And Balder my beloved brother, he sounds so happy. I just wish I could be part of it"(Norse Mythology 218).

The blind Hod is feeling sad that he can't be a part of all the fun. Here disability causes him a lot of problems. In fact, his life will be taken from him because of his disability. If he could have seen with his eyes Loki would not cheated him by any means. Loki using this opportunity says to Hod:

It is a little wooden dart I made. I will bring you close to Balder, and I will point you at him, and you shall throw it at him as hard as you can. Throw it with all your might. And then all the gods will laugh and Balder will know that even his blind brother has taken part in his day of triumph"(Norse Mythology 218).

This is a perfect plot to kill Balder. The dart is made of mistletoe, the only thing Frigg's did not care to ask for. Hod throws the dart and he expects to hear cheers and laughter. But unfortunately nobody laughed, nobody cheered. There was utter silence and Hod understood that something was wrong. His blindness became a curse and he was eventually avenged for the killing of his brother Balder. Disability in God's certainly played an important part in deciding their fates.

There is another character called Tyr. He was also a son of Odin. Tyr became disabled because of honour and love. Loki as usual the trouble maker had secretly had children by giants. One child was a wolf called Fenrir. He was small when they bring him to Asgard, but quickly he begins to grow unimaginably huge. Tyr is the person who gently takes care of Fenrir but providing it will food. But Fenrir grows humongous, and no one could control him. So Odin and the gods try to hold him with some rope, but he is too strong to break any rope. Finally they trick him to be wrapped in an unbreakable rope. But Fenrir understands that something is amiss, and so he says that "I challenge you to prove there is no treachery planned. You can tie me up if one of you will place his hand in my mouth. I will gently close my teeth upon it, but I will not bite down. If there is no treachery afoot, I will open my mouth when I have escaped"(Norse Mythology 86).

At this moment no god was ready to place their hands inside the mouth of Fenrir, but Tyr keeps his promise and places his hand. Once Fenrir realizes that he cannot come out of the bonds he bites Tyr arms. From that moment Tyr becomes a disabled person, but he becomes a disabled person to help the gods save themselves from a powerful wolf.

From these three disabled Gods one comes to understand how disability can sometimes be a curse as well as a blessing. For Odin he gained wisdom but scarified his one eye, and similarly Hod killed his own brother as he was blind. Finally, there is Tyr who let his arms be bitten off due to loyalty. Their disability helped them as well as defeated them. From these characters it becomes certain that disability, even for gods is unavoidable. The modern world might look at people with disability with disdain, but when disability is prevalent one should remember these disabled people might have gained something else in return just like Odin got wisdom for sacrificing his own pupil.

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