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From comic book to graphic novel: writing, reading, semiotics

Julia Valerie Round, MA

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with
the requirements of the degree of PhD in the Faculty of Arts**

Department of English

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses how changes within the authorship, reading practices and criticism of contemporary American comics can alert us to more general questions raised by the inclusion of popular culture in literature. It employs a cultural materialist methodology, researching the first decade of the DC Vertigo imprint (launched in 1993) and considering these texts both as the culmination of trends that can be traced throughout the industry's history, and as modern literature that sustains elements of certain literary genres.

It begins by summarising the American comics industry's progress historically and uses review of literary criticism to examine comics' progression from marginalised 'funny books' to cult literature to academic and mainstream acceptance. It then considers the Vertigo comics from a variety of perspectives, researching the ways in which they represent the continuance and culmination of thematic and structural elements perceived in the literary genres of the Gothic, Myth, and the Fantastic.

These elements are returned to as it subsequently approaches the Vertigo comics as postmodern artefacts, examining the ways in which this imprint has contributed to the reinvention of both the concept and material form of comics, and concludes with a case study that applies semiotic theories of text and image, showing how notions of the sign are affected by the hybrid nature of the medium. As an interdisciplinary study this research considers the Vertigo comics in relation to their history, their surroundings and readership, and to other forms of cultural/literary output past and present; grounding textual issues in a historical context and reflecting on critical discourse that typically sets literature against popular culture.

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Dedicated to my parents: with much love and thanks for all their support.

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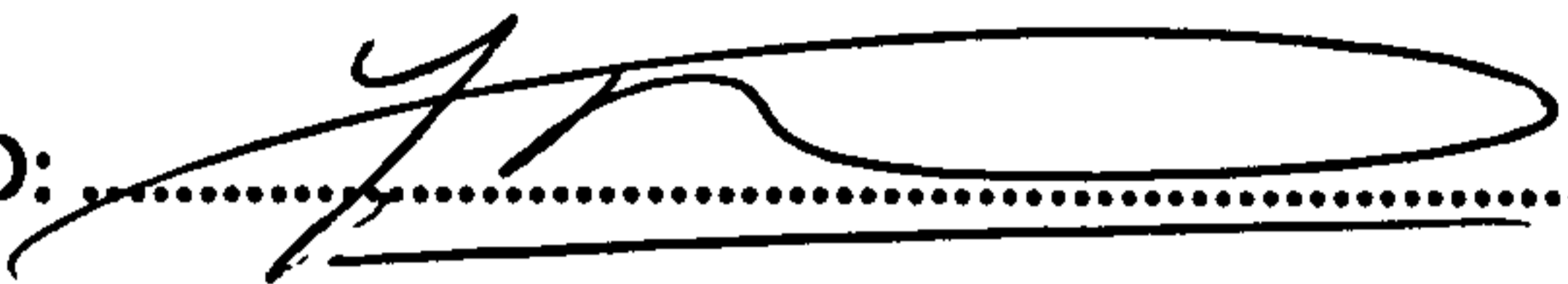
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who offered so much help, advice and encouragement**

**...especially Mark, who got me started on comics
and Matt, who fed the habit.**

Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original, except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other academic award. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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* As this dissertation examines both text and image, I have necessarily included some extracts from comics. These have been placed together at the end of this binding for greater ease of reference.

Introduction

This dissertation uses the first decade of the DC Vertigo publishing imprint (1993-2003) to examine changes in the authorship, reading practices and criticism of contemporary American comics.¹ By investigating the current situation of comics within a critical discourse that habitually sets literature against popular culture I aim to extend the critical models available to these texts. I also hope that my findings will alert us to more general questions raised by the incorporation of different media and popular culture into our understanding of literature.

I begin my first chapter by summarising the industry's progress historically: showing how perceptions of comics – and the comics themselves – have changed. I use review of literary criticism to examine comics' progression from the negative (alleged effects on children; cultural crises such as juvenile delinquency; partial readings from questionable critical positions) to the positive (application of semiotic readings; use of visual language theories; emergence of academic journals exclusive to comics).

I then proceed to discuss comics *as literature*: researching the ways in which they continue thematic and structural elements found in three literary genres: the Gothic, Myth, and the Fantastic.² In Chapter 2 I identify a continuance of the gothic tradition within contemporary comics, both thematically and structurally. I consider themes such as isolation and fragmented identity (examining these more closely through a case study of the vampire), and notions such as 'superscription' (equating the intertextual reuse and rewriting of superheroes with the gothic tradition's absorption and adaptation of texts and trends).

In Chapter 3 I go on to address the notion of the superhero as an American myth and further consider its linguistic and social functions. I discuss the Vertigo comics' use of

¹ My primary texts are a sample of comics published under this imprint, and include: *The Sandman* (Neil Gaiman and others, 1988-96), *Black Orchid* (Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, 1988), *Preacher* (Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, 1995-2000), *Goddess* (Garth Ennis and Phil Winslade, 1995-96), and *The Invisibles* (Grant Morrison and others, 1994-2000).

² Capitalisation in these areas is always problematic. I have chosen to capitalise such terms when these refer to a literary mode or genre, while the adjective remains in lower case.

mythic structures, whether in latent form (as underlying binaries) or as manifest narrative content (postmodern metafiction on the nature of the superhero), and use my conclusions to reflect further on both popular and literary conceptions of Myth, fairy tale and the Fantastic.

Chapter 4 uses literature review and the narratological temporality of comics³ to redefine critical models of the Fantastic: approaching this as an overall mode or tendency in fiction that has spawned various historical genres, and redefining the notion of 'hesitation' in textual terms. Using these theories, I consider *The Sandman* both as metafiction about the power of fantasy worlds to change real life, and as theoretical fiction regarding the telling of stories.

I proceed in Chapter 5 to define comics as structurally postmodern (non-linear; multiple points of view; guttering) before exploring the further implications of this with reference to notions of subcultures and pop culture (role of the individual reader; multiple reading communities). I establish a coherent, working definition of postmodernism (largely informed by the work of Lyotard and Bhabha) and use this to approach comics' narratology: concluding by defining the panel as a hybrid signifier.

My final chapter considers comics from a semiotic perspective, with a case study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*The Sandman* #19) that illustrates how the hybrid language of comics affects notions and discussion of the sign, and the uses and effects of doubling and rewriting in this regard. I conclude by defining comics' current position within the discourse of literature versus popular culture, building a speculative model of their future possibilities, and summarising the issues and questions that have been raised by this study.

³ Throughout I shall use the term 'comics' to refer to the medium itself (McCloud 1993, 4). Although it takes the form of a plural noun, the common usage when referring to comics as a medium is to treat it as singular.

Chapter 1: Commercial history

Industry history

The origins of graphic storytelling can be traced back as far as cave paintings or artefacts such as the Bayeux Tapestry, and attempts to identify the 'first' comic therefore seem doomed to failure. The early history of comics has frequently been disputed among scholars and it often seems felt that not enough consideration has been given to advances made in Europe and outside the Western world. While the Eastern comics tradition is recognised due to the fame of contemporary media such as manga and anime, it is generally held separate from the evolution of Western comics. There is an overall feeling that many events in comics history have been ignored in favour of perpetuating the myth of comics as an all-American product.

I have set the focus of my study upon the *fin de siècle* of the twentieth century, and more specifically the launch and first decade of the DC Vertigo imprint. As such, the origins and early history of comics will be largely passed over in this dissertation. Instead, I theorise that examining the contemporary redefinition of comics as literature will inform discussion of the current position and perception of literature itself. The Vertigo stable employs many British creators who are working within the American industry to create this hybrid literature (in both textual and cultural terms) and the following history is given by way of recent background to the emergence of comics in British and American cultures only.

The tradition of comic art as it is relevant to this dissertation began in seventeenth-century Italy with the earliest instances of caricature. In the eighteenth century this trend spread throughout England, popularised by the work of artists and engravers such as Thomas Rowlandson and William Hogarth, and it is interesting to note that a similar satirical streak can also be found in literature of this time, for example in the work of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. In 1732 Hogarth published his morality tale *The Harlot's Progress*, using sequential art to create a six-picture narrative.

In 1796 *The Comick Magazine* began publication in England. Although text, it contained a Hogarth print in every issue. Other magazines such as *The Caricature Magazine* and *Punch* followed, developing the genre into political and social satire and coining the use of the word 'cartoon' in 1843 when *Punch* published drawings by John Leech (Sassiene 1994, 11). Caricature also spread to America in the nineteenth century in the form of illustrated humour magazines such as *Puck*, *Life* and *Judge* (Gordon 1998, 20). In the mid-1880s these single-panel satirical drawings made the transition to newspapers via the editorial cartoon and soon most newspapers were publishing both single-panel cartoons and multiple-panel comic strips, which proved so popular that they were given their own pages in Sunday editions.

Richard Outcault's Yellow Kid first appeared in the *New York World* in a cartoon entitled 'Truth' in February 1895 and is generally accepted as the first identifiable serial cartoon character to prefigure modern comics. He regularly appeared in a strip entitled 'Hogan's Alley', and, although unnamed, the introduction of colour printing meant that the character (who wore a yellow nightshirt) was nicknamed the Yellow Kid by readers. Soon demand for the character was such that the *World* began publishing 'Hogan's Alley' cartoons drawn by other artists, prompting Outcault to attempt to secure copyright of the character before his move to the *New York Journal* in October 1896 (Gordon 1998, 29). He succeeded in copyrighting the title but not the likeness, prompting a flurry of unauthorised spin-off merchandise and with the result that both the *World* and the *Journal* continued to publish cartoons featuring the Kid.

In the United Kingdom, humorous cartoons of all types became popular during the late nineteenth century and in 1884 *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* was published. Created by Henry Ross, Ally was one of the UK's first serial characters; first appearing in *Judy* in 1867. The magazine *Comic Cuts* began publication in 1890 and quickly became the subject of one of the first comics copyright actions, since it only featured reprinted material. Publishers quickly began hiring artists to produce original work and magazines such as the UK's *Illustrated Chips* (1890) and the USA's *Hearst's Sunday Journal* (1897) followed.

By the early twentieth century there were many such comic strip magazines in both England and America.

Britain's golden age of comics ran from 1930 to 1940 during which time comics such as *The Dandy* (1937) and *The Beano* (1938) were introduced. In 1938 *Action Comics* began publication in the USA, featuring Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's character Superman and heralding the beginning of America's golden age, which was to run until 1945. A demand for American superhero comics quickly took over in both countries and other classic characters such as Bob Kane's Bat-Man (*Detective Comics* #27, 1939) appeared. *Detective Comics* #1 (1937) was the first true DC comic book (produced by the two companies that would later form DC). *Marvel Comics* #1 was released in 1939, although again its publishing company only later adopted this name.

The demise of Britain's golden age of comics seems to have been mainly due to World War II, which produced paper shortages and limited the importation of American comics. The American golden age continued, though, and other familiar characters including the Flash (1939), Captain Marvel (1940) and Wonder Woman (1941) were created. However, with the end of the war the superhero genre began to decline and although other genres such as romance or westerns continued to sell, by 1948 crime comics had taken over American newsstands. Horror and science fiction comics followed; the most controversial of which were published by EC.⁴

Continuing the theme of the industry's legal struggles from its very inception, the attacks on comic books were initially financially motivated – in 1940 literary critic Sterling North published the first 'anti-comics' article bemoaning that over \$1 million per month was being spent by children on comic books. In the following years the level of violence and the subjects of the stories featured in the new-style crime and horror comics began a storm of public debate that was amplified by reports of growing numbers of juvenile delinquency arrests.

⁴ Publisher William M. Gaines inherited the struggling Educational Comics from his father in 1947. In 1950 the name was changed to Entertaining Comics and Gaines launched many of the 'new trend' horror comics that, although they rescued his company financially, ultimately attracted negative public opinion.

The artistic style and appearance of the comics also came under attack: the large-breasted female figure that became a stereotype of comic-book art was probably introduced initially for the servicemen and soldiers who became part of the readership during World War II (Savage 1998, 12). Once initiated, however, this exaggerated drawing style remained, and this sexual dimension probably aggravated public perception of crime and horror comics, so that much of their content was perceived as not simply violent but sadistically and sexually violent. Among many criticisms of comics was the accusation of themes of sexual torture from psychiatrist Fredric Wertham.

Dr Wertham also cited the advertisements in comics as damaging to children. These fell into two main categories: firstly those for 'toy' weapons – hunting knives, crossbows, replica guns and even real ones – and secondly advertisements claiming to cure a variety of ills including spots and skin problems, 'unshapely small busts', products and lotions to remove fat, add fat or build muscle – basically every imaginable teenage worry. As well as being perceived as unsuitable and exploitative by today's standards, these advertisements indicate that the primary audience for postwar comics was made up of adolescents. Taking into account these comics' violent content and their open criticism in the press, it is unsurprising that these publications were blamed for the perceived increase in juvenile delinquency.

Whether juvenile crime did indeed increase is now debatable: James Gilbert cites factors such as the changing definition of a criminal offence (for example to include automobile offences), and the emergence of a youth culture based around rock and roll, as both affecting statistics and creating a cultural gap between parents and their children which may have been responsible for the perceived problem. Delinquency also became more noticeable since the issue was highly publicised and, once public demands for legislated censorship began, played for political gain. In 1948 the comics industry adopted a six-point code of self-censorship that prohibited indecent drawings, scenes of sadistic torture, vulgar language, glamorous or alluring representations of criminal activity or divorce, and ridicule of any religious or racial group. However, most publishers ignored

the Code in their pursuit of profits.

Further failed attempts at outside legislation culminated in a Senate hearing, where the threat of censorship finally forced the industry to commit to self-regulation and the 1954 Comics Code was born. Expanded from the 1948 version, the new Code also forbade presentation of specific details and methods of crime, any representations of kidnapping, use of the words 'horror' or 'terror' in titles, depictions of torture, vampires, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism, and restricted advertising to acceptable products. It also included dictates such as 'In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished [*sic*] for his misdeeds', and the catch-all 'All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited' (Nyberg 1998, 166-9).

Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham was a major voice for the anti-comics lobby from 1948 onwards. Publication of his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1953), which claimed that 'Comic books are death on reading' (121), strongly influenced the Senate hearings; although the Senate interim report indicates that the committee were unwilling to agree with his recommendation to censor all comics. As well as being due to a reluctance to set legal precedent and run counter to first amendment rights, this decision may also have been affected by criticism from others; such as Professor Frederic Thrasher who pointed out Wertham's lack of adequate research data and claimed that his research rested on a selected group of extreme cases (Senate 1955, npag).

The committee's conclusion should not be read as a rebuttal of public opinion, however, since it is clear from the report's tone, use of phrases such as 'so-called comic books' and the parallels drawn between comics reading and alcoholism that the committee was generally shocked by the content of these comics:

Surveying the work that has been done on the subject, it appears to be the consensus of the experts that comic-book reading is not the cause of emotional maladjustment on children. Although comic-book reading can be a symptom of such maladjustment, the emotionally disturbed child because of abnormal needs may show in [*sic*] a greater tendency to read books of this kind than will the normal child. This theory appears as valid as the thinking that alcoholism is a symptom of an emotional disturbance rather than its cause. (United States Senate 1955, npag)

Exportation of American comics meant that these concerns were shared in the United Kingdom and guides for worried parents such as George Pumphrey's *Children's Comics: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (1955) were produced, warning of 'comics' evil communications' (61). It wasn't long before this 'literature that glorifies the brute ... [and] encourage[s] sadism' came to political attention and was criticised in the House of Commons (Mr M. Edelman, Labour Party, 17 July 1952). In 1955 the UK Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act was passed: prohibiting the printing, publishing or selling of any work consisting wholly or mainly of stories told in pictures that was likely to fall into the hands of children which portrayed '(a) the commission of crimes; or (b) acts of violence or cruelty; or (c) incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature; in such a way that the work as a whole would tend to corrupt a child or young person into whose hands it might fall.' (British Government 1955, npag)

Both countries now had in place a network (whether from outside legislation or a self-patrolled censorship) with which to limit the production of comic books to those deemed appropriate for all ages. That the UK Act has never seen a prosecution (O'Brien 2004, npag) aligns it still further with the Code as a guide to self-censorship. Both may be viewed as a response to mass media and changes in the social climate that included an emergent teenage culture and identity, a greater emphasis on popular culture, and an increase in consumerism that focused on these concerns.

Whether comics were responsible for juvenile delinquency, and indeed whether there was a significant increase in crime is immaterial to this study, although there seems little doubt that the majority of the crime and horror comics published were entirely unsuitable for children. The real import of this issue is that it defined all comics as children's literature, despite their wide readership. Couching the 'clean up' demands in terms of child

protection rather than censorship was necessary for their success, but also meant that when the Code was finally implemented it took no account of any adult readership, unlike (say) modern-day film certificates. The consequences were years of bland, formulaic comics and the derision of the genre.

It is widely held that the 1954 Comics Code was responsible for the collapse of the American industry, and it is true that many companies shut down as a result of its restrictions, including EC Comics. The negative publicity certainly had an adverse effect on sales, as did the advent of television. There were other factors though: for example an antitrust suit forced America's leading comics distributor to pull out of national distribution in 1955 (*United States v. American News*), which severely affected the comics industry's economy. However, the majority of publishers survived, although the extent of the Code's impact on their creativity is less clear.

But, as seen, the industry's priority has always been one of production, not creativity. The legal battles that feature from the very beginning of comics publishing evidence this, as does the prominent advertising that glutted the pages of early comics. As Ian Gordon notes: 'Superman was not so much a character who helped sell comic books as a product that comic books sold' (1998, 134), and both the authors and the publishing company cashed in on associated products and merchandising. After the Code's introduction, publishers were also reluctant to experiment and so the profitable formula of superheroes was endlessly reworked.

This recycling formed the basis of the silver age of comics (which began in 1956 with DC's *Showcase #4*, starring a revamped version of their golden-age superhero the Flash). Marvel had attempted to bring back three of their superheroes in *Young Men #24* (1953) without much success, but the popularity of the DC *Showcase* comic led to The Flash being given his own title. In 1961 Marvel put out its first new superhero title and, spearheaded by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (who would create over 90% of the superheroes in the Marvel Universe (Colville 2000e, npag)), the Marvel age followed: introducing the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, Spiderman, the X-Men, and others. The notion of superhero team-ups

further prefigured the creation of the separate DC and Marvel universes. DC would later introduce the concept of parallel worlds by having both the golden- and silver-age Flash characters appear together in *Flash* #123 (1962).

In 1971 the Code was revised and relaxed, although it still took no account of an adult readership. However, with the rise of underground comics (or 'comix') in the late 1960s, a largely subversive literature dealing with subjects such as sex and drugs, comics were again being written for an older audience. Comix and their increasing fan market led to a rise of specialty stores that changed the distribution system, moving the product out of newsstands and drugstores. This new selling system led into the 'gimmick age' (also known as the speculative age), which artificially inflated the market through collecting. A resurgence in popularity of classic comics during this time meant that the uninformed saw new comics as an investment. The industry capitalised fully on this, beginning a ridiculous number of new series and releasing multiple issues #1 or #0 – each with a different cover or gimmick. Publishers inflated their own economy to a ludicrous degree; until the market crashed (causing many of the smaller companies and retailers to fold) and sales began once again to reflect the fan base. It is interesting to note that alongside factors such as the direct sales distribution system and the short-sightedness of the speculator's market, the neglect of the child market (in favour of the underground and adult) has also been blamed for this industry crash (Rogers 1999, 132).

In 1989 the Code was again revised – with an important amendment: that instead of being compulsory, the stamp of Code approval would now act only as a guarantee that the comic was suitable for children. Sidestepping the Code in this way was the first step to reasserting that comics were suitable for *all* ages, and the new wave of adult comics was signalled, in part, by the rise of the 'graphic novel', a new form of comic. The graphic novel (also known as a 'prestige format' single issue) is best defined as a semi-permanent comic: it is often longer than the usual 24-page single issue comic and consists of new material published on higher-quality paper. Trade paperbacks (collected mini-series of

comics) utilise the graphic novel form to sell reprinted collections of serialised texts.⁵

Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (published by DC Comics in 1978) is often cited as the first American graphic novel, as Eisner brought adult-oriented novel-length comics to a wider audience. Marvel claim their first graphic novel as *The Death of Captain Marvel* (1982), and the 1980s saw the rise of this form, as well as a new wave of 'flawed heroes'. While these in many ways mirrored the Stan Lee/Jack Kirby formula of the silver age, content followed form as the stories were now being aimed at adults. American writer/artist Frank Miller redefined Daredevil for an adult audience, and rewrote Batman as an aging vigilante in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1985-86); British writer Alan Moore produced *Watchmen* (1986-87), a treatise on the superhero figure that also serves as an extended metaphor for the history of the comics industry.

Grittiness, realism and violence returned to comics and, although the superhero still loomed large, the medium again began to explore other genres as writers redefined and relocated the superhero to include political and social concerns, futurist visions, philosophical questions, romance, horror, crime, westerns, and many of the other genres that had been discarded by comics. Marvel's *Epic Illustrated* (1981-88) was a magazine-format anthology publication that echoed these sensibilities: its February 1984 issue contains a wide range of stories including a time-travel fantasy, science fiction, a satire on barbarian stories, and extracts advertising a new illustrated novel version of *Frankenstein*. Described by Steve White⁶ as 'the first attempt to actually bring adults, more serious adults, to comic reading' (Round 2005, npag), *Epic Illustrated* is clearly aimed at an older readership. This is evidenced by occasional profanity in story content, adverts for alcohol, and a self-promoting advert whose text ('DURING LUNCH HOUR, I HELPED A THUNDER GOD TRIUMPH OVER IMPOSSIBLE ODDS, FOUGHT OFF AN INTERGALACTIC INVASION, AND

⁵ Using literary terminology, throughout I shall distinguish between medium, form and genre as follows: the medium (comics, prose, poetry and so forth) incorporates various forms (such as graphic novel, trade paperback, single issue; novel, short story; sonnet, limerick etcetera), which in turn may be subdivided into genres (superhero, horror; non-fiction, children's literature; epic poetry, dramatic poetry and so on).

⁶ Veteran colourist, artist, writer and editor who has worked in the industry for the last twenty years and produced work for Marvel, Tundra, Fleetway, Dark Horse and Titan.

STILL HAD TIME FOR DESSERT. MARVEL MAKES THE MAGIC!') accompanies a picture of an office worker at his desk reading Marvel comics (Lee 1984, 4). UK publications like *2000AD* similarly followed the trend for more sophisticated stories – for example Alan Moore and Ian Gibson's 'Halo Jones', which depicted an alien future through the adventures of the female everyman of the title.

The industry was also growing up in other ways. Since the 1970s creators had been given credit for their own work (in contrast to the anonymous factory-line production of the early days of comics) and now began to demand ownership of their material. In 1982 Marvel introduced their Epic imprint for creator-owned material, though this was not a success. Independent companies such as Dark Horse (1985) followed, offering creators the opportunity to retain control over their work; and companies such as Image Comics (1991) were later formed (when a team of creators co-ordinated a group exodus from Marvel Comics after being refused creative control of their work).

DC launched their Vertigo imprint in 1993, using Neil Gaiman's popular and radical redefinition of golden-age superhero the Sandman as their flagship title.⁷ Although DC retains copyright of this character, Gaiman has struck an agreement that his version will not be revived (the series has now finished). The majority of Vertigo titles (which feature original characters) are creator-owned. The Vertigo stable is comprised mainly of British authors, many of whom were recruited while writing for *2000AD* in the 1980s.

The market became flooded with imitations such as Dark Horse's Legends imprint (launched in 1993 and described by Steve White as 'really high-powered comics creators doing this Vertigo-style imprint' (Round 2005, npag)) though this soon failed. It gave way to their new Maverick imprint in 1999, which has equipped itself with a stable of credible writers and artists (including Frank Miller, John Byrne and Mike Mignola). Like DC Vertigo, Dark Horse Maverick has the somewhat paradoxical aim of uniting unique

⁷ *The Sandman* is Gaiman's epic mythic series that tells the story of Morpheus (the Sandman, also known as Dream of the Endless). The Endless are a group of deities older than gods, who represent the functions of Death, Dream, Destiny, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium). The series shares little more than a name with its golden-age equivalent, the story of vigilante Wesley Dodds.

creative voices under one imprint.

Along the same lines, Marvel re-launched its Epic imprint in 2003, redefining this as a platform for unsolicited material from published or unpublished writers/fans. However, overwhelming submissions and insufficient reading staff meant that this project failed, and was replaced in 2004 by Marvel Icon: a creator-owned publishing imprint for Marvel writers. As with DC and Dark Horse, the new diversity of the industry is reflected in this coexistence of multiple imprints within a main publishing company.

A similar diversity also exists in the new forms of graphic novel and trade paperback. As noted, the graphic novel form seeks to add a level of permanence to what was previously a disposable entertainment form. In this sense it is postmodern as it draws attention to the question of postmodern temporality. By presenting comics material in a permanent, more expensive-looking form (and labelling it as a 'novel' rather than a 'comic'), the graphic novel has had an effect on the way comics are perceived and in this way is also largely responsible for redefining comics as avant-garde adult literature. Meanwhile, trade paperbacks take the place of the collectors market as they sustain the disposable by collecting individual issues together and remarketing them as a single, preserved story arc. This simultaneous archiving and sustaining of the present is key to postmodernism and I propose that comics should now be perceived as postmodern products. I turn now to a closer consideration of some of the changes that have brought about this redefinition.

Industry changes

The evolution of comics into today's product has necessitated many changes to the medium, due to factors both internal and external to the industry. These range from the creation and sustenance of a shared universe of characters, the emergence of direct marketing and specialty stores, the feeding back of comic-book characters into other media such as cinema or DVD, and the dominance of licensing and franchising issues; to the redefinition of the audience, issues of mechanical reproduction, and current intellectual

property and copyright laws. I now propose a brief discussion of these factors to establish the current position of the comic book.

Industry factors

Technological changes such as the digitising of colour printing (in contrast to the traditional colour-separating process using screen sheets), computerised lettering, or the resizing of the comic book itself have resulted in an obvious aesthetic redefinition of the product. The effects of technological advances mean that the comic book is now barely disposable at all as both colour and print are now of a high quality. The industry history given above – particularly the ‘collectors hype’ and emergence of the graphic novel and trade paperback form – further emphasises this alteration.

Comics editor Steve White comments that ‘computerisation has more or less brought everything in house’ (Round 2005, npag) and that the new lettering and colouring arrangements have removed much of the freelance element from comics illustration – colourists, separatists, and letterers are all now employed full-time by the publishing company. This role redefinition, together with the standardisation of colour and typesetting processes through adherence to cutting-edge technology, means that aesthetically the comic book has now become homogenised to some degree. Although previously artwork was often produced in a factory-line manner, any individuality of lettering, colouring and separating has now been lost in favour of computerised fonts and digital colour.

Such observable changes have also brought about less tangible ones. For example, the changes in the distribution system have led to an increased focus on associated merchandising and marketing (for example the introduction of collectable cards, toys, games, and so forth). Previously, a character’s image would be licensed out to toy companies (or, indeed, used to advertise any of a wide range of products – Les Daniels notes the long-running and profitable relationship between Superman and Kellogg’s (2003, 74)); however the specialty store led to an increased focus on image licensing and more aggressive marketing of associated products.

Changes in the industry’s creative practices have revolved around redefining the

comic book as an individual work rather than a mass-produced cultural artefact. Writer and artist teams are assigned to work on a long-running series or company-owned character, and their 'run' is well publicised to promote the new treatment of the character: placing the emphasis on individuality and uniqueness rather than continuity. Pitches for new characters and unsolicited series ideas also stand in contrast to the production-line processes of early comics and such new material is generally creator-owned. A further effect is the recognition afforded to contemporary comics' 'star creators' in contrast to previous mentality – described by writer Frank Miller as lacking any 'real sense of intellectual property [...] Doctor Octopus was simply a character that someone pulled off a shelf and got to use' (Salisbury 1999, 190).

The high profiles of today's writers and artists means an entirely different sort of creative process is taking place when compared to the anonymous factory lines of comics history. As personal fame means graphic novels may now be found in many bookstores listed by author, perhaps this redefinition may inform discussion of the creator's position as regards his product. Collaboration, reproduction and serialisation seem key issues here and I turn initially to a discussion of the role of collaboration. Barring hand-painted work, 'gone are the days of an individual colourist and an individual letterer', says Steve White (Round 2005, npag), but the hybrid nature of comics means that collaboration must frequently take place, although now this is mainly between the writer and the artist.

I define collaboration very broadly as any and all creative interaction which goes towards the production of the comic-book narrative, whether in its initial scripted form, as material product or, finally, as the linear story created by the process of reading. Considering these different types of collaboration will allow me to expand upon differing representations of authorship with regard to the material text and the literary story. New ideas of ownership have privileged the notion of the comics creator, and the consequent reliance upon author identification allows these texts to represent the 'author function' discussed by Michael Foucault in his essay 'What is an Author?' (1969) which alerted readers to the constructed nature of this label in terms of its cultural production and

classificatory uses. Further, the medium of comics is itself intrinsically linked to notions of collaborative creation by virtue of its fusion of words and pictures, and so it seems that both the material product and narrative form of these contemporary comics can be used to alert us to the relevance of collaboration to notions of literary production.

One literary approach is to consider all writing as collaborative to some degree: intertextuality and the influence of a text's surrounding culture means that even single-authored texts display traces of voices other than the author's own. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional ideal of the singular, indeed solitary, author whose originality is the defining quality of literature. However, this notion is itself only a by-product of the romantic ideal that writers must break with tradition to create something unique and new. Previously, literature was appropriated freely by all: perceived as common knowledge. This is represented in the work of pre-romantic writers such as Samuel Richardson, who circulated drafts of his novels to female friends for contributions, revisions and suggestions. In this way he transformed the production as well as the consumption of his books into a social practice.

The collaborative creative process has been described as having two stages: internal and external, as in the work of Charlotte Thralls (Forman 1992, 69). She posits that the writer will first collaborate internally; that is, within their consciousness, often with respect to the positioning of their work against what has gone before, their attempts to interpret editorial policy and envision readership, and so forth. External collaboration (such as with the editor or publisher) then takes place when the writer submits a draft.

The idea of internal collaboration also forms the basis of Kenneth Bruffee's groundbreaking work on collaborative learning. This builds on the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose research views cognitive development as the result of dialogic processes (where the child learns through shared problem-solving experiences with someone else, such as parents, teachers or peers). In this regard, Vygotsky notes that thought shares many qualities with external language, and concludes that it can therefore be considered as a form of 'inner speech' (Vygotsky 1962, 149). Bruffee also defines thought

as collaborative (1996, 87), and his pedagogical model extends this logic to the external world: arguing that (if thought shares qualities with conversation), social discourse and interaction must enhance learning and writing skills in a similar manner (88). This conclusion is, of course, opposed to the romantic view of the author.

However, there are multiple collaborative possibilities open to the non-romanticist comics creator. From the initial concept (which itself is generally decided upon through collaboration between the creative team and the publishing house and, due to the house's propensity to reuse characters and the existence of the shared superhero universe, also in implicit collaboration with the industry itself) the writer will plot and script the episode. Scripts are written in 'Marvel style' (a brief description of the general plot which the artist then breaks up into panels before the writer returns and adds dialogue to suit the artwork) or 'full script style' (where the writer breaks each page down to include a description of each panel's action together with all the dialogue).

The choice between Marvel or full script style will affect the amount of writer-artist collaboration possible in the finished comic-book product but at this pre-drafting stage there is also the possibility of external collaboration on the *script* as product, whether by discussion with other writers or more formal collaboration between writer and artist that may extend to the insertion of scenes. However, even the work of a writer such as Warren Ellis, who says 'I lock myself in this room and I don't come out until the damn thing's written' (Salisbury 1999, 68), can be considered collaborative with reference to the idea of internal collaboration.

But external interaction is necessary to create the material product of the comic, in wedding the opposing forms of art and text. The script can never dictate the product fully and may not do so at all in terms of visual detail, and so the creative role of the artist is collaborative in this regard. Artist Steve Dillon drew the cast of *Preacher*⁸ based on

⁸ Garth Ennis's irreverent religious satire/cowboy epic, which tells the story of Jesse Custer (an ex-preacher with the illicit offspring of an angel and a demon residing in his head). Together with his estranged girlfriend Tulip and his new best friend, the vampire Cassidy, Jesse begins a literal search for God (who has abdicated His throne).

descriptions of the characters' personalities, collaborating with the script, but sometimes going directly against Ennis's visual ideas as scripted, as in the character of the Saint of Killers who Ennis describes as Clint Eastwood 'specifically in his later movies, the long coat, the wide brimmed hat, the old Colt revolvers, but Steve preferred Lee Marvin and that's why you've got this character who I always think moves, speaks and has all the mannerisms of Eastwood but has that kind of handsome ugliness that Lee Marvin had' (Salisbury 1999, 91).

By contrast, *Sandman* writer Neil Gaiman's scripts are anecdotal and detailed, using thumbnail sketches to indicate the required layout and lengthy description to expand upon colouring and mood requirements. Gaiman attributes the coherent feel of *The Sandman* (which has been worked upon by multiple artists) to this: the panel-to-panel transitions; that is, the storytelling, is all his (Salisbury 1999, 103).

But despite the level of visual detail in Gaiman's scripts, the artist still collaborates. In the annotated script for *The Sandman: Dream Country* Gaiman's panel descriptions are interpreted in a variety of ways by artist Kelley Jones. Jones makes minor alterations to some of Gaiman's instructions, such as in the last panel of page 16, where Gaiman's description has the Sandman with his back slightly to us. This stance may have made for a more convincing confrontation but Jones's decision to show the Sandman's face has more dramatic value. This sort of collaboration in terms of panel design is the most obvious input the artist will have. However, for panel 2 Gaiman describes Rick only as 'angry' and 'tight-lipped' and it is Jones's notes that add: 'Like he knows the deal and is guilt-ridden' (Gaiman 1991b, 'Script for Calliope' 27). This sort of contribution is more subtle and thematic in nature: going to the very heart of the book in terms of mood.

Editing and reflection upon the script produces further levels of internal and external collaboration. Neil Gaiman's 'blog' (online journal) is displayed at his website (www.neilgaiman.com), reflecting upon his writing and responding to questions from fans. In this way, Gaiman's eventual readers – the audience for his comic as opposed to the script – are also involved in its creation. This shows external interaction, also evident in the

diary's public status. Internal collaboration also takes place, for example the notion of the writer as his own audience – Gaiman says of writing *The Sandman* that 'at the end of the day my intended audience was me' (Salisbury 1999, 98).

The comic script, then, can be seen as addressed to a plural audience that includes the editor and artists who are its direct addressees, the reader as recipient of the story it describes, and the writer as imaginary recipient of both. In this respect, collaboration between many parties and on many different levels takes place throughout the inception and creation of the comic. It is both the history and the structure of the comics industry that fosters these varying kinds of collaboration, evident even in the original script, and even if that is sole-authored. However, contemporary comics such as the Vertigo texts (that emphasise their star writers and use either stand-alone plots or take place in a separate universe – events in the Vertigo universe do not impact on the main DC superhero universe) use the romanticist ideology of the author function to situate themselves even closer to literature.

For even the internal creator such as Warren Ellis ends his statement 'I lock myself in this room and I don't come out until the damn thing's written' with the justification 'That to me is what being a writer is' (Salisbury 1999, 68). This romantic perception of a writer's job seems at odds with the collaborative creation of the comic-book script and I turn now to a consideration of the role of collaboration in producing the comic-book material product.

As the product of a publishing *business* the medium is shaped by its production values, and the comics industry's changing priorities are intrinsically linked to the product's evolution. As noted, today's use of digital solutions and computerised art mean that the separate roles of colourist, artist and inker have, in the main, been discarded. Previously, this arrangement led to a certain amount of 'accidental' collaboration, for example when artists didn't finish off lines for the hand separatists to follow while colouring. Steve White comments: 'you'd be colouring away and then suddenly the artwork would more or less stop and [...] you'd have to sort of make it up or go back and draw in the artwork yourself' (Round 2005, npag).

Similarly, the shared universe of characters and factory-line production led to a much wider scope of collaboration between multiple parties than remains possible today. However, the author function which has replaced this has brought about a new form of collaboration where both the writer and artist's input is more closely observed; if only for the purposes of ownership. In contrast to previous arrangements where comics were created anonymously in a publisher's house style, individuality of style and voice is now crucial to the narratology and production of contemporary mainstream comics. This, together with the sidestepping of the Comics Code and the rise of the graphic novel detailed in the industry history given earlier, has also contributed to redefining comics as avant-garde adult literature.

Current copyright law and intellectual property rights reinforce this situation: the exploitation of the comics industry's writers and artists has been replaced with a notion of the author as sole owner of his work. The consequent transfer of power from publisher to author invites consideration of the role of intellectual property rights in cultural development. In contrast to free historical appropriation of texts, ownership now applies to creativity and originality is assigned. This freezing of symbols and ideas must necessarily prevent a shared cultural language and literary body from developing further and sits uneasily against current strategies of creation and production such as those seen in the comics industry: drawing attention to the constructed nature of the author function.

For collaboration and shared experience are essential to comics' use and reuse of characters, language, and motifs. For example, *Top Ten* artist Gene Ha created the appearance of character Girl One, whose outfit changes according to mood, inspired by the Yellow Kid, whose dialogue appeared on the front of his shirt (Moore 2002a, 4). A shared history is also essential within many genres of comics, as when multiple superheroes inhabit the same DC or Marvel universe. Usual industry practice with long-running characters is to create a 'schism' every so often, generally using devices such as alternate worlds. In this way past events are expunged, a character's parameters are redefined, and a coherent history for them is constructed. In this sense the form collaborates by investing its

tradition into the text.

This also occurs even if the process is used conversely, as in *The Sandman*, which Neil Gaiman instead incorporates into the histories of longstanding industry characters. A good example is his population of The Dreaming (where the Sandman resides) with characters such as the storytellers Cain and Abel, keepers of mysteries and secrets respectively – characters who originally hosted the 1970s DC horror comics *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*. Gaiman creates a back-story (told by Abel) whereby the Sandman approached him after his (biblical) death and invited him and his brother to live in The Dreaming and tell stories. The strong implication is that the 1970s comics were told from The Dreaming: Gaiman writes the comics industry into his text, providing a history for *The Sandman*. This incorporation of a back-story provides narratological coherence and also serves a commercial function as it allows self-promotion and reinforcement of the surrounding comics market.

Despite the existence of a separate Vertigo universe, shared experience still remains relevant as characters from the main DC superhero universe often appear, although their actions will not reflect back on their existence in their own titles. In this sense the Vertigo imprint is often used in a similar manner to the DC Elseworlds line – to tell stories that ‘might have’ happened. Actions performed by the Vertigo characters will, however, have continuity within the Vertigo universe. In this way comics are able to represent both literal and fictional/metaphorical collaboration.

The medium uses a spatial narrative: time is represented visually in terms of space, and the size of panels is often directly linked to their duration. The gaps between panels divide the narrative into sections of time that the reader will reconstruct into a narrative stream during the process of reading. The writer is therefore not only in implicit collaboration with the reader during the text’s creation and production but also overtly, during consumption. In this respect comics’ language too is inherently collaborative and I turn now to a consideration of the reader’s consumption of the product and the collaboration that takes place during this.

The medium demands that the reader work with the creators during the process of reading, both by filling in the gaps between panels, and also in terms of reading direction. Comics creator and critic Scott McCloud identifies the involvement of the reader in filling the 'gutters' (the spaces between panels) (1993, 68). We connect the series of panels by filling in the gaps using our own logic and experiences: a technique McCloud calls 'closure'. The reader is intrinsically involved: each fills in the gaps in their own style – although similar, no two can ever be identical.

In this way the reader collaborates by using their own assumptions and experiences to produce an individual story from the half-narrative provided by comics; a process which exemplifies Louise Rosenblatt's notion of reader response theory. The text is literally an event created by the efforts of both reader and writer in external collaboration, using the material product.

Reading panel sequences within a comic also involves other collaborative influences. Although the medium has ways of emphasising its point such as repetition, lengthened or borderless panels, inset panels, or 'bleeds' (where a panel runs off the edge of a page or into another), interpretative issues such as timing are generally at the mercy of the reader's internal collaboration. The reader ascribes time to a given sequence based on their familiarity with the events shown: a pause in a conversation, for example, will commonly be perceived as a few seconds. However, since most readers have never been involved in many of the dramatic situations found in comic books they can also use intertextual knowledge drawn from movies, books and similar to provide the necessary sense of timing.

Collaboration is therefore invested in the comic book by many different sources, most clearly shown in the repeated processes of revision that create and recreate the comic book in its various forms. The script, a product of internal or external collaboration in itself, is revised by the artist and other parties into the comic-book product, which in turn is recreated by the reader (in implicit collaboration with the creators) into the text as an event. The comic book's display of collaboration removes the simple concept of the author and forces us as readers to acknowledge not only those processes which make up the text in its

various forms but also to confront those by which we derive meaning.

The revisionist nature of this creative process is further emphasised by both the corporate structure and recycled content of the comics industry. It places critical focus on the material practice of writing, rather than the finished literary product, and thus exposes inconsistencies within current perceptions of authorship, for example in its recent adoption of the author function or with reference to notions of intellectual property. But whether the writer and artist are one and the same or not, literary production of the sort used by these comics relies upon both internal and external collaboration to produce a text that leaves space for collaborative input in all its various forms.

Outside factors

The emphasis on the role of the reader noted above is also echoed in the changes that have been inflicted upon the comics industry by external factors such as its audience, the emergence of 'fandom', or the social context surrounding its production. While the industry history above explains why comics have for so long been perceived as the domain of children, a closer consideration of this genre of literature is required in order to understand the impact of this label on comics.

The publication of Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* in 1744 is widely held to have signalled the start of children's literature and by the 1850s Victorian instructional texts had given way to recreational ones. As a literary genre, children's literature was therefore well established by the time of the golden age of comics, and Peter Hunt names the 1950s as the epicentre of children's books for precisely this reason. The emergence of children's culture at around this time (as identified by Gilbert) must have facilitated this recognition of the genre and in turn eased its absorption of comics.

Grown from popular literature such as penny dreadfuls and dime novels, children's literature is frequently perceived as having more to do with popularity than literary worth. It also has ties to illustration (early fairy tales were illustrated with woodcuts since c. 1510) and while these early versions were intended for adults and children alike, illustration soon became a hallmark of children's literature. Similarly, the genre's themes frequently include

magic, fantasy and anthropomorphism and it is therefore often perceived as trivial. The popular superhero comic books of the golden age certainly conformed to these requirements and, as evidenced by their marketing, were read by an audience that included children.

This lowbrow reputation attached to children's literature is repudiated by Peter Hunt, who stresses that it stems from critics' preconceptions of literary worth and inability to examine the genre's texts on their own terms. Texts are frequently criticised for having a limited vocabulary and simplistic style and exploiting devices such as stereotyping and unbelievable plots, however these very devices are largely responsible for the popularity of the books with children. Essentially they are characteristic of the narrative style that defines the genre.

All the above criticisms have been aimed at comics over the years, often with good cause. Stereotyping is heavily used in comics as an aid to the visual nature of the medium: it is essential that the reader recognise types of characters and professions solely from appearance. Comics employ a simplistic style of art, and their use of language is similarly short and to the point, often making heavy use of cliché; again as an aid to clarity. However, although children's books exist, the novelistic form (like the prose medium) is not intrinsically children's literature: *not all books are for children*. Children's books are recognisable from, say, an adult novel by their themes and content and therefore it seems equally obvious that, although some comics are for children, the medium itself cannot be defined as children's literature.

The wide range of themes allowed means that, unlike any other literary genre (and as its name indicates) children's literature is, of course, primarily defined by its audience. However, the presence of such thematic diversity makes this definition largely inappropriate, as does the genre's changing nature: in historical terms children's literature has changed from the instructional (such as Victorian moral tracts) to the recreational, and currently covers both: ranging between the poles of education (as reading aids) and entertainment. It also encompasses a number of different media (including poetry, prose,

and comics) as well as forms (limericks, short stories), and can even exist at a purely oral level (nursery rhymes, fairy tales).

All of these diverse themes, forms and media are assimilated under the umbrella term of 'children's literature' solely due to the nature of their audience. However (having considered the role of content in defining children's literature) there must also be parallel structural characteristics, which may provide a more coherent definition of the genre. Since children's literature is defined by its implied reader, mode of address seems to be the most relevant of the genre's distinguishing attributes. To define children's literature by recourse to its narrative mode of address seems a more quantifiable definition: a narrative that positions a child as its implied reader for some or all of the time.

Hunt identifies several different types of power relationship within the narratology created by the presence of an implied child narratee (which presupposes the existence of an overt narrator); however none of these seems applicable to comics. Most children's books fall into his category of a double-address: whereby the story caters for the child while certain in-jokes cater for the adult who may be reading it to the child, and who, after all, will be choosing the book in the first place. Hunt uses the depressive Eeyore in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) as one such example (Hunt 1994, 114): the black humour of the character's negative outlook is designed to appeal to adults.

Not only the existence of the child narratee but their role in the story is vital to defining children's literature: a double-address book, which excludes the child from some of its text, places them in a subordinate position. Similarly, when stories are addressed entirely to children, the author is often wont to talk down to the child, creating an unequal power relationship. Obvious plot devices such as the protagonist's parents dying in the initial sentences of the book evidence this, as does the style of most children's books which is often very oral and heavily narrated. This aids the books when being read aloud, but can be seen as an impediment to the participation of the reader: ironic since the genre in question is defined almost entirely by that reader.

By contrast, comics rely upon reader participation in order to construct a story and as

such are removed from children's books, even illustrated ones (illustration being another defining factor of most children's literature). *The Day I Swapped my Dad for Two Goldfish* (1998), a children's book written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean, provides a good example of the divide between this genre and the medium of comics. Many of its pages use comic-style panels, and the page itself is often treated as a metapanel (see Appendix 1.1) within which pictures and words are positioned freely. Devices such as speech bubbles are also used, blurring the lines between the two media.

However, the whole text has a running prose narrative that hangs together through the pictures. Beginning 'One day my mom went out and left me at home with just my little sister and my dad...' the story is told throughout in the (first-person, homodiegetic) voice of the child hero, from his perspective. Speech bubbles, where used, are qualified by the insertion of suffixes, as in Appendix 1.1, and overall the emphasis is on the oral nature of the story in terms of prose. The pictures are used more frequently for illustration of the subject being mentioned than they are to describe the action and are largely static: illustrating, say, the character's bedroom or the goldfish in question. Overall, the reader's role remains that of overt narratee.

As this example shows, in terms of the reader an illustrated children's book is not a comic. Similarly, if children's literature is defined by reference to the age of its implied reader then today, when the average comics reader is defined as twenty-four, male and literate (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 29), as a definition of comics it must be discarded. In terms of marketing, comics are now turning towards this new audience and reclaiming their status as an adult literature (albeit a subversive one).

The emergent fan culture also affected comics — the initial recognition afforded to artists snowballed from the letters pages carried in early comics where fans attempted to guess which unaccredited artist had worked on a strip. This led to strips being credited with artists' names and the successful were given more strips to work on. Assigning strips (and often writing assignments) to popular artists reinforced the writer's role and the emergence of fuller, more formal scripting in turn. That fan recognition now favours the

star writer as well as the artist (as noted on online forums such as www.quartertothree.com) has further contributed to comics' recent redefinition as literary, rather than visual, entertainment.

The surrounding social context also affects the industry, not least in terms of notions of mechanical reproduction. As should be apparent from my discussion of collaboration, contemporary comics illustrate such theories as Walter Benjamin's as they exist in no original form: from the written script to the final pages which exist in various stages (pencilled, coloured, or perhaps just digitally) there is no 'original' entire comic book to be manually copied and distributed. The comic book (as work of art) has no original form or aura and its mass distribution aligns it with the cinema as having 'exhibition value' rather than 'cult value'. This alerts us to the similar status of modern publications.

This situation has further relevance with regard to the emergence of digital printing and Internet publishing – Abram Stern's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction' (2005) focuses on the new role of the consumer as now being granted access to the process of reproduction via Internet downloading or other technology that allows multimedia piracy. This distances the digital work of art still further from manual reproduction by making the process itself accessible to a mass audience, that is, anybody with a computer. I shall return to the new issues of copyright and accessibility this raises in a moment.

In summary, then, changes both within and outside the industry have brought the comic book closer to the notion of the literary text. Observable changes such as technological advances, in-house employment changes, the replacement of disposability with permanence, and a shift in distribution methods stand alongside the less quantifiable – a perceived shift in audience attitude, the revival of the romanticised creator, and a new emphasis on the narrative rather than visual. All these shifts have led to a focus on licensing and copyright law: current intellectual property rights and creator-owned characters and concepts are a consequence of the recognition afforded to the star creators through the addition of an author function, as well as having their basis in the new

distribution system and associated merchandising.

There can be no doubt that not only comics publishing but also perceptions of it have changed radically over the last 70 years. Now Internet publishing is coming to the fore we may see a whole new set of changes. As such it seems useful to now review the criticism that has accompanied comics' progression from marginalised children's entertainment to cult literature to literary acceptance, before concluding by defining the current status of comics and their position with respect to both literature and popular culture.

Literature review

Although not the first published criticism of comics (the backlash began as early as 1940 with book reviewer Sterling North's editorial in the *Chicago Daily News* (8 May 1940), or the *National Education Association Journal's* 'An Antidote to the Comic Magazine Poison' (December 1940)), Dr Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* is certainly the most famous. It also summarises much of the content of the previously published anti-comics magazine articles as its focus is primarily on the number of comic books being consumed by children (and, hence, the money being spent), the shocking nature of some of the imagery used, and the wide-ranging ill effects of reading comics (listed not as empirical evidence but in anecdotal form detailing specific cases). Wertham lists eight bad effects of the medium (promoting illiteracy, cruelty, temptation, and 'unwholesome' fantasies; providing criminal or sexually abnormal ideas and, worse, the rationalisation for these thoughts; suggesting specific delinquent acts; and encouraging delinquency and maladjustment (Wertham 1953, 118)), deduced from his study of children at the Lafargue Clinic.

Similar publications in the UK such as George Pumphrey's *Children's Comics: a guide for parents and teachers* take a similar attitude, and both texts focus on the medium rather than specific titles. Wertham defines the 'crime comics' that are the subject of his study as 'comic books that depict crime, whether the setting is urban, Western, science-fiction, jungle, adventure or the realm of supermen, "horror" or supernatural beings' (1953,

20) and Pumphrey's research is similarly wide-ranging as he comments that: 'The supermen and superwomen comics with their unhealthy phantasy, violence and contempt of law and order are subtly as corrupting as any of the more spectacular horror comics' (1955, 52).

Wertham has been criticised many times for errors that show his lack of knowledge of the industry, his lack of systematic research, and his research methods in general (by examining only delinquent children). Ian Gordon notes that Wertham drew only simple causal links between comics and delinquency (1998, 152); however Wertham's text specifically concludes that 'Comic books are not the disease, they are only a symptom [of an increasingly violent society]. And they are far more significant as symptoms than as causes' (1953, 395). Criticisms and counter-attacks on 'the man who destroyed comic books' (such as Martin Barker's *A Haunt of Fears* or Mark Cotta Vaz's refutation of Batman's homosexuality in *Tales of the Dark Knight*) have now given way to more balanced discussions (such as Andy Medhurst's article 'Batman, Deviance and Camp' which uses both Wertham's treatment of Batman and subsequent responses defending the character as examples of latent homophobia).

Critical response now gives a broader picture of Wertham's other work on delinquency and social violence (for example, Dwight Decker's *Fredric Wertham: Anti-Comics Crusader Who Turned Advocate* (1997)). Other writers have praised his anti-censorship position, and his good intentions (Mark Evanier's *Wertham Was Right!* (2003)). Jamie Colville's discussion of 'The History of Superhero Comics' in *SynTax* #67 also implies that many of Wertham's criticisms (such as homosexuality or negative female role models) merely reflected attitudes of the times (2000c, npag), a viewpoint shared by A. David Lewis (see 'Seduction of the Insolent (or, Retraction of the Innocent)' (2003)). Lewis in fact goes on to point out that Wertham concluded there was no single figure to blame for delinquency, implying that we should show him the same courtesy when levelling blame for the near-demise of the comics industry (Lewis 2003, npag).

In *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture 1890-1945* (1998), Ian Gordon identifies the

beginnings of modernism's high/low divide in the marketing of goods and services towards the end of the nineteenth century. Gordon cites the history of comics in Europe before focusing on the Yellow Kid as the first character in American comic strips to have a distinct identity rather than representing a nameless type. He traces the development of the industry after this, commenting that 'Between the 1890s and 1920s comic strips transformed a particular type of urban imagery into a national commodity' (1998, 59) due to reciprocity between advertising and content of the strips, and extends his research to the emergence of the comic book as an independent commodity. Gordon defines the narratives of many superhero comics as little more than templates for suitable manners of consumption (for example in wartime (146)), but nonetheless concludes: 'The commodification of comic book art does not necessarily rob it of a critical edge' (157).

Ron Goulart's *The Assault on Childhood* (1970) also discusses consumer culture and specifically the role of the mass media in exploiting childhood. Goulart's focus is on the emergent children's culture of 1950s America and views this movement as an effect of advertising that targets children (itself a part of the commercialisation of our culture). He considers comics in some depth, and discusses the 1960s nostalgia that led to the revival of the superhero. The silver-age 'flawed hero' is compared to its golden-age template and criticised for its new inclusion of arrogance and corruption; however Goulart seems to be guilty of nostalgia himself in that he levels no similar criticisms at the golden-age characters who (if Wertham and Pumphrey are to be believed) frequently displayed a similar disregard for human law and order. I would instead argue that the overt inclusion of these characteristics in the silver-age figure is a positive step and evidences comics' progression towards a literary acceptance through mimetic or moral criticism. After considering their World War II readership and advances in art Goulart concludes that comics are not for children.

Commercialisation is again discussed in Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck* (first published 1971), which represents a contemporary reaction to the Disney corporate machine that in many ways reflects the EC outcry of the 1950s. Whereas

Goulart discusses the homogenising effect of the Disney Empire on toys, advertising and notions of childhood, Dorfman and Mattelart offer a Marxist criticism of the 'Disneyfication' (or 'dollarfication') of society and attack the cultural norms which the Disney products (including comics) promote – those of consumption, artificial standards and class divides. Their text exposes the US monopoly of children's culture throughout the globe although it offers no alternative to the mercantile Disney world.

The commercialisation of culture and development of mass media are also cited by James Gilbert whose book *A Cycle of Outrage* (1986) documents America's reaction to 1950s juvenile delinquency. Gilbert argues that the statistics evidencing this degeneration of youth were themselves slanted by cultural elements such as the increased number of children after a baby boom, or the redefinition of crime to include felonies such as drinking or automobile offences; and that the Senate attention the debate received reflected the political aspirations of certain individuals rather than the real import of the issue. By the 1960s it seemed that concerns about delinquency were actually just objections to emergent youth culture, although books such as Ron Goulart's *The Assault on Childhood* briefly revived such concerns. However, I would argue that Goulart's book actually refutes delinquency accusations, as he instead seeks to define youth culture in the context of consumerism. My conclusion is supported by Gilbert, who also links youth culture to consumerism, and asserts that the mass media was made a scapegoat to rationalise these cultural changes.

These treatments (which examine a specific cultural moment) are complemented by many critics' documentation of the golden and silver ages and the emergence of the Code, many of which offer a purely historical perspective in recording comics' evolution (for example the work of Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones, Paul Sassiene, Roger Sabin or Les Daniels). Others such as David Kunzle (who traces the history of the comic strip from the nineteenth century) link the changing function and appearance of comic strips and books to changes in lifestyle and modes of reading (as the consumer situation accelerated and people had more money and leisure time than ever before). Kunzle's new historicist approach also

incorporates the early history of the comic strip as his study encompasses Europe. Further cultural materialist criticism also exists, for example Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2001), which parallels industry history with changes in twentieth-century American society and concludes that comic books have continually reflected the national mood.

Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval* (1998) offers a historical perspective and simultaneous re-evaluation of the construction of the Comics Code itself: giving a complete history of the postwar emergence of the Code. Nyberg evaluates the Senate case; including Dr Wertham's point of view that comics represented only a small part of the culture surrounding children and that it was this culture/mass media as a whole that was responsible for social evil. However, she cites Wertham's later work praising fanzines as undermining this perspective, since these mass-produced magazines showed genuine voices outside manipulation. Her conclusion is that whereas the Code didn't destroy the industry it could have taken more account of a varied readership and that its discouragement of experimentation led to the dominance of the superhero, which (taken in conjunction with economics) popularised endless reworkings.

Ultimately Nyberg concludes that the altered distribution system and the backlash of the gimmick age have had more effect on comics publishing than the Code. Her refutation of Wertham's claims that mass media produce social evils is supported by those cultural studies listed above, in which Gilbert, Gordon and others expose this conclusion as a popular misconception surrounding pop culture. However, later publications still invoke this standard; such as John Fulce's *Seduction of the Innocent Revisited* (1990), which may be said to continue Wertham's work in both style and motivation.

Fulce critiques the comics of the 1980s, contrasting these with the 'innocent' comics of previous decades. He builds a picture of an industry that 'was not always so profit oriented' (5) and which produced comics that 'were more positive and wholesome in their depiction of society. They were merely reflecting the state of the nation at that time' (17). Fulce's thesis is that comics are now following other media such as television and film in their turn towards anti-establishment messages and what he defines as 'pornography'. He

objects to these elements of contemporary comics both as a Christian, and because 'they are a medium primarily for young people' (27). That many of the comics he cites (*Swamp Thing, Grendel, Hellblazer*) are not only aimed at adults but clearly labelled as such, he sees as irrelevant, since 'comic books are for kids of all ages – always have been, always will be' (13).

Fulce relies greatly on the research of Judith Reisman (Department of Justice) into pornography to build his case that 'The behaviour of children and the way they view reality, can, and is, being altered by a constant diet of comic book pornography. Confused children may one day become the serial killers that terrorize our communities as in the case of Ted Bundy' (6). His definition of 'comic book pornography', however, essentially seems to represent the personally distasteful rather than the undoubtedly immoral.⁹ Fulce divides his objections into six categories (reminiscent of the industry's initial six-point Code): occultism and new-age philosophy; anti-Christian bias (the personal beliefs of the author are obvious in both these chapters as he states 'Anything that diverts people from the worship of the True God is by definition evil' (46)); explicit sex (where, by censoring the images he uses with white blocks, Fulce manages to remove any possibility of the reader understanding what is actually being shown); negative role models (suicide, adultery, nudity – even if only implied); gratuitous violence (of which he lists two sorts: either use of excessive detail in depiction, or the use of excessive force in the storyline); and profanity and vulgarity (which includes blasphemy). His book invokes Wertham's both in its presentation (Fulce reprints examples with comments such as 'Another example of perversion' (128)) and hyperbole, as he uses shock tactics and rhetoric throughout (asking in conclusion: 'Do you want your child to grow up to be a Ted Bundy, or the victim of a Ted Bundy?' (184)).

Fulce obviously anticipates objections to his proposals as in conclusion he mentions

⁹ 'The truth is, the world of contemporary comic books is too sordid for most adults. It is full of illicit sex, gratuitous violence, and casual obscenity. It is a world that loves self-gratification and hates religion. In short, it is the world of the pornographer – a world without meaning – in which life is a series of sensations to be experienced without reflection.' (Fulce 1990, 13)

two arguments often used to defend the industry: the 'no harm' argument, and the civil libertarian position that relies on freedom of speech. Saying 'Firstly, let's look briefly at the idea that comic books and other such materials really do no harm to society in general and to young people in particular' (180), Fulce addresses the first defence by citing research into pornography (*not* comics) in support of his argument, and conveniently never returns to the issue of civil liberties. In light of the evidence above (and the contradiction implicit between his nostalgic view of comics and the industry history), it seems surprising that as recently as 1990 such demands for censorship remain, and that comics are still being mislabelled as children's literature.

These empirical surveys and evaluations stand alongside studies of the medium itself, one of the first and most famous of which is Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). Comics creator and industry legend Eisner coined this term as a definition of comics and his book may be best defined as a study of the communicative possibilities of the medium. Eisner discusses the various applications of sequential art and (in contradiction to early comics criticism) concludes that it has two functions: entertainment and instruction (139). He further examines the workings of the form: discussing the role of the reader, the importance of shared experience, and the development of word and picture as communication tools that rely upon the evocation of images.

Fellow creator Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) takes this conclusion one step further as it demonstrates the primacy of image by being told entirely in sequential art. In this sense it prefigures the metacritical status of much later criticism as McCloud uses the medium to illustrate his points. McCloud seeks to establish the rules and techniques underlying comics creation and consumption and in this sense his text may be best defined as a structuralist critique of the medium. He establishes the medium's rules and workings with reference to its various elements: the use of icons, gutters, words/pictures and colour; the depiction of time; and the effects of artistic style. McCloud also reviews Eisner's text, expanding his 'sequential art' definition and his use of the term 'image': replacing it with 'icon' which refers to any visual representation – words, pictures,

numbers and so forth.

Both books were popular enough to have spawned sequels – Eisner's *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996) expands upon his first book; paying more attention to the function of stories, the role of the reader, and the ways in which both reflect their surrounding culture. McCloud's *Reinventing Comics* (2000) also discusses the medium in terms of its changing cultural function and public perception (referencing the move from periodical to book, the emergence of creators' rights, and the new diversity of the industry), but focuses on the new possibilities available to the medium in digital form: theorising that all comics will soon be published solely online.

Although focused on the possibilities of the medium, these works are more concerned with providing a wider philosophy of comics authorship and reading practices than with close semiotic or linguistic analysis. Such areas are, however, the focus of critics such as Neil Cohn, whose research into visual language is published online at www.emaki.net. Cohn establishes a theory of visual language that focuses on the various possible transitions between single panels of sequential art and the cognitive processes attached to these. Further online research such as John Barber's thesis 'The Phenomenon of Multiple Dialectics in Comics Layout' (2002) also examines such a language: for example by using a Hegelian theory of dialectics to study page layout as a form of communication. Simultaneously formalist and interdisciplinary in nature, these critics also concern themselves with studying the possibilities of the medium.¹⁰

Other recent comics criticism has focused on the superhero archetype in terms of its modern day cultural functions and (implicitly supporting earlier criticism which aligns comics with other mass media) focuses largely on the industry's best-known, iconic characters. Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio's *The Many Lives of the Batman* (1991) collects essays that discuss the multiple functions of this superhero (for example as a post-industrial folk figure) and consider its differing representations in various media (comics, TV, movies). The editors conclude that conformity has given way to individuality which

¹⁰ See Chapter 6 'Literature review' for a more detailed discussion.

not only expands the market but also bestows some respectability on the text (190). I would further argue that their conclusion supports my theory of the new romantic view of the comics creator.

Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* (2001) also identifies the multiple perspectives on Batman offered by comics and links their coexistence to postmodernism via notions of simultaneous archiving (as the character's 'rules' remain upheld) and adaptation (as the character is also being constantly rewritten within these guidelines). Brooker puts forward the possibility that contemporary versions incorporate all the past treatments (from camp and comedy to vigilantism and obsession); a conclusion prefigured by Tony Bennett's 'Holy Shifting Signifiers', which states that 'Miller's Batman [of *The Dark Knight Returns*] bears the impress of all the previous guises in which the character – and his allies and opponents – have been incarnated' (1991, ix).

Other studies link the superhero to notions of nationalism (such as Lawrence and Jewett's *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (2003), which argues that the superhero represents the contemporary American tendency for crusading wars and can be used to illuminate the nation's lack of self-understanding in this regard), or explores it with reference to contemporary notions of science, religion, or magic. Of these, Simon Locke's 'Fantastically Reasonable: Ambivalence in the Representation of Science and Technology in Super-Hero Comics' (2005) argues that superhero comics address notions of science on a variety of levels – both implicitly (in their focus on notions of continuity and origins) and explicitly (where their coexistence means that while magic is 'scientised', science becomes enchanted and extraordinary). After closer analysis of the 'mad scientist' archetype and its variance in comics, Locke concludes that as this figure is portrayed in a variety of ways (from Doctor Octopus to Peter Parker/Spiderman) the representation of science in comics is ultimately ambivalent.

Richard Reynolds's *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992) prefigures this point, though Reynolds comments that in this context 'science itself is at most only superficially plausible, often less so, and the prevailing mood is mystical rather than rational' (16).

Thomas M. Doyle offers a complementary approach in 'Competing Fictions: The Uses of Christian Apocalyptic Imagery in Contemporary Popular Fictional Works' (2000), which notes a new treatment of notions of the apocalypse in texts such as Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's *Good Omens* and the Vertigo publications *Preacher*, *The Invisibles*, *The Books of Magic*, and *Hellblazer*. Doyle comments that 'Although a standard plot feature of many traditional comic books is apocalyptic avoidance (by superheroes engaged against a supervillain), the Vertigo line of books differ in their explicit use of the myths of Christianity and other religions for their source material' (26), and that instead of representing traditional notions of 'good' and 'evil', these texts instead offer a new alternative: that of 'humanity'.

Developments in the various forms of comics are also discussed, for example in Greg McCue's *Dark Knights: The New Comics in Context* (1993), which seeks to establish the origins and functions of these new dark, adult graphic novels. McCue traces 'the forces that have changed comic books from a cheap children's entertainment form with effectively only one genre to a fully-fledged medium' (4), discussing the role of audience, marketing and cultural factors in this regard. He concludes that adult comics are 'becoming increasingly common for a multitude of reasons. An adult market means a demand for a higher quality product as well as an ability and willingness to pay for such quality. The higher price helps to steer the book into the right hands – a twelve-year-old is less likely to end up with an adult comic when it carries a 5 dollar price tag' (65).

In 'Innovating Superheroes' (2003), Alvise Mattozzi similarly charts the stylistic changes in superhero comics through the 1970s and 1980s and uses semiotic analyses to explore changes at both narrative and discursive levels. He concludes that these changes were due to an emergent 'questioning of action'; using a four-part narrative schema (of contract, competence, performance, and sanction) derived from the 'Paris School' of semiotics to define 'action' as 'the sum of Competence and Performance' (2003, npag). Once the competence of the superhero had been questioned by the existence of flawed heroes, action lost its central narrative position and much of its relevance. Mattozzi focuses

on Vertigo texts such as *Swamp Thing*, *Doom Patrol* and *Shade*, but extends his conclusion to the level of DC publishing by showing its applicability to the development of the Batman tradition.

Published in the academic online journal *Reconstruction*, Mattozzi's article indicates the increasing acceptance of comics into academia. This movement is further evidenced by papers such as Atara Stein's 'Byronic Heroes in Popular Culture' (2000) – a paper presented at that year's Romantic Circles conference, and which makes reference to *The Sandman* (among other popular fiction texts) in considering Morpheus as a Byronic hero.¹¹ Stein concludes that the treatment of such heroes is today the same as in Byron's time, as is their appeal: which is to offer the vicarious experience of autonomy and power but also suggest that we may be better off in our powerlessness. Morpheus's humanisation throughout *The Sandman's* run, although unmentioned by Stein, further supports her conclusion.

The inclusion of comics in non-comics-specific conference papers such as this, and in publications such as *The Public Understanding of Science Journal* (see Locke 2005), further evidences comics' acceptance into ever-widening areas of academia (a conclusion supported by presentation of some of my own research at interdisciplinary conferences which have focused on queer theory or textual issues). The existence of academic journals such as the *International Journal of Comic Art* or *The Comics Journal*, and online discussion groups such as the Comix Scholars List (<http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/scholars/>), further evidence the increasing critical attention being paid to comics.

Other interdisciplinary studies such as Annalisa Castaldo's discussion of 'The Construction of Shakespeare in *The Sandman*' (2004) tackle the metafictional dimensions of comics. By treating Morpheus as the anthropomorphic essence of the unconscious mind, Castaldo parallels this figure with Shakespeare to illuminate our understanding of the mythologising process from both a literary and psychological perspective. Even purely

¹¹ Morpheus is the titular character of *The Sandman*, also known as Dream, Oneiros, Lord Shaper, the Sandman, Dream King, Dreamweaver, Kai'ckul, Murphy, King of the Riddle Realms and the Prince of Stories (amongst others).

literary studies and reviews are now enabled to focus on the comic book without disclaimer or justification. John Hodgman's 'Righteousness in Tights' (2005) identifies the focus on origin as being integral to the form (since serialisations are not overly concerned with resolution) and situates it in opposition to the *bildungsroman*: 'If the *bildungsroman* is the passage from childhood to maturity, then the origin story is a shorter trip, from childhood to a prolonged immaturity: Batman is suffering from a pain he will not allow to heal' (2005, 4).

Critical attention has extended to include metacriticism of the subject, such as Umberto Eco's 1999 article 'Four Ways of Speaking about Comics'. Eco categorises new comics criticism into four types: those dealing with the medium in general; those that treat comics as sociological indicators; those that extol the virtues of a single comic *despite* its form; and those that now discuss a single comic *as they would any other text*. That we have reached this last type of criticism, says Eco, is a sign that both comics and their criticism have grown up: as we are now enabled to move past the medium and, by viewing comics in terms of genre, afford them the same respect as other literary forms.

As this review shows, comics criticism has developed alongside the product, and it may be said the two forms reaffirm each other. However, it is further worth noting that certain developments in literary criticism have also contributed to these two areas. David Kunzle ties his criticism of comics to the emergence of children's literature (which genre, as discussed, alerts us to a new emphasis on the role of the reader), and considers the participant nature of comics strips (that is, the emphasis on the reader's involvement) as a tool to mediate public response in light of the printed word (which removes the teller from listener) and mass reproduction/circulation (which emphasises this distance) (1990, 3).

Such a perspective may be aligned with literary theory developments such as Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory (*Literature as Exploration*, first published 1938) which stresses the importance of the reader: a notion integral to comics where the reader must contribute to the narrative. Later theories such as Foucault's author function or Roland Barthes's death of the author have also helped to illuminate the constructed nature of

romantic authorship and bestow new credibility on more deviant forms of writing while sustaining the focus on the reader. Identification of the discursive functions of literature in other critics' work (for example Edward Said's view of the text as a power struggle (Said 1979, 178)) is also informed by study of the medium. Finally, postmodernism has increasingly blurred the divide between high/low culture and contemporary popular culture is now afforded a new respect.

Current position

Many of the above events (whether discussed earlier in this chapter or evidenced by changes in published criticism) have been factors in defining the current position and perception of comics. To summarise briefly, these various factors include: the formation of and subsequent changes to copyright and intellectual property law; development of marketing and licensing; parallels with and changes within other mass media; other technological advances; repackaging and distribution changes; and a new focus on the star creator (and specifically the star writer) that emphasises individuality of voice and consequently diversity of style.

In what is fast becoming a litigation culture, copyright and intellectual property restrictions are well publicised in both the UK and the US. Anti-piracy propaganda is even being distributed in American schools by software companies, although this initiative has been criticised for offering a one-sided view. Organisations such as the American Library Association now also distribute materials: 'The ALA sees a need for this because materials offered by groups like the Business Software Alliance and the Motion Picture Association of America are designed to influence kids with one-sided information [...] Topics like "fair use" – the right to use copyright material without the owner's permission, a key concept in American law that intellectual-property experts say leads to innovation – are not adequately addressed' (Dean 2004, npag).

Within comics, although intellectual property law has restricted the freedom of writers to play with industry-owned characters, its restrictions have allowed the coherent

formation of a character (by limiting the body of work featuring them to that approved by the owner) and implicitly encouraged individuality of expression for those creators working on long-running titles. It has also made space in the industry for creators' rights: DC now pay a 'creator royalty' as well as writer and artist royalties and the lion's share of most royalty money goes to creators in creator-owned projects. Partiality towards the creator (whether writer or artist) continues to emphasise the romantic view of the author but still allows publishers to retain control over their longest-running characters.

McCloud points out that change to creators' rights has only been implemented as it is in the publisher's self-interest – multiple publishers are currently competing for talent while name recognition means the creators have more clout than ever before (2000, 59). In a joint interview with writer and co-creator Garth Ennis, artist Steve Dillon comments that: 'In general, creator-owned stuff is more rewarding, I think because you can come up with characters from scratch' although Ennis immediately qualifies this with the statement: 'You get a bit more money on the creator-owned projects' (Osborne 1998, npag). Essentially, the coexistence of creators' rights and copyright restrictions has allowed the industry to sustain its dual status as both a business and a creative enterprise.

Licensing and merchandising have replaced sweatshop style production to alleviate the financial strain, to the point where Marvel and DC might even be described as divisions of a toy company. An article from Gotham Comics comments that Marvel owns 'over 4,700 proprietary characters' and 'licenses its characters in a wide range of consumer products, services and media such as feature films, television, the Internet, apparel, video games, collectibles, snack foods and promotions. Marvel's characters and plot lines are created and developed through the comic book publishing division' (2001, npag). Such views are reinforced by the crossover to other mass media, such as movie tie-ins and big-screen adaptations of comic books. While these adaptations promote a wider audience for comic books, they seldom provide an accurate view of the industry, due to both the dominance of superheroes and the changes made for the big screen – in response to news of changes made for the movie version of Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, creator Warren Ellis

comments on his website 'I fully expect the film version of WATCHMEN to be a fucking musical' (Ellis 2005, npag). Moore himself says the only resemblance that 'the regrettable *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* [...] had to my book was a similar title' (Graham-Dixon 2006, npag), and has since insisted his name be removed from adaptations such as *Constantine* and *V for Vendetta*, also declining royalties for these films.

However, the movie industry also allows for self-promotion and can feed back into the comic book – Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film was universally acclaimed as a return to the 'original' character after the campy 1960s TV series, while charismatic character portrayals (such as Hugh Jackman's Wolverine in the *X-Men* movie franchise) have similarly redefined certain characters. Success in the movie industry may also lead to increased publication of certain titles, as Steve White comments: 'Marvel have done fantastically well with the movies, so they've got that cash cow now – the number of *X-Men* titles you see is quite unreal [...] there are just so many I've totally lost track of what's going on now' (Round 2005, npag). Mark C. Rogers identifies this process as 'licence farming' (where comics develop characters that they then license out to different media or for merchandising) and contrasts it with the reverse strategy of creating comics around popular, established characters (such as the *Buffy* and *Star Trek* comics, or the adaptation of Kevin Smith's *Clerks* movie into a comic book (Rogers 1999, 134)).

Increased similarities between the comic-book product and the movie have also redefined the medium to a degree – when speaking of the trade paperback repackaging process White comments further that 'The publishers are following the DVD market and are now doing "extras"' (including a few pages of artist sketches, a covers gallery or similar), and that the speed of production and consumption also reflects 'another similarity now between the movie market and comics: before you used to have to wait a year or so for a video to come out [...] now you're getting movies coming out on DVD within a couple of months of the cinema release [...] it's interesting how they're obviously following the same line of thought' (Round 2005, npag).

The two media have often been compared due to their reliance on the visual in the

pursuit of narrative, but those working within the industry tend to focus more on their differences. Scott McCloud finds more emotional resonance in comics, saying: 'The partnership between creator and reader in comics is far more intimate and active than cinema' (2000, 39), while Neil Gaiman likens the experience of reading a comic to that of listening to radio (due to the emphasis on dialogue and imaginative capacity (Carroll 1997, npag)) rather than film (where the story is spoon-fed to a passive audience). However, Walter Benjamin's observations on the politicising of the work of art through mass access notes the assigned viewpoint found in cinematic camera work (which doesn't allow the audience a personal position from which to observe the work) and the static panel artwork of comics appears to represent a similar process. Taken in conjunction with Rosenblatt's reader response theory, however, it may be said that one's viewpoint nonetheless varies according to context in both media, and so perhaps both may reflect the divide between popular culture and literature.

Steve Dillon comments further: 'Most of us think we have more in common with the TV format than the film format. But superheroes, the best superheroes, tend to be more soap opera-ish – like the X-Men, and the old Spiderman stuff. But that's for a continuing-forever sort of series' (Osborne 1998, npag). The new focus on the trade paperback and creator-owned work has instead led to a preponderance of one-shot graphic novels or mini- and maxi-series with a finite end (these comprise approximately three or eight single issues, respectively), and therefore the comparisons with cinema not only look set to remain for the foreseeable future but are, in fact, becoming more relevant.

Since Scott McCloud published *Reinventing Comics* in 2000, online comics have gone from strength to strength and digital comics are now emerging. Reasons for this may include improvements in delivery methods and speeds (for example due to broadband technology which has widely replaced dial-up networking); an ever-increasing number of home computer owners; improvements in the security and methods of online payments; and a general acceptance of mobile technology, online banking and the Internet marketplace. McCloud foresees many of these developments, saying, 'Computers fulfil needs and create

desires which eventually turn into needs' (2000, 133).

He comments further that 'Each cycle of need, invention and desire takes us to a new technological level, in which the traditional assumptions of the previous level can be rendered obsolete' (2000, 136), a statement which clearly aligns with Thomas Kuhn's observations in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn's argument (that science proceeds not by accumulating facts but by revolutionary interpretative 'paradigm shifts' in which new scientific knowledge displaces the previous set of assumptions) questioned the rationality of science (as its paradigms are so distinct from each other and may require entirely different evaluative criteria). That McCloud's conception of technological advances supports this view gives credibility to his propositions that, as noted above, is further supported by hindsight. McCloud goes on to cite three 'revolutions' that computing has had on comics: digital production, digital delivery, and digital comics (22).

McCloud dates the first digitally produced comics from the mid-1980s and notes that lettering and colouring are mostly computerised now (140). He further comments that these technological requirements have reversed the traditional romantic image of the impoverished artist (153) – an interesting counterpoint to the newly romanticised comics writer. Although the digitisation of art has limited creativity in some ways (Steve White comments further that 'there are certain skills that are now almost extinct [...] it just means that now everything more or less looks the same' (Round 2005, npag)), it also has advantages when drafting (such as the ability to save multiple versions) and offers further possibilities such as 3D art or computerised effects.

Digital delivery of comics privileges the reader by providing exactly what is wanted rather than what is available on the bookshelves (McCloud 2000, 188). Will Eisner has criticised digital delivery of comics: commenting that in the process we may lose different panel shapes, the ability to refer back a page, and the emphasis on intellectual participation (1996, 148) – however Eisner is referring to online comics presented in slideshow form (as one might find on a CD-Rom). Advances made in the four years between the publication dates of their respective critical works have obviously been relevant, as McCloud offers

many further possibilities which include delivery via email or access to a website. He also lists multiple options for presentation that include a page-by-page or panel-by-panel whole screen view (which may use either 'click thru' technology or timed slideshow delivery), hypertext-based interactivity, or Flash sound and motion (165).

According to McCloud, digital delivery reverses the traditional laws of supply and demand; however it seems more accurate to say that the whole concept is negated, as there is no limit on the quantity of product available. It also evens out the playing field between big publishers and small, independent ones (194). While the addition of elements such as Flash sound and motion again begin to blur the boundaries between comics and other visual media, the notion of hypertext interactivity provides a further possibility for comics: a kind of 3D structuring. Participation of this sort would only emphasise the role of the reader and perhaps enable the creation of a new comic-book product.

Digital comics are pure information and exist in no tangible form (as opposed to online comics which are comprised of scanned pages). As such, McCloud notes they offer more options (such as the idea of using the monitor as a window before which images pass (222)) and interactive possibilities for the reader. He concludes that although comics are still life, the act of reading them remains anything but – whether the comic is in hard copy, online or digital form (229). As such the digital comic can be seen as sustaining the medium of comics, although this incorporates a certain amount of irony, since the medium-as-object will become obsolete.

Alan Moore comments: 'Scott, he's a clever lad. I'm not sure about his new: "all comics are gonna be online", I think he's talking bollocks there [...] I think he's become more evangelist [...] without thinking about any of the practicalities of it' (Whiston 2002, npag). Although McCloud does extol the virtues of technological advances his work recognises some of the dangers of reformatting the comic book into a digital form (for example the danger of comics becoming movies (211)),¹² and overall his argument is all the

¹² For example, through the addition of sound or animated motion. It is however interesting to note that the 2005 *Sin City* movie (directed by creator Frank Miller) adhered rigorously to the comic book's colour scheme and reproduced exact panel shots in many places.

more convincing five years after it was originally published. Digital comics are getting more and more critical attention and were recently allowed a category in the Eisner awards – however *Sequential Tart* editor-in-chief Marcia Allass comments that this ‘somewhat sidelines web comics in the same way that online magazines were sidelined for a long time. Surely the real way forward is to accept submissions from digital creators in all categories’ (Allass 2005, npag).

Digital publishing has also allowed greater access at a lower cost for all – a recent article in the *New York Times* discussing self-publishing notes that digital printing has taken over the vanity press and provides a cheap, effective method of publishing-on-demand (Glazer 2005, npag). Abram Stern further notes that digital reproduction has amplified many of the effects identified by Walter Benjamin in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936) as it allows mass access to the process of reproduction, not just to the work of art – access at any stage or distance, by anyone. As such, the work of art remains political, even if in digital form it is more information or data than object – and, in fact, ‘This mass accessibility to the process of reproduction becomes political in its own right’ (Stern 2005, npag).

Again, current copyright and piracy laws affect and reflect the situation as large corporations and media empires seek to limit digital art and return us to the age of aura and cult value via Digital Rights Management (such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act 1998). Copyright measures are now extended to digital technology, copyright periods have been lengthened, and some countries are even seeking to eliminate public domain work (Stern 2005, npag).

However, the digitising process has led to a renewal of audience involvement and even an expansion of the audience itself – perhaps to include those whose primary interest is computing rather than comics. The homogenisation of style is reflected in emergent trends – for example manga-style artwork is extremely popular at the moment. In 2003 Jill Thompson released *Death: At Death's Door* – a retelling of the *Sandman: Season of Mists* trade paperback in manga form (a small paperback book redrawn in this style). Steve

White has commented: 'I sense a strong female readership in things like manga' (Round 2005, npag) and the release of other texts (such as the manga-look *Nancy Drew* graphic novel published by Papercutz) would seem to support this view.

Whether the current appeal of manga is a trend that will pass or a sign of the further globalisation and development of comic-book art is currently unclear. Certainly the rewriting of *Nancy Drew* into a comic book signals an expanding female audience, and the article hailing its release describes the graphic novel as 'one of the fastest-expanding areas in book publishing' (Memmott 2005, npag). In this sense, then, the *Nancy Drew* graphic novel represents the rewriting of children's literature into comics: another sign of the medium's increased literary status.

In *Seduction of the Innocent* Fredric Wertham cites Ray Abel (an illustrator of children's books and comics) as saying: 'The artist is a machine and his only aim is to attain a mechanical competence that will make him completely undistinguishable [*sic*] from the other "machines" in the business' (266). Nothing could be further from the truth now; where the value placed on individuality and uniqueness of style has led to artist recognition. Steve White reflects on conversations with Tom DeFalco (writer and ex-Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics) concerning the formation of Image Comics, and recalls that the prevailing wisdom of the industry at the time was that readers were more interested in the characters than the creators. This theory was quickly proved wrong when the first issues of *Spawn* and *W*I*L*D*C*A*T*S** (new titles published by Image) sold record-breaking numbers. White comments further 'I used to follow creators, you know, you would pick up a book because it was drawn by an artist whose stuff you really liked, that kind of thing, so that logic never really rang true with me' (Round 2005, npag).

As noted, the star artist has now given way to some degree to the star writer. Online forums have discussed 'how the whole industry shifted from artist driven (Lee, McFarlane, Miller et al.) to writer driven (Ellis, Rucka, Straczynski, Bendis, Morrison, etc.)' and comment: 'It was a change for the better' (Mayer 2004, npag). This new emphasis on narrative has further redefined comics as literature. The wordiness of scripts from

contemporary creators such as Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman stands in stark contrast to Marvel style scripting and this trend may also have contributed to re-emphasising narrative elements in contemporary comics. An increased literariness of style is also noted by Steve White who comments on the 'classical themes' that such British writers introduced, in contrast to 'a feeling that American writers were so superhero-oriented that they couldn't take that step away from spandex' (Round 2005, npag).

The combination of British and American influences may also be a contributing factor in a wider sense: George Pumphrey notes (in 1955) that there were more captions in UK comic books than American ones (13). Comparisons between 1950s comics from both countries (using samples of the British comic *Eagle* and the American publication *Batman*) do reveal radical differences between the two forms: *Eagle* measured approximately 10" by 13¼" and was a standard 16 pages in length, although on occasion included an extra 4 bonus pages. The American comics were 7" by 10½" and contained an average of 32 pages. An average 1950s edition of *Eagle* had 9 serials and 5 one-shots and of these 4 or 5 were prose. The American comics contained between 3 and 5 stories, all in comic-book panels. However, both 1950s comics make heavy use of captions that are frequently addressed directly to the reader (such as 'HOW ABOUT YOU??? ARE YOU AS CLEVER AS THE GREAT BATMAN? HAVE YOU CAUGHT ON TO TWO-FACE'S SCHEME?' (Kane 1954, 4), or 'CAN DAN SUCCEED IN SAVING THE SITUATION? DON'T MISS NEXT WEEK'S THRILL PACKED EPISODE!' (Hampson 1956, 2)). Similarly, stories frequently begin with a paragraph of background information (*Eagle*) or a lengthy introduction (*Batman*).

The didactic nature of address used in these examples is echoed in both stories' reliance upon narrative captions in place of dialogue: reducing the panels to little more than illustrations and creating a didactic tone. This divide of prose between narrative and dialogue exposes the double narrative potential of the medium, although in the 1950s this potential remained largely untapped – except by critics. Nyberg uses suspense comic story 'The Whipping' as an example of the propensity of critics to take panels out of context in her examination of Wertham's testimony that the story preached racism. She reveals this to

be due to his consideration of the pictures and speech balloons in isolation from their accompanying textual captions (which tell an anti-racism tale) (Nyberg 1998, 64).

In this respect the 1950s comic format is quite different from contemporary comics, which now wed text and image much more closely in the panel (or hybrid signifier).¹³ These instances of outside narration and direction mark the earlier comics as children's literature by inserting an oral tone and setting up an overt power relationship between narrator and narratee. However, these comics also exploit textual signifiers such as the didactic form of address to the child for ironic purposes (for example the inclusion of phrases such as 'Sleep well kiddies' at the end of horror books). Contemporary comics also make use of this capability to incorporate literary effects – such as a voice-over or the creation of irony between different elements of the hybrid signifier: leading to an increased focus on the complexities of the story and its textual functions.

All these factors have also helped to redefine comics as literary rather than visual entertainment. The credibility of literary critics such as Umberto Eco turning their attention to comics has also aided this process – Eco comments 'it is only in the last twenty years that comics have become more adult, scholarly, cultivated, metalinguistic, experimental' (Eco 1999, npag). Critical acclaim is now counterbalanced against sales statistics – Osborne comments that 'There's a common perception that Vertigo books tend to get more critical acclaim than sales', to which *Preacher* co-creator Steve Dillon responds 'They're aiming at a different market [...] all in all, Vertigo's not doing too badly. It seems like they get loyal followings, without the collector mentality' (Osborne 1998, npag).

Finally, the changes in form have also contributed to this redefinition – Osborne further notes that Vertigo put out more trade paperbacks than other companies, a situation which Dillon expands further on, saying: 'They sell well in bookshops, not just comic shops [...] it's introducing people to comic books who haven't been into a comic book since they were ten years old. They pick it up off the bookshelf and think "Oh, this is different." It's not just people in spandex' (Osborne 1998, npag). McCloud also notes that the

¹³ My term: see Chapter 5 'The hybrid signifier' for a full discussion.

traditional cheap periodical form detracts from the promise of an art form (2000, 137), in contrast to the graphic novel and trade paperback.

Steve White extends these observations to include not just the effect on audience perception, but also on the creative process, saying: ‘now that book shops are getting much more interested in housing graphic novels, obviously comic publishers are now thinking “let’s just do the graphic novels and the trade paperbacks.” [...] There definitely seems to be an attitude among creators that they’re writing for the trade paperback [...] it has actually changed the way the comics are written – a lot of the writers don’t now think of it in individual terms, they’re looking at the bigger picture’ (Round 2005, npag).

Conclusion

It seems that comics currently straddle the boundaries of popular culture and literature and may help inform our understanding of both concepts. As such, I turn now to a consideration of comics in literary terms: using specific genres to discuss the comic book *as literature*, both to further establish its status, and to illuminate the natures of these genres themselves. The industry history given above has shown an emphasis on certain elements of production – notions of recycling and redefinition, copyright and licensing, the contraction and re-expansion of the industry in its focus on superheroes, and the coexistence of multiple forms and versions – that suggests certain genres as more applicable than others.

Notions of recycling and rewriting prompt me to begin with a consideration of the Gothic. The constant redefinition of comics in this way also points to the overtly cultural status of the product and as such invites consideration in terms of Myth – the longevity of certain characters means they may be viewed as post-industrial folk figures whose functions change over time, while the use made of mythopoeic structures and themes by the Vertigo comics may be helpful in defining and situating these texts. The fantasy thematic of the Vertigo texts (and its background in the superhero genre of mainstream comics) suggests the genre of the Fantastic, and exploration of this may be further enhanced by

consideration of the multiple new forms of comic development; linking the medium to postmodernism and semiotics. Features of comics such as the coexistence of titles, the invocation of the hyperreal, non-linear narrative layouts, the multiple points of view assigned to the individual reader, and the existence of various interpretative communities are of further relevance to postmodern theory and semiotic deconstruction.

I am using a very broad definition of 'popular culture' that refers to all that is outside high culture and the romanticist view of literature. I use 'popular' as a neutral alternative to 'mass', and take culture to refer to both process and product. I do so with John Fiske's critical model in mind: which identifies popular culture as the process of making meaning from the commodities of the culture industries (Fiske 1989, 20).

I would argue that comics and their readership fall under this definition of popular culture. Further, in this regard they may also be linked to Dick Hebdige's observations on the recuperation of subcultures by mass culture, a process by which the subcultural product is commodified (becomes mass-produced and has its innovations frozen), and its ideology reclaimed (the processes of the 'other' are trivialised or naturalised) (Hebdige 1979, 94). The creation of over one hundred comics-inspired movies by Western mainstream cinema during the last twenty years, together with the changes I have noted in comics' production and reception, thus permit me to define comics as popular culture artefacts.¹⁴

Yet simultaneously these same changes in comics' production and consumption, together with the critical attention now afforded them, bring the contemporary comic book closer to the notion of the literary text. Oddly, contemporary academia has hardly addressed this redefinition: of over two hundred comics-related dissertation titles and abstracts listed online (Kannenberg 2006, npag) only one (undergraduate) dissertation tackles this subject.¹⁵ It is my hope that by approaching comics in this manner I will be

¹⁴ See www.imdb.com. The figure rises to over two hundred if television, straight-to-video and international releases are included.

¹⁵ Being Margaret Gray's undergraduate thesis 'Neil Gaiman's "The Sandman": "Comic" or "Graphic Novel"? A study of the "adult revolution" of the 1980s and the resultant terminological debate' (2004). Of the other doctoral, master's and undergraduate dissertations listed, 58% discuss comics' treatment of a specific socio-political issue, 18% are author-specific monographs or historically limited surveys, 14% are semiotic or structural analyses, and 10% focus on the pedagogical use of comics.

able to define their current position within a critical discourse that habitually sets literature against popular culture, and to build a speculative model of their future possibilities in this regard, which will culminate in reflection on the issues and questions raised by this study. In so doing, I hope to illuminate understanding of the discourses surrounding both popular culture and literature.

Chapter 2: the Gothic

Horror and comic books have a long history: the EC comics of the 1950s such as *Tales from the Crypt* told gothic tales of 'dismemberment, corpses come back from the dead, and premature burials' (King 1982, 440), before the restrictions of the Comics Code and the subsequent superhero monopoly of the industry. However, it is my contention that elements of the gothic tradition still exist in contemporary comics, both thematically (the notion of the superhero and associated fragmentation of identity) and structurally (the nesting of story arcs sustained by the multiple forms of trade paperback, graphic novel and single issue), and that these have culminated in the dark, psychological thematic of the Vertigo label.

Literature review

Richard Davenport-Hines summarises the Gothic historically, stating that its succour 'lies in the strength of backward-looking thoughts' (Davenport-Hines 1998, 385), in overwriting and subsuming other genres. For this reason, historicist critics have argued that the Gothic's recycling of texts into a developing narrative is at least partially responsible for the notions of poetic tradition and literary history. Contemporary Gothic's structural and thematic qualities have been created/incorporated in this fluid, plural way: in the past the gothic style has flirted variously with other genres such as medievalism and parody, constantly adapting to suit its times.

The gothic tradition in the eighteenth century sprung from an architectural trend that was led by Horace Walpole's purchase and remodelling of 'Strawberry Hill' into a 'gothick' castle in the 1740s. This imitative medievalist flavour is echoed in its literary emergence (of which Walpole was again one of the earliest practitioners: *The Castle of Otranto* was published in 1764) and is also observable in many of the settings and scenarios of this era's romantic poetry (such as Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 1796). By the late 1700s the genre's range and depth was expanding: incorporating terror and

melodrama, as in the *fin de siècle* writing of Anne Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) which broke taboos and flirted with excess.

The Gothic's initial faux medievalism and this subsequent turn to melodrama incorporated elements of self-parody that continued to be employed by the nineteenth-century Gothic (as in Austen's gothic romance *Northanger Abbey*, 1818). A similar process is observable in the genre's absorption and adaptation of other genres: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) rewrites notions drawn from philosophy, science, politics and poetry and in this sense can be read as a gothic analysis of human nature that plays with the moralistic and the scientific alike. Subsequently, the gothic tradition again resituated itself by moving from the medieval to the subversive – a trend that was continued by nineteenth-century decadent literature.

Of these texts, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) led the way for an inwards turn in gothic literature that was facilitated culturally by the emergence and popularity of psychoanalysis. This trend radically altered critical views of the Gothic as the world of the literary text became analysable in terms of the desires and fears of both author and reader – gothic texts providing particularly fruitful images in this regard. As a gothic flavour again permeated mainstream fiction (as previously seen in the work of Dickens or the Brontës), gothic fiction became socially anchored and inward-looking and these elements formed the basis of American Gothic (Poe, Hawthorne). Such movements have been sustained by the contemporary postmodern Gothic – whether parodic (*The Addams Family*), romantic (Tim Burton), subversive (Poppy Z. Brite), or culturally specific (the 'brand-name' fiction of writers such as Stephen King).

This process of consistently incorporating contemporary trends allows the gothic tradition to emphasise its thematic transgression of boundaries by subsuming and altering these genres to suit its priorities: producing an excess of meaning and eliciting emotional responses. Cultural anxiety (as identified by Lecercle in *fin de siècle* texts (83)) is reflected throughout in the Gothic's focus on marginalised social elements and its inversion of social and cultural norms. The gothic tradition also utilises its subcultural and subversive status to

comment on this social anxiety. To this end its themes may be expressed as underlying messages or morals, as extended metaphors, or even by constitutive otherness – in itself, an example of the kind of inversion the Gothic relies upon, where what is not said and not present nonetheless defines a work.

Critical interest in the Gothic initially took the form of thematic studies (such as Edith Birkhead's *The Tale of Terror*, 1921), monographs, or historical surveys. Bibliophile and occult enthusiast Montague Summers wrote extensively in this regard and his *History of Demonology and Witchcraft* (1926) and later works *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* (1928) and *The Vampire in Europe* (1929) present incredibly detailed records of folk beliefs about these subjects. Devendra Varma's *The Gothic Flame*, first published in 1957, similarly proclaims itself to be 'A History of the Gothic Novel in England'. More recently McNally and Florescu's *In Search of Dracula* (1982) researches the link between historical ruler Vlad Tepes and the vampire legends of Transylvania.

Encouraged by Freud's identification of pop culture as the most fruitful for investigation (Massé 2001, 229) and the apparent applicability of gothic themes, the psychoanalytic trend subsequently produced a new wave of readings of the Gothic. Although beginning with the simplistic and metaphoric, psychoanalytic theories of the Gothic developed with reference to structures and themes, ultimately becoming systematic studies of patterns, binaries and relations that are continued by many poststructuralist and feminist schools of criticism. Much recent gothic criticism is also underpinned by similar notions (for example, via assumptions of the existence of the unconscious or the effects of repression) and the psychoanalytic frameworks underlying these models are now under examination, as in Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), which reverses the Freudian model to consider instead the monster figure of woman-as-castrator.

Contemporary cultural materialist criticism (such as the work of David Punter) situates the gothic tradition as a response to social trauma and consequently defines it as an overall tendency in literature rather than a historical genre (1980, 14). In so doing, Punter reconciles Gothic's subversive elements and subcultural status with its canonical position.

Fred Botting similarly identifies the Gothic's focus on marginalised and excluded cultural elements, postulating that the post-1970s absence of absolute cultural taboos is in this way responsible for its contemporary form (2001, 134).

Botting summarises the dual impulse the Gothic provokes historically, identifying its turn from external horror (where the source of terror was objectified and cast out) to internal horror and associated notions of guilt, anxiety and despair. Whereas eighteenth-century gothic texts located horror in the form of an outsider or mysterious external forces that could ultimately be overpowered, expelling the horror and restoring normality, later gothic works focus on the internal effects and causes of such events and resolutions reflect this. As mentioned, this turn is linked by many critics to the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, which relocated horror inside the psyche.

In this way, historicist readings of the Gothic may also be underpinned by a psychoanalytic framework: Baldick and Mighall note in such readings a 'reliance upon allegorical interpretations in which Demon stands for Deviant, and upon an unexamined model of "bourgeois fears" as the motivation for fiction, [that] ultimately undermines their historicist credentials, once more allowing "psychology" (fear of the abject, fear of the "other") to hold the field' (2001, 222). Many contemporary schools of criticism use similar structures in order to view the movement from external to internal as exemplary of the Gothic's thematic of inversion:

If terror leads to an imaginative expansion of one's sense of self, horror describes the moment of contraction and recoil [...] The movement between terror and horror is part of a dynamic whose poles chart the extent and different directions of Gothic projects. These poles, always inextricably linked, involve the externalisation or internalisation of objects of fear and anxiety. (Botting 1996, 10)

This polarisation also suggests notions of postmodern duality as the internal and external are contrasted, combined or exchanged; the horror without is reflected within.

These principles affect both the structuring and content of gothic fiction. Its underlying thematic may best be described as a notion of reversal or inversion: the Gothic often links mutually opposing ideas such as decay/growth and fear/attraction. Its focus

remains on such opposites, such as the idea of submission as power – best illustrated by the Hegelian dialectic of the master/slave relationship where, although the master ostensibly has the power, in actuality this is reversed since his need for the slave (for example to provide social status) is greater than their need for him. It is further illustrated by the idea of victim collaboration, as in the vampire myth where the victim must invite their attacker in, and also by vampiric sexuality that supports the dual presence of fear/attraction in the Gothic.

In recent years the Gothic's most significant development has also been explained with reference to its reliance upon inversion: that is, its transvaluation of moral issues, as notions of 'evil' and 'monsters' become less clear-cut. In contrast to the narrated nineteenth-century vampire (such as Dracula), the twentieth-century vampire is *narrating*: allowed his own voice (such as Anne Rice's Lestat). Nina Auerbach traces the development of the vampire over the last two centuries (from its origin as a singular, charming f(r)iend, to a predator set apart, to re-humanisation in the twentieth century) and provides detailed analysis of the ways in which the changes observable in literary and cinematic representations of vampires reflect the social and political climate.

Auerbach also comments on the insularity of the contemporary vampire, citing the work of Anne Rice (whose vampires have their own, non-human history and mythology, and a complete lack of social consciousness) and Stephen King's lawless vampires as equally iconoclastic (Auerbach 1995, 156). As here, the vampire's segregation emphasises the subcultural status of the Gothic. This is further reinforced by Auerbach's observations of vampiric performativity: 'his role is to expose the insubstantiality of the barriers that differentiate men from women, death from life' (183). Other feminist criticism continues this movement; categorising the contemporary vampire as both other and ourselves, as in the work of Gina Wisker who links Rice's vampirism with notions of gender performance in contemporary society (Wisker 2001, 172).

This follows the work of Judith Butler, questioning definitions of gender: 'Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness"

constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?' (Butler 1990, x). Butler concludes that gender is not only a cultural performance, but 'also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts [...] This production of sex *as* the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*' (7). In this way vampirism not only mirrors gender performance but also alerts us to the role of such performativity in constructing the prediscursive/natural (that is, humanity) – a theme I shall return to.

More recently, semiotic readings of the Gothic's thematic structures have appeared, such as the work of Jodey Castricano. Castricano defines her notion of cryptomimesis 'as textual production that is predicated upon haunting, mourning, and the return of the so-called living dead' (Castricano 2001, 32). The sense of haunting (as both a legacy and a promise) in the work allows it to resist lineation just as the Gothic itself resists this sort of historical interpretation by its free appropriation of other genres and fads, and by its constant evocation of the old, sustained in the postmodern present.

Castricano's theory follows the work of Jacques Derrida in considering the subject as phantom and the possibilities of approaching language and writing as non-linear. These notions also figure in Abraham and Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (first published 1976), a semantic discussion that identifies encrypted linguistic structures via the 'cosymbol' of 'the Thing' (as neither word nor thing-in-itself, but a mark or cipher). In 'Fors' (the introductory essay to this text, first published 1977) Derrida further discusses the psychoanalytic elements of semantics, taking the symbol of the crypt beyond easy metaphors by exploring its simultaneous internal/external nature (for example as above, where it is hidden inside the word 'encrypted'), notions of absence (as seen in psychoanalytic themes whose nature is to escape from discourse), and reversal, where that which is buried alive (such as an emotion) is also in some ways satisfied by this process. As such, the object is defined as a thing to be deciphered according to a cryptographic

structure, and narrative is viewed as an encrypting process.

There appears to be an implicit link between the Gothic and this kind of spectral criticism that is also seen in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), which identifies a 'spectral movement' (Derrida 1994, 148) within *Capital* and specifically in Marx's definition of the commodity (as Derrida equates awareness of its invisible and ideological attributes with the ability to see ghosts). Further links can also be observed when considering the ways in which contemporary Marxism has been in some ways buried and revived, and the spectral motif is even prefigured by pure Marxism: Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* (first published 1848) famously opens by stating it is written in response to the treatment of communism as a 'spectre [that] is haunting Europe' (Marx and Engels 1967, 78). It seems that many spectres haunt the texts of Marx and, through him, of Derrida.

These approaches appear to be consistent with contemporary cultural criticism and psychoanalysis in identifying the gothic 'other within' – Punter and Bronfen comment that the unconscious invoked by the Gothic is not the kernel of the self but the other implanted within us (2001, 21). Marcus LiBrizzi takes a similar cultural materialist perspective for his consideration of the Anunnaki as modern vampires: again invoking notions of the outsider/alien among us and the commodification of the self.

Many of these key elements and movements within the gothic tradition appear to be reflected in the Vertigo comics, most obviously in their subject matter, which revolves around supernatural, psychological horror. However, the Gothic's absorption of other genres is also echoed by the development of American comics through 'superscription' – the overwriting and adaptation of previously existing characters and events.¹⁶ Its subcultural status is similarly reflected in the marketing and audience of contemporary comics, as are themes of commodification and consumerism. Further notions of isolation and cultural anxiety (that have relevance if we perceive the Gothic as a response to social trauma) also inform the content of many comics. Within the comic-book superhero,

¹⁶ My term: see Chapter 5 'Postmodernism and the medium' for a full discussion in the context of 'retroactive continuity' (the process of incorporating additional past events into the comic-book universe in the interests of coherence).

notions of fragmented identity and alter egos abound: literally reflecting the gothic other within, and inviting psychoanalytic readings that are further reinforced by the pop culture status of comics. Finally, by linking semiotics to gothic themes, we can perceive a kind of gothic structuring within comics; as the medium presents its narrative in a non-linear form (where all moments coexist on the page). I turn now to a closer consideration of these elements.

Superscription and absorption

The Swamp Thing, a man turned plant-creature, first appeared in the DC anthology series *House of Secrets* #92 (September 1971) in a one-off story written by Len Wein (another of the industry's fans-turned-writers) and illustrated by Berni Wrightson. The story was a hit and the character was given his own title in November 1972 together with the origin story of Alec Holland.¹⁷

The series was dropped after #24 (September 1976) until it was revived in 1982 as *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and given to the creative team of Martin Pasko and Tom Yeates. Alan Moore took over the scripting with #20 (January 1984) and was soon joined by illustrators Steve Bissette and John Totleben. One of the six core titles that was to later form the basis of the Vertigo line (the others are *The Sandman*, *Hellblazer*, *Doom Patrol*, *Shade The Changing Man*, and *Animal Man*), Moore's rewriting of *Swamp Thing* set the ground rules that would later allow this entire imprint to be created around a thematic that can best be described as psychological horror.

Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* changed the original horror story into something more by incorporating mythology, social concerns, philosophy and one of the strangest love stories to appear in mainstream comics. The characters he revived and (re)created live on in many other contemporary Vertigo titles and I turn now to a consideration of the

¹⁷ A scientist working in the bayous on a regenerative formula for plants, Holland was literally blown to bits when foreign agents bombed his laboratory. He, his formula and the surrounding marshes and swamps merged, creating the Swamp Thing – a mass of vegetable matter with the consciousness and memories of Alec Holland, cut off from humanity and alone.

effects of this and the various uses of superscription in some concurrent Vertigo titles.

The Swamp Thing himself was modelled on a late golden-age creature called the Heap, but whereas both this original figure and the 1970s Swamp Thing remained freak creatures, Moore decided to provide his 1980s revival with a history – and a future. Moore rewrote the Swamp Thing as a ‘plant elemental’ with powers bordering on that of a god: literally made of plant matter, he can regenerate at will and grow a body from any living matter, anywhere. In *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #47 (‘The Parliament of Trees’) the creature discovers the resting place of those plant elementals that came before him (such as scientist Alex Olsen (the golden-age Swamp Thing) and pilot Albert Höllerer (the original identity of the Heap)) and is told: ‘ALL...OUR STORIES...ARE SUBTLY...DIFFERENT...YET THE UNDERLYING...PATTERN...REMAINS CONSTANT... / A MAN...DIES IN FLAMES...A MONSTER...RISES FROM THE MIRE...SACRIFICE...AND RESURRECTION...THAT IS ALWAYS...OUR BEGINNING...’ (Moore 1988d, 3.15.5).¹⁸

However, along with the revival of the old Moore intertwines the new in his character John Constantine, who first appeared in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #37 (‘Growth Patterns’). Introduced with no preamble or history, the audience is left to piece together this mysterious Englishman: a mystic who teaches the Swamp Thing about his new powers; a force of good (as he subsequently enlists him to help fight evil); yet unscrupulous and manipulative, as well as alcoholic, chain-smoking and promiscuous. Constantine himself dismisses his role (‘I’M JUST AN *ORDINARY PERSON WITH ORDINARY NEEDS: FOOD, SHELTER, SLEEP, SEX, RECREATION, AND A SAFE WORLD TO ENJOY IT ALL IN*’ (Moore 1988e, 4.12.4)) but his knowledge and power belie this.

Moore’s combination of the old and the new reflects the gothic tradition’s incorporation and alteration of other genres, and this movement is continued by many of

¹⁸ In some trade paperbacks page numbering is retained from individual issues. In these instances I shall cite references as here, where 3.15.5 corresponds to part 3, page 15, panel 5. References given in a two-digit form (for example, 74.5) will refer to trade paperbacks where the pages have been renumbered sequentially (page 74, panel 5). When quoting from comics I have used ‘/’ to indicate divisions between speech balloons or narrative boxes, and imitated the use of font and style so far as is possible in order to avoid inflicting my own capitalisation, punctuation and so forth on the text.

the Vertigo texts. *The Sandman's* use of intertextuality is in conflict with the industry's more usual practice of inserting periodic schisms into a long-running character's history to expunge contradictory past events (generally by using devices such as alternate worlds). In this way a character's parameters are redefined every so often, and a coherent history for them is constructed. However, Neil Gaiman instead incorporates Morpheus into the histories of previously used characters: for example populating *The Dreaming* (where he resides) with the librarian Lucien, the raven woman Eve, and (as mentioned) the storytellers Cain and Abel. All of these characters hosted various DC horror comics in the 1970s and Gaiman's strong implication is that these stories were told from *The Dreaming*: he utilises the comics industry to provide a history for and lend credibility to *The Sandman*.

Although *The Sandman's* absorption of other texts and its best-selling market position may indicate that the text has succumbed to the lure of the master narrative, setting itself up as one, this use of recycling and rewriting in the pursuit of realism evokes a gothic sensibility both thematically and structurally as characters and themes are overwritten in this 'superscript'. Even within *The Sandman* Gaiman rewrites and recreates his characters – such as the Corinthian, who is 'unmade' by Morpheus at the end of *The Sandman* #14 ('Collectors') before being remade in *The Sandman* #57.¹⁹ Although existing originally only in an 'unlife' (the life of a dream) he nonetheless 'dies' and is resurrected in a form which, while it looks similar and shares memories with the original, is not the same.

Gaiman uses the John Constantine character similarly in *The Sandman* #3 ('Dream a Little Dream of Me').²⁰ This gothic story is a clear metaphor for drug abuse: the supernatural squalor that Rachel's house has fallen into (where still-living human bodies coat the walls, having been literally eaten by dreams) can be read as an illustration of addiction (where the body suffers for the mind's dreams). This sort of extended metaphor

¹⁹ The Corinthian is a nightmare created by Morpheus in the form of a young man with teeth for eyes. He escaped from *The Dreaming* while Morpheus himself was imprisoned and walked the earth for some decades, before Morpheus located and uncreated him as punishment. Morpheus later creates a new Corinthian who shares the same form and many of the same memories as the original character.

²⁰ Where the Englishman is enlisted to help Morpheus find his pouch of sand – stolen from John's possession by Rachel, a junkie ex-girlfriend of his who has been addicted to the sand ever since.

and a conscious focus on the telling of the story are typical Gaiman (as seen in the overall structure of *The Sandman*). However, in keeping with *The Sandman*'s metanarrative status, Gaiman goes one step further and in #29 ('Thermidor') tells the tale of Lady Johanna Constantine, a distant ancestor. In this way he also rewrites the Constantine character in different forms for different times, as the perennial daring outsider who is called upon by mystical forces.

A similar process is observable in the character of Etrigan and his human alter ego Jason Blood.²¹ Created by Jack Kirby, these characters were also revived by Moore in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (#25-27, known as the 'Demon Trilogy') and have since been overwritten still further by both Gaiman and Ennis (in *The Sandman* and the 1993 mini-series *The Demon*, respectively). Kirby's original interpretation of the demon Etrigan was as a force of good, loyally serving Merlin who had bound him. However, Moore superscripted Etrigan as an amoral, vicious demon tied to an innocent man and when John Byrne wished to return Etrigan to Kirby's original specifications for *Action Comics* #587 (April 1987) this necessitated a printed explanation. In this sense Moore rewrote a (admittedly somewhat strange) Kirby superhero into a reversal of the alter ego/hero theme: that of alter ego/demon. This inversion of the superhero set the foundations for a darker, more gothic tone and it was Moore's interpretation that Ennis and Gaiman continued in *The Demon* and *The Sandman*. By collectively discarding Byrne's explanatory rewriting in favour of this interpretation, Vertigo was beginning to form its own distinct universe of characters.

Textual indicators also draw attention to the existence of a coherent and continuous Vertigo universe. These include the conspicuous absence of the Bogeyman at Gaiman's serial killer convention in *The Sandman* #14 (the Bogeyman was dispatched by Moore's

²¹ The demon Etrigan is a prince of Hell who was bound by the wizard Merlin to a knight named Jason. The bond quickly drove Jason mad and he slaughtered his family, earning him the name of Jason (of the) Blood. Immortal due to the bond between them, Jason eventually regained his sanity and by the twentieth century had become a world-renowned demonologist and occultist. Etrigan is caged inside Jason and torments him psychologically, although a spoken chant releases him into our world while Jason switches places with him in Hell. Jason can summon him in this way to destroy enemies and similar, although there remains no friendship between them.

Swamp Thing in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #44), and featuring the Family Man's invitation to the same event in *Hellblazer* #28. Gaiman similarly references *Hellblazer* #10-12 in 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' when Constantine asks Morpheus for help: 'IT'S JUST - EVER SINCE NEWCASTLE. THE LAST TEN YEARS ... / EVER SINCE NEWCASTLE I'VE BEEN HAVING THESE NIGHTMARES...' (1991a, 3.24.5).²² In this way character reuse also has chronological continuity that is reciprocal (since Gaiman overwrites Constantine's nightmares to include Morpheus's power over them and their subsequent removal).

Thematic and structural continuity also exists between Moore's treatment of Cain and Abel, and Gaiman's revival of these characters in *The Sandman*. Moore rewrote these characters to include biblical references (after killing his brother again as part of an endless cycle, Cain explains 'I'M BEING PUNISHED FOR BEING THE FIRST PREDATOR... / ...AND HE'S BEING PUNISHED FOR BEING THE FIRST VICTIM' (Moore 1987e, 2.19.3-4)), and also places them in a dream setting (the issue details their appearance to Abby as she sleeps, where they offer her a mystery or a secret). Similarly, structural continuity is employed as Moore uses Cain and Abel as a storytelling device: incorporating textual indicators (such as the shattering of a mirror into panels as Abby first begins to fall into her dream) to divide his framing pages from the golden-age story.²³

Moore hinted at the characters' industry background by entitling *Swamp Thing* #33 'Abandoned Houses', and Gaiman too refers to this (they are introduced in an issue entitled 'Imperfect Hosts' (*The Sandman* #2), referring to their original incarnations as the hosts of their respective *House of...* anthologies). Gaiman also continues Moore's biblical references and further positions the characters in *The Dreaming* as storytellers: thereby supporting and reinforcing Moore's use of them as figures in Abby's dream. In this way the Vertigo text overwrites and subsumes not only the original *House of Secrets* and *House of Mystery* anthologies but also Moore's reinterpretation of the characters.

²² The Newcastle story arc was about a botched exorcism that resulted in the death of a child.

²³ The tale Abel tells Abby is a reprint of some golden-age pages covering the origin tale of the original Swamp Thing and introducing Moore's concept that Alex Holland is not the first plant elemental to walk the earth.

Gothic culture

As mentioned, the Gothic's marginalised status means that it has created a subculture around itself, whether this is perceived as a coherent readership or simply as an example of imitative style. Consequently, divided readership of texts is perceptible and further emphasised by the genre's use of extratextual markers and addendums to raise the question of veracity in its pursuit of an emotional reader response. For example, on publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 the literati certainly knew it to be fiction; what is less clear is how this text was perceived by its mass audience.

This divided readership is paralleled within the culture of comics, where the intertextual reuse of characters and the length of serialised texts results in 'in-jokes' or rules and motivations that are unintelligible to an uninitiated reader. Even outside the medium such a divide between the 'fanboy'²⁴ and the 'average reader' remains: for example in the movie *X-Men* when Wolverine is given his black, armoured costume and another character comments 'Unless you'd prefer yellow spandex?' (his original comic-book costume).

However, the gothic subculture also has a stylistic, visual side; as its members emulate 'looks' ranging from the vampiric to the sado-masochistic. In this process, these elements of the Gothic are intercut with other styles such as punk, Victorian and cyber-fashion: recalling the gothic thematic of subsuming and altering. Such visual expression not only allows identification of other members but also ultimately enables the subculture itself to be defined against contemporary fashions. However, a parallel for this does not seem to exist in fanboy culture, where style seldom goes beyond the merchandising of T-shirts or the direct copying of character costumes for conventions and, as such, seems controlled by the industry.

Dick Hebdige's study of subcultures and their relationships to society concludes that 'Cut ups and collages, no matter how bizarre, do not change so much as rearrange things,

²⁴ Name given to an obsessive comics collector, invoking a stereotyped definition (not least in terms of gender).

and needless to say, the “explosive junction” never occurs: no amount of stylistic incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced’ (Hebdige 1979, 130). For this reason subcultures remain outside the dominant ideology of society. Hebdige draws on the work of Roland Barthes: describing subcultural style as the consciously constructed equivalent of an advertising image (101) and defining it as a challenge to mainstream culture. Perhaps then it follows that fanboy culture shows no such fluidity as it revolves entirely around the hegemony of the industry.

Therefore, it is the icons and images produced and patented by the industry that may be perceived as emblematic of its subculture. In this way, the industry’s textual themes form the basis of its subculture’s values. These include the gothic theme of parody, perceptible in many Vertigo texts, where it has been further used to comment reflexively on the nature of subculture and notions of performativity.

Ennis’s portrayal of his Irish vampire Cassidy (in *Preacher*) could not exist without its contrast against the vampire tradition – a contrast that is overtly intertextualised, as when Jesse describes Cassidy’s life as ‘SORTA LIKE IF BRENDAN BEHAN FUCKED BRAM STOKER AN’ THEY LET THE BABY DO CRACK ALL THE TIME’ (1998b, 80.5). Ennis plays with stereotypes throughout *Preacher*, satirising the vampire myth (and its twentieth-century incarnations) via Cassidy and his perceptions of Les Enfants du Sang (the ‘PACK OF PONCEY GOTHIC RICH-KID WANNABES’ (25.6) who follow the vampire Eccarius).²⁵

This comparative device foregrounds the differences between the two characters: Eccarius drinks blood at all times (‘DON’T YOU LIKE IT?’ ‘ABOUT AS MUCH AS I LIKE EATIN’ RAW STEAK!’ (1998b, 15.5)), sleeps in a coffin (Cassidy’s response: ‘GIVE US A SLEEPIN’ BAG AN’ I’LL SLEEP ON YER BLEEDIN’ COUCH’ (17.4)), and his library is composed exclusively of Stoker, de Sade and Shelley (‘NO ELMORE LEONARD, I SUPPOSE’ (17.6)). As vicarious vampires (embodiments of a subculture based around the motifs of the gothic tradition), Eccarius and his supporters can never progress beyond imitation. These

²⁵ Eccarius is a vampire who has only been dead for ten years and has consequently based his behaviour and lifestyle religiously upon all the various multimedia versions of vampires offered in twentieth-century life: in effect a postmodern vampire.

characters consequently cannot be treated as new developments on the vampire myth; their function is, rather, to comment upon the genre they emulate.

This directly critiques the popular emulation of vampirism from subcultures, a consequence of their exotic, erotic portrayal in fiction. Ennis mocks these processes constantly, insulting Eccarius's followers in both word ('PATHETIC FUCKING LESTAT WANNABES' (1998b, 159.4)) and deed (Tulip easily dispatches three of them alone (145.1-3)). Constantly played for laughs, he nonetheless makes serious points, and as Botting comments: 'The play of fear and laughter has been inscribed in Gothic texts since their inception, an ambivalence that disturbs critical categories that evaluate their seriousness or triviality' (1996, 168).

Ennis's parodic social commentary on gothic performativity is further supported by Judith Butler's model of gender as a cultural performance that also constructs the allegedly prediscursive 'natural' (as previously mentioned): Butler observes further in this regard that 'gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematize "the natural" in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex' (Butler 1990, x). In this way, subcultural practices that are common to both the gothic and comics subcultures emphasise performativity through parody.

Neil Gaiman also parodies subculture in his depiction of a convention for serial killers in *The Sandman* #14 ('Collectors'). Ironic in the extreme, 'Collectors' can be read as commenting on postmodern society and its 'replacement of the proletariat by the cognitariat' (Jencks 1989, 44) – mocking associated corporate notions of group training and team building with the presence of hundreds of serial killers sitting on folding chairs in a grim parody of any corporate conference.

But on another level Gaiman is probably also referring to comic conventions, one of the industry's internal love/hate relationships. The title draws attention to this (like comic fans, the Collectors come from all walks of life, only united by an obsession for collecting), and many plot elements further emphasise this self-subversion, for example the numerous panel discussions (a staple of comic conventions). Essentially, the whole grim story is

suffused with irony and black humour: mocking both within its subculture and without. As a gothic text it further combines the new (the convention setting) with the old (unlawful killing) in a hilarious juxtaposition.

According to reader Glenn V. Morrison: 'the metaphor was obvious' (letter printed in *The Sandman* #19). Morrison interprets the parallel as social commentary, specifically regarding the idea that 'insanity' is not an explanation of behaviour, whether applied to serial killers or fanboys. Such inward-looking conclusions are emblematic of the obsessive nature (Morrison goes on to query a date mentioned in the issue that he believes to be inconsistent) and strict internal rules of fanboy culture, and further reference the Gothic in this way.

Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp' (1964), when taken in conjunction with shows such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), similarly emphasise notions of appearance and style in this context:

Not only is there a Camp vision, a Camp way of looking at things, Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behaviour of persons. There are 'campy' movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings [...] This distinction is important. True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience. But not everything can be seen as Camp. It's not *all* in the eye of the beholder. (1964, 107)

In this way fanboy culture's self-conscious attention to detail (as evidenced above in Glenn Morrison's comments and criticisms) reinforces its subcultural status. Just as Sontag distinguishes between Camp as a viewpoint and as a quality inherent to some objects, the fanboy subculture can transform a text by creating an unwanted association with another, while other texts may deliberately contain such intertextual references.

Comics creator and critic Scott McCloud takes this idea one step further by extending it to the medium of comics. McCloud postulates that: 'when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face -- you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon -- you see yourself. [...] The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled' (1993, 36). In this way he ties notions of internal involvement to comics' particular reading practices. However, though readers may see themselves or

traces of other texts reflected in a work, or comment on its successes or failures, critical reflection on these kinds of observations is unlikely to follow. While this can be explained by the hegemony of the industry, it is also possible that the rules of fanboy subculture have, in this way, created such an unequal master/slave relationship. As such, the involvement and immersion inherent to the comics subculture may be paralleled with subcultural style and practices as seen in the Gothic.

Gothic themes: isolation

The superhero was given its most definitive and experimental mainstream rewriting in *Watchmen* (Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons), initially published by DC Comics in twelve single issues (1986-87) and released in trade paperback format in 1987. Moore pushes the superhero idea to its limit in *Watchmen*, creating a world where costumed and gadgeted superheroes and superhumans first appeared in the 1940s, when the popularity of superhero comics was at its zenith. *Watchmen* is set in 1985, when (as in real life) the superhero trend has passed in favour of other comic genres, and the series examines the lives of golden- and silver-age superheroes after their activities had been outlawed (in clear reference to the Comics Code and its effects). The whole story can be read as a metaphor for the failure of the comics industry to grow with, and therefore sustain, the superhero genre: Moore literalises comics history, using generic characters to represent the fate of each archetype.²⁶

These characters include governmental pawn the Comedian (representative of Captain America in his patriotic stance) who is murdered at the start of the series, prompting the vigilante Rorschach to suspect that '*SOME-BODY'S GUNNING FOR MASKS*' (Moore 1987a, 1.13.1). The misanthropic Rorschach represents one aspect of the Batman character (a masked vigilante operating outside the law), and teams up with Dan Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl, whose origin as a wealthy playboy also allows him to symbolise the Bruce Wayne side of Batman's character) to investigate. I would postulate that the teaming of these characters again references the gothic internal/external divide.

²⁶ Samuel Effron's undergraduate thesis 'Taking Off the Mask' discusses this in detail.

By creating *Watchmen* entirely from elements already found within the superhero genre, Moore's narrative is strongly intertextual and paints a new picture of the progress of the industry. The textual addendums to the book further reference the Gothic by immersing the audience in its world, acting as supporting evidence and providing a fictional background to the events played out in the main body of the text. The medium (that is, these panelled sections) is also used to portray various levels of story, as when we switch between the plot and 'Tales of the Black Freighter', a pirate comic being read by a secondary character at a newsstand (Moore 1987a, 3.2.1-6). This positions the audience still further inside the *Watchmen* world since we are essentially reading the same panels as a character within the story. These are only differentiated from the story proper by the gaudy (and often totally inappropriate) colours used, perhaps also a comment on the poor print quality of early comics.

The central theme of isolation is played out in 'Tales of the Black Freighter', whose marooned lead character is engaged in a hopeless struggle to make it back to his home town to warn his family and friends of an impending pirate invasion. His desperation leads him not only to exhume the corpses of his shipmates to make floats for his raft but upon his return to commit the murder of innocent citizens whom he believes to be pirate guards. His resulting isolation from the rest of humanity after these grotesque acts is symbolised as he joins the other doomed souls on the pirate ship at the end of the tale.

The notion of isolation, a common thematic of the superhero genre; is given a new perspective here as a human's incredible acts of survival result in his segregation from society – rather than the more usual exploration of the effects of being 'different' as a superhero. Just as the plot of *Watchmen* represents the fate of the superhero genre's texts, this theme plays out in Moore's subplot and therefore relates to the genre's subtext of isolation.

The idea of masks is further explored in this regard: Rorschach consistently refers to his mask as his 'Face' or 'SKIN', saying that he 'BECAME MYSELF' in wearing it (5.11.3, 5.11.1, 5.18.6). Other characters comment (somewhat more negatively) 'THAT MASK'S

EATEN HIS *BRAINS*' (7.9.2) and that costumes in general 'REALLY MESS YOU UP' (7.8.6). But whether perceived as a positive or negative force, there is no doubt that in *Watchmen* the costumes and masks are the key to the superhero conundrum: not least because they are, quite literally 'ALL THAT'S NECESSARY... / ALL I NEED' (10.9.3-4) to become a superhero.²⁷

The character Jacobi adds a further dimension to the mask as symbol when, speaking of the Comedian, he says '...HE *BROKE IN, TO SEE ME! HE WAS DRUNK. HAD HIS MASK OFF. THE GUY WAS SCARED OF SOMETHING, CRYING...*' (2.21.7). The link between not wearing a mask and revealing fear elevates the mask motif to something metaphorical: a symbol of power. This meaning is reinforced when, after an abortive first attempt, Dan Dreiberg/Nite Owl II and Laurie Juspecky/Silk Spectre II then find themselves able to successfully make love once wearing their costumes (7.27.1-12). That both these characters are second-generation superheroes (who have adopted the identity of a previous, retired character) only serves to emphasise the metaphor of costume as power.

The multiple functions of the superhero mask/costume are also referenced by Moore in *The Killing Joke* (1988)²⁸ when the Joker summarises Batman's origin as 'YOU HAD A *BAD DAY AND EVERYTHING CHANGED. / WHY ELSE WOULD YOU DRESS UP LIKE A FLYING RAT?*' (Moore 1988a, 38.4). It is variously interpreted as a symbol of internal power (as in Rorschach's 'Face') and simultaneously as an external disguise, calling to mind the associated gothic themes of isolation and the internal/external.

In *The Sandman* #20 ('Façade') Gaiman continues these themes, reviving Urania 'Rainie' Blackwell/Element Girl, a long-forgotten DC superhero who first appeared in 1967 in *Metamorpho* #10.²⁹ Gaiman picks up the character decades later to show us an

²⁷ Somewhat unusually, Moore elects to use different typefaces to distinguish between Rorschach's speech (as reproduced here) and diary (see start of paragraph), and this again emphasises the Gothic's external/internal divide.

²⁸ The origin story of the Joker: a failed stand-up comedian driven insane by one bad day – the death of his wife in a domestic accident, followed by his fall into a vat of chemicals during a robbery. Moore's creation of a history for the Joker is the only time such a story has been written and hence can be viewed as a definitive overwriting within the Batman tradition.

²⁹ As part of a US intelligence force Urania Blackwell volunteered to be exposed to radiation from a meteor, giving her the ability to transform her body into any chemical element or compound and shape although changing it permanently into something non-human in both colour and composition. She became *Metamorpho*'s sidekick for a short while until her retirement when the title was cancelled.

agoraphobic Rainie who has been pensioned off and lives isolated in her apartment.

Façade is full of references to masks: phrases such as 'PUT ON A BRAVE FACE' (Gaiman 1991b, 4.4.3) are used frequently and Rainie's apartment is littered with her cast-off silicon masks. These seem devoid of all power, and function purely as a shield or disguise, lasting only for a day or so. By continuing to read the mask motif as representing both power and disguise, we can see Gaiman thematically exploring the end of a superhero life, where power has been removed and the masks themselves have quite literally become empty shells. Even impermanent as a disguise, they are ultimately reduced to being functional only in the vaguest sense: for 'USEFUL THINGS. / THINGS NORMAL PEOPLE HAVE.' (4.8.2)

Although most obviously present thematically (in her agoraphobia), Rainie's isolation is also emphasised by the medium of comics: the regular arrangement of small panels (4.1.1-6) signifies her small, small world. On this page the arrangement of the narrative boxes is reminiscent of dialogic speech bubbles, emphasising their absence in this way – defining her isolation through *what it is not*. The constitutive otherness used here again calls to mind the conflict between internal/external – as when Rainie sees some 'FREAKS' looking happy outside the restaurant she is inside (4.10.5). Their apparent happiness contrasts sharply with her despair, but they are outside while she is inside, and so perhaps Gaiman is commenting here that appearances (the outside) can be deceptive.

Some of the cinematic techniques used also emphasise this point, as when we zoom in to focus on Rainie sitting alone (4.14.1-8). As her face enlarges, attention is drawn to the unusual colours used and soon it feels as if we are no longer viewing her exterior but her interior state. The constant switches of perspective between the two women while dining (4.10.1-4; 4.11.1-4) also emphasise this divide as Rainie's mask quite literally slips, revealing her panic and alarm. This metaphor is also reminiscent of *Watchmen*'s Comedian revealing his emotions to Jacobi by removing his mask.

Gothic themes: fragmented identity

The use of masks further alerts us to another notion at the basis of the superhero genre: that of fragmented identity. The genre's use of multiple identities and alter egos not only represents the existence of such plural possibilities within an individual and the sustenance of the multiple by the postmodern, but can also be read as symbolising the gothic notion of constitutive otherness, where marginalised elements define the text and apparent unity is maintained only by processes of exclusion and opposition.

The fragmentation of identity apparent in the superhero genre is at the basis of this, the superhero condition. The alter ego is often directly opposed to the superhero identity – as evidenced by the mild-mannered, clumsy Clark Kent (Superman), or the timid Peter Parker (Spiderman), and in this sense the two halves define each other. However, it is also worth noting that there is a further distinction: just as the superhero is defined by what he *is* – a hero – the superhuman is defined by what he is *not* – that is to say, human. That the word 'super' can be used in two directly opposing senses in these definitions supports my assertion that multiple, conflicting identities are able to coexist in the postmodern superhero/superhuman genre.

Not only does this idea relate to the concept of constitutive otherness, it can be further explored with reference to psychological criticism, such as the work of Alfred Adler and notions of organ inferiority. To summarise briefly, Adler theorised that personality may be best understood as the physical tool used in striving for the goal of power. To this end it is constructed to conceal inferiorities, as may be illustrated by organ inferiority complex; when children who have (for example) locomotion difficulties 'construct an ideal for themselves that is permeated by power and speed' (1992, 47). Adler further extends this idea to the psyche, commenting that 'The goal of superiority is a secret goal. The presence of social feeling prevents it from appearing overtly – it grows in secret and hides behind an acceptable façade' (138).

In the context of literature, this idea is illustrated by the macho Byronic personality

that stood in contrast to Lord Byron's real-life physical flaws, or the lusty poetry of Yeats versus his bloodless personality. Understanding personality as constructed around flaws, as the antithesis of 'real' character, suggests a new approach to the superhero/alter ego divide, allowing us to understand these conflicting entities as part of a single psyche, embodied in one person, however tremulously. This is further echoed by the superhero's perpetual fear that their alter ego will be exposed and in this sense Adler's psychoanalytic framework supports a reading of the superhero as a postmodern gothic symbol of fragmented identity.

The plurality of postmodernism, and particularly that of feminist criticism, also sustains this notion of multiple, coexistent identities.³⁰ Again, this returns to Butler's notion of gender performativity where even the so-called natural is constructed. Butler continues in this regard, observing that a discussion of identity need not proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity 'for the simple reason that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility' (1990, 16), again alerting us to the importance of such standards (whether these are adhered to, inverted, or used in constitutive otherness) in the construction of identity as perceived here.

Multiple identities also inform poststructuralist criticism: 'Lacanian interpretation, often yoked to post-structuralist methodologies, sees identity itself as structured like a language, but the belief in a mother-tongue, or core identity, is chimerical on the subject's part. Fragmentation, like the flickering play of language between the symbolic and imaginary registers, is to be acknowledged and sought' (Massé 2001, 239). Massé identifies a similar reliance within cultural studies and associated critical theories, where the premise that textual practices affect material bodies invokes a psychoanalytic framework:

³⁰ As inherent to the construction of the self (Adler, Jung), rather than referring to a personality disorder such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (previously called Multiple Personality Disorder).

In both realms [cultural studies and psychoanalysis], what I am calling “identity” is acknowledged as multi-faceted: we are not defined solely by the romance plot, the economic plot, or even the psychoanalytic plot. Instead, all operate simultaneously, while we yet maintain a core identity that makes us recognisable to ourselves over time and in different contexts, whether kissing someone, taking an exam or paying a bill. To some extent, this identity is an analogy for the Gothic itself, which can be seen as informing multiple cultural texts, whether legal, medical, or economic. (239)

The view of personality/ies as not only multiple but constructed is supported further by the superhero motif, where neither ‘Clark Kent’ nor ‘Superman’ accurately reflects the whole, complete person. This notion of construction is pivotal to the work of C.G. Jung, and specifically to his notion of the ‘persona’: a mask that is formed during the civilisation process to hide negative character traits/the unconscious (Fordham 1966, 47). It is also essential to Jung’s theories of ‘individuation’ (the lifelong quest for a wholeness which can only be achieved through forging a link between the consciousness and unconsciousness (76)), which process is the central concept of Jung’s psychology.

Jung’s analytical psychology shares many elements with Freud and Adler’s frameworks, however his theories of the extravert and introvert alert us to an important distinction in this regard. Whereas Freud’s psychoanalytic framework is based around the *external* frustration of the infant sexual impulse, Adler’s theories of individual psychology revolve around the *internal* drive for power (Fordham 1966, 84). As mentioned, the Gothic sustains a similar division and this is further reflected in the various, multiple portrayals of the modern superhero.

The climax of *The Killing Joke* is set at a deserted funfair, where the Joker has created a ghost train ride designed to drive Commissioner Gordon insane. Here, the motifs of doors and trains operate in a literal sense within the story as well as in the metaphorical sense that the Joker’s speech intends (‘SO WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF LOCKED ONTO AN UNPLEASANT TRAIN OF THOUGHT [...] / MADNESS IS THE EMERGENCY EXIT... / YOU CAN JUST STEP *OUTSIDE*, AND CLOSE THE DOOR ON ALL THOSE DREADFUL THINGS THAT HAPPENED’ (Moore 1988a, 21.6-7)). The psychological themes explored here seem to be

those of repression and memory, in contrast to Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*³¹ which, with its political and social agenda, may be said to represent the external concerns of the superhero rather than the internal.

The internal/external divide illustrated here again calls to mind gothic notions of inversion and reversal via psychoanalytic criticism. Although a patient's avoidance or refusal to discuss trauma may lead a psychologist to hypothesise about repression, this can only be confirmed once the blocked memories resurface. Similarly, memories that are cherished as deeply internal and personal can also be defined as only the effect of external influences. This questions the divide between the internal and external, reversing these notions – as further illustrated in *The Killing Joke* by the Joker's speech (above) where madness is described as 'THE *EMERGENCY EXIT*' and leads 'OUTSIDE', whereas the 'DREADFUL THINGS THAT HAPPENED' (that is, external events), are positioned inside the metaphorical ghost train. In this way, the fragmented identities of superheroes are linked to the gothic notions of internal/external and inversion.

Gothic themes: inversion

However, many of the Vertigo texts also make use of inversion within the context of human characters. Herr Starr begins *Preacher* as a bald, one-eyed lieutenant within the Grail army: a machine-like archetype of Nazi-esque dedication and image. However, by the end of the series he has been anally raped, loses an ear in a gunfight (Ennis 1997a, 173.5; 212.4), has his head cut to resemble a penis (1997b, 165.4-5), has a leg removed and eaten by cannibals (1999a, 187.4), and has his genitals eaten by a Rottweiler (2000, 193.1). As one of the Grail says to him 'SO YOU HAVE BECOME A MONSTER IN ORDER TO SAVE THE WORLD' (1999a, 54.1), but ironically enough it seems that as his appearance becomes less human, Starr's character becomes more so: whereas at the beginning of *Preacher* Starr is a model soldier, by the end he is exploiting his organisation for the simple (and all-too-

³¹ The story of an aged Batman, set in a Gotham city where psychiatrists argue for the release of the Joker and critics badmouth Batman as a fascist and vigilante.

human) motive of vengeance against Jesse.

A similar inversion is identifiable in the character of Gran'ma, a figure of horror from Jesse's childhood.³² Her physical frailty and clothing contrast with her brutal behaviour to emphasise her gendering and mortality: although almost completely bald and wheelchair-bound her strappy nightgown, polished nails and the red rose she wears invoke notions of femininity. This contrasts with more traditional interpretations of witches where gendering and humanity is often destabilised. This can be seen in the inverted gendering of Salvatore Rosa's or Francisco de Goya's heavily muscled, manly witches, and is also evidenced by the more general use of dehumanising strategies (such as the addition of warts or the unnatural exaggeration of some features such as a hooked nose or crooked stature) in both art and literature.

Gran'ma's reliance on her male entourage for nearly all of her strength similarly emphasises her femininity and weakness. Although historically men were also accused of witchcraft, this has been marginalised by the contemporary myth that positions them only as victims (Warner 2000, 12). A paradoxical figure, these indications of her humanity only serve to emphasise her inhumane behaviour, just as Herr Starr's monstrous appearance calls attention to his newfound humanity.

Gran'ma's brutality and Herr Starr's pathological obsession with revenging himself on Jesse allow us to take them seriously as monsters. Ennis emphasises their evil, as when Tulip says to Jesse 'YOU WOKE ME, YELLING AT YOUR... AT HER' (1997a, 29.2), unable to name their captors as 'family' and resorting to labelling Gran'ma as a 'nameless thing', only identifiable as female. As mentioned, Gran'ma is not depicted as sexless or masculine, but rather as femininity gone wrong, and is all the more terrifying for this

³² The back story Jesse tells in *Until the End of the World* begins when his mother ran away from the family home (Angelville) and met his father. After Jesse's birth his Gran'ma's retainers (Jody and TC) found and returned them to Angelville. Shortly after, following a failed escape attempt, Jody killed Jesse's father and, over the next few years, also his dog, his mother and his best friend. Jesse's religious education (in preparation for his career as a minister) was also punctuated by intermittent punishments (such as being locked in a dark coffin at the bottom of the swamp for days at a time). Throughout these pages, we are left in no doubt that Gran'ma is pulling the strings – returning us to Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine or woman-as-castrator.

inversion – similarly, through a display of systematic child abuse, Ennis desecrates any maternal expectations we may have. The reversal of the monstrous/human in both these characters allows *Preacher* to comment on human horrors as much as supernatural ones.

This inversion is also echoed in *The Sandman* #13 ('Men of Good Fortune') when the inhuman, immortal Morpheus chastises his mortal friend Robert Gadling for his involvement in the sixteenth-century slave trade, saying: 'It is a poor thing, to enslave another' (Gaiman 1990c, 4.20.7). Similarly, during the serial killer convention in 'Collectors', Morpheus is contrasted with the human convention members when he saves Rose Walker from an assault. He goes on to tell them: 'Until now, you have all sustained fantasies in which you are the maltreated heroes of your own stories. / Comforting daydreams in which, ultimately, you are shown to be in the right. / No more. / For all of you, the dream is over. I have taken it away.' (Gaiman 1990c, 5.35.7), using the gothic internal/external divide to expose the narrative construction of identity.

In this way elements of many gothic strategies and themes have culminated in the Vertigo texts, which variously refer to and employ notions of absorption, subculture, isolation, fragmented identity and inversion. However, the fluid nature of the Gothic is further reflected in the changing status of one of Gothic's most famous figures, the vampire, and I turn now to a case study of this creature before concluding with an examination of the structural and extratextual features of the Vertigo Gothic.

Case study: the vampire

The vampire myth as we know it is based on a seventeenth-century Hungarian version, which may have its basis in sociology (the aristocracy parasitic upon peasants), xenophobia (fear of Turkish invaders, who for religious reasons rejected the cross), and possibly hearsay of tales of vampire bats found in the new world. By the eighteenth century the notion of a corpse controlled and animated by the devil had become linked to suicides (who had forfeited the protection of the church and a burial on consecrated land and as such were

often buried with a stake through the heart) (Davenport-Hines 1998, 230).

Carol Senf quotes Montague Summers's description of the vampire in early folklore:

A Vampire is generally described as being exceedingly gaunt and lean with a hideous Countenance ... When, however, he has satiated his lust for warm human blood his body becomes horribly puffed and bloated, as though he were some great leech gorged and replete to bursting ... the nails are always curved and crooked, often well-nigh the length of a great bird's claw, the quicks dirty and foul with clots and gouts of black blood. His breath is unbearably fetid and rank with corruption, the stench of the charnel. (Senf 1988, npag)

In contrast to this bestial version, the twentieth-century vampire is sexual, decadent and humanised. Modern media have broken down the Manichaeic element in their portrayal still further: whereas Senf notes that Dracula 'is *never* seen objectively and never permitted to speak for himself' (1979, 95), the narrator of Anne Rice's *The Vampire Lestat* (1985) is the titular character. Recent films such as *Blade* (1998) (where a half-vampire protects humankind) support this further, as does Rice's portrayal of the sensitive and reluctant vampire Louis in *An Interview with the Vampire* (1976). As Botting comments: 'The vampire is no longer absolutely Other' (1996, 178).

This humanisation of the vampire can be seen in part as a consequence of the postmodern Gothic's overtly subcultural status: emulation and adoration have brought the notion of the vampire closer than ever to humanity, and similarly aided its progression from a simple outsider figure to an internalised element of ourselves, representing our darkest impulses. This process parallels the humanisation of the superhero (where human elements have been incorporated to enable audience identification with their heroes). Similarly, the contemporary vampire figure invokes the theme of fragmented identity in being both self and other. This state (of self/other) may be considered alongside that of the superhero/alter ego (as both incorporate antithetical notions) and in this sense again references the gothic notion of inversion.

With teeth for eyes, *The Sandman's* Corinthian can also be read as a vampiric figure, who feeds from 'SWEET' young boys (1990c, 5.34.1), calling to mind gothic notions of decadence that are further supported by his name (one of the meanings of which is 'given to

luxury; dissolute'). Described as 'A nightmare created to be the darkness, and the fear of darkness in every human heart. / A black mirror, made to reflect everything about itself that humanity will not confront' (5.33.4-5), the Corinthian overtly references the internal, humanised evil that the contemporary vampire represents. Similarly, he is both destroyed and recreated by Morpheus, and on reawakening states 'IT IS GOOD TO LIVE ONCE MORE' (Gaiman 1996, 4.24.6). He shares some memories with the original Corinthian, although when challenged 'THEY AREN'T YOUR MEMORIES' concedes, replying 'THEY ARE ALL I HAVE' (11.12.4).

In this way his situation is undeniably vampiric: although he seems identical to the first Corinthian, he is not the same being, as he himself comments: 'GOOD. AN IDENTITY... / YES. I AM ME. / I AM NOT THE *FIRST* CORINTHIAN, AM I?' (5.9.2). In distinguishing between 'ME' and the few vestiges of the other Corinthian which remain, he parallels the vampiric state of unlife, where what lives on is nonetheless entirely different from the living person.

'Without mirror image or a shadow, Dracula is a pure inversion. On a symbolic level he is the mirror and shadow of Victorian masculinity, a monstrous figure of male desire that distinguishes what men are becoming from what they should become' (Botting 1996, 149). This function is also overtly referenced by the Corinthian's description as a 'black mirror' of humanity, while his resurrection from an unlife rather than a life further inverts the vampire tradition.

It is also interesting to note that while *The Sandman* makes heavy use of folklore and myths from a wide range of cultures, no actual vampires appear throughout. There are werewolves (*The Sandman* #38 ('The Hunt')), and throughout the series appearances from numerous faerie folk, gods of various denominations, angels, demons and ghosts, but the undead are excluded. Gaiman has commented that he believes them to be distant relations of the werewolf family in 'The Hunt' (Round 2003, npag), which is supported in the text by the grandfather's response to the exclamation 'FER CHRISAKES' ('IN THE OLD COUNTRY YOU'D NEVER HEAR ANY OF THE FAMILY TAKING THAT NAME IN VAIN') (1993b, 73.3-4)

and their description as 'OUTSIDER[s]' (77.2), but their non-appearance is nonetheless suggestive. The absence of any vampiric figures allows Gaiman to reformulate notions of the vampire, keeping other interpretations marginalised in favour of his Corinthian: a purer symbol, without vestigial humanity, and thereby more in keeping with the timeless mythology of the text.

If so, parallels can be drawn between the treatment of vampirism in *The Sandman* and that of *Preacher* as these Vertigo texts reformulate the figure for their own purposes, often evoking the gothic tradition of inversion to do so and thereby positioning themselves within the postmodern Gothic. In *Preacher* Garth Ennis invites comparisons between the character Cassidy and the sexual, sophisticated contemporary vampire figure by use of the caption 'NEXT: *INTERVIEW WITH THE BASTARD*' (1996, 74.1) when we first discover that Cassidy is a vampire. In contrast to contemporary notions of performative vampirism, Cassidy's vampiric activities are kept apart from the rest of his life, which is that of a heterosexual, alcoholic hedonist. Although he is a sexual character, we perceive that these encounters are basically drunken flings rather than lust-crazed feedings: he generally only feeds during bar brawls.

Violence takes the place of sex here, although there are homosexual hints in Cassidy's past (such as performing fellatio in exchange for heroin (Ennis 2000, 159.1)) which may also be referenced by his choosing to feed from men in such a violent manner. In this sense *Preacher* harkens back to early texts such as the penny dreadful *Varney the Vampire* (c. 1845), described by William Hughes as 'a figure of comprehensive – rather than simply sexual – violence' whose attacks read 'more like an act of rape or violent physical assault' (Hughes 2001, 146). Cassidy can therefore be read as a return to 'vampire basics': stripped down to the bare essentials of violence and blood.

This reading is further supported by his outsider status as an Irish immigrant surrounded by US citizens. However, since Ennis himself is also Irish and the Vertigo stable is composed primarily of English, Scottish and Irish writers, this interpretation may again be reversed. In this light, Cassidy's use of violence rather than sex, and his choice of

male (rather than female) victims, may also be read as a reversal of the more traditional association of vampiric feeding with sex (a motif that has been identified by many critics as symbolising the 'victim complicity' essential to a traditionally gothic portrayal of the vampire).

However, his friend Si's comment 'I NEVER SAW HIM DO THAT [feed] TO ANYONE WHO WASN'T GONNA DIE ANYWAY. OR DIDN'T DESERVE TO GET IT ONE WAY OR ANOTHER' (Ennis 1996, 173.4) again reintroduces the idea of complicity, which is further reinforced by Cassidy's philosophy: 'NO NEED FOR KILLIN' AT ALL, REALLY. / UNLESS SOME LITTLE PRICK TRIES TO DO FOR *YOU*, IN WHICH CASE YEH MAY AS WELL GO AHEAD AN' TREAT YERSELF' (1998b, 40.7). While linking Cassidy's vampirism with violence rather than sex, this interpretation nonetheless supports a gothic reading by sustaining the inverted power balance between attacker and victim, if only in the contemporary cultural sense of 'he was asking for it'.

It further echoes the cultural concerns apparent in *Dracula*, where the link between feeding and sex is commonly perceived to symbolise topical anxiety about syphilis; a metaphor further explored in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, which uses magnified shots of blood cells to invoke this parallel in the contemporary context of HIV and AIDS (Botting 1996, 177). By removing sex from the equation *Preacher* reverses this assumption; a conclusion supported by the rest of the text, which is generally much more concerned with social evils such as violence and ignorance than with sexual anxiety.

Ennis brings out the originality of his character in a number of ways, one of which is, as noted, to contrast Cassidy with the vampire Eccarius, enabling Ennis to bounce his ideas off the *Dracula* myth and comment on postmodern notions of performativity and subculture. During their time together, Cassidy succeeds in convincing Eccarius that he is

going about being a vampire all the wrong way:

SUPPOSE YEH'RE AN ORDINARY FELLA [...] AN' YEH'RE IN A PLANE CRASH IN THE FUCKIN' JUNGLE. NO OTHER SURVIVORS. NO SIGNS'VE CIVILIZATION. YEH'RE STRANDED.
BY SOME MIRACLE, YEH STUMBLE ACROSS A COPY OF *TARZAN OF THE APES*. YEH READ IT.
DO YEH GO AN' LIVE IN THE TREETOPS AN' TALK TO MONKEYS? (1998b, 36.1-2).

In this way he demonstrates the intertextual basis of Eccarius's vampirism, exposing it as meaningless performativity.

Cassidy and Eccarius tear apart the Dracula myth ('DID YEH EVER TRY JUMPIN' OFF A ROOF AN' TURNIN' INTO A BAT? OR RIDIN' MOONBEAMS AS A CLOUD OF DUST?' 'I TRIED THE BAT THING ONCE. / BROKE BOTH MY FUCKING LEGS' (35.4-6)) and, as here, Ennis uses humour and repetition both textually and visually to get his point across (35.1-6, 37.5-8). In the process, however, Ennis uses Cassidy to state his own vampire rules (nothing can kill them except sunlight), and so maybe *Preacher* is setting itself up as a metanarrative in this sense: redefining the vampire, perhaps with a return to earlier versions. The starving Cassidy we see during a flashback scene in *All Hell's A-Coming* (2000, 164.1-2) is truly monstrous, and Summers's description (gaunt, lean, fetid, rank) seems all too apt.

In this sense, Ennis's metafiction can be read as parodying vampiric lore overtly while simultaneously redefining it obliquely. However, if *Preacher* does try to set itself up as contemporary vampire lore, then this is cleverly subverted throughout. A running gag throughout *Preacher* refers to Cassidy's eyes: he always wears sunglasses, and the few times these are removed during the series always provokes a shaken 'OH MY GOD WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR EYES?' from whoever is there (Ennis 1998b, 30.3; see also 1999a, 224.3). We buy into this as part of Ennis's vampire myth, but in the final showdown the truth is revealed: Cassidy's eyes are simply incredibly bloodshot (2001, 158.1), presumably as a consequence of seventy-five years of alcoholism. This sort of letdown gag prevents us from taking Ennis's vampire seriously, debunking his metafiction.

The simple fact that Cassidy is one of the most human characters in *Preacher*, weak,

fallible and prone to mistakes, also undermines any notions of a definitive rewriting of the vampire myth. Similarly, it transpires in the story that Cassidy's past monstrous state (mentioned above) arose from heroin addiction: a peculiarly human cause. It should also be noted that he speaks as usual even in this scene, his accent reminding us of his humanity (Ennis 2000, 164.2). It is a particular point of irony that the only true monster of the series should prove its most human character, and Ennis returns to this theme of inversion more than once, as already seen in the characters of Herr Starr and Gran'ma.

The aural connotations of Eccarius's name initially call to mind all-too-appropriate notions of 'echo' and 'vicarious' – however, in keeping with the gothic tradition, this character has a further, extratextual significance. Although it is possible that his name was chosen simply for its gothic sound and to provide further contrast with Cassidy (whose full Gaelic name is Proinsias Cassidy), one historical precursor is Thuringian tailor Johann Georg Eccarius (1818-89), an erstwhile supporter of Karl Marx. A more relevant contemporary source is J.G. Eccarius's novel *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire* (first published 1986): particularly since this was also made into a comic book – a mini-series published by Questing Beast. J.G. Eccarius's novel equates Christianity with vampirism, making use of Jesus's rise from the dead, hypnotic sway over his followers, ascendancy to heaven and offer of eternal life, together with Christianity's employment of ritual, particularly the blood and body of Christ taken at communion.

J.G. Eccarius's author biography encourages the association with his Marxist namesake, stating (under the intriguing title 'Everything you wanted to know about J.G. Eccarius that he's willing to tell you') that the author was born in 1818 in Thuringia, Germany – the same year and location as this historical figure. The author Eccarius appears to be encouraging vampiric assumptions about himself in this way, incorporating himself into the fiction of his book, and perhaps Ennis's use of the name is actually a reference to this. It is of particular interest to note that Ennis's story was first published in 1997 (approximately ten years after *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire*), and that Ennis's Eccarius character states at this time he has been undead for a decade.

The effects of such extratextual markers vary within the Gothic: these may aid suspension of disbelief, add a dialogue between the new and old, or blur the boundaries between reality and fiction still further. In this regard, a further vampire interpretation is also offered by Garth Ennis in *Hellblazer*, where John Constantine encounters the King of the Vampires who reveals that he has lived on many other worlds apart from this one: 'TWENTY BILLION YEARS FROM NOW, WHEN THIS PLACE IS EATEN BY ITS COOLING SUN, I'LL JUST GO AND FIND ANOTHER ONE. / AND ANOTHER. / AND ANOTHER' (Ennis 1998c, 49.3). This notion of infinite worlds invokes different contemporary interpretations of the vampire, such as that offered by Marcus LiBrizzi whose article 'The Anunnaki, the Vampire, and the Structure of Dissent' (2003) analyses the theories of David Icke with reference to vampirism. Icke's Anunnaki, a reptilian race originating from another planet, have many links with vampire lore, including blood drinking, an extended lifespan and the ability to shape shift and hypnotise.

LiBrizzi comments that Icke's work 'represents one of the most recent developments in the discourse of the vampire' but further identifies that 'depictions of the Anunnaki by Icke contain none of the erotic allure and seductiveness that distinguish many vampire texts. Instead, the sexual bond between the Anunnaki and their victims is characterised by violence – rape, murder and Satanic ritual' (LiBrizzi 2003, npag). The replacement of sex with violence (as seen in *Preacher*) further links Icke's work to contemporary vampire interpretations, as does its agenda of social commentary (also seen in J.G. Eccarius's novel *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire* which comments on the Christian tradition as 'a flock whose shepherd preys upon them' (Eccarius 1989, npag)).

During the course of the gothic tradition the vampire has metamorphosed from an animalistic outsider to become a humanised, decadent, internal figure. This trend is continued by the Vertigo texts which, as seen, use the vampire in a variety of ways according to each title's own priorities, from narratology (as in *The Sandman*) to social commentary (*Preacher*, *Hellblazer*). The vampire is rewritten into multiple forms that, while they reflect the themes and priorities of each text, also sustain the presence of gothic

themes such as inversion, parody and performativity. I turn now to a closer consideration of the structural effects and techniques of the Gothic in this regard.

Gothic structure

Structural multiplicity is a defining feature of the gothic tradition, for example as in *Dracula's* reliance 'on a multiplicity of texts and of points of view', or *Frankenstein* 'which is based on the traditional structure of embedded narratives' (Lecercle 2001, 72). Since *The Castle of Otranto* ('a prototype for many later gothic stories which were presented as taken from medieval manuscripts and were prefixed with proofs of antiquity and authenticity' (Davenport-Hines 1998, 137)), the Gothic has drawn attention to its performative structuring in this way, and particularly by its use of layered stories. This gothic formula of stories-within-stories is at the basis of Castricano's cryptomimetic structure: invoking Derrida's notion of the crypt as 'a place comprehended within another but rigorously separate from it...sealed, and thus internal to itself' (Derrida 1986, xiv). In this way also the Gothic brings down the divides between the internal and the external.

This is further illustrated by contemporary texts such as Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), the final section of which includes a reproduced 'Report of Decease' and extracts that purport to be from various books and local newspapers (King 1974, 213-222). These refer to the events portrayed in the book's internal fiction (that is, the story proper). The incorporation of such external fictions into the text blurs the boundaries of the internal and external. In this sense the structuring of both traditional and postmodern gothic novels can be called performative since it is put to use to accomplish a task that it creates for itself, most commonly relating to the genuineness of the novel in question.

This structure is performative not only by virtue of enacting this process and creating its own authenticity (whether this is believed or disbelieved), but further because it is only through this process that the question of veracity is raised. That the striven-for authenticity is generally disbelieved is a further fiction of the Gothic that may rest on cultural context, as already mentioned with regard to Walpole's publication of *The Castle of Otranto*. Such

pursuit of authenticity (through the use of testimonies, letters, appendices and innumerable textual footnotes) can also be found in contemporary gothic works such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), and produces an embedded, layered narrative structure that further incorporates external elements, and which may be paralleled in the structuring of contemporary comic books.

Neil Gaiman's *Worlds' End*, the eighth *Sandman* trade paperback, makes use of this sort of gothic structuring and in so doing stretches the potential of comic-book language. Written in the tradition of works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, the main story is set at the 'Worlds' End', an inn where travellers from many different fantasy worlds are sheltering from a 'reality storm'. Each tells a tale in turn, many of which incorporate other stories, locations and times. In this sense the construction of *Worlds' End* is similar to that of gothic novels such as *The Saragossa Manuscript* (first published 1804) and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), whose structures overtly use and exploit the reader's suspension of disbelief. This is not only due to their convoluted narrative frameworks but, more generally, to the nature of the Gothic.

For both these novels require a particular suspension of disbelief peculiar to the Gothic – a kind of double suspension, where the reader must not only permit themselves to believe in the fictional characters and settings presented as 'real', but also suspend their disbelief with regard to the laws of nature as the supernatural is invoked and exploited.³³ However, in contrast to *The Saragossa Manuscript* (whose structure, tone and setting create a mythic past that feels almost timeless), *Melmoth the Wanderer* appears more culturally dated. Aspects of this text (such as its footnotes) emphasise this; particularly when contrasted with the main narrative, which self-consciously employs a style and moral content that would have been unfashionable at the time.

Unusual strategies and extratextual markers are frequently perceived in the structuring of some of Gothic's most famous texts, for example by critics such as Jean-

³³ It interesting to note that the non-realistic style of comic-book art also requires a similar suspension of disbelief from the reader in order that people, scenes and objects may be read and recognised as 'real'.

Jacques Lecercle, who contrasts the multiple points of view used in *Dracula* with the embedded narrative structure of *Frankenstein*. Victor Sage identifies a similar ‘nesting’ technique in his consideration of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, but goes on to conclude that this is wedded to a ‘frame-breaking’ principle by the use of inversion – both structurally (rewriting the Faustian story from the perspective of the Wanderer) and thematically (as the tempter constantly fails to tempt) (Sage 2001, 86). As such, these two texts would seem to provide fair examples of the narrative range of the Gothic.

Count Jan Potocki’s *The Saragossa Manuscript* is a supernatural tale told with a complex narrative thread. Ostensibly a translation of a book found in a house in Saragossa by a French army officer, it tells the tale of Alfonso, a young Spanish officer who finds his life turned into a gothic nightmare after spending a night in an abandoned inn. Throughout the novel various characters tell their stories, creating a complex narrative structure of stories-within-stories which peaks when a tale five ‘levels’ deep is told, being ‘The Story of the Princess of Monte-Salerno’ (Potocki 1966, 158).

Melmoth the Wanderer is similarly constructed, and also features up to five levels of tales. Within Charles Maturin’s heterodiegetic story (level I) we hear the tale of a Spaniard (II), one of whose stories is a recitation from a manuscript he once read (III), which manuscript includes a story from the father of its main character (IV), said story itself featuring ‘The Tale of Guzman’s Family’, told to the father by a stranger (V) (Maturin 1968, 399).

Both texts use a variety of different devices to showcase their tales and sustain their increasingly complicated structures. Stories-within-stories are entered into via letters received by one of the characters (Maturin, 118), or as a character reads a book or manuscript (Potocki, 117). These levels are identified primarily through the use of titles: *The Saragossa Manuscript* in particular makes heavy use of many chapter headings; each time a new tale is begun it is given a title, generally in the form ‘The Story of...’. While these titles serve well as an aid to clarity they also have the effect of labelling and, in this sense, limiting the stories they precede, interrupting the narrative flow.

This is evidenced by the fact that both books are capable of discarding their rigid titling structure in favour of subtler methods. Although Potocki varies the pace of his narrative vastly, frequently plunging through layers of story (130-32 and 152), these instances are prefixed with titles, which slow their impact somewhat. By contrast, hidden stories (as when Emina continues relating to Alfonso the history of her family (59)), replicated stories (for example the gypsy's story 'The Story of Giulio Romati and of the Princess of Monte-Salerno' (148), which echoes a previous tale), and stories retold from a different perspective (such as 'Pascheco's Story' (99)) are sustained by the form of the novel with no such labels. However, without the presence of titles at other points throughout the tale, such instances would no doubt be lost in the confusion.

Although both books are similar in their convoluted style and gothic themes, their overall structure differs further. *Melmoth the Wanderer* is altogether less complicated, containing longer (and therefore fewer) tales: John Melmoth, the main character, hears but five or six stories directly. Similarly, each of the titular wanderer's attempts 'to shift his burden onto someone else makes a separate story; a casual arrangement, which saves Maturin from exposing his weakness in handling the plot' (Grant, 1968, x). *The Saragossa Manuscript*, by contrast, uses its stories as pieces of a single puzzle, into which Alfonso is thrown. Its tales have a cumulative effect and reflect back onto one another, tying the whole together in a manner more suited to the potential of the novelistic structure and making use of the sort of non-linear multiplicity seen in Castricano's cryptomimesis.

A further factor affecting the suspension of disbelief within the novelistic form is its use of language. Each of Potocki's stories is written verbatim (for example: 'Since I have the honour to be telling you my story, you will realize that I did not die' (97)). He recreates the various speech patterns of his homodiegetic storytellers, in contrast to Maturin's heterodiegetic style, which can be read as another impediment built into his structure ('The manuscript was discoloured, obliterated, and mutilated [...] Melmoth could make out only a sentence here and there' (28)).

By contrast, the nature of the medium allows comics many methods of expressing

division and sustaining a complicated narrative structure. *Worlds' End* is composed of six comic books, the content of each being the telling of a new tale framed by the setting of the inn. Artist Brian Talbot drew all these framing sequences while a different artist was assigned to each new tale. By electing to do this Gaiman allows the pictorial element of his signifiers to distinguish each new story, ensuring that the flow of the trade paperback's story arc is less obtrusively interrupted than it would be by the use of devices such as titles to indicate the commencement of a new tale.

Other methods are used similarly to distinguish each tale both from the others and from its surrounding setting at the inn. This is most obvious in the first story, 'A Tale of Two Cities' (*The Sandman* #51), which is the only one in which the teller's narrative remains constant and unbroken, as a voiceover to the images. The expanse of blank paper that this affords the metapanel (that is, the page) has the effect of making the story itself entirely dislocated from the framing metapanel that depict the inn, which have a more traditional layout of differently sized panels, speech bubbles and narrative boxes. The angular, static artwork reinforces this contrast.

Part five of *Worlds' End*, 'Cerements' (*The Sandman* #55) is the most complicated of all the tales, and requires close examination. It follows Gaiman's general pattern of a two-page introduction (set at the inn), followed by a narrative start to the tale (1994b, 5.3.1) that is subsequently mixed with dialogic boxes. Slides between the present-day, retrospective narration (which generally remains as the homodiegetic voice of the character telling the story), and past dialogic voices (that are the subject of the tales), are easily sustained by the medium.

In 'Cerements', however (which is the story of Petrefax, an apprentice in a mythical City of the Dead, whose inhabitants are trained solely in funeral rites), other characters tell their own stories as part of one such rite. This requires disruption of the 'boxed narrative versus dialogic content' structure that Gaiman uses in the other *Worlds' End* stories. Here, as an aid to clarification, the various levels of narrative are printed in differently coloured boxes. This method is introduced before the storytelling funeral rite begins when Gaiman

allows the story's characters to speak both in dialogic speech bubbles and narrative boxes (Appendix 2.1).

It is in these stories-within-stories that the medium is able to showcase its vast potential. Within Gaiman's *Sandman* story arc (level I), we have the story of the inn as told by the character Brant after the fact (II), within which the story 'Cerements' is told by Petrefax (III), within which the character Scroyle tells his tale (IV), which itself contains a story told to him by Destruction (V). Differently coloured narrative boxes are again used to sustain the complexity of the structure, enabling the transitions between the levels to be effected smoothly. In this regard it is important to note that such colour-coding may be used to distinguish either story level or speaker (as in Appendix 2.1 where both Petrefax and Master Hermas converse within the green narrative boxes, despite the fact that Petrefax's level III narrative is otherwise depicted in yellow).

In 'Cerements' the structure of Master Hermas's tale is the most impressive, being about his old teacher, Mistress Veltis, and the stories she told to him and another apprentice one stormy night. The third and final one of these level V tales, although still narrated by Hermas, exemplifies the easy transition from narrative to dialogue allowed by the medium; in contrast to the aforementioned level IV and V tales which are told entirely through narrative boxes, all dialogue being reported. This transition is effected by the use of inset panels, emphasising the point that the dialogic immediacy is part of the tale currently being narrated, and is sustained by the combination of narrative and dialogue it uses (Appendix 2.2).

Another of Veltis's tales told at level V within *Worlds' End* exemplifies further the freedom possible in comics and how the medium's content can utilise this. One of the stories she tells is reported by Hermas as being about 'A COACH-FULL OF PRENTICES AND A MASTER, SWEEPED AWAY FROM LITHARGE BY DARK MAGICS, WHO TOOK THEIR REFUGE AT A TAVERN, WHERE THE PRICE OF HAVEN WAS A TALE' (5.20.1). This brief insertion of the current level II story into level V disrupts notions of time and makes the storytelling process 'circular and endless' (Bender 1999, 184), again blurring the internal/external (as

also represented by Derrida's notion of the crypt).

The medium's hybrid structure has a myriad of techniques at its disposal, enabling it to sustain different story layers without either narrative disruption (as seen in Potocki, 152) or a flattening of story layers to preserve the narrative flow (Potocki, 49). Its structure is able to sustain strong contradictions and interruptions – even a leap between layers of story for just a single panel (Gaiman 1994b, 5.19.6). The use of a different colour or typeface may be a fairly simplistic method of enabling multiple narrative voices, but it is effective, particularly when we consider the inconstancies or complexities of its use (as noted both above and in the context of *Watchmen*). However, within the layout of the page (or metapanel) the possibilities for positioning are much more exciting – such as the use of inset panels; the signifying possibilities of panel shape, size or colour; or the opportunities for juxtaposition (whether by using adjacent panels or in the creation of patterning or syntagmatic reading possibilities).

Barely explored potential aside, it is interesting to note that while the strategies used in these comics (such as coloured text or evocative typefaces) are also available to prose narrative these seldom feature in mainstream publications. Although economic factors are at play, the lack of such diversity in contemporary prose publishing seems disproportionate to the advances made and the opportunities now available. The same strategies are being used and reused: as evidenced by concrete poems such as Lewis Carroll's 'Mouse's tale' (Carroll 1996, 35) and equivalent contemporary uses of shaped paragraphs by writers such as Irvine Welsh, whose book *Filth* (1998) positions its text in a variety of different forms to indicate speaker.

Welsh also uses the space of his page to distinguish between story levels, as in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1996). This story switches between the present, past and fantasy life of its narrator (who is in a coma) and these switches are indicated by changes of direction – sometimes forcing the reader to read up the page instead of down – and by different sizes of type and repetition of words. Similar textual strategies are also used by Danielewski in *House of Leaves* to mirror the physical spaces he describes, such as when

the story's text is printed in increasingly smaller blocks in the centre of the pages as the lead character pushes his way down a narrowing tunnel (442-61). Stephen King frequently utilises different typefaces to distinguish sections within his novels, as in *Carrie* where internal thoughts are in parentheses and italicised to contrast with the external events described in normal typeface.

Just as visual techniques are used in these novels, prose narrative techniques are also used within the comic book, as in the evocation of suspense in the final panel of 'Cerements' (Gaiman 1994b, 5.23.7). Similarly, each issue or new tale within *Worlds' End* begins with a return to the inn, providing an essential base (due to the serialised nature of the single-issue form the story was originally released in). In light of this, it can be argued that the medium of comics relies upon similar divisional techniques to those of prose in order to sustain structure. However, it seems that this technique is less essential to the success of the story so much as it is conventional in literary terms and dictated by the single-issue form – as evidenced by the simultaneous presence of an overarching, subsuming, gothic-style story arc within the *Worlds' End* trade paperback.

In light of these examples it is clear that the media of both prose and comics are capable of sustaining complicated structures with minimal disruption. What is more interesting is the resistance to this seen in both media (as established above by my comparison of the forms of novel and trade paperback), where vast potential is barely used. As seen, many of the textual tricks used by *Worlds' End* could be used within the contemporary novel, which nonetheless declines these opportunities in favour of a more traditional narrative. In this way these mainstream comics draw attention to the textual assumptions that may be made by novelists (and prose-writers more generally) regarding their limitations (of form and/or medium).

In his essay on *The Saragossa Manuscript*, Martin Schell comments that 'rather than counting the levels of the story it is more useful to recognize points of closure where some of the inner levels resolve' (Schell 2002, 1). Hidden stories in *Worlds' End* can be identified in this way – for example Charlene Mooney's story of her life, which ironically

begins 'I DON'T HAVE A GODDAMN STORY' (6.5.6). Similarly, the story of the inn itself is implicit throughout the tale (Bender 1999, 178) as we are treated to varying (and sometimes contradictory) pictures of it – again in the 'gaps' between the more obvious tales being told by the travellers. In this sense content echoes structure (or, put another way, semantics follows syntax) as we identify gaps/gutters that are far from empty and without import.

The most important implication of these hidden stories is comparable with our discovery, confirmed only in the final two pages of *Worlds' End*, that what we are reading is in fact Brant's telling of his story to a barmaid (thus creating level II of the structure). In this sense he can be paralleled with Alfonso in *The Saragossa Manuscript* as a character who has transcended his status to become an author: Brant (who does not tell a tale at the inn) has evolved from a level II character to a level I. The trade paperback form allows this realisation to become the climax of its story arc, adding a further frame to the inn's events and thereby reinforcing their credibility (referencing gothic authenticity as in *The Castle of Otranto*).

The effect of introducing this new status of Brant's only after the tale is over is to create another story level within the trade paperback. Although at the beginning of *Worlds' End* the narrative is obviously his, it is swiftly discarded in favour of dialogic immediacy (when Brant first arrives at the inn). Only when we discover that his narrative is still ongoing and that he is, in fact, telling this story to another character (the barmaid), can we identify the main narrative as homodiegetic (and more accurately as autodiegetic, as Brant is the main protagonist of this encompassing story arc). The overall structure of the *Worlds' End* trade paperback is thereby revealed as being identical to that of the individual tales (all of which are told by an autodiegetic narrator and also use a transition from narrated panels to immersion in dialogue). This deduction is only made possible by the trade paperback form.

The reader's position changes with our awareness of this extra level of story: we move from being situated unwittingly inside the text (alongside the barmaid to whom Brant is speaking) to outside, again evoking Castricano's notion of cryptomimesis. The presence

of extratextual markers within the Gothic traditionally serves a similar function, to immerse the reader in the world of the text, as also seen in *Watchmen*'s use of textual addendums. However, the fluctuating position of the reader can be perceived here too, for example when reading the 'Tales of the Black Freighter' sections (being, as mentioned, a comic read by a character within *Watchmen*).

Victor Sage asserts that the footnotes and other extratextual elements in *Melmoth the Wanderer* serve a different purpose: that, rather than attempting to define the text as factual, they actually disrupt it by starting a kind of dialogue with the narrative itself from a contemporary Irish point of view (2001, 86). These varying interpretations of the effect of extratextual markers and gothic structuring invite a reading of the comic book in this regard, and with reference to a reader-based narratology.

Barthes's theory of the death of the author places the reader at the locus of the text, and nowhere is this more in evidence than in comics. Within the metapanel, panels and gutters interact and the importance of the gutter as the location of many unseen events within the story is vital to any narratology that takes account of reader participation. By contrast, gaps occurring in prose texts serve a different function, to mystify the reader and aid in suspense:

The house was handsome and spacious, but the melancholy appearance of
desertion

* * * *

-The benches were by the wall, but there were none to sit there [...]
(Maturin 1968, 31)

The gaps in prose serve as holes in the narrative, in contrast to the language of comics where they are needed to punctuate the reader-based narrative. In this way the metafiction of books from the gothic tradition places the reader as passive listener (to a text that tries to convince them of its veracity and consequently produces an extratextual dialogue debating the same), in contrast to the aggressive involvement demanded by comics' half narrative.

The reader's importance to a structuralist reading is further evidenced as follows: Reading is not a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair: our initial speculations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next, but what comes next may retrospectively transform our original understanding, highlighting some features of it and backgrounding others [...] We read backwards and forwards simultaneously [...] (Eagleton 1983, 77)

In this light (and as seen above), the metapanel acts as clarification for the reader; one is quite literally able to read both forwards and backwards within it.

As shown by the fluctuating positioning of the reader within *Worlds' End*, the embedded narrative structures seen in the traditional and postmodern gothic novels considered above have parallels in the competing story arcs made visible by the various forms of comics. Each individual issue's plot is in turn part of a wider-reaching storyline (generally 4-8 issues long) whose conclusion marks the end of another trade paperback collection. These collections themselves, of course, are also sections of the ongoing story as a whole. By contrast, the graphic novel form (as a single, lengthier comic book) stands alone. In this way the medium of comics draws attention to narrative possibilities that, to date, have been best illustrated by the experimentations and extratextual motifs of the Gothic.

The visually compartmentalised structure of the medium itself and its consequent reliance upon reader participation and input similarly call to mind notions of fragmentation and dissolution. However, further structuring possibilities that reference the gothic tradition are also used by the Vertigo texts, such as mirroring. Gaiman comments that the structure of *The Doll's House* is symmetrical: 'using "Men of Good Fortune" (*The Sandman* #15) as a divider, the stories in the first half of the collection are more or less mirrored by their counterparts in the second half of the collection' (Bender 1999, 61). The same characters and related events occur, although often as reversals or consequences. For example, in 'The Doll's House' (*The Sandman* #10), Rose meets her grandmother, Unity, for the first time and is given a ring. In 'Lost Hearts' (#16) they meet again in The Dreaming and Unity asks for Rose's heart in return. Similarly, and as previously mentioned, Morpheus removes fantasies and restores reality in both #12 and #14. Such

doubling or inversion of events is only revealed by the structure of the trade paperback form.³⁴

As seen, the structuring of these Vertigo comics employs many elements also common to the Gothic, such as multiple points of view, embedded narratives, and extratextual indicators that result in the fluctuating position of the reader. However, I am forced to conclude that, while comics appear to have a very different range of possibilities for sustaining complicated and multiple narrative structures than those allowed to prose forms (such as the great potential afforded by visual elements, albeit offset by the limitations placed on prose), both media remain conservative on this front and share many of the same techniques. The numerous narrative elements that comics have at their disposal would seem to testify to the supplementary nature of their use of colour, dialogue/narrative distinctions, and framing techniques. Maybe their inclusion serves another purpose: sustaining the gothic tradition.

Conclusion

This chapter began its consideration of the Vertigo texts by viewing them as a continuation of some of the trends that were first brought to the mainstream of the comics industry in the 1980s by writers such as Alan Moore. Recently, Moore himself has commented in this regard:

When I did *Watchmen*, I thought, great, people are going to feel compelled to look at the clever storytelling involved and they'll feel compelled to match me or better me in coming up with ways for telling stories. But instead, it seems what most people saw was the violence, the grimness, the layer of atheist pessimistic politics that was glossed over it. That's what got regurgitated and recycled with the Vertigo books [...] their atmosphere, their ethos or whatever, seems to be based on the bad mood that I was in about 18 years ago [...] this is one of my objections to it, is that there's no fun [...] (Ross 2001, npag)

Moore's work in the 1980s certainly paved the way for mainstream acceptance of

³⁴ Interestingly, though, commercial issues have disguised this: *The Doll's House* reprints 'The Sound of Her Wings' (*The Sandman* #8) at its start. This is because, although sequentially *The Doll's House* is the second trade paperback, it was the first collection to be released due to the extreme popularity of this single issue.

darker, more psychologically realistic comics, and prefigures many of the themes later adopted by Vertigo. However, this process itself calls to mind notions of gothic absorption, as the Vertigo texts are better viewed as continuing and adapting his work rather than as straight imitations – as seen, writers such as Gaiman and Ennis have each reworked elements found in Moore's work in accordance with their own priorities: even stretching to parody (and thereby contradicting the lack of fun that Moore perceives). I hope this discussion has shown that the Vertigo comics are structurally inventive and thematically based around an ethos that, although it figures in Moore's work, can also be understood as representative of the continuation of the gothic tradition as a whole.

Both structural and thematic reversals abound in the Vertigo comics: the most important of which can be best understood in the context of the superhero. Characters such as the demon Etrigan (as superscripted by Moore and in the subsequent Vertigo texts) are a literal representation of the postmodern Gothic's notion of horror within, but also effortlessly invert the superhero/alter ego convention of mainstream superhero comics. Similarly, the serial killer convention members in 'Collectors' all have alter egos (given them by newspapers), as in the case of Funland/Nathan Diskin.

In all these cases, the superhero tradition of comics is inverted by the reversal of its 'noble hero'/'puny human' convention, where 'sadistic killer'/'human' becomes the norm, or even 'evil demon'/'human'. However, in these contemporary texts this reversal also supports the modern Gothic's turn towards the internal as these inverted alter egos again invoke postmodern notions of fragmented identity, already discussed in the context of the superhero.

In this way the Vertigo universe, itself a subculture of the DC mainstream, can also be described as its dark mirror. While it ostensibly conforms to the industry's continuity demands through crossovers and character use, it frequently overwrites and subsumes its characters: replacing the superhuman with the human, the external with the internal. In this sense it can be read as a gothic inversion of the DC superhero universe that, instead of heroics and action, tends towards the psychological and domestic. Further, if the creation

of Vertigo represents this sort of gothic turn within comics, then the Vertigo texts themselves can be seen as a darker refraction of the postmodern within the gothic tradition as a whole.

Chapter 3: Myth

Perhaps the single most important characteristic of Myth³⁵ is that, despite many critics' identification of the same themes appearing time and time again, it is not a closed category with fixed content and characteristics. G.S. Kirk reminds us of this when he says:

Once one sees that myth as a general concept is completely vague, that it implies no more in itself than a traditional story, then it becomes clear that its restriction to particular kinds of tale, 'sacred' ones or those associated with rituals, is precarious and misleading; especially if the tendencies of one culture in this respect are assumed to be analogous to those of all other cultures at roughly the same material and social level. (1970, 28)

This wide range of 'traditional stories' (myths) in existence is further paralleled in the number of applicable approaches to Myth: scholars have studied the concept using anthropological, psychological and linguistic frameworks. As both the form and content of Myth vary wildly according to the surrounding culture it is generally defined in terms of its origin, subject and function. As such, this chapter discusses the notion of the superhero as an American myth, and further considers its linguistic and social functions.

Literature review

Wendy O'Flaherty supports Kirk's conception of Myth, defining it as an anonymous story that is remembered due to its form (which is simple and fascinating) and content (which deals with universal human experience) (O'Flaherty 1995, 31).³⁶ Although both critics focus on the open nature of the concept, insisting it be treated as an empty vessel, Kirk also notes that it would be foolish to deny that Myth is often associated in some degree with religion (Kirk 1970, 29) and I turn now to a brief discussion of the anthropological approach to Myth.

³⁵ Throughout this chapter, I shall use the designation 'Myth' to refer to the overriding concept/structure/genre, whereas 'myth' refers to an individual narrative that utilises this form.

³⁶ In this context, I interpret O'Flaherty as referring to shared themes such as 'good' and 'evil' that, although they may be referenced by specific cultural vocabularies of symbols, have a universal meaning.

The anthropological approach

Bronislaw Malinowski identifies the work of Edward B. Tylor as the foundation for an anthropological study of primitive religion. Tylor theorised that animism and a consequent belief in man's immortal soul arose from misinterpretations of dreams, visions, hallucinations and similar (Malinowski 1948, 18). However, Malinowski goes on to cite later studies that refute these theories and show primitive man as much less contemplative: for example the work of Sir James George Frazer. Both Kirk and Malinowski define Frazer as a classical mythologist whose work revitalised anthropology by examining the motives behind the myths and customs of primitive societies in order to illuminate those of more developed cultures.

In *Apollodorus* (1921) Frazer gives an aetiological view of Myth (as pre-scientific explanation), supporting the theories of social evolution that were popular around the end of the eighteenth century. His work has been criticised for offering a patronising view of primitive cultures, but was positively enlightened compared to that of some contemporaries (for example philological theories which assumed certain verbal misunderstandings of primitive man or reduced everything to nature myth (Douglas 1978, 13)). However, his best-known work, *The Golden Bough* (1890), means he is most associated with the 'Myth-Ritual' theory of analysis. His examination of primitive magic concluded that it worked in one of two ways: via similarity (such as the use of effigies) or contagion (use of something belonging to or part of the subject) (Frazer 1978, 19).

By organising his codex in this way Frazer linked these magics with the current psychology of mental association and so updated his whole subject (Douglas 1978, 12). He went on to further define sympathetic/private magic against public magic (that benefited the whole community) and the effects of this, for example the creation of a public functionary from the magician: thereby substituting a monarch for a democracy or oligarchy. In this way his work informs exploration of the political and patriarchal functions of Myth as seen in both a cultural context (Bronislaw Malinowski) and a literary one (Robert Graves), while remaining linked to a psychoanalytic approach. It has contributed both to the progress of

empirical fieldwork and to our theoretical understanding of primitive man.

Bronislaw Malinowski situates his work alongside many current anthropological studies of religion that take as their starting point Frazer's definitions of primitive magic and religion (defined respectively as man's attempts to control nature versus his appeals to superior powers (Malinowski 1948, 19)). Malinowski's own work builds on these foundations: emphasising the magic/religion divide by distinguishing between rites with a function (for example, blessings to prevent sickness) and those without (such as the celebration of birth), commenting that 'While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event' (1948, 38). Similarly, he extends Frazer's exploration of weather rituals (as examples of the public magic of fertility) to include vegetable fertility rites and the role of agricultural magicians (1968, 273).

Malinowski's work dominates the field today and he has been widely lauded for his insistence on participant observation and his emphasis on documenting the native's perspective. Conversely, he has also been criticised in this regard for both his primitive methods and his restriction of the anthropological vision – Kirk comments that, in focusing solely on the prime function of myths as the recording and validating of institutions, Malinowski completely rejects their speculative aspects (1970, 6). Overall, Malinowski views Myth as a means to validate social norms, saying its function is to reconcile us to cultural unpleasantries that could otherwise be cast off.

Kirk contrasts the work of Malinowski with that of anthropologist/structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who instead offers a speculative theory of Myth. This states that, once properly understood (that is, by concentrating on their underlying structure of relationships and not their overt content or allegorical meaning), all myths are actually problem-reflecting (Kirk 1970, 7). Lévi-Strauss contends that the narrative of a myth is created from underlying binary oppositions which are mediated during the course of its telling in order to provide us with the illusion that we can and do understand the world around us (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 17). This reconciliatory function has also been observed by

many other critics, such as Edmund Leach who comments that Myth discriminates between gods and men and then focuses on the relationships that link them together; revolving around binary discriminations and their subsequent mediation (Leach 1969, 10).

René Girard similarly comments that the function of Myth is to provide a way of coping with the violence of human nature (that stems from the rivalry produced by our inclination to imitate) (Girard 1979, 205-6), rather than to explain the natural world. The conclusions of all these critics would seem to separate the function of modern Myth from that of ancient or primitive Myth, which ostensibly focused upon nature. However, and as seen in Frazer's work, primitive Myth actually served to reconcile culture and nature by affecting social politics or through magical control of the natural world. The function of Myth thus remains that of mediation. Whether it provides social justification and acceptance (Girard, Malinowski), smoothes the opposition between culture and nature (Leach, Lévi-Strauss), or is enabled to do both (Frazer), Myth seeks to fill in the gaps in our understanding by mediating binary oppositions: explaining the inexplicable.

Lévi-Strauss combines an anthropological and structuralist approach, explaining his paradigmatic model as representing oppositions that are essential to the order of the mind. However, other structuralist critics (such as Georges Dumézil) use a three-part paradigm that reflects the order of society not of the mind (Segal 2004, 120). This approach links to the view of Myth as ideology, for example as discussed in the work of Bruce Lincoln and, most famously, Roland Barthes.

In *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (1989) Lincoln defines what he calls the 'discourse of society' (that is, productive labour) against thought that perpetuates the status quo – which latter has variously been defined as ideological (Marx), ritual (Bloch) or mythic (Barthes). Lincoln classifies the narratives produced by this type of thought, distinguishing between fable, legend and myth with respect to the 'truth claims' they make: a concept that is paralleled in Barthes's work concerning the consumption of Myth.

Roland Barthes's work equates mythic thought with bourgeois ideology, commenting: 'If I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near

to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*: I am reassured' (2000, 143). He contrasts this with revolutionary language: saying that when man speaks to transform reality, Myth is impossible: 'The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth' (146). In this way Barthes establishes the cultural function of Myth, defining it as a language that presents itself as natural. In so doing Myth leads the reader to interpret its statements as causal rather than equivalent.

Barthes's deductions concerning the cultural function of Myth also relate to its linguistic and psychological functions. He defines it as a metalanguage or second-order semiological system: a language where signs are displaced into signifiers. These unite the conceptualisation of Myth with its meaning, through distortion and deformation. As such, Myth can be paralleled with other complex semiological systems such as psychoanalysis (122) – just as for Freud manifest behaviour reflects latent meaning, in Myth the manifest narrative content is also a distorted version of its underlying meaning. For example, if (as according to Freud) the meaning of the Oedipus myth is the fulfilment of desire, this can only be expressed figuratively. The symbols produced to this end (where the sign 'desire' becomes a signifier for something else, such as the forbidden) make up the myth's narrative content.

The psychoanalytic approach

A psychological approach to Myth revolves around the notion of the unconscious and features in the work of Sigmund Freud, C.J. Jung and disciples such as Marie-Louise von Franz. Freud was the first to empirically research the unconscious background of consciousness, building on neurologists' work. He theorised that manifest dream content contained symbols personal to the individual that could be unpicked (through free association) to deduce the latent, or unconscious, dream content. He viewed Myth as representing a similar process, where a narrative's manifest content (concept) contains symbols that indicate (though in a distorted form) its latent meaning. It is worth noting that the terms 'concept' and 'meaning' may be aligned with Roland Barthes's respective

definitions of the signifier and signified.

Freud concluded that Myth functions through its meaning; by allowing a vent for similar desires in both the teller and listener through identification with the hero. In this regard it does not actively express the Freudian childhood goal of independence (similar to Jung's concept of individuation, discussed below), but does aid it by venting the fixations and desires which could prevent this type of personal development. It is further worth noting that this theory merges the role of the teller and listener.

By contrast, a Jungian theory of dream analysis confines the interpretation of symbols to within the terms of the dream as use is personal to the dreamer: the symbol therefore contains both an image and attached emotion (which affects how we read the image) (Jung 1964, 43). In this sense Jung relates the symbols of dream language to those of Myth, saying that in discarding fantasy from our conscious mind we have lost a quality characteristic of primitive mind: that is, the ability to take in these types of emotionally charged pictorial languages.

Jung relates these languages to his notion of archetypes, which he defines not as definite images/symbols (as these are conscious representations) but as 'a tendency to form such representations of a motif – representations that can vary a great deal without losing their basic pattern' (67). In this way the processes observable in both Myth and dream are archetypes: manifestations of the unconscious in fantasies or symbolic images (such as the *puer aeternus* (eternal boy), a Jungian archetype I shall return to discuss shortly in the context of the superhero).

According to Jung, the function of dreams is both to restore our psychological balance by compensating for personality flaws (which motive aligns itself with some of the psychological interpretations of the Gothic already explored), and to enable the psychological process of individuation (lifelong psychological maturing). The Jungian theory of Myth analysis is built around this notion as mythic symbols replicate the individuation process. Marie-Louise von Franz has led subsequent work in this area, focusing on the fairy tale as an expression of both the collective unconscious psychological

processes that represent unconscious archetypes, and of the notion of individuation as one's unique personal destiny.

Von Franz finds representations of the individuation process in fairy-tale symbols such as the impossible quest, which stands for 'the initial crisis in the life of an individual. One is seeking something that is impossible to find or about which nothing is known' (1964, 167). She also identifies further unconscious symbols in these mythic narratives, such as the Jungian animus/anima (personifications of the dreamer's unconscious that are of the opposite sex to the dreamer), whose acceptance by the conscious mind is mirrored in fairy-tale stories of transformation; as when the princess kisses the frog and restores his natural form, or the prince awakes the sleeping beauty (194). Her work focuses primarily on the fairy tale as she believes that, because these are overlaid with less specific cultural material than is found in Myth or legend, such narratives mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly (1973, 1).

By following the work of Jung and including emotional experience as a factor in symbolism, von Franz considers fairy-tale symbols to be more than mere amplifications of the signatures of his archetypes (8). This strategy also enables her defence of Jung's interpretative methods (which have been criticised as unsystematic) as she points out that the material he presents is a living experience that is emotionally charged and ever-changing, so systematisation can only ever be superficial (1964, 164). Essentially, the psychological approach to Myth views it as a symbolic order made up of manifest and latent meaning, analogous in many ways to the processes observable in dreams and the unconscious mind.

The literary approach

As narrative, Myth also lends itself to various literary deconstructions such as the genre studies of Northrop Frye, the linguistic approaches of Jacques Derrida or Ferdinand de Saussure, the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, or the formalism of Vladimir Propp. By way of summary, Frye's work defines Myth as one of the archetypes of literature; theorising that all narrative categories (a term he assigns to tragedy, comedy, romance and

irony – categories that encompass multiple genres) may be aligned with the stages found in the quest myth (Frye 1963, 17; 1990b, 162). He defines Myth as an abstraction (opposed to naturalism) that provides a framework for literature's elaborations and, as such, views literature as a reconstructed mythology whose structural principles are derived from Myth (1963, 38).

By defining Myth as the structural organising principle of literary form (1990b, 342), Frye uses the mythological process to explain familiar literary facts. He contrasts the historian with the poet in these terms and states that, while the former works inductively (towards a unifying form from the facts in hand), the poet works deductively: by imposing a shape on the content (1963, 54) according to its narrative category (25), hence the derivation of literature from Myth. Countless studies have built upon his work, such as Lawrence and Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002)³⁷ which contrasts the pattern of the classic monomyth (such as the initiation myth identified by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) with the 'redemptive' American monomyth (2002, 6).

Campbell aligns Myth and fairy tale as the macrocosm and microcosm of the traditional pattern, stating that the components of 'seeker' and 'found' which make up the quest myth represent 'the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world' (1993, 40). His comments echo the shifts perceived in anthropological interpretations of the function of Myth as Campbell believes that, rather than the animal or plant world, 'man himself is now the crucial mystery' (391) and that the function of modern myths has changed accordingly. It is worth noting that the hero figure is central to these approaches, and its importance is further emphasised by Frye's attachment of it to the eternal cycle of the seasons (1990b, 159-60), a parallel Robert Graves also explores in his book *The White Goddess* (first published 1948).

The linguistic function of Myth also informs the work of Jacques Derrida and

³⁷ A study focusing on the all-American hero (for example as found in westerns) rather than the concept of the comic-book superhero.

specifically his concept of *differance*, a term assembled from the concepts of 'deferral' and 'difference'. Derrida's definition of the signified is distinct from de Saussure's in that he believes it is only able to be understood as a link in a chain of signifiers (through contrast against and associations with other meanings), rather than as a totality of meaning that is apparent to the listener as concept. Later studies such as Abraham and Torok's *The Wolfman's Magic Word* utilise this kind of framework (in treating their subject as dialogic rather than attempting to reduce meaning to a single core event) and as such emphasise a shift from psychoanalysis to conscious fictionality (1986, lvii). As such, the process behind establishing the linguistic function of Myth constitutes this type of endless deferral of meaning.

The consequent treatment of Myth as a semiological system or language is supported further by the approaches of Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Propp's formalist approach examines the structure of the genre tale at the diachronic level: by dividing its plot into morphemes – the smallest identifiable units which make up the whole. This method is therefore customarily referred to as syntagmatic; although it is worth noting that, since these morphemes bear a relation to all others in the sequence (in Derridean terms), structure can never be entirely syntagmatic. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach explores the general laws of mythic structure at the synchronic level – by focusing on the underlying codes that organise its elements into related semantic fields.

In *Morphology of the Folktale* (first published 1928), Propp identifies thirty-one elements ('mythemes') that make up the narrative of a 'wondertale'.³⁸ These are standard events such as 'An interdiction is addressed to the hero'. In 'Structure and Form' (an essay responding to *Morphology*) Lévi-Strauss criticises this approach, commenting that Propp errs in his treatment of signifier and signified; that is, by attempting to separate grammar and vocabulary (in discarding the specifics of content (vocabulary) to focus on the stages of the structure (grammar)). Lévi-Strauss argues that these are inseparable in Myth since (as a metalanguage) it has no recourse to any level not created by its own rules. Therefore,

³⁸ Propp focuses solely on this type of Russian folk tale (an oral story which predates the literary fairy tale).

everything is syntax, but simultaneously everything within is also vocabulary since the distinctive elements are words (Lévi-Strauss 1984, 188).

In his response ('The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale') Propp defends his approach, denying that he divides form and content since his analysis focuses on both plot and composition. His argument is that plot incorporates content and composition reflects form, so his work analyses both simultaneously (Propp 1984, 77). He goes on to turn Lévi-Strauss's own arguments against him: saying that, if content and form are inseparable, then he who analyses one is also analysing the other (77), and arguing that Lévi-Strauss overextends Propp's work to a generalised, abstracted level in order to critique it, when Propp's conclusions only refer to individual narratives and their specific laws (74).

Propp succeeds in defending his work as specific to folk tale analysis, and I shall return to his theories regarding the definition of folk tales at the close of this chapter. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach is concerned with the rules underlying the abstract notion of Myth. His structuralism is opposed to Propp's formalist treatment (which defines form against content, as above) as it applies the same approach to both form and content (Lévi-Strauss 1984, 167), and analyses these at the synchronic (rather than diachronic) level.

This approach breaks myths down into episodes and identifies the binary oppositions that underlie each section, creating a matrix of latent meaning whose elements can be read both as binary opposites and as paradigmatic clusters. Lévi-Strauss stresses that we must read a myth 'as a totality', approaching it by reading not only from left to right, but at the same time vertically (1978, 44) in order to observe its meanings as both syntagmatic pairs and paradigmatic clusters. This strategy is illuminated further by his distinction between *langue* (the sentence-as-structure) and *parole* (the individual example of speech), which concepts inform his underlying philosophy – that while human consciousness is shared on a universal basis; cultural diversity constitutes examples of *langue* and *parole*. In this regard his matrices refer to the *langue* of Myth, whereas the overlaid content is its *parole*.

Lévi-Strauss's methods have been criticised, as the sections he breaks myths down

into seem to be arbitrarily assigned according to the requirements of his analysis (Leach 1970, 62). However, since the invariant mythic structures he searches for do not depend on a syntagmatic division of the tale it seems to me that his method is valid. Whether his observations and method are applicable to literature in a more general sense remains under debate, though, for as Leach further comments, to engage in such 'verbal juggling' may 'only lead into a world where all things are possible and nothing sure' (1970, 62).

Lévi-Strauss says that Myth 'gives man [...] the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe' (1978, 17). This view supports the cultural function of Myth as identified by Barthes as Lévi-Strauss goes on to add that, 'It is, of course, only an illusion' (17). Yet in his focus on the matrices underlying individual myths he remains more concerned with establishing Myth's structural rules than defining its function further. It is also worth noting that, in being constructed around binary oppositions, these matrices can also be read as sustaining a psychological approach to Myth.

Referring to these matrices Lévi-Strauss defines Myth as a static, closed system (in contradistinction to history), saying, 'we find the same mythical elements combined over and over again' (1978, 40). While this further supports a literary approach to Myth (as a process that imposes a specific structure on its content), it would seem to contradict Kirk's insistence on the open nature of Myth with which we began this chapter. However, I believe the two may be reconciled. For Lévi-Strauss is referring to the latent codes which organise concepts of related semantic fields within myths, whereas Kirk and O'Flaherty are referring to their manifest form and content, which may vary wildly while still reflecting the same underlying oppositions.

It is integral to the notion of Myth that its origin is often hazy and it is frequently defined as a perpetual rewriting with no original form. Myths appear to operate on many levels simultaneously: leading to the distinction between function and subject matter that separates a myth's purpose from its narrative (and specific cultural influences). In combining latent and manifest elements in this way, Myth lends itself to anthropological,

psychological and literary interpretations, and perhaps it is not too much to say that its mediating function is reflected in the ease with which it sustains such wildly varying, and often opposed, readings.

The superhero myth

As seen, Myth is a fluid concept whose origin, function and subject matter continue to be variously interpreted by critics as cultural, historical, psychological or linguistic. In the words of Joseph Campbell:

Mythology is all of these. The various judgments are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age. (Campbell 1993, 382)

Northrop Frye defines literature as a reconstructed mythology, whose structural principles are derived from Myth (1963, 38). If the function of pure Myth is to enact a belief or set of beliefs (through ritual) that enable us to better understand the world around us, then literature is produced when Myth is severed from ritual. Frye's theories are clarified further by other critics who postulate that a myth becomes a wondertale or fairy tale when its narrative is detached from ritual, and who mark the origination of the idea of 'literature' in this way (Carden 1980, 180). In such cases myths become stories – in the broadest sense, narratives whose subject matter is another world – although their function remains the same: to enable greater understanding of our world.

In this sense, the medium of comics may be viewed as a return to a purer form of Myth (whose associated rituals are the conventions of panel reading, the collaboration between creator and reader, etcetera), as its pages literally bring into being the subject matter they depict – this being another world that exists in self-conscious fictionality. The comic-book panel does not translate a 'real-life' scene or describe it for the reader; *it is itself* the scene it presents, bringing this moment into being as the reading process

ritualistically creates a linear narrative from the page's static images.³⁹ Similarly, we may view these narratives as mythic since, as will be demonstrated, the fictional worlds that are their subject matter serve to explain and clarify the world around us. As such, I propose that the notion of the superhero may also be defined as a mythic structure and propose to examine this figure and its functions using the terminology of Myth.

Origin

As established in Chapter 1, the superhero as we know him first came into existence in 1938 with *Action Comics #1*, starring Siegel and Shuster's Superman character. Although an instant hit, as evidenced by the subsequent introduction of many similar characters, the genre's popularity skyrocketed after the introduction of the Comics Code crippled the production of other, more controversial genres. As such, depictions of the superhero shifted their focus from the fantastic to the moralistic, showing 'total power [...] as totally benign, transmuting lawless vigilantism into a perfect embodiment of law enforcement' (Lawrence 2002, 46).

These golden- and silver-age superheroes were upstanding citizens, fitting perfectly Marie-Louise von Franz's conception of the fairy-tale hero as an abstraction of the hero concept – a selfless, pure-of-heart figure whose actions are always 'right' and guilt-free (1973, 14). This hero existed in the primary colours of a comic-book world whose rules were crystal clear: as the Batman says in *Batman #3*, 'I think Robin and I make it pretty clear that WE HATE CRIME AND CRIMINALS! [...] Why? Because we're proud of being AMERICANS – and we know there's no place in this great country of ours for lawbreakers!' (Cotta Vaz 1989, 15). It should be obvious that the concepts of justice and fair play that these comics drew on are themselves cultural myths; used by the child readership to understand a world in which they are powerless, and perceived by adult readers as either a nostalgic return to their childhood naivety or as healthy moralistic lessons for their children.

The 1980s brought about a reversal of this situation as creators such as Alan Moore

³⁹ See Chapter 5 'Art and the hyperreal' for further discussion.

and Frank Miller rewrote the superhero world into a more realistic portrayal of ours and reformed its characters into more human figures, bringing a new self-consciousness to the superhero genre.⁴⁰ While the mood altered, it must be noted that the basic definitions, origins, and personalities of these heroes remained largely unchanged. It is this latest incarnation of the superhero that I now propose to examine as Myth, before turning to a series of case studies that consider the ways in which the Vertigo texts both continue and deviate from this notion.

Function: cultural and historical

In *Batman Unmasked* (2001) Will Brooker offers the following summary of the Batman myth, which he defines as such due to its being the 'popular consciousness' view, requiring little or no familiarity with the character:

Batman is Bruce Wayne, a millionaire who dresses in a bat-costume and fights crime. He has no special powers, but is very fit and strong, and very intelligent. He lives in Gotham City. He fights crime because his parents were killed when he was young. He is often helped by his sidekick, Robin. He fights villains like the Joker. (40)

A similar definition of the original superhero, Superman, might read: Superman is an alien from the planet Krypton who disguises himself as Clark Kent, a mild-mannered reporter. He is very strong, can fly, and is invulnerable to everything except kryptonite. He lives in Metropolis and helps the citizens there because he is good. He is in love with Lois Lane. He fights villains like Lex Luthor.

These definitions apply as much to the modern versions of the characters as they did to their earlier incarnations. Furthermore, it should be noted that they fit with both the traditional and the modern forms of the American monomyth (as defined by Lawrence and Jewett using examples drawn from cowboy westerns). Whereas the traditional mythic structure (or initiation myth) follows a pattern best described as *separation-initiation-return* (Campbell 1993, 30), Lawrence and Jewett define contemporary versions as redemptive myths: 'The monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations,

⁴⁰ As mentioned in Chapter 2: creators of *The Killing Joke* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, respectively.

a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner' (2002, 47).

Superman can be read as an initiation myth: the alien Kal-El is sent away from civilisation (his home planet of Krypton) to grow up in rural America as Clark Kent. He then returns to society (represented by Metropolis, since Krypton has been destroyed and Superman/Clark Kent now lives alongside humanity) with the power to save it. However, if approached from a purely human perspective, the myth also fits the redemptive pattern: Superman's origins are kept secret, and he originates from outside the community that he is frequently called upon to save. His immigrant status also has a cultural function that supports this reading; as Arnoldi comments, 'He was created at a time when America needed a new mythology. We had become the great melting pot [...] Siegel and Shuster gave America that myth [*sic*] she needed in the form of an immigrant from space that came to represent all that America stood for' (Arnoldi, npag).

The Batman myth can also be read as following this redemptive pattern: Bruce Wayne is a loner within the Gotham community, or can even be read as an outsider since he appears to be its only wealthy citizen; existing in a completely different class bracket from the people he is called upon to save. Lawrence and Jewett further comment that the heroes of these redemptive myths are 'lonely, selfless, sexless beings who rescue an impotent and terrorised community' (5), and that the American monomyth 'always begins with a threat arising against Eden's calm' (26). The murder of the young Bruce Wayne's parents is an example of this kind of disruption, and positions Batman as a classic redemptive hero: saviour of a terrorised Gotham City.

Batman's popularity had much to do with his lack of superpowers – the inference was that any reader had it within them to become a superhero. As such, the myth has a cultural function as it attempts to reconcile the opposition between democracy and the fascistic elements implicit in the superhero figure – Fredric Wertham commented that: 'the mass-media Superman is the symbol of power, force, and violence' (Wertham 1968, 213). *The*

Dark Knight Returns, Frank Miller's 1986 rewriting of Batman, 'bears the impress of all the previous guises in which the character – and his allies and opponents – have been incarnated' (Pearson and Uricchio, ix), for example in his reintroduction of the notion of vigilantism. By using a self-consciousness of the implicit contradiction between democracy and fascism the comic attempts to reconcile these notions – and, in so doing, transforms an entertaining story into a mythic structure with a social function.

Function: religious and psychological

Belief, or faith, is central to the function of Myth, distinguishing it from fable or legend. Bruce Lincoln uses the criteria of truth claims and credibility to define the three forms – fable makes no truth claims; legend and history make truth claims that are perceived as not credible and credible (respectively); and Myth incorporates both credibility and authority into its truth claims (24). The obsessive nature of fandom (quibbling over details, insisting on credibility and coherence between storylines) prompts Lawrence and Jewett to observe in this regard that the superhero's fan base can be described as 'a new form of religious community' (47). They further comment that 'superhuman abilities reflect a hope for divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind' (7) and, as such, the figure of the comic-book superhero can also be read as a myth with a religious function.

This function of Myth seems best located between its cultural and psychological functions, incorporating elements of both. Superheroes can be read as providing a cultural rewriting of religious doctrine for a secular age, while our continued need for such stories also evidences a psychological function: reconciling notions of omnipotence with powerlessness. Contemporary Freudian criticism considers Myth to have a psychological function that enables us to handle our neuroses by venting them harmlessly, and in so doing merges the teller and the reader of Myth. The collaboration between creator and reader required by comics echoes this viewpoint.

This view of Myth as a vent for emotions is continued by many critics – with some slight variations, such as Bruno Bettelheim who distinguishes between Myth and fairy tale

in this regard, theorising that fairy tales, not myths, provide this sort of release as they revolve around everyman figures rather than inimitable gods (Segal, 100). Jack Zipes is among those who have criticised Bettelheim's 'arbitrary' and 'authoritarian' claims regarding the superiority of fairy tales over all other literary forms in psychological development (Zipes 2002, 181). In a similar manner, I would argue that Bettelheim's distinction is moot in the case of the 'accidental origin' superhero: since the hero's previous everyman status allows him to sustain this psychological function.

This view of the superhero myth seems particularly apt when considering the comics reader: if the difference between adult and child can best be described as an acceptance of the reality principle (growing out of the belief that one is immortal) it nonetheless remains that the individual's perception of himself still incorporates vestiges of this notion. This 'latent omnipotence' colours individual psychology, best summarised as the 'it won't happen to *me*' attitude: smokers continue to smoke despite health warnings; drivers continue to speed despite knowledge of the statistics; first-time drug users never believe they will become addicted.

Following the work of Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz defines fairy tales as an expression of collective unconscious psychological processes (1973, 1) and the attraction of the superhero myth may be largely due to its ability to provide a harmless vent for this universal belief in one's omnipotence (whether manifest, as in children; or latent, as in adults) while reconciling this with reality. The Jungian archetype of the *puer aeternus* (eternal boy) would seem to apply here. The *puer* syndrome has increasingly become the accepted life philosophy of the Western world, where (as Stephen King has commented) 'such a great store is placed in the fragile commodities of youth, health and beauty' (King 1982, 157) – with the consequence that age, decay and death become politically incorrect and inevitably taboo. What better modern incarnation of this archetype than the deathless world of the all-powerful superhero?

Conversely, if the function of Myth (as mentioned) is to reconcile the unbalanced psyche or compensate for its deficiencies, then perhaps the aging, flawed, 'realistic' heroes

that make up the modern form of the superhero myth also function in this regard: balancing contemporary Western culture's obsession with the *puer* archetype. This dichotomy in function is further echoed in perceptions of the subject of the superhero myth. While the manifest subject of the superhero myth appears to be a clear-cut moral lesson on good versus evil, its latent subject appears to simultaneously be questioning this morality, since heroes win by might and violence is generally not the last but the first – and only – resort. I turn now to a consideration of the linguistic function of the superhero myth that will hopefully demonstrate and clarify this dichotomy further.

Function: linguistic

The work of Vladimir Propp lists thirty-one morphemes that make up the syntagmatic narrative of the folk tale. Treating the superhero as a myth that supports various narratives (which, due to the serialised nature of comics, may vary wildly) these are in fact less applicable than one might expect. I shall therefore return to Propp's theories at the close of this chapter, and for now will focus on Claude Lévi-Strauss's linguistic theories of Myth. His definition is based on a philosophy that supposes the existence of an underlying logical structure of human consciousness that is shared on a universal basis, while the diversities perceived in individual cultures constitute examples of *langue* and *parole* (individual expressions of this structure that exist in reversible and non-reversible time, respectively. *Langue* refers to the sentence-as-system, for example in the form 'subject + predicate', whereas *parole* refers to the individual example once uttered.)

The superhero myth, and specifically the introduction of the supervillain as the hero's nemesis, provides the basis for the sorts of binaries that are observed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his discussion of Myth.⁴¹ The supervillain enables the creation of the poles of good/evil and life/death within the text, and Frank Miller comments on this sort of linguistic construction when he further defines many of Batman's opponents as Doppelgängers of the hero. Miller also introduces a third binary, saying that: 'The Joker is

⁴¹ Umberto Eco identifies a similar dichotomy in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels; noting that Bond's characteristics are directly opposed to the 'typical qualities of the Villain' (Eco 1982, 251).

not so much a Doppelgänger as an antithesis, a force for chaos. Batman imposes his order on the world; he is an absolute control freak' (Pearson and Uricchio, 36).

The introduction of this order/chaos opposition implicitly introduces a further binary: that of duty/desire. The superhero tenet 'with great power comes great responsibility' applies here – I have already commented on the hero's sexless existence but, further, he is unable to reveal his identity to his friends and family; forced to live a secret existence and sacrifice his desires in favour of his duty. Defining the superhero's role as one of service to society means that the order/chaos binary negates the concept of vigilantism and sanctions the superhero's aggression: he represents the direct wishes of the state. This sets the superhero apart from the rest of the populace.

The outsider status implicit in this last binary returns us to the gothic theme of isolation; which I have already established as fundamental to the superhero myth. Ironically enough, the superhero's perception of himself as an outsider makes him even more of an everyman figure to the individual reader; especially when considered in the context of comics' audience, since teenage fears often stem from the feeling of being different. This again refers back to the cryptomimetic notion of hidden depths within a person: we all recognise that, to some extent, we present ourselves to the world as a Clark Kent, while fear or timidity motivates us to keep hidden what we perceive as our real self. Marina Warner identifies the motif of metamorphosis as 'the most widely and successfully adopted stratagem in the confrontation of fear' (2000, 19) and this motif is, of course, particularly applicable to the superhero, again supporting its definition as Myth.

By using the metamorphosis motif, the superhero myth is able to discriminate between gods and men while simultaneously focusing on the relationships that link them together (for example, through the accidental origin of the superhero from the everyman, or via their secret identity – as Greg McCue comments: 'Without it [the alter ego], he [the superhero] is a distant, inaccessible god on Olympus' (20)). This mediation of binary discriminations is also identified by Edward Leach, who describes it as a 'pattern that is built into the structure of every mythical system' (10). Again we can observe the

reconciliation of opposing notions within the structure of Myth.

However, applying Lévi-Strauss's theory to the superhero myth means we must consider its binaries not just as syntagmatic pairs (that is, as oppositions) but also as paradigmatic clusters. As such, the superhero provides a symbolic cluster that might include notions such as 'good', 'life', 'order' and 'duty'; while the villain represents a similar cluster of 'evil', 'death', 'chaos' and 'desire'. This message is reflected in both the American *parole* (as in specific historical instances such as prohibition or censorship: 'The belief that "badness" could be purged from comic books by a single stroke was thoroughly monomythic' (Lawrence and Jewett, 360)), and *langue* (the perpetual 'American dream' that success is available to all hard-working individuals).

The paradigms these binaries make up are further reinforced by the myth's manifest subject: the good superhero is immortal (or near enough), a force of order whose primary concern is always to do his duty; whereas the evil villain perpetuates death and chaotic destruction purely for personal desire. The manifest subject of the moralistic superhero myth is that to do one's duty in the pursuit of order is good and life-affirming, whereas to succumb to chaos and one's desires is bad.

However, the subject matter of the myth also operates on a latent level that seems to question its manifest lesson. Is might always right? Is the superhero a figure of democratic protection or one of fascist control? Is violence a satisfactory solution? The numerous genre rules integral to the superhero myth (which include the protection of innocent life at all costs, the prohibition of guns and firearms, and the rehabilitation or punishment of the villain rather than his destruction) are attempts to reconcile the myth's implicit contradictions. A similar process is observable in the Bond films (for the indestructible James Bond may also be read as a superhero), where science and humour are used to disguise the fact that his gadgets are actually violent weapons. As such, within the superhero narrative we can perceive the processes of Myth: just as mythic thought recognises oppositions in the world, mythic structure works to reconcile these oppositions.

Form

Much of the impact of any myth lies not just in its argument or validity, but also in its imagery and metaphor – as Wendy O’Flaherty comments ‘The power of a myth is as much visual as verbal’ (33). The costumes and iconography of superheroes (such as Superman’s distinctive logo and colour scheme, or Batman’s mask and bat-signal) are as much a part of their mythic status as their stories, and further support their definition as Myth in this way; since a costume is the one essential to being a superhero. In this way the medium of comics supports a mythic narrative structure, since its visual elements allow the creation of such an iconography.

Similarly, the medium simultaneously represents the Lévi-Straussian notions of reversible versus non-reversible time – the coexistence of panels on the page creates a synchronic and reversible narrative structure that can be read in many ways, while the linear narrative created in the process of reading is non-reversible and sequential. Jim Collins examines *The Dark Knight Returns* in this regard, identifying a ‘double movement that projects the story forward frame-by-frame at a relentless pace, but also arrests the strict linear movement of the image (and the eye) through the invention of the fragmented tableaux that draws relationships between images that are non-successive, but co-present’ (1991, 173). It is my theory that this self-conscious playing with form (and also with content) is further sustained by the Vertigo texts’ treatment of the superhero character and forms the basis of their (re)construction of the superhero-as-myth. I turn now to a series of case studies that consider both the content and the mythic structures underlying these texts.

Case study: *Black Orchid*

Black Orchid first appeared in 1973 in *Adventure Comics* #428-430 and subsequently in a handful of issues of *Phantom Stranger* between 1974 and 1976. Her identity and origin were never revealed and she remained an enigmatic heroine who used her talent for disguise (and a series of rubber masks) to fight crime. The character’s run was short-lived and, aside from a few cameos (for example in 1985’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #5), Black

Orchid was quickly forgotten until (during a DC talent-scouting expedition at which the company also recruited Grant Morrison) Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean pitched the idea of a revival to DC editor Karen Berger.⁴²

So in 1989 Neil Gaiman rewrote the forgotten character for a three-part mini-series illustrated by Dave McKean. This version redefined the character as a plant/human hybrid created by Dr Philip Sylvian, an eco-scientist who designed the hybrid to combat the problem of global warming (like a plant, it takes in carbon dioxide and breathes out oxygen). Sylvian's project began during his time at university, where he studied alongside Alec Holland (Swamp Thing) and Pamela Isley (Poison Ivy), under the tutelage of Dr Jason Woodrue (Floronic Man). Using strategies I have already examined in the context of the Gothic, Gaiman superscripts the original Orchid's history in order to provide her with an origin and an alter ego: that of Susan Linden.⁴³

The character reuse and intertextual involvement of recognisable characters (such as Lex Luthor, Batman and Poison Ivy) positions *Black Orchid* within the superhero genre, although Gaiman's modifications allow the series to reverse many of the genre's trends. His origin story provides the character with certain powers lacking from the original version – she can fly and, like the Swamp Thing, alter her body (which otherwise appears purple) to disguise herself as human. However, the original Orchid (who has infiltrated Lexcorp) is unmasked before her death at the book's start; her use of a rubber mask and disguise keeping Gaiman's rewrite coherent with the 1970s series.

As seen in the previous chapter, reversals again abound in this treatment of the superhero. The death of the first Black Orchid is brutal, unanticipated, and shocking. It

⁴² Comics lore has it that Berger initially replied 'Black Hawk Kid, who's he?' (Salisbury 1999, 98).

⁴³ Phil Sylvian and Susan Linden were childhood best friends. As an adult, Susan married Carl Thorne, a henchman of Lex Luthor's, until at Phil's urging she finally left him and was persuaded to testify against him. To prevent this, Thorne had her murdered and Sylvian subsequently used Susan's DNA to create his orchid/human hybrids, the first of which Gaiman identifies as the original (1970s) Black Orchid. The 1989 mini-series begins with her death and the subsequent destruction of Sylvian's laboratory, which kills all the other hybrids except two: one adult, one child.

also has a metafictional status as her murderer says:

HEY ... YOU *KNOW* SOMETHING? I'VE SEEN, Y'KNOW, THE *MOVIES*, JAMES BOND, ALL THAT. I'VE READ THE *COMICS*.
SO YOU KNOW WHAT I'M *NOT* GONNA DO? I'M NOT GOING TO LOCK YOU UP IN THE BASEMENT BEFORE INTERROGATING YOU.
I'M NOT GOING TO SET UP SOME KIND OF COMPLICATED *LASER BEAM DEATHTRAP*, THEN LEAVE YOU ALONE TO ESCAPE.
THAT STUFF IS SO *DUMB*.
BUT YOU KNOW WHAT I *AM* GOING TO DO?
I'M GOING TO *KILL* YOU.
NOW. (Gaiman 1991c, 14.1-2)

And he does. As Mikal Gilmore identifies in his introduction to the *Black Orchid* trade paperback, at this moment the killer is also addressing the reader and explaining that the usual genre rules will not apply here. From its very beginning the metafiction of *Black Orchid* is concerned with redefining the superhero genre.

Similarly, Gaiman's *Black Orchid* is teamed with a child version of herself (who calls the character '*MOMMY*' (80.1)), and in this sense the hero/sidekick relationship is overtly redefined as familial, and female. Gaiman also reverses the more usual superhero subtext, as the underlying theme of *Black Orchid* is a message of anti-violence. After Susan's ex-husband Carl kills Phil and destroys his laboratory together with all the other orchids (her '*SISTERS*'), the Orchid nonetheless saves him from Lex Luthor, saying '*TOO MANY HAVE DIED TODAY. / NO MORE*' (78.2-3). This act is ultimately repaid as Carl's attempted revenge on Luthor's thugs unintentionally helps her.

Further, in the final scenes, Luthor's henchmen refuse to destroy the Orchid and her final message to him is:

ORCHID THE GAME IS OVER. I'M TIRED OF IT.
IT'S FOOLISH AND VILE.
TELL HIM THAT IF HE *EVER* INTERFERES *AGAIN* WITH ME, OR
MY SISTERS, WE WILL *RETALIATE*.
I WILL *RETALIATE*.
HENCHMAN *SURE. YOU'RE* THE ONE WHO'S SO DOWN ON *VIOLENCE*!
ORCHID I DIDN'T MENTION *VIOLENCE*. BUT IF HE PERSISTS ... I WILL
FIND *WHATEVER* IT IS THAT HE *LOVES* ...
AND I'M SURE THERE *IS* SOMETHING ...
AND I WILL TAKE IT *AWAY* FROM HIM.
TELL HIM THAT. (152.2-3)

The Orchid's mercy towards Carl is repaid with his help, and her peaceful ethos is rewarded by Luthor's hunters adopting a similar reasoning ('*I - WE'VE KILLED FOR YOU BEFORE. IT'S WHAT WE DO. / BUT NOT HER. NOT HERE*' (150.6)). Similarly, Carl's destructive mission of revenge (against Lex Luthor, the Orchid, and everyone else) ultimately results in his death. The life/death binary that underlies this superhero tale (and many others) is brought to the surface in *Black Orchid* and ultimately balanced. Although, as seen, it is integral to the superhero ethos that they do not kill, brutality is nonetheless sanctioned by the genre as the superhero's use of violence produces peace. This is not so in *Black Orchid* where violent acts reap a similarly bloody reward.

Gaiman makes the identity struggle that is at the heart of the superhero conundrum overt in the Orchid's quest for her own identity: her first spoken words are 'WHO AM I?' (25.6). She is conscious of her stolen identity, and knows she is the second Orchid, but her search for answers spans the whole of the book, until the Swamp Thing finally explains her origin. Interestingly, her confusion at the alter ego/hero divide is not shared by the child Orchid: in answer to Black Orchid's statement 'WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE ARE, LITTLE ONE' the child replies 'SUZY. I'M *SUZY*.' (79.3-4)

The myth underlying Gaiman's tale resolves many of the oppositions implicit in the superhero myth: specifically, the fractured identity of the superhero condition. Gaiman makes the Orchid's identity overtly multiple: the child Suzy says at one point 'THAT WAS CARL, WASN'T IT? [...] I WAS ... MARRIED TO HIM' (75.1), confirming that she and the Orchid share the same identity. It may also be said that, by redefining the Orchid as plant-based, Gaiman makes the notion of multiple identical incarnations easier for the reader to understand. Similarly, the underlying binary of death/life is resolved as the Orchid plants seeds given to her by Swamp Thing to produce new sisters, and as her non-violent ethos is rewarded.

Subversion of the medium is essential to establishing and redefining these elements of the superhero. Gaiman elects to show the actual moment the first Orchid is shot (Appendix 3.1); in contrast to the more usual strategy of allowing such events to occur in

between panels, as identified by Scott McCloud (Appendix 3.2). McKean's painted artwork adds a further sense of realism to the scene, where the colours and style used also differ from the medium's traditional brightly coloured scenes and cartoon artwork. The shot to the head which 'kills' the first Orchid is made even more brutal by its presentation, which includes showing the exit wound as further evidence of its finality.

However, the death of the first Orchid, like her life, is multiple: two pages later it is revealed that the gunshot has not killed her and she tries to escape from the burning building. Again, our expectations (that she will succeed; after all she has survived being shot in the head) are subverted as, on the next page, the entire building is blown up, emphatically and finally dispatching the character. As already discussed, Gaiman continues to represent the superhero as the site of multiple identities and underlying this is the myth of the May Queen and the binary of life/death.

Poison Ivy calls the Orchid 'MAY QUEEN' (95.2), as does the Swamp Thing (114.2). Ceremonies revolving around this legend have existed throughout Celtic, Saxon and Pagan eras and symbolise the renewal of life and the ability of all to be reborn. The shared identity of the two remaining Orchids and their plant status give the myth a literal representation. Its underlying binary of life/death is invoked (both are depicted as multiple) and ultimately reconciled in some of the Orchid's final words: 'PERHAPS OUR KIND *NEED* DEATH, SUZY. / SUSAN LINDEN GAVE US HER LIFE, JUST AS PAMELA ISLEY GAVE HER LIFE TO THE SPOILED THING IN ARKHAM' (135.2).⁴⁴

Black Orchid is a quiet, unassuming superhero tale, without any of the brashness or violence that so often underlies the superhero myth. The Orchid herself, the May Queen, represents a new incarnation of the peaceful superhero (of the same type as Moore's Swamp Thing), and is used to redefine the superhero figure. By existing in overt

⁴⁴ Arkham Asylum, Gotham's mental hospital for the criminally insane. Created by Dennis O'Neil and introduced in *Batman* #258 (October 1974), the asylum is named after founder Amadeus Arkham's mother: Elizabeth Arkham (although this backstory, by Len Wein, was not created until 1985). Outside the fiction the name is of course a tribute to H.P. Lovecraft's fictional city of Arkham, Massachusetts, and both the asylum and Lovecraft's town have an architectural and atmospheric leaning towards the Gothic and the occult.

multiplicity and providing an alternative to brute force she is able to resolve the identity fracture and power conundrum that underlie this genre. With this in mind I turn now to a consideration of another Vertigo text, Garth Ennis's *Goddess*, which takes as its subtext the motherland myth. Robert Graves defines such national convictions as 'the ultimate source of all religion, myth and poetry' (1961, 408) and, as such, a wider myth of the femininity of nature may be identified as the underlying structure of both these superhero texts.

Case study: *Goddess*

Garth Ennis's *Goddess* is an eight-part maxi-series collected in trade paperback that tells the story of Rosie Nolan, a woman who discovers she is the incarnate spirit goddess of Earth.⁴⁵ The setting and events are typical Ennis: overtly political (Rosie's powers first manifest themselves when she unintentionally splits Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom), violent (environmental activist Mudhawk makes his point by gunning down foxhunters), and the narrative carries an underlying message of social commentary that is reinforced by its use of Myth.

Rosie's powers simultaneously represent natural rights ('I'M GOING TO SAVE HUMANITY FROM ITSELF AND REPAIR ALL THE DAMAGE TO THE PLANET' (Ennis 2002a, 240.3)) and female rights ('IF YOU *EVER* TOUCH ME AGAIN ... IF YOU EVEN BLOODY *DREAM* OF HITTING *ANY* WOMAN, *ANYWHERE*...' (169.1)). The two are paralleled in Mother Sun's speech about the current state of Earth/Rosie: 'I DON'T WANT THIS HAPPENING TO MY OTHER DAUGHTERS, GIRL. / SOON MEN WILL REACH OUT FOR THEIR PRECIOUS BODIES, DRINKING THEIR BLOOD IN THE NAME OF FUEL AND POWER' (218.4). Rosie simultaneously represents the abstract and the specific, the natural world and its human dependants: a combination that is reinforced by the medium (Appendix 3.3).

This page (or metapanel) shows the dichotomy between these concepts: Rosie is

⁴⁵ Rosie develops uncontrollable psychic powers and becomes hunted by both British and American police forces for these. The comic reverses the quest convention by focusing on her flight from her pursuers along with her friends Mudhawk, Sandy and Jeff. Rosie ultimately meets with the pantheon of other planet goddesses and is told to destroy mankind (to save Earth). She refuses, choosing instead to return to Earth and use her powers to remodel the planet.

rising up into the air as the panels simultaneously pull back into outer space. This cinematic technique allows the narrative to move from the specifics of her surroundings towards an abstract view that shows the split of Scotland from England. Despite the fact that the illustration of Rosie gets smaller as we read down the page, we nonetheless retain the sense that she is actually rising up and becoming larger. In this way the visual narrative of comics sustains the natural/human or abstract/specific identity binary underlying the text.

The rest of the comic makes a more traditional use of the medium: in contrast to some of the scenes discussed from *Black Orchid* much of the action takes place between panels (as when Mudhawk steals a motorcycle (88.3-4)), forcing reader involvement and deduction to create the story. Its visual attributes are mostly used in the pursuit of metaphor (as when Rosie summons waves in the form of white horses (65.1)) or to make a visual point (Sam's question 'WHY?' is answered by the appearance of a humpback whale (174.3)) (both pages attached as Appendix 3.4). Both these panels dominate their respective metapanel in terms of size, positioning and style – the detailed, lifelike illustrations of the natural world contrast with the tiny characters who are shown in both instances surrounded by and clinging to their technology (in the form of a boat and a plane).

As mentioned, both *Black Orchid* and *Goddess* use a motherland myth that invokes the femininity of nature, whose binaries underpin the text and whose tenets are redefined by its contrast with another myth. This is that of the American dream: 'GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR, YOUR HUDDLED MASSES YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE ...' / AND I WILL SEND THE ASSHOLES TO LIVE IN THE SOUTH BRONX, WHERE THEY WILL NOT FIND A JOB AND WILL END UP DRINKING *LIGHTER FLUID!*' (94.1-2). This statement is instantly qualified by Jeff, the homodiegetic narrator, as the 'HORRIFIC BLACK TRUTH ABOUT THE AMERICAN DREAM' (94.3). By commenting overtly on this myth in the text, Ennis sets it up as representative of 'culture' (as an antonym of nature), and is able to contrast it with the implicit myth he uses: that of respect for the natural world.

Ennis's motherland myth operates according to binaries where male/female ('THERE

ARE NO GODS, LOVE. JUST GODDESSES' (196.2)) and culture/nature (*'I'LL REGROW THE RAINFORESTS -- CREATE A COUPLE OF MILLION NEW WHALES -- FIX UP THE OZONE LAYER ... / AFTER THAT I'LL ABOLISH ALL GOVERNMENTS, AND THEN I'LL BE IN CHARGE'* (241.1)) are aligned with bad/good. These are introduced as obvious syntagmatic oppositions that are supported by both the content of the text (from the beginning it is established that Rosie and her friends, the environmental activists, are our heroes) and its form (expectations of the medium are that there will be 'good guys' and 'baddies'). The paradigmatic clusters formed from these pairs are therefore 'male, culture, bad' versus 'woman, nature, good' and these binaries underlie Ennis's myth of respect for the natural world.

However, during the course of the book elements of the text begin to work against these symbolic clusters and break down their meaning. Initially, Ennis mocks the military forces (part of the 'man-culture-bad' cluster and set in opposition to his pantheon of planet-goddesses) by assigning ridiculous names to their staff (*'DICK LIMPCOCK'* (28.2)) and operations (*'SEARCH CONTROL, THIS IS COLON LEADER!'* (175.2)), and ensuring all these characters meet a nasty end. But the alternative (the female pantheon) is quickly revealed to be a dictatorship whose mandates Rosie also refuses to accept: *'I DON'T HAVE TO BLINDLY FOLLOW SOME CRAP ABOUT EARTHQUAKES AND WHO EATS WHO AND WHAT'S SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN'* (233.2).

The binaries that originally underlie Rosie's dilemma (as to whether she should destroy mankind and save her planet, or save mankind and thereby allow its destruction), have therefore been redefined by the time she comes to make this decision. Her refusal to do either (*'I'VE GOT THE POWER OF A WORLD AND THE MIND OF A WOMAN [...] IF SOMETHING'S WRONG, YOU DON'T DESTROY IT. YOU FIX IT'* (233.2)) is only made possible by the mythic structure utilised by *Goddess*, whose narrative redefines and reconciles the contradictory elements of its underlying myth – elements that are integral to the superhero genre as a whole.

Just as *Black Orchid* resolves the fractured identity of the superhero condition, in

Goddess Ennis is able to redefine the genre's notion of power. *Black Orchid* subverts the superhero power binary, concluding that strength is not always right and creating a place within the genre for a different sort of power. However *Goddess* is able to take this a step further by allowing both the female rights and the natural rights Rosie represents to work in harmony: bridging the culture/nature opposition that lies at the heart of the motherland myth.

Case study: *The Invisibles*

Eschewing contemporary politics in favour of idealism, *The Invisibles* uses a more philosophical approach in its efforts to create an adult superhero tale concerned with the nature of good and evil.⁴⁶ Grant Morrison's chronicle of the apocalyptic battle between 'good' (anarchic) and 'evil' (mechanistic) comments on the tradition of the superhero team, and 'rewrites the superhero narrative into a kind of posthuman body: self-conscious, incoherent, fundamentally... flawed' (Goodman 2002, npag). In the process the comic builds a philosophy of understanding life which revolves around the notion that all times are present together and an implicit debate on the idea of progress; notions of new gods (the guillotine, John Lennon); and the ultimate goal of an eternal language which is defined as the unconscious speaking directly, and will free people from the limits imposed on them.

On a manifest level, *The Invisibles* follows Joseph Campbell's pattern of the traditional hero myth as Dane is first separated from his background (both in his escape to London, and on a more abstract level as he enters the parallel world the Invisibles move in), before being initiated into the Invisibles through training and a series of tests. The power at stake is defined in terms of control and modification: the Myrmidions create their soldiers

⁴⁶ The comics tell the story of homeless teenager Dane and his initiation into the secret society of the Invisibles, whose goal is to free the minds of the masses and fight the Myrmidions (another secret society whose goal is control). For the purposes of this case study I shall be considering only the first trade paperback (*Say You Want a Revolution (The Invisibles #1-8)*); however in later issues Morrison develops his philosophy of the universe further. He ultimately turns the whole series on its head by revealing numerous conspiracies and that many of his so-called heroes are actually double-agents (and double-double-agents). It is therefore worth bearing in mind that a lot of the themes discussed here are inverted or transcended later in the series; however it remains that 'what is written is written'.

by giving them new eyes and removing their brains and genitals, saying 'TWO THINGS WE WILL MAKE YOU; SMOOTH BETWEEN THE LEGS, SMOOTH BETWEEN THE EARS' (Morrison 1996, 40.5).

Similarly, the war the Invisibles are engaged in fighting is defined in completely Manichean terms by both sides: as their leader King Mob says '<WE'RE IN THE FINAL FURLONG IN THE RACE BETWEEN A NEVER-ENDING GLOBAL PARTY AND A WORLD THAT LOOKS LIKE AUSCHWITZ...>' (204.4). His opponent, Gelt, comments similarly in this regard, saying: '...MAKE NO MISTAKE, THERE IS A WAR BEING WAGED BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. THE FORCES OF CHAOS ARE FOREVER SEEKING WAYS TO GAIN FOOTHOLDS IN YOUNG AND IMPRESSIONABLE MINDS' (31.3). It is worth noting that, while both sides associate the other with evil (King Mob's Auschwitz comparison; Gelt's alignment of chaos and evil), the text aligns itself with the Invisibles, that is, on the side of chaos.

In this sense, although notions of power remain traditionally masculine in *The Invisibles*, the standard superhero binary of order/chaos is reversed in *Say You Want a Revolution*. We are reassured that the Invisibles are on the side of good, since they engage in none of the bodily mutilation of the Myrmidions and stand opposed to their fascistic regime. However, other elements of the text work against this: Dane's codename within the Invisibles is Jack Frost, from a childhood memory of his mother warning him to be good. As such, it is associated with badness and his mentor comments at one point 'HE [Jack Frost] STILL COMES WHEN YOU'RE BAD, DOES HE?' (90.5). Similarly, during his initiation, Dane's eyes are temporarily replaced with those of a bird (81.4), and at one point a series of panels hint at an alien abduction, during which close observation could deduce that Dane's brain is being removed (Appendix 3.5).

As Dane asks of another of his mentors, Boy: 'IF NOBODY KNOWS WHO'S WORKING FOR WHO, HOW DO I KNOW I HAVEN'T JOINED THE OTHER SIDE?' (134.4). Her reply ('JESUS! GOOD QUESTION, JACK. / GOOD QUESTION' (134.5)) is less than reassuring. Morrison's descriptions of a Manichean war are inverted so many times (from their initial associations that stand in opposition to the superhero genre rules; to Dane's Myrmidion-

esque initiation; to the notion that nobody knows who they are working for) that soon we become reluctant to make such value judgments. In an aside, Morrison introduces a scene involving a puppet show, where one of the audience comments: 'THE *DALANG* IS MORE THAN A PUPPETEER. / HIS SKILL MAKES US BELIEVE THAT WE SEE A WAR BETWEEN TWO GREAT ARMIES, BUT THERE IS NO WAR. / THERE IS ONLY THE *DALANG*' (124.4-5). This point of view is clarified further by Elizabeth Goodman, who comments that 'the Manichean war presented [...] is for Morrison the SYMPTOM, not the problem' (2002, npag).

On a manifest level, then, the text uses a mythic structure to reconcile its binaries – even managing to mediate between good/bad, as seen. It also tackles the myth of progress as Morrison parallels his twentieth-century setting with the French Revolution, identifying both as containing new gods of progress (such as John Lennon (25.2, 33.5) and Madame Guillotine (149.5)). The progress myth is defined as the search for utopia, as when the goals of the French Revolution are described: 'HEAVEN IS ABOLISHED AND IN ITS PLACE THEY'RE PROMISING *UTOPIA* HERE ON EARTH' (158.2). In this way it is initially stated that utopia can only be built on hell: 'YOU TALK *UTOPIA* BUT THERE WAS NOT ONE DAMNED *UTOPIA* THAT DID NOT SET ITS FOUNDATIONS IN HUMAN SUFFERING AND PAIN' (127.5).

This myth is also approached from the reverse point of view, where progress is defined as a virus: 'HUMAN CULTURES WERE ORIGINALLY *HOMEOSTATIC*, THEY EXISTED IN A SELF-SUSTAINING EQUILIBRIUM, WITH NO NOTIONS OF TIME AND PROGRESS, LIKE WE'VE GOT. THEN THE *CITY-VIRUS* GOT IN [...] LIKE ALL VIRAL ORGANISMS, ITS ONE DIRECTIVE IS TO USE UP ALL AVAILABLE RESOURCES IN PRODUCING *COPIES OF ITSELF*' (83.4). In this way the utopia myth is dislocated from the binaries 'progress, good' and 'stasis, bad'. However, the killer Orlando sends the Invisibles a postcard picturing Arcadia, with the message 'ET IN *ARCADIA* EGO' ('and in Arcadia, I') (142.2) and this association denies the alternative 'nostalgia, good', 'technology, bad' binary available to this myth. The overall effect is to resituate the utopia/progress myth outside the notion of

linear time, as Morrison offers an alternative point of view.

From its opening line ('AND SO WE RETURN AND BEGIN AGAIN' (8.1)) *The Invisibles* is preoccupied with notions of repetition and the cyclical nature of history ('<HE WAS TALKING ABOUT REVOLUTIONS. OR THE REVOLUTION. I SUPPOSE THERE ONLY IS EVER ONE>' (201.3)). This implicit critique of linear temporality emphasises the text's postmodern status still further (if, like Jean-François Lyotard or Bruno Latour, we perceive postmodernism as a symptom of the sense that something has gone awry with modernity). As Nietzsche observed, we suffer from the illness of historicism in sustaining the illusion that we have broken with the past. Latour has commented further:

The modern passage of time is nothing but a particular form of historicity. Where do we get the idea that time passes? From the modern Constitution itself. Anthropology is here to remind us: the passage of time can be interpreted in several ways – as a cycle or as decadence, as a fall or as instability, as a return or as a continuous presence. (1993, 68)

By using recurring symbols such as the scarab beetle ('THE BEETLE'S SUPPOSED TO STAND FOR DEATH AND RESURRECTION, ISN'T IT?' (33.4)) and the 1960s band The Beatles interchangeably, Morrison subverts the notion of progress through linear history, supporting alternate views of temporality. The static nature of the medium also enables this theory to be conveyed in the text's content, as when Dane witnesses a conversation between two members of the Beatles; as they are unable to see him he is simply removed from the panel (19.3). As a symbol dating from Ancient Egyptian times the beetle stands for new life and resurrection, and it is perhaps also worth noting that this link with multiplicity is not a new one within literature, for example the narrative of Richard Marsh's gothic novel *The Beetle* makes use of multiple narrators.

In this way, the binary of space/time underlying the narrative is resolved: *The Invisibles'* philosophy is that all time is coexistent. The medium is obviously essential in not only conveying this point, but also demonstrating it by displaying the space/time binary. This is because a theory of time as coexistent implicitly underlies the kind of narrative used in comics: where we may read a linear story but all moments nonetheless

coexist on the page. Perhaps *The Invisibles* may even be read as metafiction in this sense: for in comics time is, of course, represented as space.

Fredric Jameson's preface to *The Prison-House of Language* (1972) also seems applicable in this regard, as he comments that 'We have tended to take temporality for granted [...] Perhaps that is, indeed, the ultimate propadeutic value of the linguistic model: to renew our fascination with the seeds of time' (1972, xi). He goes on to cite Boris Eichenbaum: 'Time in history is fiction [...] The study of history reveals the dynamics of events, laws which function [...] everywhere and at all times. In this sense, paradoxical as it may sound, history is the science of the permanent, the unchanging, the immobile, even when it deals with change and movement' (Jameson 1972, 97). *The Invisibles* takes as its structure a similar philosophy of history and, as we shall see, it is this structure that dictates the text's content (from a formalist perspective where content is only created through the text's attempts to resolve its structural problems through composition).

This philosophy of history invalidates the question underlying the progress myth (whether utopia grows from hell or vice versa):

DE SADE <AH, SO IT'S MORE FEEBLE-MINDED UTOPIANISM? [...]
I HAVE NO WISH TO LIVE IN ANYONE'S PERFECT WORLD BUT MY
OWN.>
KING MOB <EXACTLY.
THAT'S WHY WE'RE TRYING TO PULL OFF A TRACK THAT'LL
RESULT IN EVERYONE GETTING EXACTLY THE KIND OF WORLD
THEY WANT.
EVERYONE INCLUDING THE ENEMY.> (204.5-6)

This conversation between the Marquis DeSade and King Mob hones in on the personal nature of utopia, again redefining our perceptions of the notion (since by definition each person's paradise must be unique). It is in pursuit of this goal that both the *Invisibles* and the *Myrmidions* seek the same mysterious treasure:

RAGGED ROBIN IS THAT IT? THE TREASURE IS A NEW LANGUAGE?
SAUNIERE NOT NEW. ETERNAL. GLOSSOLALIA IS THE LANGUAGE
OF ECSTASY AND DREAMS. THE PRIMAL TONGUE OF
FIRE.
IT IS THE ORIGINAL VOICE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND
AND EVERYONE WHO HEARS IT INTERPRETS IT
DIFFERENTLY. EVERYONE HEARS WHAT THEY NEED TO
HEAR. (217.1)

The Invisibles intend to use this universal language to give everybody the kind of utopia they want, while the Myrmidions need it to control the masses. However, this opposition is problematised by Morrison's destabilisation of the good/bad binary and we wonder if perhaps the two goals are not that dissimilar after all.

Most commonly associated with the religious experience of speaking in tongues, glossolalia nonetheless has also been studied as a secular concept; for example in the work of George Devereux, whose research notes striking similarities between children's speech and glossolalic speech patterns ('The Voices of Children' (1965)). Morrison's depiction (as the 'VOICE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS') seems to support this secular interpretation of glossolalia as a return to an earlier way of speaking; a definition that is further supported by the practice of glossolalia in many non-Christian religions around the world (Jennings 1968, npag). These studies do not define glossolalia as a strange, divine language, but rather as the aborted or incomplete formation of familiar language.

By explicitly referring to the unconscious, I would propose that Morrison's glossolalia is further linked to psychoanalytic hermeneutics; for example it recalls Freudian notions of dream interpretation via latent and manifest content. As mentioned, Freud's dream interpretation operated by translating manifest dream content from the personal (the symbols used by the dreamer's own psyche) to the universal (explaining these by transposing them into everyday language), and using these conclusions to deduce the latent, or unconscious, content. A similar process underlies Abraham and Torok's psycholinguistic study *The Wolfman's Magic Word*, where Freudian psychoanalysis informs Derridean semiology. Essentially, both these processes parallel the deconstruction of Myth, where latent content/underlying meaning is extrapolated from the manifest content/surface symbolism and only understood once translated into comprehensible language.

By defining glossolalia as an underlying unconscious language, Morrison not only supports a reading of the term as a partially formed, familiar language (a language of

regression to childhood), but also enables an understanding of glossolalia as divine. Scripture tells of the gift of tongues bestowed upon the disciples following Jesus's death, which allowed all who listened to hear God's message in their own language (Acts 2). Morrison uses a similar tone in his portrayal, describing glossolalia as 'ETERNAL' and using biblical-sounding phrases such as 'THE PRIMAL TONGUE OF FIRE' (which references 'cloven tongues like as of fire' (Acts 2.3)).

Similarly, theological studies of glossolalia note that, although able to be understood by all, the language's primary function is not to enable communication (see further below) but, rather, to partake of the presence of God. In this sense it is similar to prayer (for example as discussed by Jacque Ellul in *Prayer and Modern Man* (1970)). This function of glossolalia can therefore be clarified as ritual: that is, bringing about a certain experience (the manifestation of God). This interpretation is also supported by Morrison's version, which does not appear to be focused on communication ('EVERYONE HEARS WHAT THEY NEED TO HEAR.')

Essentially, then, Morrison's glossolalia supports conclusions reached by both secular and theological research. He further uses the concept to destabilise the Manichean opposition of good and bad. Similarly, his depiction reinforces the notion of language as a unification device that reconciles latent and manifest content, the unconscious and the conscious. Essentially, he treats glossolalia as a pure myth that contains within itself the ability to reconcile all these opposing concepts.

It is worth further noting that, in its ability to be understood by all, glossolalia could be described as a language like pictures – intelligible to everyone, though (unlike other languages) not a medium for *dialogic* communication. In this sense, it may not be too much to suggest that it mirrors comics: the medium's pictorial elements are intelligible to all readers, regardless of which language they speak. Similarly, the reader input required to interpret panels and to fill in the events of the gutters means that, as noted (see Appendix 3.2), the story created is unique for each reader and 'EVERYONE HEARS WHAT THEY NEED TO HEAR.'

The pictorial elements of comic-book signifiers also operate on an unconscious level in a more obvious sense, since the style of art may implicitly establish a mood without the need for explicit description. In this sense pictorial language stands opposed to textual language, as the latter requires conscious deduction of meaning from its words in order for the mood to become intelligible. However, Roland Barthes comments that 'Pictures [...] are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it. But this is no longer a constitutive difference [...] as soon as they are meaningful; like writing, they call for a *lexis*.' (2000, 110) While I agree that the conscious deduction of meaning from the purely visual (as when considering a work of art, for instance) does require a similar process to that of deciphering written language, I nonetheless contend that visual language is also able to convey an impression that operates on some level of the unconscious, particularly when (as in comics) the reader's conscious focus is necessarily kept on deciphering the textual elements of the panel.

For example, the gunshot shown in Appendix 3.1 (drawn by Dave McKean) carries quite a different effect from the similar scene shown in Appendix 3.6 (Steve Dillon). Whereas at first glance this could be attributed to McKean's using paint (rather than flat ink) and a realist style (as I noted earlier), in fact his panel is much more abstract than Dillon's, for example in its use of an entirely red background. This carries a psychological effect (as the colour alone connotes violence), and also allows the white flash of the gunshot to dominate the panel. Dillon also employs a blank background (a sepia-coloured sky), but instead relies upon positioning to emphasise the execution (it is both central and foregrounded). In both panels the gunshot dominates, but with entirely different connotations - whereas McKean's scene disturbs and could even be said to evoke notions of hell, Dillon's (despite the presence of the child Jesse) is, I would argue, less emotionally disturbing for the reader and instead seems to focus more on human brutality.

That the Invisibles' treasure is a language is one of the most significant elements of Morrison's fiction. It allows him to comment directly on the nature of Myth itself and to contrast it with our preconceived ideas of the function of language. This subtext is

introduced initially when Dane's mentor Tom explains to him:

AH, I FEEL A SADNESS ON ME, DANE. THAT'S HOW THE IRISH PEOPLE SAY IT.
IN THEIR LANGUAGE, YOU CAN'T SAY, 'I AM SAD,' OR 'I AM HAPPY'. THEY UNDERSTOOD WHAT WE ENGLISH HAVE LONG FORGOT. WE'RE *NOT* OUR SADNESS. WE'RE *NOT* OUR HAPPINESS OR OUR PAIN BUT OUR LANGUAGE HYPNOTIZES US AND TRAPS US IN LITTLE LABELLED BOXES. (102.2-3)

A similar strategy is employed when the time-travelling characters find themselves within one of de Sade's novels (*The 120 Days of Sodom* (written 1784, first published 1904)) while trying to find an exit back to the twentieth century. Morrison has de Sade describe his writing of the book while in prison, saying: 'I BUILT A DOOR MADE OF WORDS, ESCAPED THROUGH IT' (Morrison 1996, 185.3), explaining the presence of this exit by transforming metaphor into fact.

In *The Prison-House of Language*, Frederic Jameson clarifies this point of view further in his discussion of Russian formalism, which views textual content as merely an illusion projected by the structural problems of the text as they find their ongoing resolution in its composition (1972, 88). *The 120 Days of Sodom* is remembered chiefly for its shocking content; however, viewing this as an illusion created by the self-conscious work of art (as the content exists only to enable the book to come into being) causes us to ask what components make up its structure. Morrison uses de Sade's imprisonment to explain his creation of his literature as arising from a need to escape society's restrictions (as he had already been imprisoned for similar). As such, the book does conform to a formalist deconstruction: the ostensible content may be defined as a treatise on the notion of excess and free will, yet this exists only to play out and thus resolve the structural problems of the text – the implicit binary of imprisonment/freedom and the contradictory desire to create offensive and alienating literature which nonetheless exists to be read.

In this way Morrison alerts us to the implications of taking language at face value; an observation prefigured by Roland Barthes's observations of the dangers of Myth in the

context of ideology. Barthes comments that:

What allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system. (2000, 131)

As already mentioned, Barthes defines Myth as a metalanguage, as '*a second-order semiological system*' (114) that operates along the same lines as language while shifting each semiological concept (sign, signifier, signified) a lateral step. So a sign in language becomes a signifier in Myth. He clarifies this further by saying that 'the signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness' (123).

This theory is consistent with Lévi-Strauss's observations of the relationships between Myth, music, and language. These are perhaps best expressed spatially, as follows:

Language =	phonemes/letters	words	sentences
Music =	notes/letters		melodic phrase/sentence
Myth =		equivalent words	equivalent sentences

Lévi-Strauss continues: 'If we try to understand the relationship between language, myth, and music, we can only do so by using language as the point of departure, and then it can be shown that music on the one hand and mythology on the other both stem from languages but grow apart in different directions, that music emphasizes the sound aspect already embedded in language, while mythology emphasizes the sense aspect, the meaning aspect, which is also embedded in language' (1978, 52). As such, its linguistic elements have both a literal and metaphorical meaning.

Both critics observe that Myth operates as a metalanguage, and that if treated as such its mysteries may be resolved and its ideology revealed. By commenting on the dangers of taking language literally, Morrison echoes these observations and is also enabled to use

Myth as the metalanguage for *The Invisibles*. As a text whose narrative is non-linear (due not only to the medium, but also to its time-travel content and philosophy of coexistent time), *The Invisibles* not only rewrites the superhero genre into a postmodern treatise where the superhero is a figure of continual change (constantly fluctuating between the binaries it invokes and existing outside of linearity); but may also be described as metafiction whose subject is the interplay of language and Myth.

Myth, fairy tales and towards the Fantastic

As seen, many of the Vertigo comics utilise mythic structures, whether in latent form (as underlying binaries) or as manifest narrative content (in reflecting upon and/or satirising mythic figures such as the superhero). Many of the resulting functions can be aligned with my observations on the use of gothic structuring and content and it appears that these comics incorporate multiple literary genres in order to produce some of their key narrative and stylistic effects. Bearing this in mind I turn now to a brief discussion of the properties of the fairy tale, in the hope that my conclusions may provide a starting point for my subsequent consideration of the Fantastic.

As mentioned, Marie-Louise von Franz defines the fairy tale as a mythic structure with less culturally specific material overlaid – a problematic statement when we consider the universal nature of Myth. However, a Lévi-Straussian dissection of the fairy tale identifies similar underlying binary structures as might be found in the deconstruction of a myth, so von Franz's definition may stand if we consider her statement to instead refer to the cross-cultural nature of fairy-tale *content*, which generally takes place 'once upon a time' and in a land 'far far away'. Fairy tales do not deal with the local, personal history of a single culture, but operate in an altereity; in a world like ours, but dis-located and removed from our immediate experience.

This removal of the historical element found in Myth leads us to another defining factor of the fairy tale, identified by Edmund Leach who says that 'the special quality of Myth is not that it is false but that it is divinely true for those who believe, but fairy-tale for

those who do not' (Leach 1970, 54). His definition links Myth and the fairy tale through the role of the reader/listener; relying upon their response to define the genre. As such it is clearly much more subjective than von Franz's criteria, but perhaps no less accurate for that.

Comics, then, as well as being able to utilise a mythic structure, also have certain parallels with the fairy tale. Their setting is often an alterity that reflects certain aspects of our world – writer/editor Denny O'Neil has famously commented that 'Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year' (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 9).⁴⁷ So while their setting may be culturally specific (enabling the characters and tales to be perceived as a kind of myth), it is simultaneously a fairy-tale alterity.

We return then to the subject of belief, and to the role of the reader in this regard. Traditionally, the fairy tale reader has many parallels with the reader of comics – both may be assumed to be a child (and as such may well believe in the superhero: supporting Leach's definition); the tales frequently have a moralising function (as in the golden- and silver-age comics); and illustrative elements are common to both media. This last point, however, is somewhat misleading since (as I hope is obvious) the sequential narrative art found in comics has few similarities with the purely decorative illustrations found in children's books in terms of function.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the collaboration of reader and writer in creating a narrative story from the comic's static pictures may also support Leach's fairy tale definition in its focus on the role of the reader.

However, the Vertigo comics operate somewhat differently from the traditional conception described above. Marketed as adult fiction and also received as such (DC market research c. 1991 showed that their average reader was 'twenty-four and male and

⁴⁷ It also seems worth noting that, taken together in this way, Gotham/Batman and Metropolis/Superman represent a binary opposition (within the superhero myth as a whole) that is further emphasised by O'Neil's use of the terms 'below' and 'above'.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 1 'Industry changes: outside factors'.

very literate' (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 29)), these texts no longer assume a child readership. Similarly, and as shown in my case studies thus far, the traditional moralising function has been discarded in favour of a more realistic and humanised portrayal of the superhero figure as flawed.

This position between fairy tales and Myth seems applicable to *The Sandman*. Gaiman's style and subject matter provide a sense of fairy-tale wonderment, while the 'waking world' is an American alterity that echoes our world while allowing magical things and events to exist and occur. However, the text has also been defined as Myth by Stephen Rauch: whose work considers Gaiman's stories as modern myths. Rauch's definition of Myth is drawn from Joseph Campbell's work and, specifically, the four functions (mystical, cosmological, sociological and psychological/pedagogical) Campbell identified. Rauch finds evidence of all these functions in *The Sandman*, concluding that therefore the series 'can be seen not just as incorporating mythic elements, but *as a myth in itself*' (19).

Rauch makes a convincing argument for reading *The Sandman* as a modern myth that successfully combines the old and the new to produce an updated version of the hero quest (as the series tells the story of Morpheus's ongoing humanisation and his ultimate replacement by a human version of himself (40; 53)). His observations support anthropological, psychological and literary definitions of Myth – for example as he identifies the socialising function apparent in Morpheus's humanisation and acceptance of death (56); the overt link between dreams and Myth (22), and The Dreaming (Morpheus's abode) as a dramatisation of Jung's collective unconscious (23); or the structure of the hero myth as underlying 'all interesting tales' (52).

Rauch ultimately concludes that *The Sandman* is a modern myth as it inverts the traditional hero quest structure in its humanisation of a god (rather than vice versa) and contains many female (rather than male) quests: such as Rose Walker's search for her brother in *The Doll's House*; Thessaly, Hazel and Foxglove's mission to save their friend Barbie in *A Game of You*; or Lyta Hall's quest to retrieve her son in *The Kindly Ones*. I

would point out that, as inversions, these also reflect some of the gothic literary strategies discussed in the previous chapter. In support of his conclusion Rauch also cites the inclusion of multiple pantheons of gods, which enables Gaiman to ‘craft[s] a new mythology around the existing mythologies’ (37). It is worth noting that this is also echoed in *The Sandman*’s incorporation of previously used industry characters – enabling the text to present itself as metafictional and postmodern (in its intertextuality and polytheism).

However, Rauch also comments that the sociological function of *The Sandman* myth may be closer to folklore since, while Campbell describes this function as validating a certain social order, *The Sandman* instead ‘challenges the ideologies of a society’s myths [as] Gaiman uses folkloristic elements and includes characters from groups that have been marginalized by society, and by “traditional” myths’ (97). Rauch nonetheless concludes that *The Sandman* must be defined as a modern, rewritten myth (citing other scholars who identify Myth as a challenge to the social order (98)); however I would contend that his observations in this regard also support a reading of the text as fairy-tale or folklore.

Rauch is aware of this dichotomy and comments that, in its combination of oral and written stories, *The Sandman* is ‘a blending of myth and folklore’ (118). It is in this regard that he makes an interesting point regarding the distinction between Myth and story, commenting that ‘Is it not possible that the distinction between myths and stories is simply one of quality?’ (135), paralleling notions of high and low culture with myth and story. He concludes that ‘What *Sandman* should make clear is that the line between high and low culture is a false distinction’ (135), and it is my contention that the highbrow mythic elements observed in this text and my other case studies serve precisely to underline this point. Their inclusion in comics means that, despite public perception and pop culture stereotypes, the medium cannot be inherently lowbrow.

It seems, then, that in light of the range of specific definitions possible the line between Myth and fairy tales or folklore can be variously interpreted, and that the stories told by the Vertigo comics may not necessarily fall clearly into one of these categories. In *Theory and History of Folklore* (1984) Vladimir Propp states that ‘The character of a genre

is determined by the kind of reality it reflects, the means by which reality is expressed, the relation to reality, and its assessment' (41). If such a distinction relies on reader perception and, specifically, notions of belief and reality, then perhaps we can begin to see the relevance of the Fantastic. As such I turn now to a consideration of the Fantastic and the ways in which the Vertigo texts may represent the continuance and culmination of some of its thematic and structural elements.

Chapter 4: the Fantastic

Perhaps as befits a genre that has most famously been defined as ‘occupying the duration of [this] uncertainty [...] that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural experience’ (Todorov 1975, 25), the Fantastic frequently eludes definition and resists categorisation. Critics remain hesitant as to its status (as a genre or mode) and attempts at definition have focused variously upon its thematic, structural, stylistic or cultural elements. I therefore offer below a brief summary of the current critical position, which informs my own critical model. I then propose to apply this model to two of *The Sandman* trade paperbacks (*A Game of You* and *The Kindly Ones*) in order to reflect upon the ways in which these comics function as fantastic literature, and also upon the applicability of the model itself. By further considering these texts in light of the gothic and myth criticism already examined I hope to extend my discussion of this critical framework. I conclude by looking forward towards my final chapters, linking the Fantastic to postmodernism and semiotic criticism, and refining my model in this way.

Literature review

Northrop Frye’s criticism offers a broad view of literature in identifying archetypes and modes that encompass genres. As noted, Frye uses a mythic framework to argue that these correlate to the various seasons or stages of the life of the hero (Frye 1963, 17); however, these archetypes may also be understood as the narrative categories of comedy, tragedy, romance and irony. Frye offers a similar categorisation of modes (as overall tendencies in literature rather than historically limited genres) in situating Myth and naturalism as the opposing poles of literary design, with romance (again defined not as a historical genre but as a movement in literature towards the displacement of Myth into the human sphere) found between the two (Frye 1990a, 136). Similar models are found in the work of other critics, for example Robert Scholes’s catalogue of seven modes that are derived from historical

genre definitions yet encompass these, and roughly correspond to Frye's narrative categories, albeit in an expanded form (Scholes 1969, 107).

Although he criticises the non-literary nature of Frye's categories (Todorov 1975, 16), Tzvetan Todorov's famous structuralist definition of the Fantastic mirrors Frye's work in creating a similar three-part structure at the level of genre (where the Fantastic is situated between the marvellous (supernatural accepted) and the uncanny (supernatural explained)). In critiquing the ambiguities and omissions of Frye's model, Todorov exposes the distinction between historical and theoretical genres (a notion that looks as far back as the theories of Plato or Diomedes, and which defines genres that may not exist alongside those that do) in Frye's catalogue (Todorov 1975, 13); and creates a similarly theoretical model of the Fantastic.

Todorov defines his work as 'structural poetics' and contrasts its focus on both static and dynamic elements with Frye's purely thematic categorisation (Todorov 1975, 17). His method identifies three textual levels (the verbal, the syntactical and the semantic) and proposes that the 'moment of hesitation' that defines the Fantastic may be located on any of these levels (20). Whereas previously this hesitation commonly referred to perception (and therefore was most often found in the verbal area – referring to both the utterance itself and its performance, and thereby involving both the speaker/narrator and the listener/reader), Todorov proposes that language has now replaced perception as the defining factor of fantastic discourse. Consequently he concludes that hesitation is also observable both in the syntactical relations between different parts of the text, and in its semantic content (its themes, which he identifies as being either of the self or the other).

Todorov's model builds on Frye's theories, although he also cites support for his reader-based definition and the notion of hesitation from previous philosophical works such as those of Vladimir Solovyov (25). His critique of Frye seems supported (for example by Frye's own insistence in his work on the autonomy of literary criticism (Frye 1990a, 6) while denying any such self-sufficiency to his literary categories), and Todorov's structuralist model is one of the most famous definitions of the Fantastic to date. Previous

literary studies had touched on the Fantastic only as a part of a wider categorisation of literary criticism (Frye) or generic theory (as Robert Scholes describes his own work: situating it between the generalisations of modal theory and the preciseness of genre study (1969, 111)).

Genre studies such as John Cawelti's work on formula fiction are predominantly concerned with deductively establishing the formulae behind certain genres before considering the cultural functions of each formula, for example by applying impact theories, deterministic theories, or symbolic/reflective theories (Cawelti 1976, 22). As such, Cawelti's model focuses largely on thematic textual elements and considers these with reference to the genre's underlying formula (it is worth noting that, for Cawelti, formula fiction relies on recourse *not* to reality but only to the formula itself, and that in this way the text creates its own field of reference (10)). Cawelti further links this arrangement to the role of the audience in dictating the degree of reality needed for suspension of disbelief (38) and identifies the importance of evoking a fundamental attitude shared by the audience as crucial to success (30).

Other studies such as the formalist work of Vladimir Propp also focus primarily on the text's semantics. *Morphology of the Folktale* explores the text at its narrative level and as such focuses on its overt content and themes. Through syntagmatic analysis of individual narratives, Propp identifies thirty-one functions that he claims are common to the narrative structure of all Russian wondertales. By focusing exclusively on this limited body of work, Propp's study also includes an implicit cultural element, although this is not explicitly considered in *Morphology*. However, Propp's later book, *Theory and History of Folklore*, expands somewhat upon his earlier observations to consider the semantics of his wondertales in a cultural context: concluding that folklore reinterprets the images of the old social system in order to depict the unusual in impossible dimensions (1984, 11).

Propp further comments (somewhat more widely) that, as such, genres may be

classified according to their relationship with reality:

The character of a genre is determined by the kind of reality it reflects, the means by which reality is expressed, the relation to reality, and its assessment. Unity of form results in unity of content, if by content we understand not only the plot but also the intellectual and emotional world reflected in the work. It follows that unity of form is sustained by everything called content and that the two cannot be separated. (1984, 41)

In this way Propp gives his semantic study a syntactical dimension and, although the resulting model has been criticised (for example by Claude Lévi-Strauss), it has also been successfully defended (see previous chapter).

Defining the Fantastic in terms of its relationship with reality is further supported by the work of Kathryn Hume, who defines fantasy as one of the overall impulses (together with mimesis) that underlie all literature (Hume 1984, xii) and subdivides it into four different modes according to its response to reality (55). While Hume's inclusive definition is certainly non-restrictive it is of small help in defining exactly what fantasy might be except a departure from reality – though her identification of fantasy elements in a wide range of fiction certainly emphasises the lack of critical attention paid to this impulse. She comments that 'we are curiously blind to its presence because our traditional [Western] approaches to literature are based on mimetic assumptions' (1); further citing Roland Barthes's *S/Z* with regard to the insufficiency of such approaches.

Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) seeks 'to extend Todorov's investigation from being one limited to the *poetics* of the Fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its forms' (Jackson 1981, 6) in order to consider the cultural formation of the Fantastic. Although she supports Todorov's definitions of the marvellous, Fantastic and uncanny, Jackson appears to read Todorov's model as operating at a modal level and as such disagrees with his use of the uncanny (which is not a mode or narrative category) (32). She instead chooses to situate the Fantastic/fantasy (she uses the two terms interchangeably) between the modes of the marvellous and the mimetic (which parallel Frye's opposing modes of Myth and naturalism, and Hume's fantasy/mimesis dichotomy).

By situating her model at this level (and as such following the work of Frye and

Scholes), Jackson defines the Fantastic as a mode that assumes different generic forms (32). Defining the Fantastic in this way allows her criticism to take place outside the exactitudes and limitations of genre study and formula fiction by removing restrictions such as the notion of historically limited genres. Essentially (to use Jackson's linguistic metaphor) the mode of the Fantastic is the *langue* from which various *parole* (genres or forms) derive; according to its interpretation and the surrounding historical situation (7).

Jackson has been criticised most for her indiscriminate use of terminology (see Traill 1996, 6; Cornwell 1990, 27), but her work also introduces two important notions: 'alterity' and 'paraxis'. These may be further illuminated by the opposing modes of Myth/marvellous and naturalism/mimesis. 'Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real' (20). Fantastic worlds are therefore alterities – 'this world re-placed and dis-located' (19), and Jackson defines this process of transformation and replacement as paraxis – signifying 'par-axis', being that which lies alongside the main body (or axis) (19). Jackson further notes the significance of her optical metaphor (paraxis is a technical term referring to an illusory area of perceived unity after light refraction), alerting us to the significance of perception in defining the Fantastic.

In adding a cultural dimension to Todorov's model, Jackson's criticism is largely semantic in nature, and much of her study is concerned with identifying the Fantastic's themes (such as invisibility, transformation, and dualism) and motifs (vampires, mirrors, shadows, ghosts, madness, and dreams) in her selected texts. It is again worth noting that all these revolve around difficulties of perception and the problematisation of vision (45). However, she does also apply her criticism, albeit briefly, to the syntactical dimensions of the text: supporting Todorov's model in commenting that anxiety and hesitation may be found in the work's structure (28). Jackson further notes that the structure of the Fantastic is founded on contradictions (21) and anticipates modernism's gap between sign and meaning – conclusions that are informed by her subsequent discussion of psychoanalytic theory, and which link the Fantastic to the Gothic (whose nameless things and thingless

names I have already discussed).

However, Jackson's work is not able to provide a new model for future criticism, but instead uses Todorov's model to inform a series of observations that connect a variety of works in terms of their structural characteristics and underlying semantic themes. Although I would argue that Todorov's model, while replicating Frye's three-part structure, takes place on the generic rather than the modal level, his genres are theoretical (and as such are not historically limited), and in such a situation this terminology becomes confusing. It is therefore far simpler to situate the Fantastic explicitly at a modal level, between the marvellous and the mimetic, and this repositioning of the term informs Jackson's discussion of notions such as alterity and paraxis, as noted.

Subsequent criticism has continued to redefine Todorov's model in a similar manner, using stylistic and semantic deconstructions of fantastic literature to justify modifications. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1981), Christine Brooke-Rose attempts to define the Fantastic stylistically, providing an analysis of previous critical models (including those of Wayne Booth, Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov) and genre-based theories (such as those of Philippe Hamon or Darko Suvin). She redefines Todorov's notion of hesitation in terms of the text's implied author and reader (as well as its narrator and narratee) and analyses the text's related stylistic features, concluding that the textual codes used are necessarily either over- or under-determined (we are given too much (conflicting) information, or not enough) in order to sustain the Fantastic (Brooke-Rose 1981, 112).

Brooke-Rose also applies a formalist perspective in using the concepts of *fabula* (plot) and *sjuzet* (its telling), which she relates to Gérard Genette's terms of story time ('ST') and narrative time ('NT'), respectively. Genette's model uses the weighting of these two terms to define the text syntactically, offering the following system:

pause:	$NT = n, ST = 0$. Thus: $NT \infty > ST$	[NT is infinitely greater than ST]
scene:	$NT = ST$	[NT is the same as ST]
summary:	$NT < ST$	[NT is less than ST]
ellipsis:	$NT = 0, ST = n$. Thus: $NT < \infty ST$.	[NT is infinitely less than ST]

(Genette 1980, 95)

Brooke-Rose redefines Genette's asymmetrical model so that 'NT=ST' becomes pure dialogue, enabling her to extend his model to include the missing term 'NT>ST', which she defines as a scene (due to the inclusion of narrative description) (315). Not for the first time, attention is drawn to the stylistic strategies common to the Fantastic – for example, unreliable narration, one form of which is represented here by pure dialogue.

She further proposes an adaptation of Todorov's model into a circular form, introducing 'realism' as a bordering space between the opposing poles of the uncanny and the marvellous. This provides for the inclusion of genres such as science fiction (as marvellous-realism) although it does not solve the problem of situating works such as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), which has been defined (by both Todorov and subsequent critics) as the uncanny-marvellous.

Later critics' work continues in this vein, reassessing and adapting Todorov's model in order to both refine its applicability and inform discussion of the types of strategies common to the Fantastic. A.B. Chanady's *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* (1985) attempts to clarify and distinguish between these two terms, treating them as similar modes. Commenting that 'critics do not even agree whether it is a mode, a genre or an attitude towards reality' (1985, 1), Chanady goes on to draw attention to the confusions of Todorov's system (where despite naming the Fantastic as a genre, he nonetheless situates it between two modes (1)). She instead adds the Fantastic to Robert Scholes's catalogue of seven modes and discusses it at this level.

Although she does not adopt Jackson's alterity terminology, Chanady also notes that fantastic literature is set in a world 'very similar' (though not identical) to our own (5), in contrast to fairy tale, which takes place in the world of the outright marvellous. She defines three criteria for the presence of the Fantastic/magical realism: the co-presence of the natural and supernatural; antinomy between the two; and authorial reticence (31). The treatment of these factors is, for Chanady, the distinguishing factor between magical realism and the Fantastic: whereas the co-presence of the natural and supernatural is normalised by the presence of a realistic framework in magical realism, this is denied in the

Fantastic. The antinomy of the supernatural and natural is thereby resolved in magical realism and authorial reticence leads to acceptance; whereas such contradictions are foregrounded in fantastic literature and uncertainty prevails (11).

Chanady's attempt to distinguish between the two terms is made less clear for some readers by her use of Spanish-American narratives, which are included without translation. However, her method leads to closer study of the strategies used to enable authorial reticence (such as singularisation) and she concludes by suggesting further areas for research that include the character of the narrator, use of subjectivity, characteristics of enunciation, and closer analysis of structural elements such as the use of suspense, suggestion and so forth.

Neil Cornwell's study *The Literary Fantastic* (1990) seeks to link the Fantastic to both gothic and postmodern literature and in so doing offers a comprehensive literature review of many of the models examined thus far, summarising their main techniques and flaws. In this regard he also critiques the interchangeable use of terms such as 'the Fantastic', 'fantastic [literature]' and 'fantasy' (Cornwell, 1990, 27). For Cornwell's purposes, Todorov's genre theory of the Fantastic exists within the broader mode that Cornwell names as fantasy, although he notes that fantasy also exists as a sub-genre (for example Tolkien-esque fiction), and in addition defines the Fantastic as a quality that may be found in works such as the uncanny (31).

Cornwell goes on to adapt Todorov's model to include a space for the pure Fantastic (which is represented only as a line between the Fantastic-uncanny and the Fantastic-marvellous in Todorov's original diagram). He subdivides Todorov's model still further (extending it towards the left (on the side of the uncanny) to include uncanny-realism, realism, fiction, and non-fiction; and adding mythology to the far right of the diagram and subdividing the marvellous into 3 categories: 'what if?', 'fairy story' and 'romance/fantasy') (36). Cornwell then situates the problematic *Metamorphosis* and works of magical realism in this first sub-category, supporting the textual observations and conclusions drawn by Brooke-Rose and Chanady. He further cites the work of Kathryn

Hume in this regard, postulating that all these genres will, to some degree, utilise fantasy (39).

In again discussing fantasy as a mode, and in examining adaptations of a straightforwardly linear model (such as Brooke-Rose's circle), Cornwell's work evokes Robert Scholes's original linear spectrum of seven modes, which Scholes subsequently adapts into a two-dimensional 'V' shape by bending the line along which his categories are situated at the halfway point (Scholes 1969, 106). In so doing Scholes creates a space (the inset area of the resulting 'V' shape) in which the cross-fertilisation of genres can take place. Cornwell's process invents a similar space for the Fantastic to exist in, and while this may deny Jackson's optical metaphors (where the process of paraxis refers to an apparent unity where there is in fact none) it opens up the notion of the Fantastic as a space of literature – a point I shall deal with more fully in a moment.

Scholes's work in fact identifies a trend in modernist literature to depict a world which is 'fragmented and distorted, and [where] language would be tortured in an attempt to hold the satiric and romantic views of life together' (109) (the satiric and the romantic are the two poles of his spectrum of modes). This fragmentation has continued within postmodernism (as identified by Cornwell, who theorises that the dominant 'has passed steadily from the old certainties of realism to the fragmented and ambiguous challenge posed by the literary fantastic' (Cornwell 1990, 145)); and in fact, in his view, the Fantastic has been promoted to dominance by many of the same modernist authors cited by Scholes. Again, this parallel implicitly situates the Fantastic between polarised modes.

Cornwell also looks backwards to gothic fiction and aligns David Punter's definition of 'paranoiac fiction' with the Fantastic (53). In this sense he again strengthens the case for consideration of the Fantastic as an overall mode rather than a historically limited genre – and goes on to criticise the narrow period from which Todorov's examples are drawn (141). Although it is clear that many of the best examples of fantastic fiction are to be found in certain eras, its applicability to the disparate genres of both the Gothic and postmodernism refutes such a limitation, and (although Cornwell does not express this directly) his work

therefore aligns with Jackson's in treating the Fantastic as a mode which assumes various forms according to its historical context.

Cultural studies that focus on the historical genre of the Fantastic do, however, provide further information as to its function and enable semantic discussion. Cawelti notes that, while the genre is universal, the formula behind it is cultural (Cawelti 1984, 57), and as such it may be said that studies such as Propp's *Morphology* can inform on both levels. Cawelti concludes that formula fiction has a ritualistic function: to reaffirm cultural values (100), and Jack Zipes's work on fairy tales offers a similar conclusion (Zipes 1988, 143). Zipes's semantic consideration draws a distinction between the functions of the oral tradition of fairy tale and those of its written form and as such offers a syntactical element that is further enhanced by his observation that the structure of the tale is designed to facilitate recall (for example in its use of tasks as signs, or the absence of names) (Bannerman 2002, npag).

The various works of Marina Warner offer a similar thematic deconstruction of many of the dominant themes, motifs and symbols of fairy tale as Warner traces the historical development of this genre. She identifies changes in the depiction of certain motifs (such as the witch figure (Warner 2000, 12)) and in this way links the semantic content of fairy tale firmly to its historical context. *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (2002) focuses on the changing uses of the transformation motif (in figures such as the zombie), and again aligns the Fantastic with gothic fiction by identifying shifts in its treatment that have spread ideas such as plural consciousness and doubling; concluding that: 'Contemporary writers are increasingly plotting their fictions against the normative models of the unified self' (Warner 2002, 203).

Jacqueline Rose's *States of Fantasy* (1996) again takes a cultural perspective on the Fantastic, using the modern Israel versus Palestine territory debate to approach this issue. While Rose concurs that the Fantastic reflects the dominant mode of society, she is more concerned with considering its public role and taking it out of the exclusively private sphere: 'To think of fantasy as private *only* is a form of possession; holding on to our

fantasy, we blind ourselves to the way it circulates and empowers itself in other, more public, domains' (Rose 1996, 79). Placing the modern state in dialogue with Freud's work, Rose's socio-psychoanalytic reading argues that concepts such as justice are part of a public fantasy upon which the authority of the state depends (10).

As seen, then: while these cultural and semantic theories focus upon cataloguing the motifs and themes of the Fantastic, contemporary syntactic models have refined Todorov's framework to emphasise the textual structure rather than the subjective reader response. This enables consideration of the Fantastic in terms of its relationship with reality (a notion prefigured by Propp and Hume), as in the work of Nancy Traill, who uses a theory of fictional worlds (derived from possible worlds) to examine the stylistic and semantic elements of the Fantastic. Like Chanady, Traill redefines reader hesitation as the co-presence of the natural and supernatural within the text, arranged in alethic opposition (Traill 1996, 9). She identifies various modes of the Fantastic (such as the disjunctive, outright fantasy, the ambiguous, or the paranormal) and (commenting on Jackson and Todorov's definitions) defines these as being tied to a moment in history while also transcending it (20). She further reviews terms such as realism in this way, distinguishing between the historical movement (realist fiction) and the ahistorical requirement (mimesis) (43).

Traill's work therefore has a cultural element, and she cites movements such as spiritualism or creationism as factors in the changing treatment of the supernatural, following Kuhn's paradigm theory of knowledge. As such, she concludes that 'The fantastic survived the impact of science and of positivist philosophy by developing a new mode, by making an adjustment that carried it into the twentieth century' (141): naming the paranormal as this new, modern mode, and situating it in the domain of the 'natural' (equivalent to Todorov's 'uncanny').

As such, fantastic-specific criticism has provided (and subsequently modified) a framework for analysing fantastic texts syntactically that is enhanced by its observations of the narrative techniques common to this model. These include: narrative remove, authorial

reticence, over- or under-determination, floating signifiers, the use of figurative rather than literal discourse, and irreversible temporality, to name but a few. The semantic focus of other criticism from this school similarly identifies its relevant themes (such as transformation, invisibility, and dualism) and the symbols and motifs used to emphasise these.

As Cornwell notes, the literary Fantastic has many similarities with the postmodern, a link further supported by his identification of the current preponderance of fantastic literature. Similarly, Scholes's definition of contemporary writing as fragmented and distorted applies equally to both the Fantastic and modernist/postmodernist fiction. Some of the more general surrounding literary criticism further emphasises this point.

In *Romancing the Postmodern* (1992), Diane Elam links the 'excess characteristic' (Elam 1992, 1) of romance to postmodernism: considering romance both as a postmodern genre and as postmodernism itself (12). In so doing, she treats postmodernism not as following modernism, but as its counter-discourse (3), commenting that 'postmodernism does not simply happen after modernism but is a series of problems present to modernism in its continuing infancy' (9) and hence focusing on texts that are problematised by their inclusion of romance (4). In my view, by situating romance in opposition to literary realism, defining it as 'excess', commenting that its character remains 'an uncertainty' (7), and focusing on its problematic tendencies, Elam's treatment of the concept may inform discussion of the Fantastic (if not outright fantasy). She further adds a gender dimension to her study in her consideration of woman 'as the figure of the self-excess of romance' (17).

Bruno Latour takes a similar perspective on the coexistence of modernism and postmodernism in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), arguing that the historically limited genres of modernism and postmodernism are illusory and that, in fact, modernism has never existed in accordance with its own constitution. By exposing modernism's inconsistencies (its processes take place in a mediated space between nature and society that it deems not to exist), he establishes it as the unconscious of the moderns (Latour 1993, 37) and postmodernism as a symptom of this misunderstanding (46). As such, he defines

postmodernism not (as it presents itself) as the end of history, but instead locates it in the perpetual impasse of the avant-garde (62). In so doing his work, like Elam's, accords with Jean-François Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, as 'not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant' (Lyotard 1984, 79).

The Space of Literature identified by Maurice Blanchot in his 1982 book offers an inverted way of approaching literature as a silent empty space. Blanchot argues against common literary perception in proposing that art is not the real made unreal; that we do not ascend from the real world to art, but instead emerge from art towards what appears to be a mutualised version of our world (Blanchot 1982a, 47). Literature dwells in a silent, empty space and similarly is only able to be defined in terms of its negative attributes, such as the power to stop writing (25). As such, it is inward-looking: concerned only for its own essence (42). The illusory space accorded to the Fantastic by some of the literary models I have examined thus far, together with the reversal of the real and fictional worlds that underpins Blanchot's framework, again seem to tie his model to the Fantastic.

The idea of literature as that which 'has become concerned for its own essence' (42) also evokes the notion of metafiction; a form common to the postmodern. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (Waugh 1984, 40). However, she also defines it as 'a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels' (42) and identifies many metafictional techniques that I observe as being shared by the Fantastic, such as the defamiliarisation of language, an undermining of the omniscient narrator (49), or the setting up of an opposition between the construction and breaking of illusion (52). In this way metafictional texts explore the concept of fictionality and expose reality itself as a mere concept.

James Whitlark notes a metafictional dimension to the modern superhero as 'their relationship to their creators becomes more explicit' (Whitlark 1986, 108) and it is worth briefly considering this figure in the context of the Fantastic. If, as Propp suggests, form and content are inseparably linked (Propp 1984, 77) then the popularity of this figure may

inform my consideration of comics' generic qualities. While, as noted, the notion of the double self (the superhero/alter ego) has the strongest ties to the Gothic, this is further emphasised by Whitlark's observation that the superhero-as-fantasy may be read psychologically as representing either the superego (Superman, Spiderman), or the id (the Hulk, the Thing) (109). Similarly, the reconciliation function and the notion of balance between good and evil tie this figure to Myth.

However, the bridging mechanism that sustains these elements of the superhero is, of course, the notion of transformation, and in this sense the superhero may also be read as a motif of the Fantastic. No matter what the purported setting, the presence of the superhero defines the comic-book shared universe as an alterity, and its metafictional elements (as also identified in previous chapters) further emphasise the Fantastic.

These critical areas seem important to my conception of the Fantastic, and will hopefully be further informed by my subsequent case studies. These will be performed using a model of the Fantastic derived from the critics mentioned above and which I define as follows. I view the Fantastic as an overall mode or tendency in fiction (in this way similar to David Punter's definition of the Gothic) that has spawned various historical genres. These genres include those named by Todorov as fantastic, uncanny, or marvellous (which last is also known as magical realism or fantasy), and also the newer genres of the paranormal, science fiction and so forth. From this point on I shall therefore distinguish between the (ahistorical) mode of 'the Fantastic' and the (historical) genre of 'the fantastic', or 'fantastic literature' (which is distinct from fantasy or magical realism, as detailed below).

I intend to examine the mode of the Fantastic at both a syntactical and semantic level and as such I will define the conditions of the Fantastic textually. In this regard I follow later critical models in redefining Todorov's notion of hesitation as the co-presence of the natural and supernatural (while noting that this may be indicated by reader hesitation). This is my primary condition for identification of the mode of the Fantastic, which (depending on the treatment of this opposition and other textual and historical factors) may then spawn

any of the above-listed genres – such as magical realism/fantasy (if the co-presence of the natural and supernatural is normalised), or the fantastic/fantastic literature itself (where this juxtaposition is problematised). Using this model, I shall now turn to a consideration of the comic book and the Fantastic, using two case studies of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*.

Contemporary status

It seems important to recognise that the audience for fantastic literature aligns with that of comics – perhaps more closely than any of the other genres I have considered thus far. Like comics, the genre of fantasy literature is still perceived by most as children's literature. Similarly, fan conventions are events common to both comics and fantasy; and role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* link the Fantastic to the same fanboy/nerd label applied to comics. Offshoots such as live role-playing further emphasise costuming as a common factor and this is again reinforced by the presence of conventions, where costumes (such as Star Trek uniforms or magician's robes) are commonplace. Finally, fantastic literature, movies and associated merchandise are often sold in comic book shops and in this way the genre literally shares a space with comics – *Forbidden Planet* (one of the largest chains of comic book stores in the UK) describes itself on its website as 'the world's LARGEST and BEST-KNOWN science fiction, fantasy and cult entertainment retailer' (see www.forbiddenplanet.com).

It is worth noting, however, that although the audience for fantastic literature is clearly identifiable as a subgroup with both visual and personality stereotypes (and similar in these ways to the gothic subculture previously discussed), its sister genre and mode, romance, does not share in all these factors. Although the romance audience has a clearly delimited stereotype – female, middle-aged, spinster – there is no interpretative community such as that found for fantasy (where online gaming leads to a strong community spirit) or comics (whose online discussion groups provide similar).

Fantasy blockbusters such as Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (2001-02) or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (the first of which was published in 1997) may

be perceived as breathing new life into the genre, however I would argue that this is deceptive. Jackson's movies have not legitimised fantasy in a wider sense (for example by bestowing new credibility on older fantasy movies such as *The Beastmaster* (1982) or *Krull* (1983)) and Rowling's success, although paving the way for imitators, has not made it any more acceptable for adults to read generic fantasy – even her own books have been famously repackaged in this regard (using black-and-white photographs rather than character illustrations) for those who wish to read them in public. Likewise, the credibility that is afforded by the packaging of the glossy graphic novel and trade paperback forms or bestowed upon the literary Vertigo writers mirrors this situation – as it should be remembered that this does not yet extend to general public perception of comics.

Case study: *The Sandman: A Game of You*

A Game of You (the fifth *Sandman* trade paperback) tells a story split between two contrasting worlds – the dream world of its heroine, Barbie, and the 'real' world of New York.⁴⁹ The presence of these two alterities invokes the Fantastic as we struggle to decide which world is most valid: which we should believe in. However, as Samuel Delaney alerts us in his introduction to the trade paperback, it is a mistake to read one world as fantasy and the other as reality. Delaney instead proposes that both worlds are fantasy: citing as evidence the mirroring and doubling of events between worlds, and the parallels between characters such as George and Wilkinson, or Wanda and the Tantoblin (Delaney 1993, npag).

The natural and supernatural coexist within the setting of Barbie's dream world (which is known only as 'THE LAND') – although in fact its introduction focuses entirely on

⁴⁹ Barbie (first introduced to us in *The Doll's House*) is troubled when her old fantasy dream world (which she has not visited in some time) starts to invade her waking life. Due to interference from agents of the Cuckoo (The Land's evil ruler) she becomes trapped in this alterity. Her friends Hazel, Foxglove and Thessaly travel to her dream world to save her, calling down the moon to do so, which causes a hurricane to hit New York. They defeat the Cuckoo and return safely, although Barbie's transsexual friend Wanda (who remained behind in reality) and the other occupants of her apartment building were all killed by its collapse during the hurricane. The book concludes with Barbie travelling to Kansas to attend Wanda/Alvin's funeral, during which she dreams of a new world where Wanda's transformation is complete.

its natural elements. This is primarily achieved by showing the opening conversation (between Luz, Prinado, Wilkinson and Martin Tenbones) without revealing the speakers to be talking animals (Gaiman 1993a, 1.1.1-1.3.3), and is further reinforced by the subject of their conversation, which indicates that the laws of life and death also apply here (the panels depict the dead body of the Tantoblin, the friend they are discussing (1.1.3)). In fact our first encounter with The Land (in *The Doll's House*) emphasises this point, as it is introduced as: 'BARBARA'S RICH DREAM-LIFE, MORE VALID AND TRUE THAN ANYTHING SHE FEELS WHEN WAKING' (Gaiman 1990c, 6.15.1). At least initially, the unreal seems more real than the fiction's presentation of 'reality'.

Conversely, from the very first issue of this story arc, supernatural elements from The Land invade the New York setting. Barbie's escort, Martin Tenbones (a giant dog-like creature) crosses into this world to alert her to danger (1.15.2); ghostly cuckoos appear and then vanish in Barbie's room (1.24.4-5); and in the final panel her neighbour George reveals himself to be a servant of the Cuckoo (1.25.8). Following from my model of the Fantastic, these may be best defined as supernatural elements that sit at odds with the natural elements of the New York alterity and are treated as such – the police shoot down Martin Tenbones, believing him to be an escaped animal; Barbie panics upon seeing the cuckoos; and George is defined as abnormal as he is shown eating an entire (live) bird in one mouthful.

Barbie's response to the presence of the supernatural in her world is pure hesitation – she repeats Martin Tenbones's name more than once in disbelief and although his physical presence cannot be denied nonetheless continues: 'BUT YOU'RE FROM MY DREAM...' (1.21.4). Similarly, the supernatural events (such as Thessaly's drawing down of the moon so she, Hazel and Foxglove may walk its path into The Land) have natural ramifications – as George (posthumously) tells Wanda: 'THESSALY WASN'T JUST DOING SOMETHING UH *SPIRITUAL*. THAT WAS UH *PHYSICAL* TOO' (4.19.7). As such, these unnatural events cannot be dismissed and therefore the New York setting may, as Delaney alerts us, also be read as a fantastic alterity.

However, there is also a third alterity present in *A Game of You* – the world of The Dreaming. This too is introduced in the first issue of the story arc (1.11.1-5, 1.12.1-7), although as Morpheus's domain it is not new to us. As such we know it to be real (within the confines of the text) yet also fantasy (in accordance with the willing suspension of disbelief that is the condition of fiction). As the master shaper and storyteller who will also turn out to be the god of Barbie's dream world (whose name, Murphy, derives from Morpheus (5.31.5)), Morpheus and his realm may be read as a point of reference which adds a metafictional dimension to the text that I shall return to discuss.

It seems, therefore, that the mode of the Fantastic informs all of the contrasting alterities within *A Game of You* with varying effects. Whereas in *The Land* the co-presence of the natural and supernatural is normalised, and as such may be read as representing the magical realism/fantasy genre; the contradictions we perceive in our introduction to the New York alterity tie it to the genre of the fantastic. The third alterity of The Dreaming further utilises the Fantastic to create metafiction as it is revealed that Morpheus (who is often defined as a storyteller figure) is the literal creator of one of the worlds.

The opposition between the real and the unreal perceived in the worlds of *The Land* and New York produces a hesitation as we attempt to read this antinomy in various ways and decipher which world is real. The solution provided by the Cuckoo and reaffirmed by Barbie in the book's final pages, is that:

**EVERYBODY HAS A SECRET WORLD INSIDE OF THEM.
I MEAN EVERYBODY. ALL OF THE PEOPLE IN THE WHOLE WORLD - NO
MATTER HOW DULL AND BORING THEY ARE ON THE OUTSIDE.
INSIDE THEM THEY'VE ALL GOT UNIMAGINABLE, MAGNIFICENT,
WONDERFUL, STUPID, AMAZING WORLDS... NOT JUST ONE WORLD.
HUNDREDS OF THEM. THOUSANDS, MAYBE. (6.19.2-4).**

However, it may be said that by offering such a non-physical explanation this solution is problematical not magical: supporting a view of the text as fantastic literature.

Intertextual references further blur the line between fantasy/reality and fiction/metafiction in all three worlds – such as Barbie's frequent references to *The Wizard of Oz* (4.18.2, 6.6.2, 6.10.1, 6.23.4) or her observation that 'I FELT LIKE BILBO IN

MIRKWOOD, IN THAT BIT WHERE THE GIANT SPIDERS GET THEM' (see Appendix 4.1). Her question to Wilkinson and his answering confirmation that giant spiders do indeed exist in *The Land* plays expertly with the medium by using the gutter (between panels 3 and 4) to mislead the reader before subverting their expectations (both regarding the existence of giant spiders and as to their 'good' and 'timid' nature), and in this sense both the medium and the text's structure support and sustain the hesitation necessary to the fantastic.

Aside from the co-presence of the natural and supernatural, other textual features of *A Game of You* also reveal the Fantastic. Although a third person, omniscient narrative voice is used initially to describe some of the New York setting (2.9.1-5, 3.12.1-8), this is only used to introduce the setting of 'THE LAND' and Barbie's voice provides all subsequent narration for this alterity (4.1.1 onwards). Unreliable narration is also overtly used in the New York setting: for example Martin Tenbones's description of the 'high stone cliffs' (1.18.2) of the city; or the voice of Barbara Wong on WRAT radio, whose comment that there's 'NO CHANCE' the hurricane is returning is literally shown as unreliable by the storm tearing down New York in the surrounding pictures (5.8.1-4). By the end of the trade paperback the omniscient narrator has been completely removed and, after her return from *The Land*, Barbie narrates the sixth and final section.

The defamiliarisation of language is another technique common to the Fantastic, and is also used here in a number of ways. It exists in Martin Tenbones's misinterpretation of the city's buildings as stone cliffs, and a slight resonance may be found in the doubling of Barbara our heroine and the ill-informed radio presenter Barbara Wong (whose full name also references a character briefly introduced in *Preludes and Nocturnes* (Gaiman 1991a, 7.8.1)). The main focus of this technique is upon this notion of naming.

The anonymous nature of 'THE LAND' is sustained by its elements, such as the underdetermined signifiers of the mysterious 'HIEROGRAM', the 'PORPENTINE', and the 'TANTOBLIN'.⁵⁰ That these are introduced by unseen speakers with equally strange and

⁵⁰ While Gaiman is aware of the meaning of at least one of these words (Bender 1999, 120), as they remain unexplained within the text I feel justified in describing them as underdetermined. However, all date from the seventeenth century and variously refer to a sacred symbol ('hierogram'); an Elizabethan word for

unexplained names (1.1.1-1.3.3) further emphasises this effect. Similarly, the threat of 'THE CUCKOO' remains unidentified until the fifth chapter – in answer to the question 'WHAT *IS* THE CUCKOO?' George is only able to reply: 'I...DO NOT...KNOW...IT IS THE CUCKOO...' (3.15.5). Insufficient information defamiliarises these words so they become thingless names. However, the visual nature of comics also enables many of these characters and figures to simultaneously appear as nameless things (for example the initial depiction of the Tantoblin (1.1.3), the glowing eyes which are all that represent the opening speakers (1.3.3), or the first appearance of Martin Tenbones (1.15.2)).

Conversely, it may be said that the real world suffers from an over-determination, specifically in its use of naming. Barbie's name has commercial and gender-based implications in invoking the popular children's doll, a link that her comments about her ex-husband Ken and his new girlfriend Sindy only emphasise (1.17.6). Similarly, characters such as the transsexual Wanda are revealed as having multiple names and identities: as she explains, '*WANDA'S MY REAL NAME, BARBIE-BABY. ALVIN'S JUST THE NAME I WAS BORN WITH*' (1.17.8). Barbie's gesture at the end (amending her friend's tombstone with lipstick to read 'WANDA' instead of 'ALVIN' (6.21.4)) further emphasises this over-determination by demonstrating the mutability of names.

Other characters such as Thessaly (whose name refers to her origins as a Thessalian witch rather than a personal identity – Morpheus and the moon both address her as 'THESSALIAN' (3.19.1, 3.19.5, 6.4.1)) also emphasise the insufficiency of a name as an identity. The rat Wilkinson's speech further stresses this point:

*I loved bein' a kid. I was one of seventeen children.
 We were all named Wilkinson – I suppose it was roughest on the girls, but we all got used
 to it in the end. [...]
 I would've liked to've bin an only child. That way when someone shouts Wilkinson, you
 know if it's you or not.
 Mustn't grumble. Our parents were the salt of the earth.
 Lovely people. It was just when they found a name they liked, they stuck with it.
 (4.13.1)*

porcupine ('porpentine'); and a cake or tart ('tantoblin', later also to become a slang word for excrement – the origin of which meaning is perhaps also hinted at in *A Game of You* by the 'Old Wilkinson family saying' (4.11.6)).

This again alerts us to the links between naming, gender and identity.

Delaney provides a Marxist reading of *A Game of You* that probes its apparent support of a dominant ideology. This hinges on his observations that the only black character (Maisie Hill), and the only transsexual (Wanda) are killed off at the end of the comic 'so that we can feel sorry for them, then forget about them'. He concludes that: 'Making the supernatural forces in the tale the enforcers of a dominant ideology is what makes it a fantasy – and a rather nasty one at that. And it remains just a nasty fantasy unless, in our reading of it, we can find some irony, something that subverts it, something that resists that fantasy' (Delaney 1993, npag).

However, Delaney does find the sort of irony he deems necessary in order for this ideology to be subverted – initially in the motifs and themes that are doubled and echo throughout both of his identified alterities. He aligns the initial references to the '*CUTE FROG MUG*' (Gaiman 1993a, 1.8.6) that Wanda uses for Barbie's coffee with the Cuckoo's question '*I'M AWFUL SWEET, AREN'T I? I'M AWFUL CUTE*' and Barbie's response '*YOU'RE ... CUTE ... AS A... / ...BUTTON...*' (5.6.5). This allows him to conclude that the supernatural forces' apparent support of the dominant ideology (to the reader's dismay, as Wanda is a likeable character) is actually no more than a comment on its sustenance by our natural world.

It seems to me that this parallel may in fact be taken a step further, as Barbie's observation '*YECCHY COFFEE. / CUTE MUG, THOUGH*' (1.10.6) can inform our later perceptions of the Cuckoo. Though she seems sweet and innocent on the outside; that which is inside is certainly not, as she plans to fly out of Barbie's dream world '*INTO LITTLE GIRLS' MINDS AND LAY EGGS OF MY OWN THERE...*' (5.27.2), in the '*SECRET WORLDS*' (5.23.4) that we all have inside ourselves. I propose that Gaiman uses the Fantastic in this way to explore an ideology that focuses specifically

on notions of gendering. The Cuckoo explains:

BOYS AND GIRLS ARE DIFFERENT, YOU KNOW THAT?
LITTLE BOYS HAVE FANTASIES IN WHICH THEY'RE FASTER, OR SMARTER, OR
ABLE TO FLY.
WHERE THEY HIDE THEIR FACES IN SECRET IDENTITIES, AND LISTEN TO
THE PEOPLE WHO DESPISE THEM ADMIRING THEIR REMARKABLE DEEDS.
PATHETIC, BESPECTACLED, REJECTED PERRY PORTER IS SECRETLY *THE
AMAZING SPIDER*. GAWKY, BESPECTACLED, UNLOVED CLINT CLARKE IS
REALLY *HYPERMAN*. YES? [...]
NOW, LITTLE *GIRLS*, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAVE DIFFERENT FANTASIES.
MUCH LESS CONVOLUTED. THEIR PARENTS ARE NOT THEIR PARENTS. THEIR
LIVES ARE NOT THEIR LIVES.
THEY ARE *PRINCESSES*.
LOST PRINCESSES FROM DISTANT LANDS.
AND ONE DAY THE KING AND QUEEN, THEIR *REAL* PARENTS, WILL TAKE
THEM BACK TO THEIR LAND, AND THEN THEY'LL BE HAPPY FOR EVER AND
EVER.
LITTLE CUCKOOS. (5.4.5-5.5.2)

Gendered identity is clear at the beginning of the trade paperback, where the dominant ideology is enforced – Wanda's nightmare shows her confusion at her identity in revealing her self-image to be male while insisting she's a woman ('MY NAME ISN'T ALVIN. IT'S WANDA. / I'M A WOMAN.' (2.12.6)) As Wanda's nightmare continues the visual medium further emphasises this as the panels depict her as increasingly muscled and masculine (2.13.2). Similarly, Wanda's description of her adolescent fantasy of being a Weirdzo (an intertextual reference to the Bizarros)⁵¹ is, according to the Cuckoo's rules quoted above, a masculine rather than a feminine fantasy.

Both society and nature align in their support of a rigid and unalterable gender taxonomy. Just as the moon will not let Wanda walk its path ('IT'S *CHROMOSOMES AS MUCH AS ANYTHING*' (4.19.5)), Wanda's Aunt Dora says: 'GOD GIVES YOU A BODY, IT'S YOUR DUTY TO DO WELL BY IT. HE MAKES YOU A BOY, YOU DRESS IN BLUE, HE MAKES YOU A GIRL, YOU DRESS IN PINK. / YOU MUSTN'T GO TRYING TO *CHANGE THINGS*' (6.14.3). Events such as Wanda's untimely death further support this, and even Morpheus says (speaking of the Cuckoo): 'She acts according to her nature. / Is that evil?'

⁵¹ A Superman spin-off series from the late 1950s. The Bizarros were flawed copies of Superman and Lois Lane created by Lex Luthor's imperfect duplication ray. They lived on the square planet Htrae: a mad version of Earth where everything is done backwards and all words have the opposite meaning.

(6.2.2)). As Delaney notes, both the natural and supernatural elements of the comic reinforce the dominant ideology.

However, by the end of *A Game of You* the rules of identity formation have begun to shift and become less rigid. This may be seen in the focus on naming already discussed, but is made more overt as the book continues by comments such as 'IDENTITY BLURS ON THE MOON'S ROAD' (5.9.1), or Barbie's regretful 'I REALISE THAT I'M *ALREADY* BEGINNING TO FORGET WHAT WANDA LOOKED LIKE. / IS IDENTITY *THAT* FRAGILE?' (6.17.5). I would argue that this shift in viewpoint is achieved through a motif of transformation, the treatment of which specifically relies upon consideration of the book's three alterities.

This motif of transformation most obviously invokes the Fantastic. As Marina Warner comments, tales of metamorphosis 'embody the transformational power of storytelling itself, revealing stories as activators of change' (Warner 2002, 210). Barbie's amendment of Wanda's tombstone with lipstick (6.21.4) is, as noted, a transforming gesture, but it should also be acknowledged that it is an impermanent one: rain will wash the lipstick away in no time. However, the dream Barbie recalls from her coach journey to Kansas provides a different vision of Wanda as 'PERFECT. DROP DEAD GORGEOUS. THERE'S NOTHING CAMP ABOUT HER, NOTHING ARTIFICIAL. AND SHE LOOKS HAPPY' (6.23.4). The presence of Death (Morpheus's elder sister) as her companion validates this vision of Wanda, and other visual elements of the panel further support it. Although comics' style of art can be used to fictionalise (such as Barbie's painted-on veil which is indistinguishable from the real thing), close perusal of Wanda's depiction at the start of the comic reveals clues as to her masculine identity, whereas in this final illustration she is indeed entirely feminine (see Appendix 4.2).

Following from this, it may be argued that the actual structure of *A Game of You* is transformational: that two fantastic worlds have merged by the end of the comic. Textual indicators such as the continuation of Barbie's narration (rather than a return to an omniscient narrator) or the preponderance of intertextual fantasy references in the final

chapter further support this – Barbie decides to take ‘THE DOROTHY OPTION’ (6.6.2) to get her and her friends home safely from The Land; Wanda’s funeral actually takes place in small-town Kansas (6.10.1); and in Barbie’s dream the feminised Wanda ‘REMINDS ME OF GLINDA IN THE OZ MOVIE’ (6.23.4). It may not even be too much to suggest that Barbie’s observation of her fellow Greyhound passengers (‘THE MAN IN THE SEAT IN FRONT OF ME KEEPS WHISPERING, ‘MR. WIGGLY HASN’T GOT NO NOSE’ TO HIMSELF, THEN BURSTING INTO TEARS’ (6.23.2)) may be another of Gaiman’s literary jokes and refers to Nikolai Gogol’s story *The Nose* (1835).⁵² This story has often been aligned with Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as a problematic example of the pure Fantastic.

Barbie’s comment on the names of the Kansas towns she passes – ‘THEY SOUND LIKE THE NAMES OF MAGIC KINGDOMS’ (6.18.4) – again seems to indicate that the waking world has become fantastic; that the two spheres have merged. The transformative structure is most clearly evidenced by Wanda’s now-possible gender transformation, and similarly by the Cuckoo’s metamorphosis into the bird she so desperately longs to be (6.7.1-3). The result is that static notions (such as identity or home) are redefined as fluid and changeable, as in Barbie’s comment that ‘I DON’T THINK HOME’S A PLACE ANYMORE. I THINK IT’S A STATE OF MIND’ (6.15.3). This in itself again calls to mind A.B. Chanady’s observation that ‘critics do not even agree whether it [the Fantastic] is a mode, a genre or an attitude towards reality’ (Chanady 1985, 1). That Gaiman has also introduced alterities such as his land of Faerie (‘WHICH IS A PLACE, BUT PERHAPS ALSO, I LIKE TO THINK, AN ATTITUDE’ (Gaiman 1996, 10.9.1)) in this way further supports this reading.

Finally, notions of metafiction are supported by both the structure and content of the comic. Cornwell notes that metafiction ‘forms a part of the general uncertainty and discontinuity of much recent fiction’ (Cornwell 1990, 158) and Gaiman’s use of Morpheus as a point of reference to contrast with the uncertainties of the other worlds in *A Game of You* further supports this. Morpheus’s presence validates certain worlds (such as Barbie’s

⁵² The story of Major Kovalyov’s search for his mischievous missing nose, which has taken on a life of its own and run away.

final vision of Wanda) and, read in this way, his creation (and subsequent uncreation) of The Land redefines *A Game of You* as metafiction about the power of fantasy worlds (or fiction) to change real life. This view is further informed by Maurice Blanchot's treatise on the space of literature, and specifically his observations that literature/fiction leads to reality (and not vice versa) (Blanchot 1982a, 47). As Mark Currie says: 'the realistic novel constructs, rather than reflects, the real world, or, to put it another way, [that] the outside world is always mediated by language and narrative, however much it is naturalised by the transparency of realistic language' (Currie 1998, 62). The fantasy alterities of *A Game of You* support this view of literature as the source of our construction and understanding of reality and identity.

Case study: *The Sandman: The Kindly Ones*

The Kindly Ones (the ninth *Sandman* graphic novel) tells the story of Lyta Hall's quest to find her son Daniel and revenge herself on Morpheus.⁵³ As such, it employs many of the same motifs and themes identified in *A Game of You*, specifically those relating to notions of gender and identity. However, the treatment of these varies wildly in places: whereas the alterities of *A Game of You* are distinct and equally valid, *The Kindly Ones* places us in doubt as to the mere existence of many of the fantastic worlds it depicts. It is my hope that the previous discussion may therefore inform my consideration of this text.

It should initially be noted that the fantastic elements of *The Kindly Ones* are, unlike

⁵³ A heavily pregnant Lyta Hall and her dead husband Hector were introduced to us in *The Dolls House*, where they lived inside the mind of Rose Walker's brother Jed for two years, having been fooled by two of Morpheus's escaped servants into believing that Hector was the Sandman himself. Upon discovering this Morpheus restored them to reality, and told Lyta that the child she carried for so long in dreams would someday belong to him. This left Lyta with the perception that he murdered her husband and threatened her child. *The Kindly Ones* begins three years later, showing us a paranoid, obsessive Lyta who has barely let her son Daniel out of her sight since his birth. When he is subsequently kidnapped a completely unhinged Lyta begins her quest to track him down and revenge herself on Morpheus. She invokes the Furies, or Kindly Ones, in this regard: an act that is only made possible by Morpheus himself (as legend has it the Furies are only empowered to hound those who spill family blood) since years back Morpheus killed his son Orpheus in an act of mercy after he was ripped apart by the Bacchae (Gaiman retells this Greek myth in *The Sandman: Fables and Reflections*). Although Lyta does not regain her son (who was initially kidnapped by the Norse god Loki and the faerie Puck for their own reasons, and whose mortality was burnt away before Morpheus could track him down), her quest for revenge is ultimately successful and the Morpheus we know dies in #69. However, as he is one of the Endless another aspect of Morpheus instantly takes his place – the transfigured form of Daniel.

those of *A Game of You*, drawn from established myths. These include the triple goddess (a pagan figure that has been thoroughly documented, for example by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*); the Norse gods (whose names are familiar from legend); and well-known fairy-tale and literary characters such as Puss-in-Boots (Gaiman 1996, 4.10.1) or the Puck.⁵⁴ The fantastic elements of the text are, in this sense, simultaneously validated and revealed as pure fiction.

It may not be too much to suggest that using intertextuality and legend in this way validates other elements of the text – for example the Three tell Lyta that ‘THERE’S A DOWNSTAIRS IN EVERYBODY. THAT’S WHERE *WE* LIVE’ (2.15.2): supporting the notion (that there are multiple worlds inside everybody) expressed in *A Game of You*. Other observations such as Larissa’s statement ‘NOTHING IS TOO CUTE AND SWEET TO BE DANGEROUS’ (7.14.5) also refer back to this text. Comments on the inevitability of acting according to one’s nature are also reiterated by characters including the Corinthian and Matthew (5.11.1-2) and the Puck (10.13.2).

Similarly, the doubling of characters observed by Samuel Delaney in *A Game of You* is repeated here – for example the gorgons Stheno and Euryale (4.16.4) are paralleled visually with ‘real’ characters such as Chantal and Zelda who were first introduced to us in *The Doll’s House* (1990c, 6.2.4). Characters such as the witch Thessaly (now calling herself Larissa) also reappear, and her new identity alerts us to the importance of naming, a motif repeated in this text. Apparent in the thingless name that is the recreated Corinthian, or the snake Geryon’s discourse on the etymology of Lyta’s name (4.18.3), the implications of naming are however explored most deeply (and, again, tied to notions of gender and

⁵⁴ Although only one appears in *The Sandman*, Gaiman accords with the accepted meaning of ‘puck’ as a generic word (Holland 1994, 35) as the character refers to himself as ‘A PUCK’ and also speaks of ‘WE PUCKS’ (1996, 10.2.7).

ideology) when Lyta finally encounters the Kindly Ones:

LYTA	I AM SEEKING THE FURIES.
MOTHER	<i>NOT</i> THE FURIES, MY LOBELIA. THAT'S SUCH A <i>NASTY</i> NAME. IT'S ONE OF THE THINGS THEY <i>CALL WOMEN</i> , TO PUT US IN OUR <i>PLACE</i> ...
THE THREE	TERMAGANT. SHREW. VIRAGO. VIXEN. WITCH. BITCH. (7.21.5-6)

The titular Kindly Ones are also referred to as the Furies, the Erinyes, the Eumenides, the Hounds of Hades, the Dirae and the Morrigan. By using these Greek, Roman and Celtic names interchangeably, Gaiman establishes their function as primary rather than their name, and as such they may also be read as nameless things.

Notions of transience are also explicitly mentioned in the text (5.6.2) and the transformation motif appears many times – most obviously and literally in Daniel's transformation into Morpheus (13.22.1-6), but also in Loki's fight with the Corinthian, during which he changes form many times (9.12.1-6); or when Lyta sees Larissa as a white bird (7.3.3-6). These last two emphasise the role of perception within the Fantastic. Transformation also exists on a structural level, as Morpheus's humanisation is shown to be the catalyst for all the events of *The Kindly Ones*. As he says: 'I told Ishtar that she was wrong. That I was not changed. That I did not change. But in truth, I think I lied to her' (11.6.7), and his newfound humanity is also evidenced visually when the Furies inflict physical harm upon him (11.19.4).

Like naming, transformation is also linked to gender, for example in the revelation that the character of Vixen LaBitch is Rose Walker's old landlord Hal (12.10.1). It should also be noted that the very first panel of the trade paperback begins '*THERE'S A DREAM IN WHICH HUGE FACELESS WOMEN WITH WOLVES ASTRIDE THEM ARE CHEWING AT MY ENTRAILS AND LEGS.*' (1996, 'Prologue' 1.1) Although unlinked to the rest of the book this initial image of faceless women resonates with the multiple, confused female identities that are subsequently explored in the text.

Lyta herself is doubled and multiplied in various ways: initially when she sees her reflection in a shop window and engages in debate with two identical versions of herself: 'WHO ARE YOU?' 'TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT' (5.21.2). She later engages in similar conversation in front of another mirror, seeing herself in a variety of forms – as the sophisticated Lyta of the first few pages of the book; as a child; as the Fury; and in her current deranged state (daubed with Larissa's protective potion) (7.17.2-6). These contradictory visions of Lyta cast doubt on the existence of the various alterities she has wandered through: as these seem to coexist in the same physical space, we may conclude that Lyta's body remains in the waking world/reality.

After entering what can be perceived as either a world of myth or a hallucination, the panel where she wakes is triplicated (Appendix 4.3). We see Lyta as she appears in the waking world, Lyta as she appears in her hallucination or 'myth world', and Lyta as she appears in *The Dreaming*, as one of the Furies. One effect of this is to validate all three perspectives, encouraging the reader not to dismiss two of the three versions as unreal. The reader is forced to hesitate: throughout *The Kindly Ones* pictures of Lyta in her myth world are doubled with the waking world (Appendix 4.4). This hesitation is frequently mirrored in the semantics of the tale: themes of perception are emphasised again and again, most overtly when Morpheus dies and we are repeatedly told that what is being mourned is no more than 'A PUH-POINT OF VIEW' (Gaiman 1997, 44.4).

As also seen in *A Game of You*, two alterities are set up alongside *The Dreaming*, which remains as a fictive point of reference. Although the hallucinatory quality of Lyta's myth world, the doubling of its characters with people and objects in reality (see Appendix 4.4; also 6.19.6-8) could imply that it is entirely fictional, other events belie this. For example, a homeless man comments of Lyta: 'SHE'S GOT SNAKES IN HER HAIR. AND SHE'S NOT ALONE IN HER HEAD ANY MORE' (5.17.8), which is how she does indeed appear in her myth world.

Again, the myth world seems to comment on the real-world alterity – while the Three appear in many forms, their existence may most obviously be linked to the three main

characters such as Zelda (the crone), Lyta (the mother) and Rose (the maiden). All the female characters of the book fit into this sort of triple-part structure - not only do the Three appear as the Fates and the Furies but also as mortals when Rose Walker returns to the nursing home where her grandmother spent her life (Gaiman 1996, 6.8.3). Of these three old ladies, Helena (whose last name is unpronounceable, according to the other two) may well represent Lyta's mother, Helena Kosmatos, the golden-age Fury.⁵⁵ In response to a story, Helena comments that:

ACTS OF REVENGE ARE SANCTIFIED. I HAVE ALSO DONE IT. I SPENT TWO DECADES LOOKING FOR THE MAN WHO HAD KILLED A PERSON I LOVED. I HOUNDED HIM FOR YEAR AFTER YEAR AFTER YEAR, ACROSS THE WORLD...
[...]
EVENTUALLY, I KILLED HIM. FIRST, THOUGH, I DESTROYED HIS LIFE.
(6.19.1-2)

Although I have been unable to find a specific *Young All-Stars* story to which this might relate, it certainly fits with the idea and the purpose surrounding the Furies. Helena's subsequent denial and then affirmation of her story (6.19.3) further comments on the impossibility of establishing truth with any certainty.

Similarly, notions of reality are completely denied more than once, whether this is indicated subtly (Larissa reads a book entitled 'WHEN REAL THINGS HAPPEN TO IMAGINARY PEOPLE' (13.20.2) whose title signifies a popular bestseller while replacing its notions of 'bad' and 'good' with these concepts) or more obviously, as when Delirium threatens Mazikeen: 'IF YOU DON'T LET ME IN I WILL TURN YOU INTO A DEMON HALF-FACE WAITRESS NIGHT-CLUB LADY WITH A CRUSH ON HER BOSS [Lucifer], AND I'LL MAKE IT SO YOU'VE BEEN THAT FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME TO NOW AND YOU'LL

⁵⁵ Prior to the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* retcon (a 12-issue series published 1985-86 which rewrote much of the DC universe), Lyta Trevor was Fury, daughter of the golden-age Wonder Woman and pilot Steve Trevor, who together with her husband Hector Hall/Silver Scarab joined the supergroup Infinity Inc. while at University. As per her history in *The Sandman*, she fell pregnant by Hector Hall, who then died. When he became the second silver-age Sandman, Lyta went to live with him in the Dream Stream (which is where Gaiman picks up the story in *The Doll's House*). Post-*Crisis* her origins were rewritten by Roy Thomas as the daughter of Helena Kosmatos (the golden-age Fury, who received her powers from the Greek Furies to avenge her husband's death and who was also created at this time to be part of *The Young All-Stars*, in a rewrite of the golden age) (Niederhausen 1999, npag). Lyta was adopted by Derek and Joan Trevor after her mother's mysterious disappearance and while at University took the name Fury and joined Infinity Inc with her fiancé Hector Hall, until he was killed and Lyta herself vanished, pregnant with their child.

NEVER EVER KNOW IF YOU WERE ANYTHING ELSE AND IT WILL ITCH INSIDE YOUR HEAD WORSE THAN LITTLE BUGSES' (12.7.3). Of course, this is precisely what Mazikeen is. Such a statement refutes any notion of an objective, unalterable reality: further confirming that we should read the settings as fantastic alterities.

Perhaps this is the one of the fundamentals that underlies the medium itself: to write a comic book is not a way of telling a story with illustrations replicating the world it is set in, but a creation of that fantastic world from scratch. In this sense the medium evokes the hyperreal, and supports Blanchot and Currie's view of literature as previously mentioned. It also informs discussion of Gérard Genette's model, whose asymmetry (as previously noted) is amended by Christine Brooke-Rose so that 'pure dialogue' becomes 'NT=ST' (where 'narrative time'/*sjuzet* = 'story time'/*fabula*), enabling all other scenes (those with narration) to be defined as the missing 'NT>ST' (Brooke-Rose 1981, 315). To my mind, the medium of comics enhances this distinction: as panels with no narration most obviously epitomise the 'NT=ST' while still remaining able to include visual or emotive elements such as expression, tone and so forth. Panels with narrative may then be defined as 'NT>ST' which alerts us to the role of temporality in this distinction, a point I shall return to in my discussion of the postmodern.⁵⁶

As seen from the intertextual references identified above, the irony of Lyta/Fury working with the Furies is obvious, however Gaiman again uses the medium to emphasise this. In basing his pictures of both the Fates and the Furies on the three witches from the 1970s DC title *The Witching Hour*, Gaiman grounds his version of the Furies within his industry and within the DC universe; itself an alterity that exists in a state of the hyperreal. In this way, intertextuality is used to further emphasise the role of the Fantastic.

While the disturbing presence of multiple worlds is enhanced by the visual nature of the medium (a good example is the splash page at 4.7), its verbal elements are equally disconcerting. Underdetermined and unexplained signifiers such as Morpheus's 'reflectory' (11.24.2) or the 'NIMBIC GLIMMERING' (5.15.4) haunt the text, as do the

⁵⁶ See Chapter 5 'The hybrid signifier'.

overdetermined – words with multiple meanings are mentioned but undefined (10.19.4); as when the Puck says to the Corinthian: ‘I SHALL RESTRAIN MYSELF FROM ENQUIRING WHETHER YOU TAKE YOUR NAME FROM THE LETTERS, THE PILLARS, THE LEATHER, THE PLACE, OR THE MODE OF BEHAVIOUR...’ (10.3.1).

Other textual features such as unreliable narration (provided by Lyta) further evidence the existence of the Fantastic. In fact, this narrative strategy is taken to a new level as the narration provided by Destiny’s book, which throughout *The Sandman* has prefigured the comic’s narration (and, as such, emphasised its validity (11.14.3-4)) is shown to be uncharacteristically uncertain by the existence of multiple Destinies (3.10.1-2; 7.11.2; 11.14.2; 11.15.1-2). Both the metafictional function of Destiny’s narration and its sudden unreliability are characteristic of the Fantastic.

All these textual features evidence the Fantastic, which is again linked to notions of gender. Lyta’s quest to find her son is semantically, if not structurally, feminised: the fairy-tale figures she encounters include a female Puss-in-Boots (contrary to the Perrault version of the tale, though present in Strapola and Basile’s versions), a female Cyclops, and a maiden who is attempting to free her prince from his imprisonment in a castle (4.10.1-5; 4.9.1-4; 4.8.1-6).⁵⁷ These standardised figures support Propp’s model of the wondertale (which focuses on functions rather than characters) and also enable metafictional comment on the nature of fairy tale, for example as when Puss tells Lyta:

PUSS I INTEND TO WAGER THE SILVER COLLAR AROUND MY NECK THAT
 THE OGRE CANNOT CHANGE ITSELF INTO THREE THINGS THAT I
 SHALL NAME FOR IT.
LYTA WILL THE *THIRD* SHAPE BE A *MOUSE*?
PUSS OF COURSE
LYTA BUT ... DON’T THEY *EVER* LEARN?
PUSS THEY *CAN’T*. THEY’RE PART OF THE STORY, JUST AS I AM.
(4.10.4-5)

Mark Currie states that ‘theoretical fiction is a performative rather than a constative narratology, meaning that it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but

⁵⁷ As noted above, these characters are juxtaposed with their waking world equivalents: a stray cat (4.9.6), a traffic light (4.9.5), and a stranger who gives Lyta money (4.8.7).

rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative' (Currie 1998, 52). As theoretical fiction, *The Sandman* concerns itself with the telling of stories and invokes the Fantastic in this regard, as seen from the textual features examined thus far. In both these trade paperbacks *The Dreaming* is contrasted with various alterities, whose fantastic elements comment on their mimetic ones. As seen in the work of Maurice Blanchot, here fiction informs fact: supporting Diane Elam's observation that 'romance threatens to expose "reality" as a constructed referent rather than a "natural" state of existence to which we all naturally, textually, refer' (Elam 1992, 8).

A debate on nature, change and gender seems to underlie both stories, as Gaiman repeatedly questions the idea of identity and 'being true to one's nature'. While many characters ostensibly believe that nature is fixed and unchanging this is persistently belied by many of the texts' themes and motifs, such as the focus on transformation or the presence of characters such as Loki.⁵⁸ The conclusion of *The Kindly Ones* does not provide any real answers to this debate: we are aware that Morpheus's destruction has been caused by both the changes he has made in himself as a consequence of his eighty-year imprisonment (Gaiman 1991a) and his inability to change enough (1996, 13.6.3-6).⁵⁹ Similarly, although we are given the impression throughout the text that Lyta is acting outside any notion of fate (as indicated by the conflicting Destinies that appear), Morpheus's death has in fact been prophesied by Cluracan and we have already seen his funeral procession (1994b, 6.18.1; 6.19.1-3). In prolonging such thematic uncertainty *The Sandman* again evokes the Fantastic.

Conclusion

Many of the fantastic elements of *The Sandman* also inform my previous discussion of the Gothic and Myth. The inversion between the real/unreal and the dichotomy between

⁵⁸ In Norse myth Loki often represents change.

⁵⁹ The Furies are able to hound Morpheus because he killed his son, Orpheus, in an act of mercy that went against Morpheus's previous decision to abandon him. Morpheus is, however, unable to change enough to disregard the rules a second time (for example he could simply kill Lyta; or remain safe in *The Dreaming* despite being summoned by Nuala in accordance with the boon he granted her), which causes his death.

exterior/interior identified in *A Game of You*; notions of doubling; and the treatment of identity as plural and unfixed are all themes common to the Gothic. Similarly, critical exploration of over- and under-determined signifiers and the gap between sign and meaning in fantasy provide a textual basis for the Gothic's use of thingless names and nameless things. Todorov's division of fantastic themes into those of the self and those of the other hints at the role of the Fantastic in sustaining this divide in Gothic literature. The coincidence of these elements of the Fantastic and the Gothic within postmodernism (as in Warner's observation that contemporary fictions are plotted against the notion of a unified self) further emphasise this link. Even the audience for both genres is similar in having both a subcultural status and a strong sense of community.

Equally, Lyta's quest in *The Kindly Ones* may be viewed as a feminised version of the labours of Hercules: the inclusion of the Garden of the Hesperides, the figure of Geryon (incarnated as a three-headed snake, thereby also referencing possible links to the Hydra), Hippolyta's name, her advancement to godlike status (as the embodiment of the Furies) and the predominance of Greek myths over other legends evidence this. Mythic monsters and references such as these have a 'transpersonal significance' (Hume 1984, 67) and add a symbolic level to the text that validates its alterities. In turn, the text's thematic focus on the impossibility of total change and its metafictional dimensions not only indicate its fantastic status but also reference this ability of Myth to freeze symbols and signifiers and endow them with a wider meaning.

Kathryn Hume notes that 'fantasy exists in the basic myths; they assert values that cannot be validated scientifically, and the stories they tell are most decidedly not verifiable' (33). She further discusses the psychological functions of both Myth and fantasy, particularly with regard to latent fantasy and notions of escapism. The concept of Arcadia is informed both by myth criticism that endows it with the significance of a utopia myth, and by psychoanalysis that links it to escapism – which is one of Hume's four fantasy subgenres. This applicability of psychoanalytic criticism in turn suggests the Gothic, and moreover it should be noted that certain gothic texts such as *The Saragossa Manuscript*

also exemplify the conditions of the Fantastic (Todorov 1975, 31). In this sense the various genres of the Gothic, Myth and fantastic literature all seem to be informed by the mode of the Fantastic.

In the broadest possible terms, the Fantastic is based around a notion of hesitation between reality and the marvellous (Todorov 1975, 25), achieved through the co-presence of natural and supernatural elements. It takes place in an alterity that may be defined in terms of its relationship with reality; however Diane Elam comments further that: 'Romance does not offer alternative realities, rather it underscores the fictionality of the "real" and the unreality of culture' (Elam 1992, 49-50). As such, the fantastical coexistence of the natural and supernatural within *The Sandman* destabilises our understanding of both reality and fantasy, leading us towards a linguistic situation where meaning cannot ever be firmly established.

Such indefinite, multiple linguistic meanings also reference postmodernism and, as such, another way of looking at this hesitation is in postmodern terms: hesitation becomes a response to the lack of a grand narrative dictating the conventions of subject and form to establish reality. The Fantastic questions the existence of reality and grand narratives, and alerts us to the paradoxical state of literature (as per Blanchot's observations that literature necessarily arises from the death of subject yet still sustains this subject, a point I shall return to in Chapter 5).

Furthermore, in requiring this hesitation, the Fantastic can exist only in the present (Todorov 1975, 42). This echoes the postmodern notion of sustaining the present through constant revisiting – a process which is further emphasised by the medium of comics, where all moments coexist on the page. This postmodern 'perpetual present' has further relevance to the industry techniques of superscription and retcon.⁶⁰ Similarly, semiotic anomalies such as the gap between sign and meaning that Jackson identifies in the Fantastic mean that this mode may further inform my discussion of how changing perceptions of

⁶⁰ 'Retroactive continuity' – the process of incorporating additional past events into the comic-book universe in the interests of coherence. 'Superscription' (my term) – the overwriting or contradiction of established events or stories for the same purpose.

comics can inform our understanding of these concepts.

Visual arts manifest the void where work wants to dwell more fully than books can (Blanchot 1982a, 192) and in this sense the medium strengthens the ability of its text both to operate as metafiction regarding the telling of stories, and to comment on notions of nature and reality. Its workings may inform further discussion of the effects of including popular culture in literature and I therefore turn now to my penultimate chapter: an examination and deconstruction of the postmodern attributes of comics.

Chapter 5: Postmodernism

Literature review

According to Charles Jencks, the term 'postmodernism' was first used c. 1934 by Federico de Onis to describe a reaction from within modernism. This reaction was later defined by historian Arnold Toynbee as the decline of Western dominance in favour of a new cultural plurality. In 1965 the prefix 'post' was adopted by Leslie Fielder who tied it to current counter-cultural trends; a notion which was conceptualised in the 1970s by Ihab Hassan who attached the label to 'the ideas of experimentation in the arts' (Jencks 1989, 8). The consequent view of postmodernism as a radical, critical stance was initially sustained by its links with notions such as deconstruction. Despite its current assimilation into the establishment alongside modernism, this view has been maintained by postmodernism's avant-garde nature that does not privilege traditional definitions of high culture over low.

Jencks's own definition of postmodernism focuses on its use of double-coding and intertextuality: as 'a writing which may use traditional forms in ironic or displaced ways to treat perennial themes' (9). In this sense his work aligns with that of Umberto Eco (such as *Misreadings* (1994)) in not only acknowledging the unoriginal nature of one's words, but also by using any contextual meaning that is attached to them as a consequence of this unoriginality. I shall return to discuss Eco's work on semiotics in my final chapter, but for now it seems fair to say that, for both these critics, postmodernism is self-reflexive, ironic and multiple in meaning; as it both comments upon and conveys a sense of society and self that is fractured and divided.

Like Eco and John Barth, for Jencks postmodernism is both 'the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence' (10) and as such is situated in opposition to Hassan's perception, which defines postmodernism as modernism in its ultra or exaggerated form. Hassan observes that 'whereas Modernism – excepting Dada and Surrealism – created its own forms of artistic authority precisely because the centre no longer held, Postmodernism has tended toward artistic anarchy in deeper complicity with things falling apart – or has

tended toward Pop' (Hassan 1971, 400). This view situates postmodernism alongside modernism, rather than subsequent to it, and is reflected in the works of later critics such as Jean-François Lyotard, Bruno Latour, and Diane Elam.

For Lyotard the postmodern condition is defined by its disengagement from notions of unity and its denial of grand narratives (such as faith) to legitimate knowledge. Instead postmodernism uses a multiplicity of language games that are variously successful at legitimating different sorts of knowledge, though as a consequence uncertainty actually increases not decreases. As the perpetual avant-garde of modernism his postmodernism is unidentifiable in terms of time: having 'to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)' (Lyotard 1984, 81).

Lyotard's model is supported by Bruno Latour's treatise on the illusion of modernism. In situating postmodernism in the perpetual impasse of avant-gardes (1993, 62), Latour denies the type of historicity that locates it as subsequent to modernism, and instead defines postmodernism as a 'symptom of the contradiction of modernism' (131). Diane Elam adopts a similar point of view: commenting that 'postmodernism does not simply happen after modernism but is a series of problems present to modernism in its continuing infancy' (1992, 9). This denial of linear historicity further reflects postmodernism's semantic emphasis on sustaining, revising and revisiting.

Elam also notes that: 'In postmodernism, as in romance, the division between high and low culture, the study and the boudoir, becomes blurred' (1992, 1). This observation further supports a view of postmodernism as the avant-garde, and informs discussion of its deconstructive, problematic and reactionary qualities. These qualities are the focus of Jean Baudrillard's work on the use of signs in mass culture (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976)), in which he argues that these now exist in total relativity as reality has been replaced with the hyperreal.

Baudrillard identifies simulation as the dominant schema of our age, commenting that currently 'signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real' (1976, 438). As a consequence he theorises that there is no actual reality: as simulacra do not exist in

dialogue with any notion of the original 'we are now living entirely within the "aesthetic" hallucination of reality' (456). One consequence of this is to distance the current dominant schema of simulacra from that of counterfeit (which he identifies as the dominant schema of the classical age), an observation which follows from Walter Benjamin's observations on the nature of mechanical reproduction, and further emphasises the postmodern merging of high/low culture.⁶¹

As well as denying us recourse to reality (resulting in a state where '*reality itself is hyperrealist*' (456)), this lack of an identifiable signified results in 'the commutability of formerly contradictory or dialectically opposed terms' (440). This unstable situation (where left and right politics may swap positions, or Manichaeic morality breaks down) also indicates the lack of grand narratives that is perceived by Lyotardian postmodern theory.

Similar observations may be found in the work of Hayden White, whose *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) identifies troping as the process 'by which all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyse objectively' (2). This statement both locates discourse as performative and introduces the importance of context to meaning, since troping is concerned with identifying the connections between things. In *Figural Realism* (1999), White goes on to define historicity as tropological: as both a transforming process (as events are transformed by emplotment into a linear story) and culturally specific (7-8). Although White's work focuses primarily upon the processes of cultural formation and, as such, is not explicitly concerned with the postmodern, observations such as these evidence its existence in modern society.

Homi Bhabha's observations in *The Location of Culture* (1994) take a similar form as Bhabha comments that Western culture has more to do with temporality than historicity. Consequently it 'requires a kind of "doubleness" in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centered causal

⁶¹ While erosion of the boundaries between high and low culture can be dated long before the emergence of postmodernism (Haslett 2000, 153) this nonetheless remains one of its tenets.

logic' (141). This depiction of discourse aligns with Umberto Eco's comments on the postmodern linguistic situation, as Bhabha notes that strategies such as reinscription, negotiation and revision make up this postcolonial culture (192). That many cultural discourses (such as race) display 'the *problem of the ambivalent temporality of modernity*' (239) accords with a model of the postmodern (as discursive, perpetually present, problematic) that is also seen in the work of Lyotard and Latour.

The works of Maurice Blanchot do not easily align with any literary theory, except maybe Hegelianism in his constant questioning of why we write, and, more specifically, why we write literature (and, as is implied by many of the statements above, what this might be). However, elements of Blanchot's criticism seem postmodern in the extreme and as such are relevant here. These include the denial of an external reality as the text's referent (1982a, 47; 1982b, 118); the performative nature of narration (1982b, 63); and the disjointed temporality that is produced by the writing and reading experience (1982a, 198; 247), where literature both arises from the death of the subject while simultaneously sustaining this subject. *The Space of Literature* (1982) he identifies may also have resonance with Homi Bhabha's identification of culture as an enunciative space (Bhabha 1994, 178).

Similarly, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1983), while not explicitly dealing with the postmodern, may also inform its discussion. Eagleton's text attempts to define literature and literary theory in a Marxist sense and to establish a working model that he discusses in terms of its psychological and political implications. However, his argument that 'Reading is not a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair: our initial expectations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next, but what comes next may retrospectively transform our initial understanding [...] we read backwards and forwards simultaneously' (1983, 77) also has relevance to the notion of a strange, subjective temporality that is identified both as the site of postmodernism (as in the work of Lyotard, Latour et al.) and as its consequence (Blanchot, Derrida et al.)

Eagleton's denial of the cumulative nature of the reading experience also references

Kuhn's paradigm theory of knowledge, and in this regard has relevance to comics, both in terms of the medium's material technological advances (as discussed in Chapter 1) and explicitly with reference to its narratology (for example the layout of the page – a point I shall return to). His rejection of the idea that writing is subordinate to speech (130) similarly conforms to some of the points raised by Jacques Derrida.

In all these senses the postmodern is strongly intertextual, drawing on its surroundings and its history to sustain multiple meanings in the perpetual present. Its lack of recourse to any external legitimating metanarrative allows us to perceive its consequent isolation as something incomplete and uncertain. This is echoed in its denial of notions such as reality, origin and unity. Mark Currie's *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (1988) specifically applies such thought to narrative, attempting to form a postmodern framework that will sustain its contradictory aspects. Much of Currie's focus is on the formation of identity through narrative, and in this sense he blurs the lines between narrative and reality. He references Derrida in this regard, commenting that: 'it is not possible to distinguish categorically between what is written and what is outside' (45).

In addition, Currie observes that intertextuality is also woven into the outside world and its texts (70). He describes further similarities between narrative and reality in terms of time: evoking the postmodern sense of simultaneous archiving/restoring in this regard ('How many of us live our adventures as future narrations of the past' (98)) and concluding that this reflects 'a kind of reverse mimesis, where people's lives imitate stories rather than the other way around' (98). In this sense his postmodern framework denies reality in favour of metafiction, and recognises the privileging of narrative knowledge over experience in the formation of identity.

In this sense, we may view postmodernism as a critique of notions of presence, origin and unity, as 'a renunciation of intellectual hopes for simplicity, completeness and certainty' (Cahoone 1996, 4). While the prefix 'post' references its reactionary, avant-garde status, and appears to hint at an attack on modernity (as in 'beyond'), the word also implies the continuation of modernism in a new guise. Taken as a whole, the word also

suggests an impossible temporal situation – the ‘post-present’, suspended outside time. Finally it implies the possibility of hybridisation – at once both modern and something else entirely.

It is therefore unsurprising to discover that the very nature of postmodernism makes it impossible to pin down as a philosophy, and the summary offered above is a tentative one at best. Postmodernism takes many forms and may be discussed as a literary style, artistic tradition, or belief system. At once transcendental, revivalist, and, at least in part, modernist, its plurality is echoed in the label it has been given, whose contradictory elements are noted above. Lyotard’s observation that postmodernism has been perpetually present in modernism but is only now being recognised (1984, 79) is of use, and, keeping this in mind, perhaps Cahoone’s summary may serve us best: ‘a renunciation of intellectual hopes for simplicity, completeness and certainty’ (Cahoone 1996, 4). One of postmodernism’s overwhelming features is not just duality, or complexity, but multiplicity.

It is this plural nature of postmodernism that I wish to focus on initially as it seems particularly apt for my medium. From production to product the medium of comics is essentially multi-faceted; a medium of collaboration, not only of elements but of styles and, of course, creators. Having considered the process of comics creation and the commercial position of the Vertigo comics,⁶² I first propose to examine the role of postmodernism in this regard, and its effects on the genres and conventions that are exploited by these texts. This discussion will revisit many of my previous observations and explore the implications of these against each genre’s respective cultural and historical interpretations. I intend to conclude by examining the medium more closely in the light of notions of hybridity, time and space.

This chapter uses a postmodern theory that is largely informed by the work of Hassan, Lyotard, and Bhabha, and which attempts to sustain postmodernism’s contradictory and hybrid elements, as summarised above.

⁶² See Chapter 1 ‘Industry changes: industry factors’.

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (Bhabha 1994, 37)

Contemporary culture exists in this moment of enunciation, an idea that is collaborative to Lyotard's notion of society's construction solely through 'little narratives', or language games. In the 'ambivalent space' of culture (which as a space may also evoke Blanchot's notions of literature), the 'old' is reworded, archived and consigned to history, whilst simultaneously being re-used in the creation of the 'new'. This doubling of events and the resulting hybridity of contemporary creations is an interesting tool for use in my examination of the graphic novel form, questioning notions of signs and signifiers, the hyperreal, time/space and narratology.

Post-literature?

As noted, the latter half of the twentieth century has seen many changes in the comics industry. While series such as *The Sandman* have survived outside these events; others such as *Preacher* have thrived on them, using the industry's old stereotypes and status quo against it.⁶³ Texts are emerging with a new self-awareness, less limited by their genre, and a range of originality has resulted whose expression in this medium informs many different aspects of narratology – specifically in the light of current literary issues of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Much of the evidence detailed previously supports the individuality of the Vertigo texts within their industry. Parallels can be drawn here with the ideas of Franz Kafka, whose work, amongst other things, offered many insights into the role of writing in the twentieth century, questioning what it means to be devoted to art and writing. John Lechte

⁶³ Gaiman comments: 'We were selling 100,000 copies [of *The Sandman*] a month and we were down at number 70 or so, and the bestselling comic was selling in the millions. And then the bottom fell out of the industry and all of a sudden there we are still doing our 100,000 copies and we're now at number 25. And by the end of it, we were *still* doing 100,000 and we were at number one. We were beating *Batman* and *Superman*.' (Savlov 1999, npag). By crossing many of the usual genre boundaries of mainstream comics, *The Sandman* has reshuffled the comics market: repositioning titles that existed both before and after its reign.

paraphrases:

A response to this question hinges on what it is that the writer qua writer in modern society feels called upon to do. If he or she is content to conform to the existing conventions of writing, there is really no problem; the doors of journalism and writing within well-established genres (e.g. the detective novel) are open to them. Rightly or wrongly, however, the category of literature has, since the middle of the eighteenth century, emerged in modern society. Literature, from one point of view at least, is the 'canonisation' of a truly singular writing. (Lechte 1994, 243)

If comic books are written outside their established genre conventions in terms of subject, style, artwork, composition, length, scale, ambition, and packaging, then can they still continue to be classed as mere comics? Can they not exist within a postmodern definition of literature such as Kafka's?

Vertigo's treatment of generic fiction (as discussed thus far) would seem to support such a view. Within the gothic tradition, the superhero can be read as referencing the postmodern through its theme of fragmented identities, its sustenance of multiple names and meanings, its emphasis on the origin as the point where the character becomes split between superhero/alter ego, and its use of each half to define the other as its antithesis. This last observation calls to mind the idea of constitutive otherness, and other textual strategies and motifs common to the Gothic such as the transcendence or inversion of Manichaeian morality are similarly reflected in postmodernism's embrace of uncertainty.

This sort of transcendence is also observable in Vertigo's treatment of Myth as binary oppositions are broken down (as seen in *The Invisibles* or *Goddess*). Recognisable figures (such as the May Queen) are similarly rewritten into a new form, or given a new multiplicity (as in *The Sandman*'s polytheism). Similarly, established myths are dislocated or redefined, as in *The Invisibles*' treatment of the progress myth, which Morrison refutes in favour of time as coexistent – a denial of linear historicity that also reflects the postmodern. The revisionist tendency of the comics industry further enables these texts to present themselves as metafictional and postmodern.

The Fantastic is similarly linked to postmodernism through its destabilisation of concepts such as reality (for example with reference to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra)

and in its emphasis on subjectivity (as in its reliance on perception). This questioning of grand narratives alerts us to the paradoxical state of literature (as necessarily arising from the death of the subject while nonetheless sustaining this), as discussed in the work of Maurice Blanchot.

Blanchot's description of narrative as 'not the account of an event but the event itself [...] the narration, while it narrates, enacts what it narrates, is only possible as a narrative if it becomes the event it is narrating' (1982b, 62-3) has further relevance to both these concepts (narratives and events) in evoking the hyperreal. Blanchot expands on this observation by tying the process of narration to the notion of metamorphosis: commenting that literary creation not only transforms the writer, but that the resulting narrative is both motivated by and represents the need for metamorphosis required by the empty space of literature (64).

In straddling these borders (between gothic, mythic and fantastic literature), it may also be observed that the Vertigo comics erase the boundaries between high and low literature, further evoking a postmodern sensibility. Neil Cornwell identifies the postmodern in similar 'contemporary trans-generic literary forms: fictional and metafictional trans-genres which dissolve, in their turn, into the multifarious realms of modern culture [...] all of recognisable genres and of none' (1990, 143). In this way the postmodern merging of genres aligns with a similarly postmodern merging of high and low culture.

I believe that comics are thriving in the current postmodern literary swell. Whilst the medium is intrinsically fascinating as a narrative structure, only within the realms of postmodernism is its potential even beginning to be exploited. Postmodernist narratologies can redefine the comic-book panel as a hybrid signifier, placing the onus of storytelling on the language used. Within the panel the layers of words, story and art are extremely exposed, represented by layers of colours, pencils and inks; providing a postmodern emphasis on the multiple elements that make up the whole. This forms a basis for my theory of the hybrid signifier: a literary perspective on the construction and reading of

contemporary comics.

Poststructuralism

Structurally, the medium of comics is of great interest. The panel, its basic building block, often poses more questions than it answers, affecting notions of narrative, space and time, as well as raising more philosophical questions concerning the nature of language and the sign, signifier, and signified. Its overtly plural nature invites a postmodern deconstruction, where multiple elements must be examined as such. This deconstruction must tread a fine line: untangling textual elements for examination while focusing firmly on the tangle itself as the most important quality of the work: foregrounding the notion of multiplicity.

The panel as signifier is hybrid. Within the apparent unity of each panel, the combination of images, words and style (style not only in terms of art but also with reference to other visual elements, such as use of colour or typeface) work together to convey the content. The medium transcends notions of sentences, paragraphs or description. This is the essence of a comic: distinguishing it from, say, a picture book or any illustrated text is the interplay between these different elements. They work together and appear essentially inseparable.

The hybridity of the medium that combines these multiple elements can also be examined in the light of Bhabha's theories of the formation of culture. He writes that the prerogative of postcolonial culture 'consisted of reinterpreting and rewriting the forms and effects of an "older" colonial consciousness from the later experience of the cultural displacement that marks the more recent, postwar histories of the Western metropolis' (174). We can see the cyclical pattern of the comics industry's successes and failures as a similar process, as each time writers reinterpret the tired superhero formula of what has gone before and attempt to rewrite the image of comics to reflect this. In terms of content, the introduction of literary elements into comics and their exploitation and rewriting of different genres also reflects this.

To ignore their duality of representation and read comics as illustrated texts or picture

books is often false totalisation: partial reading foregrounding either the literary or artistic elements of the text. Poststructuralism emphasises the need to ‘sustain contradictory aspects of narrative, preserving their complexity’ (Currie 1998, 3) and any structuralism that allows totalisation must be discounted, for example Jakobson’s theory that different functions of language coexist and take turns to dominate depending on the form of the text (38).

In examining some examples from *The Sandman* we can see a range of elements at play. Two types of written style are used: dialogue (in speech bubbles), and narration (in boxes) that takes various forms (from third-person heterodiegetic to first-person homodiegetic). Although these are standard literary techniques, the medium of comics gives them much more freedom – the text can be isolated anywhere in the panel, as in panel 1 of Appendix 5.1 where the use of separate narrative boxes provides strong punctuation. The basic phrase: ‘He’s scared. Stage fright’ is weak in comparison. The narrative boxes not only split the phrase, punctuating it dynamically, but simultaneously their positioning directly over the audience that is their subject strengthens the sentence’s impact: directly associating word and content by invoking the ‘indirectly signified’ of the phrase (the audience). It is impossible for us to read the sentences without at the same time focusing our eye on the audience. That the signified (audience) is already present within the signifier (the panel) in the form of a simple illustration is a doubling of this effect. This is typical of the successful interplay between the elements that make up the panel.

Continuing to consider the pages in these terms, let us now look at some other elements, best expressed in Appendix 5.2.⁶⁴ While the overall layout of the page is fairly standard, different elements are simultaneously interacting. For example, while the first two panels contain only simple narrative images they are expanded upon through the other elements. The way that panel 1 is inset into panel 2 gives it an inferior status: an aside to the second (reinforcing the fact that the action taking place here is just idle conversation

⁶⁴ Where, while at a convention for serial killers, three of the genuine killers have discovered an undercover reporter in their midst and are disposing of him.

before the main event). It also emphasises the link between the two panels as the scene setters (compared to the more explicit descriptions given in panels 3 and 4) but allows them to transcend this.

In textual terms, the description of these scenes would either have to ignore many of the extraneous details that the pictures supply, or be absurdly lengthy (for example: 'It was getting dark by the time they arrived in an isolated glade. "You certainly know this area well, Corinthian" said the Doctor as the two of them hung the unconscious Philip from his wrists by a tree. He seemed very thin. Nimrod stood aside, staring at the ground. "I made a previous visit here a decade back" replied the Corinthian...'). It would be impossible to convey the same level of detail in text while retaining the simplicity offered by comics, where we can see what is happening. Mere description is transcended; it is no longer needed.

To establish a poststructuralist view of comics, I shall begin by exploring and clarifying my definition of the panel as a hybrid signifier: an interaction of words and pictures. This is particularly necessary in the light of the similar postmodern notions of double-coding/duality, plurality and multiplicity, terms which I shall be using as follows:

Double-coding/duality: the presence of a combination of (often contradictory) elements (new/old and so forth), 'the essential definition of Post-Modernism' (Jencks 1989, 19).

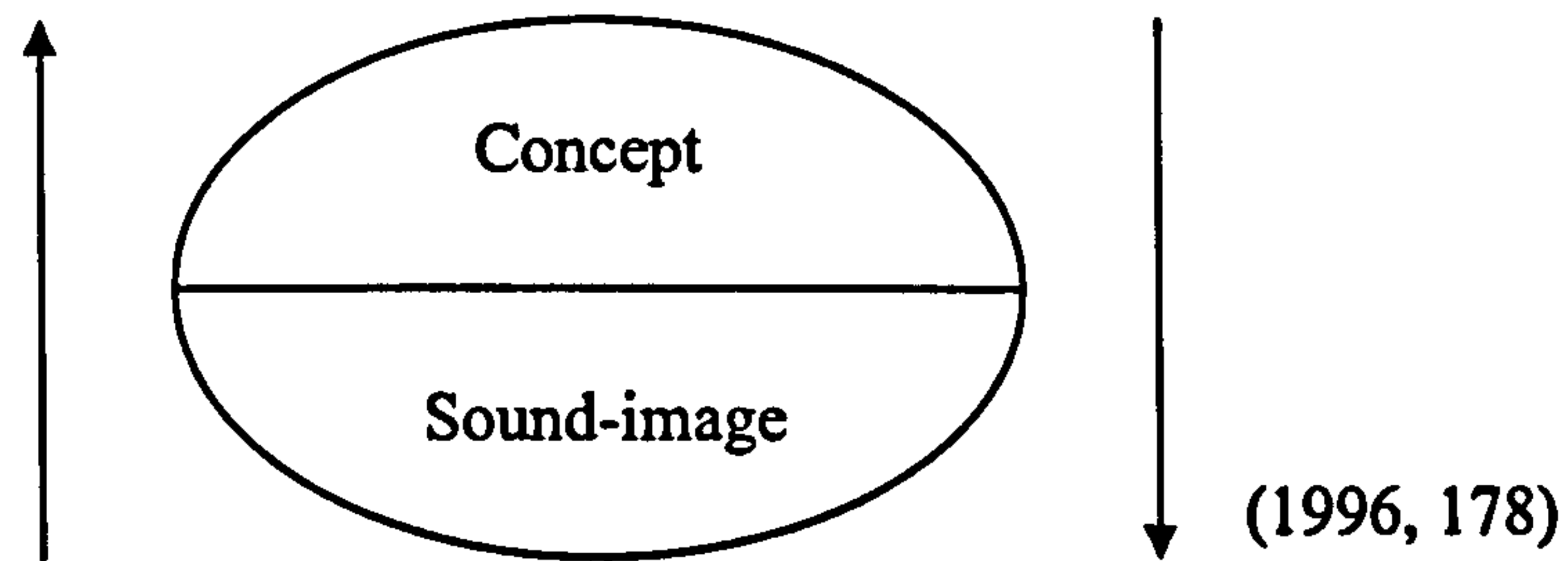
Plurality: no element within postmodernism can be seen as isolated, as existing in a vacuum. Everything is touched by previous elements, by current elements, and by projected future elements.

Multiplicity: the self-reflexive nature of postmodernism, in that postmodern plurality is no more than a single element of postmodernism as a whole.

The hybrid signifier

Modern structuralist notions of the sign, signifier and signified define the linguistic sign as a concept with multiple qualities, the signifier as an exteriorised version of this concept (via writing or speech) and the signified as the semantic content/concept of the sign. Ferdinand de Saussure summarised this by defining the sign as 'a two-sided psychological entity'

represented as follows:



This places the panel as signifier under scrutiny: can it truly be said to be part of a definite conceptual sign such as this, portraying as it does so many different elements, and incorporating within itself so many different signifiers (by way of speech, narration, pictures, sound/motion effects and so forth)? It is certain that panels, as the language of comics, do not operate in the same way as words, the more usual signifiers.

However, Currie comments that words are similarly ‘internally divided’ due to their composition of alterable sequences of letters – ‘it is only as part of a combinative sequence that the word accrues meaning, so that it is marked by the temporal process of the discourse of which it is part’ (1998, 81). Rhymes, alliteration or personal memories can all contaminate the meaning of a word, simply by virtue of its reminiscence to another – or its meaning (contextual or personal) to its various speakers or addressees.

Similarly, Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist work turned largely on his theory that ‘it is impossible rigorously to separate the poetic-cum-rhetorical dimension of the text (the level of the signifier) from the “content”, message or meaning (the level of the signified)’ (Lechte 1994, 108), due to the notion that context overrules all other constraints of language. Taking this into account, it seems that the panel can indeed be seen as a signifier, with its signified being a narrative morpheme – a scene, moment or gesture in a story, overwhelmingly dependent on context. Will Eisner’s classic definition of comics as ‘sequential art’ also emphasises the single panel’s dependence on context and, in this light, I feel confident to proceed with my definition.

The structure of Gérard Genette's narratological model further supports a view of the panel as signifier. As noted in Chapter 4, Genette's framework (as modified by Brooke-Rose) defines the various ways in which narrative time relates to story time. Comics enhance this distinction as panels with no narration (those that are either silent or purely dialogic) most obviously epitomise a ratio where narrative time = story time ('NT=ST') while still remaining able to include visual or emotive elements such as expression, tone and so forth. I shall return shortly to the role of temporality and the hyperreal in this regard.

Postmodern notions of plurality and multiplicity as established above can confuse the issue of hybridity, and perhaps a comprehensive dictionary definition is needed:

hybrid ► *A noun.* 1 An animal or plant that is the offspring of individuals of different kinds (usually, different species) [...]
► *B adjective.* 1. Of mixed character, heterogeneous; derived from unlike sources [...]
hybrid vigour = HETEROSIS [...] 2. GENETICS. The tendency of a crossbred individual to show qualities superior to those of both parents [...]
(*OED*, hybrid; heterosis)

In the light of these definitions, I have no hesitation defining the panel as hybrid. This is primarily because I believe that the panel as signifier is a unified single entity, which rules out definitions such as plural and multiple. Furthermore, the word hybrid seems particularly apt, firstly since the panel is intentionally created as a combination of elements and secondly because these elements are 'unlike'. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud comments on the differences between pictures and words by treating the two as 'icons' (visual symbols that represent a meaning), and concluding that they are diametrically opposed; whereas pictures work on the basis of realistic representation, 'words are totally abstract icons' (1993, 28).

That the typography and style of comics comes near to reversing these definitions (text appears to be hand-drawn while art is heavily abstracted and stylised) does not change their opposition. Will Eisner draws on the development of hieroglyphics and Chinese and Japanese pictographs (ongoing simplification and abstraction of communicatory pictures resulted in the formation of a language) as one explanation for the highly stylised art used

in comics, comparing artistic execution to a kind of calligraphy 'if one considers the effect the cartoonist's style has upon the character of the total product' (Eisner 1990, 14). Eisner sees both words and pictures as distinct languages, which are welded together in comics.

Conversely, McCloud objects to the notion of the panel as a combination of words and pictures, seeing this as reductionist: 'it's a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction' (1993, 92). However, it seems to me that this confuses issues of plurality with hybridity, hence my inclusion of the biological term 'hybrid vigour' within the dictionary quotation above. 'Hybrid' implies anything but reductionism, referring as it does to the creation of a new entity that often surpasses the sum of its parts.

Hybrid vigour (also known as heterosis) can also be examined in light of Derrida's work after de Saussure and more classic notions of structuralism which often characterised the signifier as subservient. De Saussure defined writing as secondary to speech, a notion which Derrida has since challenged by interrogating the assumption that writing is a purely graphic, fundamentally phonetic representation of the sounds of language, postulating instead that language itself has purely graphic elements (such as punctuation), just as speech has irrepresentable elements (silences) (Lechte 1994, 107-8). This has been further supported by the work of later critics such as Terry Eagleton (1983, 130). One of the strengths resulting from the panel's hybridity is that it negates this whole issue by representing both text and image in graphic, visual form and as such demands to be examined on its own terms and in accordance with the criticism of Derrida and Eagleton.

In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud postulates six different word/picture combinations that make up the various types of panel, with examples of each (1993, 153). His distinctions are interesting, but I believe that they all fall under my perception of the hybrid signifier: in no instance is either word or picture rendered useless or separate from the other. McCloud believes otherwise, however, commenting that in picture-specific combinations 'words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence' (153). I would disagree with this: it seems integral to my notion of the hybrid signifier that all elements of the panel are essential to it *as signifier*. To use McCloud's skittle example

(153), it seems to me that the shout of '*HE DID IT!*' does more than add a soundtrack: it tells us that the bowler is a man; that someone else is there rooting for him; that the throw was important (or else why such jubilation?) and so forth.

Similarly, while considering McCloud's notion of the parallel combination, I do not believe that the panel's words and pictures can ever be separated: the panel's physical attributes (borders etcetera) prevent this by creating an association even if, in terms of content, there is no overt relevance. To my mind, the odd shapes and bleeds often used in the Vertigo texts generally only serve an aesthetic purpose and do not detract from the autonomy of the panel. Since the hybrid signifier is its own master, as explored above through Derrida's notion of context, the inclusion of two elements in the same panel (and therefore within the overall context of a story), no matter how unlike they may be, forces the reader to combine them in whatever way they think best, drawing their own conclusions as to the meaning of the scene signified (I shall return to discuss the role of the reader). This approach is implicitly supported by Roland Barthes's deconstructive process for press photographs, in which he examines text and image separately due to their being 'contiguous' (having 'separate defined spaces' on the page), rather than 'homogenized' (as in forms such as the rebus (and, in my view, the comic-book panel) which fuse words and images in a single line of reading) (1977, 16).

The combination of McCloud's that seems closest to my notion of the hybrid signifier is his interdependent combination, where 'words and pictures are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading. When both partners try to lead, the competition can subvert the overall goals ... but when these partners each know their roles and support each other's strengths, comics can match any of the art forms it draws so much of its strength from' (156). I would postulate that all of his types fall under this definition: although the distinctions he makes are useful tools, they refer to little more than the degree to which either words or pictures lead the story.

McCloud's combinations only reflect greater or lesser degrees of interdependency, while often overlooking the fundamental unity of the panel – his referral to the types as

'combinations' testifies to this. In contrast, comics creator Will Eisner does identify the mutual reliance of words and pictures within the panel: 'When the two are "mixed" the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages' (Eisner 1990, 122). I would argue that this welding of words and pictures creates a single, hybrid signifier. However, Eisner fails to take this any further, stopping short of exploring the effects and nature of this 'mix'.

Taking all this into account, the identity of the hybrid signifier seems to be best defined as follows:

hybrid signifier – multiple signifiers interact to create a single unified signifier (such as words and pictures within the comic-book panel).

However, it does seem to me that McCloud's definitions can point us towards further consideration of the hybrid signifier: some panels are more complicated than others, leading me to postulate, at a very basic level, the existence of both simple and complex hybrid signifiers. McCloud makes some extremely incisive comments concerning the representation of time as space within comic-book panels, concluding that: 'In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same' (1993, 100). Panels containing conversation, for example, (where remarks and replies are portrayed in speech bubbles reading from left to right/top to bottom), portray a period of time, be it five seconds or five minutes; whereas some panels portray a single moment and nothing more, for example an impact shot as part of a fight scene.

The size of a panel may also indicate its duration, as do the events within it; as McCloud further comments: 'it's not hard to make an educated guess as to the duration of a given sequence, so long as the elements of that sequence are familiar to us' (1993, 100) and a pause in a conversation, for example, will be perceived as a few seconds. Will Eisner also comments that 'There is an almost geometric relationship between the duration of dialogue and the endurance of the posture from which it emanates' (1996, 60), and I would extend the implications of this statement to non-dialogic panels: the pose a character holds

will directly affect the length of time the panel is perceived to last. This use of space-as-time is the fundamental distinction leading me towards my definitions of simple and complex signifiers.

To consider examples from Garth Ennis's *Preacher* (Appendix 5.3), we can see the difference between these simple panels, where a single event or moment is captured, and complex panels, where multiple events take place and, therefore, time passes. Purely pictorial panels seem to me to be able to be classified as either simple or complex along with those that use both words and pictures; although due to the difficulties of perceiving time they are more likely to be simple in nature, whereas hybrid panels are more likely to be complex.

This theory is further informed by Genette's narrative model (as previously mentioned in Chapter 4). The panel is narrative time (NT), a hybrid signifier that represents a varying amount of story time (ST). I would argue that panel's time-as-space arrangement of pictorial elements indicate the story time it represents, which its dialogic content (if any) further clarifies. However, the panel's pictorial elements can also indicate NT as either less than ST (through the use of summary shots, such as panel 6 of Appendix 5.6), or greater than ST (when considering the amount of extraneous description conveyed by the composition and detail of the picture, as noted in my discussion of Appendix 5.2). Similarly, narrative boxes (if present) may either summarise the panel's events (as in panel 3, Appendix 5.6) or expand upon its contents (Appendix 5.1).

The Derridean notion of context can also be evoked in connection with my adaptation of this model, as in fig. 5 of Appendix 5.3 where we recognise the two characters with Jesse and therefore know what they want. Even picture-only panels (where arguably NT=ST) can, if put in context, signify more than they could if taken in isolation, as in fig. 6 of Appendix 5.3 where Ennis uses a series of simple snapshot pictures to convey a multitude of complex ideas. In the light of context we see more than a crying woman embracing a man in a bar: we see Jesse's mother changing her anti-war beliefs, the forgiving side of his father's nature and so on. The role of context here supports the definition of the panel as a

Derridean signifier still further.

To return to Brooke-Rose's adaptation of Genette's narratological model, I theorise that both simple and complex panels may correspond to each definition as follows:

Descriptive pause (NT ∞ > ST):	simple and complex; narrative allowed
Scene (NT > ST):	simple and complex; narrative allowed
Pure dialogue (NT = ST):	simple and complex; narrative prohibited
Summary (NT < ST):	simple and complex; narrative allowed
Ellipsis (NT < ∞ ST):	simple and complex; narrative allowed

As noted, NT=ST requires verbatim text (that is, dialogue only) or none at all (a silent panel). However, any inequality between NT and ST may be achieved either through textual summary/exposition (via narrative) or visual summary/exposition (via pictorial content). Therefore both simple and complex panels may fall into any category. In these instances (where NT and ST are unequal) the narratology of the comic book resembles that of prose fiction, strengthening the case for viewing the panel as a literary building block with the same adaptability we perceive in prose. The role of context and the reading experience similarly suggests the applicability of literary criticism to NT=ST panels. In this regard, though, the notion of ST (always present as the signified of the panel, and most obviously in NT=ST panels) leads me now towards discussion of the hyperreal.

The medium of comics

Prose and description

While comics may have a single creator both writing and illustrating their work, often a writer and artist will work together as discussed in Chapter 1. However, these roles may be divided in a variety of different ways, and some comics have a writer (who produces the initial scripts), an illustrator, and a letterer (who at the end of the process draws in the text – I hesitate to say 'writes' since the use of different hand-drawn fonts and varying sizes of text often contributes much to the panel). The illustrator's job may also be broken down still further and a penciller (who composes and sketches each panel), inker (who defines the pencil lines) and colourist (who colours and shades) can be used to build the body of each panel in three distinct stages. A brief look at the history of typography sheds a new light on

this process of pencilling, inking and colouring:

The visual form of Western written and printed language derives from two models. The first is the Roman monumental capitals, or majuscules, which date from about AD 100. Artisans formed these letters in a three-part process: written first with a brush on stone, second chiselled into the stone, and then coloured. (Detrie 1999, npag)

As the second model of current type (the Carolinian miniscule) derived from this c. AD 800 we can safely identify this process as the original. It does not require a huge leap to equate its stages with comics' pencilling, inking and colouring. In the light of postmodern multiplicity these multiple external textual elements form the basis of a link between printed language and comic-book art. Perhaps this should be taken as an indication of how to approach the anomaly of comics storytelling: that we should treat its panels as a kind of 'pictorial' writing, as signifiers (a notion that is supported by Eisner's evocation of hieroglyphics and calligraphy).

Comic-book art's transcendence of description and of other extraneous typographic effects allows the medium more freedom of representation than the novelistic written word. The usual literary barriers between reality and representation have been removed. This sort of simulation is identified by Baudrillard as a defining element of postmodernism: where reproduction and the real cease to differ. The result is hyperrealism (Baudrillard 1976, 454), which can be identified as one possibility of the postmodern position of these comics.

Art and the hyperreal

The hyperreal, this notion of blurring between representation and the real, is echoed in other formal elements of the comic book. Returning to Appendix 5.2, the switch from a heterodiegetic (or external) perspective to the homodiegetic perspective of the victim, halfway down the page, jumps us into an apparent immediacy; a heightened representation. For all intents and purposes we are Philip, and the pictures accomplish this in a way no text can: even a traditional first person narrative ('they loom in front of me') is remote in comparison since 'me' is not the reader. Perhaps the closest textual equivalent would be a modernist second person narrative ('they loom in front of you'); however this prescriptive

narrative voice still detracts from any immediacy. The visual element transcends this.

Where, then, is the reader? Although we have Philip's perspective, we are not Philip in any sense. Perhaps the question, then, may inform discussion of narrative identity. Lyotard's theory of the formation of the social bond through language games implies an incorporation of the formation of personal identity, but it is Currie's narratology that focuses primarily on this. He posits that narrative founds identity in that we construe our identity against that of others, via difference, and externalise our conception of it by using narrative methods; by telling our own story (Currie 1998, 17). However, he also raises the question of view, of vision, commenting on the 'tension between seeing and writing [...] in contemporary narratology' (127) since seeing overrules the authority of verbal narrative.

This returns us to my previous exploration of Currie's statement that a word is 'not simply a free form or the bearer of meaning as presence, since that presence is always contaminated by absences, traces of context, both immediate and distant' (81). The idea of the signifier removed from its signified pervades the postmodern notion of writing. Writing is seen as a 'fall from presence' (82) and its existence invokes questions of origin – referring to the moment of speech when the signifier was uttered, uniting sign, signifier and even the signified (by invocation).

Currie continues that 'These examples of origins as underpinning moments of purity and presence are all derived from the language' (83), and in turn this presupposes the existence of a metanarrative of linguistics defining the terms sign, signifier and signified and placing them in unity within speech. In a postmodern state, as noted, this metanarrative must be denied: both writing and speech are distanced from the unity of the sign. This leaves us with little to fall back on except the word itself. Writers such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and B.S. Johnson have explored the notion of the materiality of the word extensively and using a variety of methods, as in *House mother normal* (1971) where

Johnson writes:

Crêpe paper.
Crêpe? Crêpe, crêpe, what a word.
crêpe.

Crêpe. (Johnson 1971, 34)

As here, the materiality of the word is all that remains, and can be used to separate it from its sign, for example through repetition. It becomes a meaningless signifier, even removed from the rules of punctuation (which, as another metanarrative, is similarly dismissed). The breakdown of metanarrative in this way frees and enables words, undermining notions such as reality or Manichaeic morality, as identified in my discussion of both gothic and fantastic literature.

This lack of metanarrative and the emergence of little narratives have been argued as the defining quality of the postmodern condition (Lyotard 1984, 41). Although living entirely within language we have lost the notion of a coherent social narrative linearity, which we perceive only in the past. Lyotard focuses his study on speech, positing the existence of speaker, addressee and referent (subject) as its defining qualities (9). Personal identity and the contemporary social bond are formed via a series of language games (11).

The panel's reliance on the sequential nature of its art is also relevant in this context, leading to an exploration of the positioning of creator, reader, the panel and the page. As noted in Chapter 1, the creator and the reader exist in a state of mutual cooperation: as comics creator Will Eisner expresses it 'on any given page, for example, there is absolutely no way in which the artist can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first [...] there is left to the sequential artist only the tacit cooperation of the reader' (1990, 40).

He defines this two-way relationship between creator and reader as follows:

The sequential artist 'sees' for the reader because it is inherent to narrative art that the requirement on the viewer is not so much analysis as recognition. The task is then to arrange the sequence of events (or pictures) so as to bridge the gaps in action. Given these, the reader may fill in the intervening events from experience. (38)

In this light, we may still perceive the creator and the reader as the Lyotardian speaker and

addressee, but only if we admit that their positions swap constantly throughout the narrative (depending on whether the story is being told in the panel (by the creator) or between panels (by the reader)). This encourages a view of narrative sequential art in line with Lyotardian notions of language games, in which speaker and addressee swap 'posts' constantly.

Their referent, the narrative itself, can similarly be examined in this light. Eisner goes on to establish that both the page (within which there are multiple panels) and the panel itself are 'frames' with which the creator attempts to control the narrative (41). It follows that the page can therefore be considered a metapanel, a notion lent weight by the existence of 'splash pages' – full-page panels inserted into the story for effect. Often these feature many events taking place simultaneously, frequently breaking established industry rules of time, space and linearity.

However, the page can also be considered a metapanel by virtue of being the one constant of form within a comic book. It dictates the number/size ratio of its panels, treating their arrangement as that of a little narrative: to alter the properties of the page is to affect its contents. Throughout, though, whatever goes on inside the panel is primary in terms of narrative, and so the metapanel's dictates ultimately are meaningless in this respect: another collapse of a grand narrative.⁶⁵

Bearing this undermining of narrative control and the fluctuating positions of the creator and reader in mind, questions of points of view in this instance seem doubly postmodern in their multiplicity. The evocation of the hyperreal is a side effect of the multiple points of view that are created by juxtaposition. The literal pictorial view assigned by the panel (which is often a homodiegetic character view) and the narrative input granted to the reader are set against the strongly contrasting notion of our own identity as observer; as controlling devices (such as a heterodiegetic narrative voice or constant shifts in visual perspective) within the text remind us. It is at this point that the hyperreal first begins to

⁶⁵ While the metapanel is narratologically subservient, it is worth noting that it may simultaneously be regarded as visually dominant. I expand on this point in more detail in Chapter 6 'Literature review'.

trouble us, and is then continually evoked through other methods.

Currie comments that seeing is generally taken to overrule writing and reading, not only due to notions of the sign and its origin (see above), but also as a consequence of the realistic medium seeing generally requires: as in filmic narration, where the camera will 'reveal the truth of past events as a reliable contrast to their narration in words' (1998, 126). The reliability of the medium itself is seldom compromised, since 'film can only deceive through the use of implausible rubber masks and improbable doubles' (126). However, comics' use of overtly stylised art subverts this (as there is no truth or realism inherent in the mode (drawing) or style (which is generally non-realistic)), and seeing in comics is therefore elevated to the same fictional status as writing within this medium. If 'postmodern art is not so much ambiguous as it is doubled and contradictory' (Hutcheon 1988, 87), then comic-book art is postmodern in the extreme as it denies notions of realism and, as noted, the notion of the original via its status as an overtly reproduced copy.⁶⁶

The distinctiveness of style employed by comics is also interesting in itself. Much has been written on it as the basis for pop art, most notably by Roy Lichtenstein, who explains that much of his attraction to cartooning stems from its paradox of 'very highly charged subject matter carried out in standard, obvious and removed techniques' (Morphet 1968, 13). In this respect, pop art paralleled the work of the abstract painters, and an awareness of this informs criticism of stylised comic-book art. Its thick outlines, dot-matrix style colours and heavy highlighting techniques all contribute to the 'icon' – an abstract shape that we instantly recognise due to social conditioning (such as two dots placed above a horizontal line to represent a face).

The most obvious implications of postmodern cartooning and pop art testify to the invasion of mass culture. 'The inhabitant of any of the world's large cities – London, Tokyo, Paris, New York – is more likely to find himself "at home" in any of them, than in

⁶⁶ As noted in Chapter 1 'Industry changes: outside factors', contemporary comics illustrate the notion of art in the age of mechanical reproduction (Walter Benjamin) as they exist in no original state: from the written script to the final pencilled/coloured pages which exist in various stages (or perhaps just digitally) there is no 'original' entire comic book to be manually copied and distributed.

the rural parts of his own country; the international cultural milieu which sustains him will be more evident. So-called “mass” culture, [is] both agent and symptom of this transformation’ (McHale 1967, 48). Taken from an article written in 1967, this statement has proved true. Lichtenstein, in a 1963 interview, similarly commented on his work:

Everybody has called Pop Art ‘American’ painting, but it’s actually industrial painting. America was hit by industrialism and capitalism harder and sooner and its values seem more askew [...] I think the meaning of my work is that it’s industrial, it’s what all the world will soon become. Europe will be the same way, soon, so it won’t be American; it will be universal. (Morphet 1968, 9)

Again, in contemporary times this statement has become startlingly applicable. Although Lichtenstein is referring to his own work, his comments are equally applicable to the medium that is his subject matter. The Westernisation (or even Americanisation) of the world is one of the defining factors of this *fin de siècle*, and it is clear that this cultural anomaly is reflected in the style of comics.

These points also affect our conception of the hyperreal. Traditionally, the hyperreal is evoked through a notion of the original: in overtly denying this concept, comics are only able to evoke the hyperreal through an excess of style that, as discussed in Chapter 4, relies upon notions of postmodern doubling and of romance and its excesses. The temporality of comics as a throwaway medium reinforces this: ‘We seem to reconstruct and “permanentize” the past as swiftly as we move forward into a more materially “ephemeral” present and future’ (McHale 1967, 50). Postmodern conflict between the reconstructed, archived past and the temporary present, in which comics exist as stylised, temporary media, sustains the hyperreal in this moment of present.

In light of this, we can see how the illustrative elements of the comic reinforce and sustain the excess of the medium. In Appendix 5.2 the use of colour in panels 3 and 4 is in stark contrast to the muted, indistinct illustrations of panels 1 and 2. The blandness of colour in these first panels emphasises the sudden use of red – a great deal of red – for the face-on shot of the three killers. The use of a separate, smaller panel in contrasting purple around the Corinthian’s head (he with the sunglasses) in panel 3 similarly heightens the

sensation – he is the focal point of the scene, both for us and for his victim. The move from this heightened sensuality to the stark, menacing silhouettes is again disorientating: the single red glint from the knife draws our eye (making us uncomfortably conscious of the Corinthian’s ‘PENCHANT’), and hence the panel also provides the reader with personal closure – we can be sure that there is no escape for Philip.

The way that the colours play with our senses while the pictures play with notions of perspective produces a heightened sense of representation, while the typography of the language provides a similarly exaggerated reproduction of realism. The equation of narrative time with story time (as noted in my adaptation of Gérard Genette’s critical model) further aids the hyperreal by providing a similar facsimile of ‘real time’.⁶⁷ The manipulation of these interlocking elements takes the scene into hyperrealism: exposed as *a facsimile with no original* the whole becomes the ultra-real, a signature of the real in excess. Through the interaction of multiple elements, comics enter the hyperreal, transcending notions of literary media as limiting.

Narrative and identity

As seen, the panel is the basic building block of the medium’s narrative, and although it appears to have its own rules as to its language and nature, its purpose is much the same as that of any narrative element. Fundamental to my consideration of this is the notion of narrative knowledge as explored by Currie and Lyotard, and the effects the postmodern comics medium has, not only on traditional narrative (by virtue of its postmodernism), but also on postmodern narratology (due to the medium’s nature).

In *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie considers questions of identity: concluding that our identities are construed via others, via difference, and also through narrative – by telling our own story (or even thinking of our lives in terms of story structures), which allows us to externalise ourselves (1998, 17). Lyotard takes a similar view of narrative knowledge as opposed to scientific knowledge. Narratives and stories pre-1980s were often overwhelmed by the overt presence of authorial control over these

⁶⁷ See Chapter 4 ‘Case study: *The Sandman: The Kindly Ones*’.

elements as authors manipulated obviously in order to make the points they felt necessary (Currie 1998, 23), whereas the contemporary trend in narrative styles is to veil authorial control.

Can it be said that comics such as these Vertigo texts have the advantage here due to their removal of many of the barriers between author and reader that evidence this control (such as extraneous description, or the seeing versus hearing dilemma)? I believe that, although the medium is responsible, the apparent absence of narrative is also due to the evocation of the hyperreal through overstylised art and text: by exposing the layers we are distracted from the notion of a unified vision driving the work. Even in *The Sandman*, which is overwhelmingly narrative-driven despite its medium, this illusion persists.

By contrast, throughout the entire sixty-six episodes of *Preacher* Ennis barely uses third-person heterodiegetic narration at all. Excluding some issues which have the briefest of introductions stating time or place (which are deliberately vague, such as 'NOW' (1997a, 7.1), or 'SIX MONTHS LATER' and 'SIX MONTHS EARLIER' (1991b, 3.1; 5.1)), there are maybe five instances of this kind of authorial narration, none of which run for more than a few pages. Homodiegetic first-person narration (from the point of view of one of the characters) occurs a little more, but overall Ennis chooses to tell his story predominantly in dialogue.

Homodiegetic narrative emphasises an interesting literary condition: that of fictional truth (Currie 1998, 118). It draws attention to itself as a narrative and also foregrounds its subjectivity: making it clear to us that fiction is, after all, what we are reading. A good example of this is shown at Appendix 5.4 where Tulip's narration is belied by the flashback scene it refers to. Stressing the contrast between actual events and her telling of them removes any doubts we may have about the truth of what we are *seeing*, as it is so clearly more accurate than the subjective version we are being told.

Ennis uses the condition of fictional truth in homodiegetic first-person narrative to detract attention from the fact that all fiction lives in this condition, making his story as a whole more convincing. This sort of postmodern play invokes the tension between writing

and seeing. As Currie says 'There is something about seeing, even fictional seeing, which overrules the authority of a verbal narrative' (1998, 126-7). Comics utilise this condition of postmodern narratology by incorporating both the visual and the verbal and, through stylistic excess, elevating the two into a new, often overt, condition of fiction.

In terms of purely literary narrative style, second-person narrative (whether heterodiegetic or homodiegetic) seems more truthful: it at least accounts for the presence of a reader and narrator, while being much more difficult to spot. Ian Banks's *The Business* (2000) is written entirely in the second person; however the resulting prosaic lack of intrusion makes this difficult to spot, excepting isolated incidents when the protagonist explains something directly to the reader. The medium of comics, however, is able to switch seamlessly between first-, second- and third-person narrative, and homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative, as I shall demonstrate.

In this respect, comics' hybrid language also alerts us to an often-overlooked point of literary terminology. The trend of describing narrative as first-person or third-person (and, occasionally, second-person) has given way to modern criticism's homodiegetic and heterodiegetic labels (as coined by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980)). However, comics display the inadequacy of both systems *if used alone*. The adaptability of comics' narrative boxes provides for first-, second- or third-person narrative, both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic (my use of which term will henceforth include Genette's autodiegetic category, which is essentially 'the strong degree of the homodiegetic' (Genette 1980, 245)). In this way comics reveal the need for a critical terminology that combines both methods.

For example, the narrative boxes in Appendix 4.1 and 4.2 offer a first-person homodiegetic narrative, while Appendix 2.2 demonstrates a third-person homodiegetic narrative. The narrative of Appendix 5.1 begins as third-person heterodiegetic, but by the final panel has become first-person homodiegetic. This new taxonomy is enlightening if applied to other texts, revealing (for example) that *The Business* is written in a second-person homodiegetic voice, as we are addressed by a character within the novel.

At the end of *The Sandman* #72 (the end of the last story arc: the final three issues were one-shot specials) the reader is immersed in the story, addressed through the panels. Initially the narrative is homodiegetic, as Morpheus says: 'They are awake. All but one...' (Gaiman 1997, 92.1), referring to the reader. However, this slips seamlessly into second-person heterodiegetic as we are addressed directly by the narrator/Gaiman (fig. 1, Appendix 5.5). The mobility of narrative techniques available to comics makes these sorts of changes not only possible, but discreet.

In 'The Castle' (the prologue to *The Kindly Ones*) a dreamer is given a tour around Morpheus's castle. From a linguistic view, the narrative is initially first-person homodiegetic, as a fictional dreamer muses before falling asleep, before the story becomes purely dialogic, as characters in the story introduce themselves to the dreamer. Visually, however, the perspective of the panels transforms their dialogue into a kind of second-person homodiegetic narrative, as they appear to be addressing themselves directly to us (fig. 2, Appendix 5.5). We have become the dreamer in the story.

Preacher makes similar use of changing panel perspectives within the visual strand of its narrative: in *Until the End of the World* Jesse's story of his childhood is illustrated with pictures of the past and the present as he narrates. Although told as first-person homodiegetic (by Jesse), the panel perspective is constantly changing. In Appendix 5.6 we can see the effects of this: the story cuts twice between the past and the present in the space of six panels. Initially (in the present) while panel 1 is heterodiegetic, panel 2 appears to be Tulip's perspective of Jesse. This is indicated both semantically (by her sidelong glance in panel 1, which trains her eyes directly on the profile picture of Jesse in panel 2), and syntactically (by the overlap between the two panels). Further down the page, in a scene from Jesse's past, the narrative changes from Jesse's perspective (panel 3), to Jody's perspective (panel 4), to a heterodiegetic perspective (panels 5 and 6).

This returns us to the condition of fictional truth: the story is being told by Jesse, from his memory, and so should be drawn entirely from Jesse's perspective. That switches to heterodiegetic perspectives and even other homodiegetic perspectives (such as Jody's) fit

smoothly into the sequencing of panels is evidence of the power of the medium to sustain these sorts of contradictions and excesses. In this sense, the medium overtly illustrates our acceptance of fictional truth as part of the literary process – where in order to experience fiction fully we must pretend to ourselves it is real.

Currie links the condition of fictional truth to that of narrative identity: ‘When I tell my own story, I must deny that I am inventing myself in the process in order to believe that I am discovering myself’ (1998, 131). In a postmodern *coup d’état* we can observe the character of Tulip experiencing this process (in Appendix 5.4) while her narrative also affects us similarly as we reaffirm our own notions of identity:

This is more than saying narrative reflects life. It is saying that narrative is one of the ways in which identity, the ideological subject, is manufactured. It is also saying that the manufacture of identity is not a single originary occurrence but a process of repetition [...] (Currie 1998, 32)

Tulip tells her story recasting herself as unafraid and the main character of the whole affair. We take her narrative on board and incorporate it not only into our perception of her, but also into our own perceptions of ourselves; reforming our own identities by contrast. Ennis’s subversion of her tale does little to alter this effect, but adds an element of self-consciousness, allowing the narrative to exist in postmodern plurality.

The effect of the hybrid signifier’s incorporation and adaptation of these postmodern narrative techniques is to actively involve the reader in the story process. McCloud further emphasises the involvement of the reader in his discussion of the role of the reader in using closure to fill the gutters.⁶⁸ The gutter is often the site of major events, as in *Preacher* when Genesis enters the Reverend Jesse Custer, causing the death of his entire congregation (Ennis 1996, 32.5-33.1). Here, the actual deaths are not shown: in the final panel of page 32 Jesse’s audience are alive and talking; by the first panel of page 33 they are already dead. The reader is intrinsically involved: investing the story with his or her own identity and experiences to keep it coherent, as McCloud’s example shows (Appendix 3.2).

⁶⁸ See Chapter 1 ‘Literature review’, also Appendix 3.2, and further McCloud (1993, 68).

All these variations on postmodernism and narratology place comics and their readers in an interesting position. To summarise: narrative knowledge is intrinsic to a postmodernist formation of identity. However, comics can subvert this by playing with the narrative conditions of fictional truth and the restrictions of seeing-versus-writing that most other literary forms cannot. Yet other characteristics of the medium (such as its hybrid signifiers, use of stylised art, and the gutter) continue to allow repetition of identity-affirming reader involvement. Essentially, the level of reader involvement (and, hence, the consequences for narrative identity) becomes postmodern due to this multiplicity. In this way, and by evoking the Lyotardian notion of fluctuating speaker and addressee, comics' narratology sustains these elements of postmodernism.

Postmodernism and the medium

However, postmodern culture also has its effect on comics – for example, as McCloud points out, closure is a technique learnt in society: 'Every time we see a photograph reproduced in a newspaper or magazine, we commit closure. Our eyes take in the fragmented, black-and-white image of the "half-tone" patterns and our minds transform it into the "reality" of the photograph' (1993, 64).

In this sense our social surroundings have an effect on the way we read time in comics, for example in providing the basis for our interpretation of the time elapsing in each panel (as noted). Although the medium has a few ways of emphasising its point such as lengthened panels, repeated panels, borderless panels or bleeds (where a panel runs off the edge of a page or has another inset within it), in a general sense its interpretation is at the mercy of the reader's culture or, more accurately, the artist's perceptions of the ideal/IMPLIED reader and their social norms. However, since most of us have never been involved in many of the situations we experience in comics (such as a gunfight) we also rely on intertextuality – movies, books and so forth – to provide us with a sense of timing.

In this sense intertextuality can also be seen as a response to the postmodern lack of grand narratives: in the absence of intrinsic truths we use other reference points as

constants, elevating them almost to the status of grand narratives. Comics' reliance upon a shared universe and coherent history is relevant in this regard, informing the industry's traditional reliance on retroactive continuity (retcon) – where a previously non-existent past is called into being in order to generate a new storyline (as in 'you never knew this before, but...'). Also relevant is my notion of superscription, which ignores or overwrites the past for the same purpose.⁶⁹

In temporal terms, there seems to be a distinction between these two processes. If retcon is an additive strategy that looks backwards to comics' history, superscription looks forwards to the new text(s). The resulting redefinition may have implications on both levels (as seen in characters such as the Swamp Thing), and as such the hyperreality of comics is universally subjective. Continuity is informed on every level by intertextuality, and hence the medium displays the complete rejection of grand narratives that is so essential to postmodernism.

The relationship between comic narratology and postmodern society is, however, more complicated. Currie holds that the nature of readership was first recognised as fractured due to an awareness of issues such as reader identification and interpellation which formed the basis for poststructuralism in the 1980s and removed the notion of the singular reader (Currie 1998, 29). As seen, comics make extensive use of reader identification and interpellation (in light of the gutter phenomenon even making these essential reading skills): is then their readership the most fractured? As McCloud says, each reader fills in the gutter in their own style – although similar, no two can ever be identical: 'I may have drawn an axe being raised [...] but I'm not the one who let it drop, or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why' (Appendix 3.2).

This fractured readership points very clearly to some of Lyotard's thoughts on the postmodern condition. By positing the existence of language games and the absence of

⁶⁹ My invention of the term 'superscription' is introduced in Chapter 2 'Superscription and absorption'. The term 'retroactive continuity' was coined in 1983 by writer Roy Thomas in the letter column of *All-Star Squadron*, before being contracted to the more user-friendly term 'retcon' by Damian Cugley in an USENET online discussion in 1988. Thomas claims he originally heard the word at a convention and it has since become part of official comics jargon, used by writers and fans alike.

grand narratives as the defining qualities of contemporary society, Lyotard places the postmodern individual in an isolated condition, as a mere post through which various messages pass (Lyotard 1984, 15). McCloud echoes this concept, saying 'The comics I see in my mind will never be seen in their entirety by anyone else, no matter how hard I try' (1993, 196). As results of our inability to communicate telepathically, communication and its various media do not simply result from the postmodern condition but also, on some level, sustain it (for example by producing a fractured readership). In this light, comics are not only a postmodern medium but the effects of this medium exemplify the postmodern condition.

The postmodern condition is also evoked in comic-book notions of time and space. As mentioned, Currie comments on the strange attitude of our society towards time: an obsession with the archiving and documentation of the present exists alongside an impatience to reinstall these events in the present (exemplified in media such as TV advertisements which parody previous campaigns or famous historical events) (1998, 100). Jencks also recognises this, saying that the word 'postmodern' suggests 'the post-present – as if it were suspended beyond time' (1989, 65), a definition further supported by Lyotard's perception of postmodernism as the perpetual avant-garde, or as modernism in a constant, nascent state (1984, 79).

The subjective temporality created by superscription and retcon further reflect Lyotard's observations that 'The artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*' (1984, 81). However, an equally strange temporality with regard to readership is observed by Jacques Derrida (speaking of Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* (2000)), who comments that the reading process exists in a disjointed present and is 'henceforth always in abeyance' (2000, 97). This comment aligns with Blanchot's own observations on narration as the 'imminence' of the event itself, situated in 'the site where it will occur' (1982b, 62).

In light of this kind of temporality the comic-book page is significant, for while the current panel alone represents the present, all around it we can simultaneously see the past

and the future – held in abeyance while the eye animates that which it currently focuses on.⁷⁰ The contiguous arrangement of panels and gutters (similar to that noted by Barthes with reference to photographic images (1977, 16)) allows this process. Jim Collins discusses the consequences of layout in his artistic consideration of *The Dark Knight Returns*, whose panels are numerous, irregular and fragmented: ‘The end result is a narration that proceeds syntagmatically across and down the page, but also forces a paradigmatic reading of interrelationships among images on the same page or adjacent pages, so that the tableaux [*sic*] moves the plot forward but encourages the eye to move in continually shifting trajectories as it tries to make sense of the overall pattern of fragmentary images’ (Collins 1991, 173). This observation supports my argument that the page/metapanel is a literal example of postmodern plurality, and perhaps also illustrates the importance of context to the signifier – as in comics the surrounding context is, quite literally, always visible.

Conclusion

It seems the medium’s narratology is inherently postmodern – the text becomes a sort of postmodern narrative machine: entirely subjective, heavily self-referential and primarily concerned with the poetic, phatic and metalinguistic functions of its fiction. This is further illustrated by *The Sandman* as Gaiman’s series is a story almost entirely concerned with the telling of stories: as seen, his message highlights the ideas and methods behind storytelling itself, the form these are told in and the relationship between the speaker and addressee.

Read in this way, as metafiction, *The Sandman* foregrounds elements such as a postmodern historiography, intertextuality, writer/reader language games, and plurality. It is, in many respects, a good example of the type of postmodern historicising noted by Currie – due largely to Gaiman’s intertextual references and his use of comics history.⁷¹ Taking this observation in conjunction with the market position and length of *The Sandman*

⁷⁰ This conception of the role of vision in sequential art was first proposed by William Hogarth (see Baruth and West 1998, 117-8).

⁷¹ As discussed in Chapter 2 ‘Superscription and absorption’.

it is possible to posit that the text has succumbed to the lure of the master narrative: setting itself up as one. Its emergence has reshuffled the comics market to a great extent: repositioning comics that existed both before and after its reign, both in terms of what will sell, and with regard to the effect it has had on the characters and series it has incorporated. This state both sustains the past (as it constantly references industry history) and, as discussed, evokes an exaggerated virtual reality: the hyperreal.

Preacher also has a rich variety of postmodern attributes, although many of these are subverted or destabilised by its content, which provides a unique take on postmodernism and our present. But perhaps the most startling thing about *Preacher* can only be recognised by looking at the whole in terms of its basic concept: a story set in the 1990s about one man's search for God. A conventional *fin de siècle* theme, but given an extra postmodern twist in that the search is a quite literal one.

Currie comments that a text 'should not be seen as poststructuralist because it articulates a poststructuralist view on intertextuality, but rather because it enacts that view, performs that view, in its intertextual relation to other novels, other historical novels, other detective stories, and the texts of academic theory. In short, it is not what a novel says but what a novel does that links it to poststructuralist theory, so that narratological knowledge of other texts derives from its intertextual performance and not from the statements of a metalanguage' (Currie 1998, 69-70). In this light, the effects of medium, form and content within both *Preacher* and *The Sandman* are pervasive; the interaction of multiple elements plays with notions of signs and signifiers, narrative and reality. The mobility of narrative voice and visual perspective in comics alerts us to new classificatory possibilities within the realm of literature. The medium's multiplicity defines the reader's constantly fluctuating involvement with the text, while the whole exists in an abundance of excess. As I hope this deconstruction has shown, in terms of duality, the medium of comics is postmodern in the extreme; a product of our times that both prefigures and echoes them.

Chapter 6: Semiotics

Literature review

As discussed in Chapter 1, contemporary comics criticism tends to view its subject as texts that are valid only as cultural markers or semiotic deconstructions and it seems that literary and academic acceptance of comics has culminated here. Cultural studies of these texts can have a semantic or syntactic focus, and the former may consider the superhero archetype either in terms of its modern day cultural functions or political implications (Whitlark, Reynolds, Lawrence and Jewett), or use semiotic deconstruction to trace its historical development (Matozzi). In terms of the latter, deconstructions or close linguistic analyses of the medium itself may aim to provide a philosophy of comics authorship and reading practices (Eisner, McCloud) or pursue a more general theory of visual language (Cohn, Barber) as I will now discuss in more detail.

Norman Bryson's *Word and Image* (1981) broke new ground in applying narrative deconstructions to images drawn from French painting of the *ancien régime*. To do so, Bryson approaches the image 'as a sign [that takes on] the same kind of construction as the verbal sign' (1981, 1), arguing that both images and words alike incorporate within themselves a signifier (graphic or acoustic in nature) and signified (the intelligible form of meaning).⁷² By examining pictures at a narrative level he redefines the work of painters who were previously considered stylistic anomalies, and is able to reveal cross-cultural thematic links. In so doing he offers an alternative to the standard view of art as a history of successive visual styles.

Neil Cohn's research is concerned with defining the processes of visual language, which, he is at pains to point out, is not directly equitable to comics: the medium is simply one that uses this idiom. In 'Visual Language Acquisition' (2003) he establishes the existence of the same by paralleling stages of art education with language acquisition and

⁷² As such, Scott McCloud's use of the term 'icon' to refer to any graphic representation (see Chapter 5 'The hybrid signifier') may be defined as a signifier in this sense.

observing similar elements in both processes. These include the 'nativist'/item-based learning debate; the existence of a critical period of acquisition in childhood for both; and the distinct nature of cross-cultural forms of visual, as well as verbal, language (2003, 3-5). As such, his work continues Bryson's in principle: by arguing for a new form of art criticism that takes the same approach as that of verbal linguistic criticism.

In earlier work Cohn categorises the possibilities for the relationship between word and image and traces how these have developed from basic transcription. These include the complementary relationship (where image and word are held separate, as in Roland Barthes's observations of newspaper pictures and accompanying text); the integrative (where the two are linked visually, as in speech balloons contained within the comic-book panel); and the substitutive (where one replaces the other). Cohn demonstrates the transcription of a sentence (such as 'the man runs to the shop') in visual language, showing how it removes the separation of concepts (such as 'man' and 'runs'), and instead uses a stream of concept-linking images (in this example, the image of a man running towards a shop). He then tests his theory by deconstructing the whole image: defining it as a 'concept-bundle' made up of *cognemes* that are the basic blocks of conceptual meaning.

Cohn uses a pyramid-shaped framework to deconstruct the variance possible in visual language's representation of images. He defines representation as being made up of *haplósis* (the process of conceptual simplification); *schematismós* (where the shape-basis of the representation dominates); and *chromósis* (where the representation is colour-focused). As such, the image is made up of concept, shape and colour, and abstraction will occur when one of these is altered, bringing about a consequent variance in semantic meaning.

The syntactic relations between concept bundles make up the backbone of meaning for visual language (Cohn 2002a, 12). Just as verbal language is made up of formatives (such as nouns, verbs and adjectives) whose arrangement is structured by its syntactic rules, so too is visual language, which has five types of formatives (concept bundles). Cohn observes eight types of panel transitions governing these, expanded from McCloud's list of six (McCloud 1993, 70-2). However, Cohn groups his transitions into three distinct classes

(temporally progressive, temporally ambiguous, and environmentally co-dependent) and the consequent focus on their function rather than content provides a model that is linguistic rather than simply observational. He further identifies three transitionally variant conditions that affect our reception of this syntax: the inclusionary (where a panel not only relates to the next but also has one embedded within it), the embedded (where a transition may take place within the panel with no outside indication), and the overlay (which panel will connect all those underlying it).

Cohn proposes using these base level transitions to analyse the hierarchical grammatical properties that govern visual language. He defines both visual and aural language by their sequentiality, saying: 'Without sequence, statements are simply declarative, the same as single images' until they are connected in sequence to form 'concept streams' (Cohn 2002a, 12). The immediacy of visual language's concept stream distinguishes it from aural language's concept stream (which, in its use of words, may be better characterised as referential). As such, I would argue that it contributes to comics' construction of the hyperreal, which I define as a state that is produced when such an immediate conceptual language is employed in the pursuit of fiction. Similarly, the use of sequentiality in defining such a language (as in Cohn, McCloud and Eisner's focus on panel transitions rather than their content) has reference to the Derridean notion of *differance*, which I shall return to discuss.

In 'Bimodality of Thought' (2002b) Cohn, like McCloud, writes in comic-book panels, using the medium that is his subject. Using 'puzzle theory'⁷³ he argues that although verbal language and visual language use a separate mental modality they both stem from the same conceptual framework (built from the co-dependency of the signal and signified in concept bundling). He states that when the two are combined either words or pictures must dominate; however his examples only indicate this in syntactic terms (that is, with reference to the respective size and positioning of the letters and images), and he

⁷³ A model based on the theory that any time one switches from one language to another a separate mental modality is used (i.e. a different 'puzzle pattern' is employed) (Cohn 2002b, 2).

declines to discuss the semantic relationship between the two, citing instead McCloud's inventory of word/picture combinations (McCloud 1993, 153-155). As already discussed, my view of comics' narrative requirements denies this sort of semantic dominance, but Cohn's observation of syntactic dominance through visual placing seems to be indisputable. As such, and considering Cohn's approach (which breaks down the image into cognemes), perhaps syntactically my hybrid signifier may also be viewed along similar lines: as a conceptual representation of a narrative morpheme.⁷⁴

In 'The Phenomenon of Multiple Dialectics in Comics Layout', John Barber examines the effects of panel layout within the page or *mise-en-page* (double-page spread). Barber follows the reasoning of filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein as he redefines McCloud's notion of closure in Hegelian terms: positing that two sequential panels may be understood as the thesis and antithesis that require synthesis (McCloud's 'closure'/reader gutter activity) (Barber 2002, 3). He further notes that this can also occur within the panel; either when it depicts sequential events, or simply between its text and image, referencing Cohn's substitutive relationship in this regard (9). However, in concentrating on the *mise-en-page*, Barber's focus is on identifying the multiple syntagmatic relationships displayed between panels and their effects on narrative.

Barber decries the idea of a taxonomy of panel types that references the relationship between word and image – referring to McCloud's list of transitions (although not his semantic classification of panel content).⁷⁵ He comments (in his discussion of Benoit Peeters's work on panel types) that 'in practice the distinction between visuals and story can become hopelessly blurred, let alone the dominance of one over the other. This is a wholly unsatisfactory system for investigating layout' (13). Barber instead adopts Randy Duncan's three-part framework (comprising spatial, sequential, and juxtapositioned effects) and sets it alongside his dialectical semantic structure. He therefore defines the comic as

⁷⁴ Cohn defines a 'morpheme' as an acquirable standard representation that is part of a culture's shared visual language; however I use the term here in its literary sense (see discussion of Vladimir Propp in Chapter 3 'Literature review: the literary approach' for further details).

⁷⁵ See Chapter 5 'The hybrid signifier'.

having an 'internal syntagm' that is its content (in terms of theses and antitheses), and an 'external syntagm' that relates to its layout (in terms of size, placement and so forth (14)).⁷⁶ He goes on to conduct various experiments in layout and comment on their effectiveness, and concludes that comics' unique methods of communication are created by their use of juxtaposition within both the internal and external syntagm. Results include persistent images, non-linear reading and the interaction of image and text in various ways.

These contemporary critics use comics to inform discussion of visual language in a wider sense, while their focus on the nature of panel transition establishes an inventory of syntactic possibilities for the medium. Whether they define visual language as 'comics' (McCloud), consider the medium to exemplify the possibilities for sequential art communication (Eisner, Cohn), or are concerned with examining the narrative impact of its visuals (Barber), the comic nonetheless is subsumed into a discussion that ranges from reading direction and the workings of the human eye to the role of culture in decipherment. In light of Bryson's theories I propose instead to continue to approach the panel as a signifier and consider it further in these terms, focusing primarily on its narrative import.

The Saussurean notion of the sign introduced in Chapter 5 has been deemed overly simplistic for literary use within postmodern critical theory, which denies the search for unity or a pure signified. As such, a Derridean definition of the signified (as intelligible only in terms of its context, that is, as a link in a chain of signifiers) currently dominates, although this sort of hermetic semiosis often results in an endless deferral of meaning.⁷⁷ A Derridean semiotics establishes notions of the sign by analysing meaning solely in terms of this textual chain, rather than pursuing the hunt for the pure signified (Derrida 1992, 107).

Critics such as Umberto Eco, however, view this process as little more than an endless discovery of similarity where, at each stage, we discover only that 'what one believed to be the meaning of a sign is in fact the sign for a further meaning.' He blames this on the 'flawed' principle where 'If two things are similar one can become the sign for

⁷⁶ 'Syntagm' is defined by Duncan as 'the structure by which signs combine and interact to form a meaningful unit of juxtaposition' (Barber 2002, 14).

⁷⁷ Of the type Edward Leach objects to as 'verbal juggling' in his discussion of Lévi-Strauss (1970, 62).

the other and vice versa' (Eco 1992, 47). As such, Eco decries this type of hermeneutics as 'over-interpretation' and claims that only exceptional links can have significance. In so doing, he does of course rely upon a Derridean notion of context to limit the number of interpretations and associations possible (1994, 21).

To my mind, the semiotics of comics may avoid this by presenting a signifier that is simultaneously its own signified, negating the chain of deferral. As a consequence the reader enters a hyperreal zone of literary meaning, a situation that is reinforced by the visual elements of comics (colour, positioning, abstraction), and sustained by a consequent switching of perspective (as previously observed in Chapter 5 'Art and the hyperreal'). The onus this puts on the reader is similar to the freedom of interpretative choice that is essential to both Eco and Derrida's conception of the search for meaning – Eco notes that the creative text offers multiple options for interpretation (1992, 140-1), and distinguishes it from the closed, academic text in this way. The reliance on context to define 'exceptional links' between signifiers that will indicate one of the multiple, 'correct' interpretations, offers an alternative to a Lévi-Straussian view of the text as made up of matrices of crystallised meaning, or a strict Derridean interpretation of the text as composed of empty signifiers that only evoke others. Instead, Eco argues that the structure of a creative text allows for multiple meanings yet limits the hermeneutic choices allowed to the reader (Eco 1994, 49-50), a situation that is overtly demonstrated in the gutters of comic-book syntactics.

Other interpretative frameworks deny that the concept of difference defines literature (in terms of its uniqueness (Derrida 1992, 14)).⁷⁸ Rather, their concern is with identifying clear functions that are common to all generic texts of a certain type. In using a purely linear framework, any extra dimensions are denied – in contrast to more complex paradigms, such as that of Lévi-Strauss, which adds the extra dimension of thematic clusters arranged in binary opposition. In this sense the Lévi-Straussian model links

⁷⁸ Such as Propp's formalist approach to the wondertale, discussed previously (see chapters 3 and 4 'Literature review'), or Eco's examination of Ian Fleming's use of narrative formula in the James Bond novels (Eco 1982, 244).

difference to context: embodying the established Derridean notion of *différance*. This notion of difference limited by context may be said to inform the spatial/sequential narrative of comics, where paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships are displayed simultaneously.

Although narrative remains the primary focus for structuralists, various other textual forms make use of syntagmatic structures: spatial relationships are employed by posters or montages; conceptual relationships structure arguments, exposition or conversation. Many texts in fact have more than one syntagmatic structure although one will dominate. As such, narrative in its most general sense may be described as having a sequential, causal, and syntagmatic structure. This linearity is said to be characteristic of English prose (Chandler 2001, 2) and is often coupled with a structural closure (for example in academic writing). By contrast, although the comic-book narrative is sequential, it requires active reader participation in order to become a linear, causal narrative, as it initially exists only in a spatial, syntagmatic form.

The basic principle of reading comics follows the same process as reading prose – the words dictate the reading direction, which is left to right, working down the page. At the same time, the panel borders and gutters block off different groups of speech bubbles/narrative boxes in order that we may approach these in turn. In terms of primacy, then, the dictates of these textual borders dominate (that is to say, within the speech bubble or narrative box we must read left to right, only then progressing to the next), followed by the panel frame, then that of the metapanel, then the double-metapanel (the double-page spread or *mise-en-page*). The visual elements of the panel form a frame to the words, and may be interpreted either before the text, after it, or simultaneously (depending on individual reading habit or a personal preference to let either the textual or visual hierarchy dominate). As noted, these elements may also have a subconscious effect with regard to interpretation or emotional response.⁷⁹

John Barber's experiments in layout prompt him to observe that: 'The difference

⁷⁹ See discussion of Appendices 3.1 and 3.6 in Chapter 3 'Case study: *The Invisibles*'.

between placing the text below rather than next to the image is negligible compared to the difference in reading caused by a loss of the immediate spatial juxtaposition of multiple images within the *mise-en-page*' (40). For Barber the double-page spread is primary, as its impact is both immediate (it is the first thing taken in by the reader upon turning the page), and lasting (it will affect the reading of all panels contained within it). His statement seems at odds with my previous paragraph but I believe that comics' hybridity of image and text can provide a basis for explanation. I would argue that, while a textual hierarchy of speech bubbles, then panels, page and double-page dictates reading direction and as such provides syntax; a visual hierarchy (in which the *mise-en-page* is instead dominant) simultaneously dictates what semantic import the narrative will have to the reader. As such, if the page (and, indeed, the *mise-en-page*) is a metapanel (or double-metapanel), it too is hybrid.

Roland Barthes's deconstruction of photographic images implicitly supports a view of the panel as a homogenized combination of image and text (1977, 16) and his work provides a general basis for deconstructing images in terms of their iconographic connotations, stressing the image's conscious construction over any false naturalism it may convey. Other critics have further explored the codes of image construction. For example, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen identify a three-part system of composition using information value (the ideological meaning of image placement: where left/right indicates old/new, top/bottom implies positive/negative, and centre/margin dictates primary/secondary information), salience (the import of size, colour, contrast and so forth) and framing (Kress and Leeuwen 1996, 183).

Comics' non-realistic style of art, as noted, also serves to emphasise the presence of the hyperreal and stress the narrative condition of fictional truth.⁸⁰ This last is also known as the 'mechanism of dissociation' and defined by Barthes as the 'pleasure principle': being fiction's need for both the actor and the spectator to engage in make-believe. The intrusion of text in sound effects and 'desperation device[s]' (Eisner 1990, 26) such as the speech bubble further stresses these conditions and, while Barber notes that such stylistic

⁸⁰ See Chapter 5 'Art and the hyperreal', also footnote 33.

convention is 'certainly not a defining point of comics' (51), no alternative is proposed by any of these critics. As such, the impact of these elements of comics' stylised art also factors in semiotic interpretation.

I therefore propose to use a hybrid critical framework for semiotic deconstruction that draws on art criticism while having its basis in a Derridean model of textual semiotics. A textual hierarchy of borders creates the narrative's syntax, while an opposed system of visual ranking simultaneously dictates its semantic import. Within this, I define the panel as a complex hybrid signifier whose meaning is limited by context and enhanced by its visual attributes. As such, my deconstruction of semantic content and the spatial and sequential import of syntactic content will be informed by the work of Kress and Leeuwen, and Barber's adaptation of Randy Duncan's model. I shall however be using the semiotic terminology of 'semantic' and 'syntactic' rather than Barber's 'internal' and 'external' syntagm.

Essentially, my primary focus is to consider how all elements of the panel (and metapanel) contribute to its operation as a signifier, and the impact this has on comics' narratology. Without inflicting any more restrictive framework, I turn now to an examination of some of the pages and panels of Neil Gaiman's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (*The Sandman* #19), which will consider how comics' use of semiotics informs our interpretation of the text as a whole, before concluding as to the more general impact of these conclusions on semiotic criticism (of literature, popular culture and the image).

Case study: *A Midsummer Night's Dream**

Dream has been presented in many media. In addition to a long-running theatrical tradition there exist a century's worth of cinematic productions (dating from 1909) and numerous television versions (including the 1981 BBC production and their more recent 2005 modernisation). Other formats include at least two ballets (one directed by George Balanchine, another being Sir Frederick Ashton's *The Dream*), a musical (1984, dir.

* Henceforth referred to as *Dream*.

Celestino Coronada) and various animations. As befits its theme of transformation, the play is nothing if not adaptable.

My concern here is to situate Gaiman's *Dream* with respect to this surrounding body of work. Many critics now view the text as an 'intertext' whose meaning exists only with reference to 'all the other texts to which it refers and relates' (Allen 2000, 1).⁸¹ This view aligns with the modernist perception of Shakespeare as being infinitely adaptable rather than universal (Sanders 2001, 13). As such, *Dream* exists not in isolation as a canonical text, but in multiplicity: as a tradition created through a process of constant reworking and revision for each performance. As Julie Sanders comments further: 'Shakespeare is not the sole intertext and [...] [contemporary interpretations] are as much in dialogue and debate with themselves and each other as with his plays' (12).

As Gaiman's *Dream* falls within the boundaries of both visual media and popular culture I have limited my survey to similar formats: that is, theatre, film, and television, as well as the original written text. It seems necessary to first define the relationships between these various media a little more clearly (in order to situate comics with respect to their surrounding visual media). I then consider the variance apparent in intertextual relations between these different versions of *Dream* before proceeding to a close reading of the Gaiman text and concluding as to its place within the play's tradition.

It seems obvious that the choice of medium will necessarily enable or restrict various production qualities. As far back as the 1930s, Allardyce Nicoll commented that the forces governing contemporary cinema were very similar to those behind Elizabethan theatre – that is to say, purely economic motivations (Davies 1994, 2). Anthony Davies, on the other hand, observes that both cinema and TV align against theatre in their ability to manipulate audience perspective, dissolve the divide between actor/spectator, and in the removal from presence (2). However, Judith Buchanan considers these two media to be distinct in terms of audience: defining television against film as a private versus a public medium (Buchanan

⁸¹ These include Roland Barthes (1981, 39), Harold Bloom (1973, 5), Graham Allen (2000, 1) and Julie Sanders (2001, 1).

2005, 7). The effects of this divide have been noted by critics such as Stanley Wells, who identifies Shakespearean comedy's need for a 'reacting audience' (Wells 1982, 272).

Like television, the comic book is a private medium. It offers the shifting audience perspective and immediacy of television and cinema, yet (due to its use of the hyperreal) without the removal from presence common to both these forms. Conversely, it may be aligned with the theatre in its presentation of tableaux. Critics such as Marguerite Alexander link Jacobean drama and postmodern metafiction as both are conscious of their own artifice and often ambiguous (in their refusal to subscribe to absolutes) (Sanders 2001, 11) and, as will be seen, Gaiman's *Dream* creates what I deem to be a successful metafiction on the subject of both the creative process and Shakespearean canonisation, or 'bardolatry'. To my mind the medium of comics sustains the word and image equally (in its hybrid signifiers) rather than allowing one to dominate; as the visual does in cinema and television, or the linguistic in theatre and literature (Willems 1994, 70). As such, although it shares elements in common with all these media, it cannot be equated directly with any of them, although in this instance it may be helpful to particularly note the medium's theatrical connections.

Parallels can be drawn between comics and dramatic texts, which are subject to constant reinterpretation and re-creation with each new production and, while having a textual basis, therefore exist in no original form. The comic-book product (which exists in multiple identical copies yet without an original) has a similar status regarding origin, as noted. This parallel of dramatic literature and sequential art may suggest that the space-as-time syntax of comics can provide an appropriate medium for documentation of a theatrical presentation and, in fact, it has been noted that certain comics writers (such as Will Eisner) use a 'theatrical' style where characters get into position and speak their lines (Eisner 1996, 60), rather than a 'poster' style where the artistic focus is on layout (Barber 2002, 19).

Comics

Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (*The Sandman* #19)⁸² was

⁸² The comic follows on from *Sandman* #13 where Shakespeare makes a Faustian bargain with Morpheus

published in September 1990 and was the first (and only) comic to win the Word Fantasy Award for Best Short Story (in 1991, after which the rules were changed to exclude comics from this category). Drawn by Charles Vess (who had previously illustrated a Starblaze edition of the original text of the play and much of whose other comics work is ethereal in nature: *Stardust*, *The Books of Magic*), the comic tells the story of the first performance of Shakespeare's play by Lord Strange's Men to an audience that includes Morpheus, Auberon, Titania, and the rest of the faerie folk.⁸³

This is the first appearance of *The Sandman's* faerie cast and, although some discrepancies between minor characters (such as the menacing Peaseblossom) have been inserted, Gaiman's versions and Vess's rendition of them largely accord with the Shakespearean 'originals'. For example, Gaiman is able to incorporate both the sinister and pastoral elements from *Dream* (present in the original text's combination of Mayday and Midsummer rites (Paster and Howard 1999, 92)), in juxtaposing his menacing faerie audience with their prancing actor counterparts.

Further, and in keeping with the theme of *Dream*, it is often hinted at in *The Sandman* that Titania and Morpheus have been lovers (as the faerie character Nuala later comments: 'HOW FITTING THAT LORD AUBERON IS HORN'D' (Gaiman 1996, 5.14.6)). However, in existing only in the hyperreal, these characters do not have a 'textual penumbra'.⁸⁴ Gaiman's Titania (unlike Hoffman's, see my later comments) does not bring an actress's reputation or typecasting to the role, but instead emphasises the accuracy of Shakespeare's character (rather than its inventiveness); Charles Vess generally draws her in profile with long, slanted eyebrows that give her a permanent sidelong glance, signalling her hauteur and dangerous subtlety (see Gaiman 1991b, 3.8.2; also Appendices 6.2 and 6.4). In this

'TO GIVE MEN DREAMS, THAT WOULD LIVE ON LONG AFTER I AM DEAD' (Gaiman 1990c, 6.12.3) in exchange for which he must write two plays for Morpheus: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*.

⁸³ For the sake of clarity I shall retain the spelling Gaiman uses for his Auberon and other faerie folk (for Gaiman, 'faerie' is the abode/adjective only, although the characters themselves are also known as the fey).

⁸⁴ Judith Buchanan's term for the body of information that, while it is not explicitly part of what is on screen, nonetheless surrounds a film.

way the hyperreal setting of comics enables a presentation of *Dream* that aligns with the original text both by allowing this freedom in critical interpretation and in blurring the lines between reality and illusion.

Buchanan theorises that Shakespearean films fall into three categories (Buchanan 2005, 4): theatrical (the straight film-of-the-stage), realist, and filmic (where the text is sublimated to the medium's conventions). Yet applying this model in fact demonstrates the adaptability of most productions, which straddle these borders: although one category dominates, each production nonetheless reflects elements of all. Of my selected texts, the Vitagraph production is primarily realist yet also filmic in its presentation of special effects, while the Warner Brothers' film is primarily filmic yet also exudes theatrical excess and presents realist settings. Hoffman's and Fraiman's texts are first and foremost filmic, but also realist in depiction. Noble's film is primarily of-the-stage yet uses televisual effects, and Moshinsky's work similarly retains a theatrical quality yet prioritises the cinematic techniques of montage, segmentation and close-up (Taylor 1994, 96).

If this model is extended to theatre (as I have extended it to television, above), the minimalism of contemporary productions of *Dream* (such as Peter Brook's or Gregory Doran's) means that, while remaining primarily theatrical (in being obviously staged), these may also be aligned with Buchanan's 'filmic' category: as Shakespearean drama is sublimated into modern theatre's trends. Using this model in this broad way also allows us to note that cross-medium influences are similarly present: as may be found in Moshinsky's television production which in fact has more in common with Noble's cinematic version than Fraiman's text, and shares stylistic elements with Brook's and Doran's versions.

Similarly, while Gaiman's comic aligns with the filmic in visual style, it remains theatrical in its use of tableaux and in depicting a performance of the play. Realist elements are also employed as the play is presented outside, in a 'real' wood. As such, taken as a whole, these visual productions of *Dream* support my previous observations of the reciprocal intertextual relations that exist between these media, as I will now demonstrate.

Theatre

Our understanding of theatre today is quite different from the emergent medium it was in Shakespeare's time. Whereas twentieth-century public expectations of the play demand child-sized fairies fluttering around elaborately constructed woodland scenery, Christopher McCullough notes that the emphasis on visual spectacle would not have been prevalent at the time of the play's creation in the 1590s and that these images owe more 'to the imagination of a Victorian children's illustrator than they do to the Elizabethan mind' (McCullough 1991, 108).

Later productions have varied wildly from this sort of stereotype: for example the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1970 version (dir. Peter Brook) famously departed from realist staging in using a pure white set, replacing Bottom's ass's head with a clown's red nose, and so forth. The conceptual costuming and staging allowed audiences to approach the play afresh and emphasised its underlying binary of reality/illusion. Subsequent RSC interpretations have continued to seek something new in the play, for example by foregrounding certain themes (as in the focus on fertility rituals in Michael Boyd's 1999 production), or specific motifs of language (as in Gregory Doran's use of puppets in his 2005 production, which Doran says was inspired by the play's references to the fairies as 'shadows' (*Dream* III.ii.347, V.i.414)). Doran's directorial process hinges on 're-vivifying' and 'reshaping' Shakespearean language, by which he aims to create the experience of 'a new play' while retaining the 'universality' of Shakespeare (White 2005, npag). As a somewhat outdated phrase, this may be better described as continuing the spirit of theatrical reinterpretation: displaying the play's adaptability while retaining its appeal from generation to generation.

By drawing many of its idiosyncrasies directly from the language of the original text Doran's production gives a fresh interpretation of many scenes, such as his Puck's initial appearance in disguise, which reinterprets the fairy's question at II.i.32-4. Similarly, dolls or tea-light candles are held by the fairy actors to represent their shifting size, which is further informed by the extension of this motif to shadow puppetry. This not only

references lines such as 'king of shadows' (III.ii.347) and 'we shadows' (V.i.414), but also emphasises some of the play's more sinister scenes – Oberon's shadow, projected onto the back screen of the set, looms over the sleeping Titania in a manner more reminiscent of Nosferatu than Cupid (at II.ii.33-40). The fairies' ragged gothic attire, eerie high-pitched voices and the dilapidated state of the plastic dolls they use also add to a darker representation of the play. Other elements such as the incidental music at III.ii.378-395 (where the Puck's misgivings are backed by ominous string music while Oberon's rejoinder is accompanied by twinkling percussion) further demonstrate that the basis for this interpretation lies in the language of the Shakespearean text.

Doran's use of contemporary dress and lack of set decoration echoes the circumstances of a Jacobean performance of the play: allowing the audience 'to respond to the lovers as people they could recognise' (rather than inappropriately exoticising these characters and the mechanicals through use of Elizabethan dress), while stopping short of a themed modernisation that might limit interpretation of *Dream's* meaning (White 2005, npag). Drawing on William Hazlitt's observations that excess of spectacle can destroy poetic message, McCullough notes that a possible critical focus may be drawn from the way in which 'the play's fantastical conventions confront notional stage realism' (McCullough 1991, 108). In using minimalist, contemporary staging, Doran is able to maintain his focus on the language of the text.⁸⁵ In so doing he offers a strong production that combines a sense of Jacobean theatre with modern appeal.

Cinema

The beginnings of cinematic presentations of *Dream* support McCullough's observations as to the changing presentation of the play. In the Vitagraph 1909 silent movie (dir. J. Stuart Blackton), the earliest cinematic recording of *Dream* on record, the entire fairy cast is female (the character of Oberon being replaced by the fairy Penelope); following the

⁸⁵ The stage is bare except for a suspended globe that serves as both the sun and moon, indicating the passage of time through its changing position and colour. Three white walls stand for the scenery of Athens, and are covered by a backdrop of cluttered and broken pieces of wood for the forest scenes. The fairy characters also represent the wood with their bodies: for example when the lost lovers stumble through their clawing branches/hands (III.ii).

nineteenth-century understanding of this domain as feminine (Buchanan 2005, 125). Simplicity and realism are foregrounded: the lovers wear Grecian dress and wander through a real, summer-lit wood. The 1935 Warner Brothers' film (dir. Reinhardt and Dieterle) is similarly idealistic in its presentation of gauzy balletic fairies, although distinct from its predecessor in presenting an excess of visual spectacle that has popularly been considered more than a little vulgar. As such, these early productions oppose many subsequent versions that have come to emphasise the play's more savage and sinister elements.

Later films have explored *Dream* in more depth, for example by referencing their theatrical predecessors or using various frames to present the play's metafictional dimensions. In Adrian Noble's 1996 film, a boy dreams the events of the play. The opening bedroom scene includes a shot of a toy theatre that, after the introduction of the wood, becomes the setting for various scenes – for example Oberon and his Puck observe the mechanicals' rehearsal as on a miniature stage. In this way notions of reality (for example with reference to character size) become blurred and inconstant. The boy is sometimes directly addressed (by Oberon) and as such also serves to represent the audience (a story level that is lacking elsewhere in the production, as many of the courtiers' asides are cut from Act V). Characters flit between the various levels of story, whose settings range from the realistic (such as the palatial rooms or woodland lake setting) to the conceptual (the toy theatre used in Act V or the fairy world of suspended umbrellas and light bulbs, referencing Brook's previous RSC production in its vertical movement).

In constantly switching between cinematic realism and theatrical spectacle (actors also double roles and wear dramatic costumes), Noble's production maintains a dreamlike quality. The addition of a further layer of fiction (the character of the boy) creates a sense of uncertainty due to the constantly switching audience position. Further, in making the play a literal dream (and in so doing referencing the traditional fairytale stereotype), Noble maintains *Dream*'s transforming structure as the ending implies the boy has joined the fairies as a changeling: after drinking water given him by Oberon he takes the Puck's hand (in response to V.i.428) and poses with them in the final tableau on the theatre stage as if

awaiting a curtain call. The gothic nature of this sort of structuring, doubling and inversion should be noted as it is seldom foregrounded in productions of *Dream*.

Director Michael Hoffman offers a modern adaptation of *Dream* (1999) designed to appeal to a mass audience, in which actors Michelle Pfeiffer and Rupert Everett present a hauntingly beautiful Titania and Oberon with a stellar supporting cast. Hoffman relocates his film to the village of 'Monte Athena' in Italy, allowing for a backdrop of operatic music, although the time period and setting are best defined as late Victorian – as the credits explain that 'necklines are high' and 'the bustle is in its decline'. The use of the bicycle as a mode of transport and the English accents of the courtiers and the fairies emphasise this, and divide them from the mechanicals, who have strong American accents. The fairies take the forms of beautiful women in silk robes or Bacchanal revellers – satyrs dressed in furs and sporting horns or elfish pointed ears (the Puck has both) – and also transform into tiny, animated 'Tinkerbell' type lights.

The film is a much more polished cinematic production than Noble's self-consciously theatrical version. The scene structure has been adapted from the original play to provide more tension by using fast cuts between shorter scenes. Techniques such as a montage (showing the wedding preparations) are included, special effects are used to present the transformations, and each actor plays only one part. Most effective, however, is its semantic updating in order to be more realistic for a contemporary audience; for example the play in Act V is removed from Elizabethan convention as its audience respond to Flute's depiction of Thisbe as they would a humorous drag act – until he removes his wig and speaks his last soliloquy from the heart, bringing down the house. In this way the movie is successfully brought into a new context while retaining a classical sense, as it both refers to and is dislocated from historical reality (whether that of England, Greece or Italy).

Buchanan notes that Calista Flockhart's performance as Helena calls to mind her famous role as television's Ally McBeal (2005, 140), naming this as part of the textual penumbra that surrounds the play. I would argue that the casting of Pfeiffer similarly presents Titania as beautiful and feminine (as opposed to *The Sandman*'s more dangerous

and regal queen), as the status attached by contemporary culture to an actor affects our interpretation of the figure. This makes up part of the intertextual nature of *Dream's* tradition: for example, in other modern productions the character of Bottom has been played by comedians such as Benny Hill (1965, dir. Joan Kemp-Welsh) and, more recently, Johnny Vegas (2005, dir. Ed Fraiman). As here, if Bottom is played by a comedian then the audience is much more likely to view his character simply as a fool; rather than focusing on other qualities such as his innocence or enthusiasm.

Television

Elijah Moshinsky's BBC production (1981) presents a traditional version of *Dream* in which choral harmonies introduce child-sized fairies attired in woodland colours with wings attached and wreaths of flowers in their hair. The resulting impression, however, is one of natural simplicity rather than artificial glamour – the Puck is bare-chested except for a filthy ruff around his neck and the dilapidated attire of the other fairies follows this lead. Phil Daniels brings a bestial air to this role, representing the Puck as a goblin or dervish who speaks in frantic rhythms with more than a hint of the demonic. That the production closes on the line 'So, good night unto you all' (V.i.426) further emphasises this sense of danger by erasing any sense of a common human bond between the audience and the Puck (as we are no longer invited to be 'friends'), and animalising the character even more by denying him his human name of 'Robin' (V.i.427-8).

The costumes (designed by Amy Roberts) are more Elizabethan than Grecian in their design, and the attendant music and the interspersed harmonised songs are also in their traditional English forms such as the roundel. Similarly, the dress of the Athenians is more homely than Hollywood: Theseus appears initially to us in his armour, emphasising the sense of his line 'Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword' (I.i.16) while instantly crushing any expectations of high court pomp and glamour the audience might have. Both girls wear the attire of Elizabethan gentlewomen rather than Grecian ladies, while Helena's frizzy hair and glasses are more reminiscent of a schoolmarm than an ingénue and contrast with the polished ringlets that delineate Hermia's beauty. By contrast, Titania appears free and

regal in a flowing white dress and other characters such as the Indian boy (here depicted as a very young toddler who is carried in her arms like the possession he is) also indicate the use of dress and appearance to dictate character function.

Such use of visual stereotyping has been commented on previously as a cornerstone of the semiotics of comics, and a similar impulse may also be found in the initial Shakespearian text (for example where Helena and Hermia are distinguished solely in terms of height and colouring). However, visual coding serves a double function in Moshinsky's production, where it is used both homodiegetically (to indicate character function) and also heterodiegetically (to comment on the origins of the play itself) – as it not only provides a contemporary audience with the visual clues required to form an opinion of a specific character, but also with an understanding of the play as Shakespearian (rather than Grecian) in origin. This double function should be noted as it indicates that, even in reworkings that present themselves afresh (that is, with no framing devices or acknowledgement to earlier versions) a postmodern strand of comment may be found.

By way of contrast, Ed Fraiman's 2005 television production aligns with Doran's in using modern dress (and, in this case, language too). While this ostensibly separates Fraiman's production from the Shakespearean text, it really brings it closer: giving viewers an experience that relates more closely to that of a Jacobean audience (in using the newest entertainment medium and contemporary dress and language). The story is similarly amended and instead focuses on saving the marriage of Hermia's parents – Polly and Theo, who are composites of Hippolyta and Theseus/Egeus – and, by extension, the marriage of Titania and Oberon (whose quarrel no longer concerns the Indian Boy). As such the theme too is updated as it refers to today's modern divorce crisis, rather than exploring the issues of patriarchy that must have been relevant in Elizabeth I's reign. Again this represents the near-limitless adaptability of the Shakespearean text.

Metafiction and (meta)faction

Continuing from *Sandman* #13, Gaiman's *Dream* rewrites the Shakespearean legend into a Faustian bargain that practically makes Shakespeare into a Marlowe character (see Gaiman 1990c, 4.12.3). In this sense it also forms part of the long history of doubt surrounding Shakespeare's work, which dates from 1728 and includes both factional and fictional works.⁸⁶ Although space does not permit a detailed discussion of these theories, they contain some persuasive arguments that include the educational limitations of the man from Stratford and his family, the dates ascribed to his named publications, his entry in the deaths register as merely a 'gent' and the lack of elegies, memorials or any literary possessions at this time. The Hoffman theory⁸⁷ is one of the most striking of these arguments and accredits Shakespeare's work to an exiled (rather than murdered) Kit Marlowe, although it has also been suggested that the two wrote in collaboration: with Shakespeare providing the common touch and Marlowe the literary ability and knowledge (Rubbo 2005, npag).

While appearing to support bardolatry in his homage to Shakespeare (whose work is adaptable for multiple eras and audiences and appeals not just to humans but to non-humans also), Gaiman in fact subverts it by providing a source for Shakespeare's only original play(s).⁸⁸ In creating this Faustian reference, he appears to implicitly reference (and support) the Hoffman theory, an observation that is further supported by Marlowe's presence at the time of their bargain (1990c, 6.12.1-6), and Morpheus giving Shakespeare the news of Marlowe's death (1991b, 3.16.3). However, Gaiman's purpose may be quite different: as Morpheus comments of their bargain 'Will is a willing vehicle for the

⁸⁶ These early publications include Captain Goulding's *Essay Against Too Much Reading* (1728) and anonymous allegories such as *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense* (1769) or *The Story of the Learned Pig* (1786). Many subsequent texts have theorised that Shakespeare was little more than a pseudonym and have accredited authorship of his plays to, variously, Kit Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, William Stanley, or Edward de Vere (see <http://www.shakespeare-oxford.com/histdoubt.htm> for a complete list, or the Australian Film programme *Much Ado About Something*, dir. Michael Rubbo, for a more detailed discussion).

⁸⁷ Calvin Hoffman, *The Man who was Shakespeare* (1955). Also known as Marlovian theory.

⁸⁸ *The Tempest* is named as the other play commissioned by Morpheus and is the title and subject of *Sandman* #75. Together with *Love's Labours Lost* (which may have been based on events and people contemporary to Shakespeare) and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, these four texts are the only 'original' Shakespearean plays (where the plot does not directly reference an obvious literary or historical source).

great stories. Through him they will live for an age of man; and his words will echo down through time' (3.19.2). In naming Morpheus as Shakespeare's co-collaborator and the source for his rewrites of classical stories, perhaps Gaiman is merely offering a more pleasing alternative to the claims made by Hoffman et al., and redefining Shakespeare as a divinely inspired genius.

As such, *The Sandman* may be read as metafiction that deals not only with the creative process and the telling of stories, but also with the nature of fact and fiction/reality and illusion. As this binary underlies *Dream*, the comic therefore also comments on the creation of this text – and, consequently, its own creation: in keeping with the nature of *The Sandman* which is, first and foremost, a comic *about* stories and their telling. This draws a further parallel between Shakespeare and Morpheus himself that again blurs the levels of fiction and metafiction.⁸⁹

In a similar manner, the character of Hamnet (who acts the part of the Indian Boy) is stolen away by Gaiman's Titania during the course of the performance (3.16.7; 3.17.5; 3.20.3; 3.24.5). This echoes Noble's film (where the extratextual character of the Boy doubles with the Indian Boy (Buchanan 2005, 135)). However, Gaiman takes his rewriting a step further by reversing the gender bias of *Dream*'s original text and allowing Titania to keep her prize: her new pageboy later appears in *The Books of Magic* #3 (Gaiman 1991d, 35.3), drawn in identical fashion by Charles Vess and named as Hamnet.

This level of metafiction is continued in other elements of the text and used by Gaiman to enter the world of fiction. Shakespeare's son Hamnet says of his father 'IF I DIED, HE'D JUST WRITE A PLAY ABOUT IT. / "HAMNET."' (3.13.3), referencing Shakespeare's famous tragedy, theories about its autobiographical relevance (rumour has it the plot was inspired by Anne Hathaway's supposed infidelity with Shakespeare's brother), and the historically documented death of his son in 1596.

A similar extratextual comment may be found in Gaiman's inclusion of the real

⁸⁹ As fathers estranged from their sons: Shakespeare's dismissal of Hamnet and Morpheus's indifference to Orpheus's plight leads, in both cases, to their loss.

setting of Wendel's Mound.⁹⁰ Historians to this day remain undecided as to the exact nature of the figure, which is commonly perceived to be holding two staffs – although it has been suggested that there is overlooked detail at the tops of these (depicted accurately by Vess at 3.5.1) which has been interpreted as either the crosspiece of a gate, or perhaps as the tops of scythes or similar tools. Although the earliest known record of the Wilmington Giant is 1710 it is believed to be much older, and details of the site note it provides a natural amphitheatre: all of which lend credence to Gaiman's setting.

Gaiman's date (23 June 1593) also appears historically accurate, while serving as a device of convenience, as it is known the company would have been engaged in country tours during this time due to the outbreak of plague in London. Although it is believed that *Dream* was written c. 1595 there is no conclusive evidence as to the exact date, and all that can be certain is that it was being worked on at the same time as *Romeo and Juliet*. Both references are picked up in the Gaiman text where Richard Burbage anticipates his next role as 'A LOVER MOST TRAGICAL' (3.3.3) on their return to London and various other members of the company complain about 'THESE PROVINCIAL TOURS' (3.4.1). Burbage, Dick Cowley, Henry Condell, Thomas Pope,⁹¹ Robert Armin and the clown Will Kemp all feature in the Gaiman text and have been named as part of Shakespeare's acting company.⁹² Again history is incorporated into the fiction as it is not only likely that Kemp would have played Bottom in the original production (Cookson and Loughrey 1991, 85), but also believed that Kemp's departure from the company in 1599 was due to his chronic improvising. This is thought to have been satirised by Shakespeare himself (*Hamlet* III.ii.37-8; *Dream* I.ii.1-103) and is similarly referenced by Gaiman (1991b, 3.1.3-4; 3.6.5).

⁹⁰ A chalk figure located near the village of Wilmington in East Sussex – 'Wilmington' may be derived from 'Wendel's Mound Town'. Also known as the Long Man of Wilmington or the Wilmington Giant.

⁹¹ Referred to only as 'Tommy' in Gaiman's text. Thomas Vorwerk names this character as Tommy Nash, however my research indicates that this name refers to either an Elizabethan satirist writing at the same time as Shakespeare or the property owner who married Shakespeare's granddaughter, and that Thomas Pope is a more likely identity.

⁹² Although the exact dates are inconclusive, Burbage and Shakespeare are thought to have been members of Lord Strange's Men c. 1592-93. By 1594 they and Will Kemp(e) were members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the same company that Thomas Pope, Henry Condell and Robert Armin also played with from 1597, 1598 and 1599 respectively (British Library Resources, npag). That these players had previously worked with Shakespeare during his time with Lord Strange's Men is therefore likely.

In this way the retcon strategy that is so essential to comics' shared universe figures in *The Sandman's* re-presentation of *Dream*, as the comic book inserts itself into both historical fact and a shared literary history. The hyperreal setting of comics further informs such a presentation in allowing the metafictional depiction and commentary on both fiction and reality detailed above.

Semantic models: the Gothic, Myth, the Fantastic

Various semantic themes of the play are sustained by the Vertigo comic, which I shall initially consider before proceeding to a deconstruction of the visual syntax of the medium. The most obvious of these themes is *Dream's* reality/illusion dichotomy: summarised at V.i.1-27 (see Girard 1979 for a full discussion), and further emphasised by the play-within-play motif, which emphasises the boundaries of reality/illusion in various ways.⁹³ As such the relationship between the inner and outer play may be read as commenting on the relationship between the outer play and reality, or the inner may serve to illuminate the themes of the outer play more clearly. The frame with which Gaiman surrounds *Dream* not only enables his metafiction, but also recreates this Shakespearean motif.

In its constant switching between audience discussion and the drama onstage, Gaiman's interpretation mirrors Act V of the original text. However, his fictional audience blurs the lines between reality and illusion still further; by being obviously fantastic, and by doubling the characters in the play they observe. As a consequence, the fiction with which Gaiman surrounds the Shakespearean play begins to collapse into it as characters, events and structure are doubled. The outdoor setting for Gaiman's production (3.3.6) replicates the mechanicals' rehearsals (*Dream* III.i.1-11), just as Will Kemp's enthusiasm mirrors Bottom's (*Dream* I.ii.66-9; Gaiman 1991b, 3.1.3-4). Similarly, Gaiman's Auberon, like

⁹³ Historically, after play was severed from ritual (see Chapter 3 'Literature review'), a self-conscious creation of illusion began that I would argue still exists today (for example in postmodernism). This is also represented by the play-within-play motif: one effect of which is to expose fiction's need for make-believe in both actor and spectator (the pleasure principle (Barthes 1975, 47)) by making explicit our preoccupation with stage illusion. The motif is found throughout Shakespeare's plays, whether it is presented overtly (as in *Hamlet* and similar) or obliquely (in the form of masquerade, play-acting, or disguise).

Shakespeare's Theseus, enters fully armoured (in productions these two parts were often doubled); and Thomas Vorwerk notes that the six mechanicals of *Dream*'s cast double the six actors (not including Hamnet, who Vorwerk deems a literal 'extra') of Gaiman's troupe (Vorwerk 2002, npag).⁹⁴

The play's events are also doubled: the Puck's comment 'I'll be an auditor – /An actor too, perhaps, if I see cause' (*Dream*, III.i.72-3) anticipates both Gaiman's faerie audience and his Puck's replacement of the actor Dick Cowley (3.15.6). Likewise, Morpheus's comment 'It is a fool's prerogative to utter truths that no one else will speak' (3.6.4) applies as much to the function of the Shakespearean fool as it does to Gaiman's Puck, its referent. Linguistic quirks are similarly replicated – Gaiman's Puck's statement 'I HAD FORGOTTEN ME, THESE CENTURIES IN FAERIE, WHAT RARE CREATURES MORTALS COULD BE... / ...AND WHAT RARE *FUN*.' (3.9.5) recalls the Shakespearean character's famous 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' (III.i.115). Structurally, too, the breakdown of order that Gaiman's faerie audience create in his production ('*THAT IS NOT COWLEY! WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHERE ARE THEY GOING?*' (3.22.5)) mirrors the role of Shakespeare's fairies within the fiction of his play.

Overall, Gaiman's frame is largely consistent with *Dream*: the comic shows mechanicals (the actors) acting for a faerie audience, possibly referencing the subtext of Shakespeare's play where the lovers provide the fairies with entertainment (just as the mechanicals provide the lovers' entertainment in Act V). In this context, the commentary of Gaiman's faerie audience recalls that of the courtiers observing the mechanicals, blurring reality and fiction as in Titania's comment: 'SO. / WE HAVE FOUR LOVERS HEADING FOR THE WOOD. WE HAVE CLOWNS, WHO WOULD BE ACTORS, AND ACTORS PORTRAYING ME AND MY ROYAL CONSORT' (3.11.5) as the characters, setting and structure of *Dream* are doubled by the frame Gaiman provides.

Similarly, productions such as Peter Brook's have presented the Act V play-within-play as an inversion, where the mechanicals become audience to the courtiers' jests: "They

⁹⁴ This observation, however, does not take account of the mention of Bob Armin at 3.1.3.

are playing Shakespeare to the mechanicals [...] They are forcing the mechanicals to admire their courtly acting” (Selbourne 1982, 163). Gaiman also uses this strategy as his actors are just as interested in observing their fantastic audience as the faerie folk are in watching the play (*‘I SAW BOGGARTS, AND TROLLS, AND, AND NIXIES, AND THINGS OF EVERY MANNER AND KIND’* (3.9.2)). The relationship between reality and illusion is one of the strongest themes of *Dream* and it is foregrounded here by the gothic doubling and inversion of events that makes *Dream* itself a play within Gaiman’s drama: an arrangement that is sustained by the hyperreal setting of the medium.

The relationship between fact and fiction is also commented on in a similar manner by the characters: Gaiman’s Titania’s speech (3.11.5) blurs notions of lovers, actors, clowns and fairies (on both story levels) and his Puck also comments: *‘IT NEVER HAPPENED; YET IT IS STILL TRUE. WHAT MAGIC ART IS THIS?’* (3.13.9). Oberon similarly claims the events of *Dream* are not true, to which Morpheus responds: *‘Oh, but it IS true. / Things need not have happened to be true. Tales and dreams are the shadow-truths that will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot’* (3.21.5). This panel is juxtaposed with Theseus’ comment *‘THE BEST IN THIS KIND ARE BUT SHADOWS, AND THE WORST ARE NO WORSE, IF IMAGINATION AMEND THEM’* (*Dream* V.i.208-9; Gaiman 1991b, 3.21.6): paralleling the respective fictions of *Dream* and *The Sandman*, and in so doing adding a metafictional dimension to the text, as noted. This parallel is continued at 3.22.2-3, where Oberon’s interjection ends the Puck’s soliloquy at *‘Now are frolic.’* (V.i.378), corresponding with Oberon’s entry at line 382 of the Shakespearean text. The departure of the faerie audience leaves Gaiman’s Puck alone for his final epilogue, again using the hyperreal in order to imply that the ‘real’ Robin Goodfellow composed this (3.23.1-6), and providing an accurate depiction of the epilogue as, quite literally, outside of the play proper.

Gaiman’s Titania comments: *‘IN THE OLD TALE THERE WAS A LOVE POTION, THAT LEFT THE GODDESS RUTTING WITH AN ASS...’* (3.11.5), and, as noted, *The Sandman* characteristically superscripts literary history in this way: simultaneously redefining the

Shakespearean canon (by providing a source for *Dream*) and retroactively inserting itself into this literary tradition. In this sense, though, it also mirrors the circumstances of *Dream*'s creation since, in creating characters such as Titania and the Puck, Shakespeare too was overwriting stories drawn from English folklore.

Peter Holland notes that 'Robin Goodfellow, hobgoblins and pucks all belonged to the same group of fairies, a class of rough, hairy domestic spirits characterized by their mischievousness', but that 'Shakespeare alone combines the three into a single spirit, Robin Goodfellow the puck, also known as "hobgoblin"' (1994, 35). As noted, Gaiman also uses the word 'puck' in a generic sense (see footnote 54) and his Puck directly corresponds to the Shakespearean character, as when he says '*I AM THE PUCK, CALLED ROBIN GOODFELLOW. I AM A TRICKSTER, AN ANTIC PRANKSTER, A WILL O' THE WISP.*' (Gaiman 1996, 10.1.7) He is also referred to as 'hobgoblin' in both the Shakespearean text and *The Sandman* (*Dream* II.i.40; Gaiman 1991b, 3.6.3).

Visually, too, Vess's hairy, wild Puck accords with English folklore, although his animalistic, demonic side dominates through his red eyes, rough skin, and a grin that shows rather more teeth than is reassuring. Vess nonetheless manages to temper these bestial, earthy qualities with an ethereal air as his Puck's angular head wisps off into nothingness (see Appendix 6.1), recalling elements of Titania's depiction (and, indeed, that of many of the fey). Similarly, the phrasing Gaiman uses (such as 'ho ho ho') is drawn from folk songs such as 'The Ballad of Robin Goodfellow' (Bender 1999, 79),⁹⁵ and as such the figure generally accords both visually and semantically within a shared literary universe drawn from established folklore.

Just as the Shakespearean Puck is a composite of folklore, Shakespeare's Titania also represents multiple mythic figures such as Diana, Hecate, Mab, Maeve and so forth, and Holland notes that the name is derived directly from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (where it again references multiple characters including Circe, Latona, Pyrrha and Diana) (1994, 32).

⁹⁵ More accurately named as 'The Mad Merry Pranks of Robin Goodfellow' and popularly accredited to Ben Jonson (Paster and Howard 1999, 309).

Gaiman's Titania also has multiple names (1996, 10.2.8) and Grecian connections, as shown by her comment: 'IT SEEMS TO ME THAT I HEARD THIS TALE SUNG ONCE, IN OLD GREECE, BY A BOY WITH A LYRE' (1991b, 3.10.5). It is easy to speculate that this singer was Orpheus, Morpheus's son, a theory that is given further credence by Shakespeare's (and Gaiman's) later mention of 'The riot of the tipsy bacchanals / Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage' (*Dream* V.i.48-9; Gaiman 1991b, 3.20.6). I have previously noted the metafictional import of this citation (see footnotes 53 and 89), which also comments on the origins of *Dream* from folklore – and, as such, its status as truth/fiction.⁹⁶

Other elements of Gaiman's text also follow the established conventions of folklore and fairytale, for example the troop's payment in faery gold that turns to leaves, or the actors' awakening on a hill the next morning (3.24.4; 3.24.1). However, Gaiman also adapts and adds his own folklore into the mix: for example *Dream*'s fairytale thematic of benign metamorphosis (Warner 1995, 274) is embodied etymologically in his Morpheus character, also known to the faerie folk as Lord Shaper (Gaiman 1991b, 3.6.3). Just as Shakespeare used overwriting strategies to adapt notions of the fantastic and fairytale into his drama, so too do the structure and content of the Gaiman text use and expose these strategies as fundamentals of comics.

The fertility blessing contained in *Dream* (V.i.392-413) and its references to Mayday customs (IV.i.131-2) also provide for a reading of the play as Myth which, taken as a whole, displays a transforming structure (where the effects of the wood's magic overcome the rule of Athens). As discussed previously, an anthropological approach to Myth defines rituals such as this as the historical origin for dramatic fare and identifies a transforming power in mythic narratives. Gaiman's text explicitly describes the play as 'MORTAL MATING RITUALS' (3.8.5) and in so doing comments metafictionally on the nature of Myth and tradition.

Russell Jackson uses a Todorovian model in his reading of Reinhardt's *Dream*,

⁹⁶ See Chapter 3 'Literature review: the anthropological approach' for a brief discussion of 'truth claims' with reference to fable, legend and myth (Lincoln, Barthes).

commenting on the film techniques used to sustain the play's fantastic elements (1994, 103). In my opinion, the hyperreal of comics allows for such an interpretation. As previously defined (as part of my semiotic model), my use of this term is opposed to the work of film theorists such as Yu Lotman, who argues that the semiotics of animation operate 'with signs of signs; images of images' rather than cinema's moving photograph which functions as a direct sign of reality (Boose and Burt 1997, 107). However, I believe that in comics the hyperreal is created by the reader involvement demanded by the medium, which immerses the reader in its narrative. As noted, this offers the authority of vision without the effects of heterodiegetic intertextuality (Buchanan's textual penumbra) that infect cinematic and theatrical productions. Instead, any use of intertextuality is overtly assigned to the reader and in this way more openly exposed for what it is, as I hope is apparent from this section's discussion of literary rewriting.

The superscription that is essential to the comic-book shared universe figures above in Gaiman's presentation of his faerie folk, just as retroactive continuity enables *The Sandman*'s self-insertion into historical fact. In so doing *The Sandman* not only echoes the circumstances of *Dream*'s original creation, but also includes itself in the traditions of other media (such as the Shakespearean canon), alerting us to the shared nature of literary texts. This is in accordance with a theory such as Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, which states that all poetry is appropriated and that such repetition is essential for the tradition's development; again implicitly redefining all texts as intertexts.⁹⁷

Visual effects

Before turning to the import of the visual syntax used by comics' sequential narrative, I wish to focus briefly on the semantic import of Gaiman and Vess's representation of the fey. Titania, Auberon and the Puck, while basically humanoid, nonetheless give off an

⁹⁷ Strangely, Bloom does not include Shakespeare's use of Marlowe in this regard, reasoning that Shakespeare was writing before this 'anxiety of influence' became apparent, and that Marlowe is 'a much smaller poet' (1973, 11). I find these reasons somewhat suspect since they appear to be slanted by a false view of literary history (as survival of the fittest) that ignores Marlowe's intense popularity during his lifetime.

alien air – subtly conveyed by the sidelong perspective and angular lines Vess uses to elongate their profiles (extended ears, Auberón's horns and Titania's long hair and jewelled headdress further emphasise this). In contrast to the accepted view of fairies as tiny, winged beings, the rest of the fey are presented in dizzying variety and colour – they range from the diminutive to the monstrous (1991b, 3.14.2), may have tails, horns (3.9.6), and red eyes (3.8.3), and insectile or bat-like wings (see Appendix 6.3, panel 1).

As in Doran's production, their dangerous side is indicated visually, but is also explicitly referenced; as when Gaiman's Peaseblossom (drawn by Vess as an ugly, angular mass of twigs) comments of the Puck: '*I AM THAT MERRY WANDERER OF THE NIGHT? I AM THAT GIGGLING-DANGEROUS-TOTALLY-BLOODY-PSYCHOTIC-MENACE-TO-LIFE-AND-LIMB, MORE LIKE IT*' (3.10.4). The diminutive goat-woman Skarrow's question of the monstrous, yet placid, Bevis ('*WHAT MEANS THIS PRANCING CHATTERING MORTAL FLESH? METHINKS PERHAPS THE DREAMLORD BROUGHT US HERE TO FEED?*' (3.8.3)) serves a similar purpose. In this way Vess's depiction of the fey as scary creatures is underlined by their equally unsavoury natures.

While some critics argue that 'the names of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [also] convey their entomological character and small scale' (Warner 2000, 173), and that other plays further reference their small size (*Romeo and Juliet* I.iv.54-64), Holland comments that descriptions of their size shift unpredictably (1994, 23) and concludes that in fact the fey may have been played by the same actors as the mechanicals (24).⁹⁸ A depiction of *Dream's* fairies as substantial beings rather than ethereal ballerinas took place as early as 1914 in Harvey Granville Barker's stage production (Buchanan 2005, 129) where their static, eastern attitudes contrasted sharply with the play's references to their speed and litheness, and has since been continued by directors such as Peter Brook. Although Gaiman's fey remain ethereal, a parallel to this can be found as their aggressive behaviour belies Shakespeare's lines (as above in the case of the Puck) or subverts our

⁹⁸ While Hoffman uses animated effects to depict his fairies' transformations and varying size, Noble's use of the toy theatre set (which his actors both appear within and observe in miniature from without) effectively conveys this fluctuation while allowing the actors to retain their original forms.

expectations with reference to size or gender (Skarrow versus Bevis).

Other textual indicators (such as the Puck's exchange with Oberon at III.ii.378-95, in which he aligns the fey with ghosts and evil spirits, which Oberon denies) also cast doubt on the Victorian fairy stereotype, and this concept is further belied by the traditional and literary depiction of the Puck and other domestic spirits. From this point of view, today's stereotypes of fairies are considered to be a result of Christian meddling in pre-Christian myths. While other literary sources have depicted Oberon as a tiny king (Holland 1994, 31), Vess draws him as over two metres tall (3.15.1) and as such accords more readily with older folklore, which describes the Sidhe of Celtic legend (believed to be the direct source for Oberon) as tall and noble. Other legend has also described the fey as bizarre and ugly (with the caveat that to call them so would result in a curse, hence providing an explanation for their ethereal depiction) (Morrow 1993, npag). Gaiman in fact supports both views in creating a magical glamour that is customarily worn by his faerie folk to disguise their true forms (see Gaiman 1992, 8.14.3-4; 1996, 10.11.1-6) and as such again gives his fiction precedence over Shakespeare's drama by retroactively inserting it into literary and historical tradition.

Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of poetic influence offers a list of six different relations between (inter)texts. While I observe elements of all six types in Gaiman's rewriting, I concede that Bloom's model may remain valid if (as in my use of Buchanan's film classifications) we instead consider which one dominates. Of Bloom's six types, two seem particularly relevant: *tessera* and *apophrades*. Bloom defines *tessera* as a completion and antithesis: where the poet retains the terms of the parent poem while meaning them in another sense, 'as though the precursor had failed to go far enough' (1973, 14). Gaiman's amendments of Shakespeare's drama to accord with earlier folklore and history, and his use of metafiction in so doing, seem to apply here. *Apophrades*, on the other hand, refers to the later poet rendering himself as an apprentice to the earlier master, while conversely such a representation makes it seem 'as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work' (16). Its (fictional) Faustian bargain aside, the themes, motifs and

story of *Dream* (and, to a lesser extent, *The Tempest*) certainly appear to be more of *The Sandman* than Shakespeare; while Gaiman's metafiction on the creative process and his use of superscription and retcon further support such a view.

However, as I hope has been demonstrated, all the various versions of *Dream* exist in accumulation: as a 'performance legacy' that is inextricably identified with the original source (Buchanan 2005, 121). Buchanan further notes that this history has relevance even when new interpreters may not consciously be able to identify the origin of a particular interpretative idea. As such, in actuality Gaiman's *Dream* exists in relation to all the other interpretations offered by popular visual culture, and of which I have only been able to examine a limited number.

Whether consciously or not, Gaiman's *Dream* sustains elements from all these interpretations, as discussed. It reflects contemporary theatre's darker elements, yet sustains the ethereality of earlier cinematic productions, and incorporates elements of both public and private viewing. However, its retroactive positioning and metafictional status means that it also exists outside the play's legacy. As such, it simultaneously summarises and contributes to the ongoing tradition of *Dream*. I turn finally to a discussion of the role of the semiotics of comics in such a redefinition.

Syntactic process

As noted in literature review, I shall be using a hybrid critical framework. The semantic content of the panel will be discussed using an art criticism model that is specifically drawn from the work of Kress and Leeuwen, while its syntactic content will be discussed using Barber's adaptation of Randy Duncan's model, which considers the layout in terms of its spatial and sequential elements. My taxonomy of simple and complex signifiers will not be of explicit relevance to my model as I have already noted the panel's nature will, in general, tend towards the complex and shall approach it as such. My critical model is instead grounded in an understanding of textual semiotics (as established in literature review) where context limits meaning. Essentially, my primary focus is to consider how all

elements of the panel contribute to its operation as a signifier and the impact this has on comics' narratology.

Information value

The positioning of panels within the metapanel of the page often provides a good example of the information values identified by Kress and Leeuwen, for example as in Appendix 6.1. Here, the left/right dichotomy indicates old and new information as, although they are not previously named, Oberon and Titania are the focal figures of the previous splash page (Gaiman 1991b, 3.5.4) in which their identities are fairly obvious. By contrast, Appendix 6.1 also includes the explicit introduction of Robin Goodfellow the hobgoblin in panels 2-4: new information for the reader that is situated on the right hand side of the page. This marginal position also indicates that the exchange between the Puck and Oberon is an aside to the main event of Morpheus welcoming his faerie guests. Similarly, the positioning of the faerie folk's arrival at the top of the page overshadows the players' meeting that is the subject of panel 5, in accordance with the focus of Gaiman's text as a whole (where the interactions of the audience dominate over the play itself). This is emphasised throughout the comic as on many pages the audience comments are in a central position, while those depicting the play are marginalised. (1991b, 3.8.1-6; 3.9.1-6; 3.19.1-6)

This may be indicated in a variety of ways, for example Appendix 6.2 shows two exchanges (between Titania, Oberon and Morpheus at panels 2-3; and Shakespeare and Hamnet at panels 4-5) that take place over the action of the play (panels 1 and 6). Each exchange is held distinct from the other by the use of consistent colour and panel size, through which the immortals' conversation dominates the page (it holds the central position and is composed of larger panels than the mortals' discussion). Further, these conversations overlay those depicting the play, which is literally pushed into the background.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, this use of depth has a signifying function that may evoke the hyperreal, for example as the performer is positioned over the audience. In Appendix

6.3, Shakespeare's stage fright is expressed visually rather than verbally (panels 2 and 4, which show his shocked gaze and sweat), but is further informed by the background of panel 3, which depicts his audience. As in Appendix 5.1, it is impossible for us to observe the actor's distress without simultaneously focusing our eye on its cause, and again the hyperreal is invoked as the reader's position fluctuates between the audience's perspective (panels 1, 6 and 7), cinematic close-ups (panels 2, 4, 5 and 8) and the (theatrical) viewpoint of the actor on stage (panel 3).

Such use of depth has further implications as regards time. In Appendix 6.3 the splitting of the actor's silence between four panels serves to indicate the extent of his speechlessness until he finally recovers his composure in panel 7. Similarly, the way in which panels 2 and 4 overlay panel 3 indicates that these events are taking place simultaneously. This informs deconstruction of Appendix 6.4, where Titania and Morpheus have a long conversation during Bottom's speech at IV.i.198-215. Vorwerk takes this as an example of comics' ability to alter time (saying 'Morpheus and Titania have a lengthy conversation while at the same time only about two lines (IV.i.205-7) of Bottom's famous monologue are omitted' (2002, npag)), however I would dispute this. Rather, the use of depth (as panels 2-5 overlay panels 1 and 6, which depict Bottom) may indicate that Titania and Morpheus's conversation takes place during the entirety of Bottom's speech.

The panels depicting the play are frequently placed behind those that show the faerie audience and are often borderless, in this way quite literally making up the background (3.7.7; 3.9.4; 3.10.1; 3.14.1; 3.18.6; 3.21.6 and so forth). As such they may be said to belong to the metapanel rather than being distinct from it, again emphasising their subordinate status when compared to the individual panel. The white background of these stage shots may also indicate their status as overt fiction (removed from the hyperreality of Gaiman's setting), while imitating minimalist staging such as Brook's. It also alerts us to the import of colour when reading images, as follows.

Saliency

Colourist Steve Oliff comments: 'We used subtly different color effects for each [layer of story]: relatively bright, comic-bookish colors for the stage performances; a muted blue, fantasy-like color scheme for the audience; and a muted but naturalistic color scheme for the real-world backstage scenes' (Bender 1999, 85). The metafictional import of this colouring (where the fiction of the play is explicitly delineated by its artificial colouring) is worth noting, and is clearly shown at Appendix 6.5. Similarly, the progression of daylight is depicted in the comic's colour scheme as the play ends on an entirely black panel (Gaiman 1991b, 3.23.6).

As noted at Appendix 6.3, perspective varies throughout the comic. This often has a semantic function, as asides are drawn in close-up as befits an intimate conversation (see panels 2-5 of Appendices 6.4 and 6.5), while the scenes from the play show the actors in full figure as from an audience perspective (panels 1 and 6 of Appendices 6.4 and 6.5). The size and shape of panels serve a similar purpose; asides are placed in smaller panels than those depicting the play, regardless of the quantity of dialogue in each. This has import not only in terms of context (indicating intimacy versus performance) but also with reference to time, as in Appendix 6.4 where Bottom's speech stretches the whole width of the page, possibly indicating a lengthy, ponderous tone in contrast to the regular, square panels that depict Titania and Morpheus's words. As a whole, the layout of the comic follows this lead, as a panel's size and shape indicates its tone or context. A good contrast to this is page 13, where a conversational exchange is represented in regular, grid-like panels (3.13.1-6).

Framing

As already noted, framing is employed primarily to create a depth dimension that has relevance to the information value of the metapanel. It is also conspicuously absent from those panels that make up the comic's background and as such affects our perception of the hyperreal. However, frames are also occasionally used within the panels themselves, for example at panel 1 of Appendix 6.5 where the edge of the stage set divides the characters of

Oberon and Titania in accordance with the scene being played out.

The frame of the metapanel/page also affects interpretation, as seen at Appendix 6.4 where the vertical mirroring both emphasises the difference in tone between the play and the asides and indicates the dominance of the audience over the actors (see also 3.8.1-6 and 3.9.1-6). Other framing effects support this distinction between the watchers and the watched, as at 3.9.4 which, in being unframed, is distinct from the adjacent panels that depict the audience (3.9.2-3 and 3.9.5), and serves instead to link the top and bottom panels (which also depict the play).

Other effects are also possible, such as the expansion of panel 2 into panel 3 on page 8. Here, the left to right convention dictates reading order and as such the close up on Titania and Morpheus (panel 2) comes before the wider shot of the audience, despite both overlaying and being completely contained within the third panel. This contrasts with the use of overlaid panels to build on a set scene (for example as at Appendix 6.1) or to indicate metanarrative changes (see Chapter 2 in the context of 1994b, 5.20.4-6). In these examples, placing the overlaid panels to the right of the wider background results in their being read after it, in accordance with the textual hierarchy noted earlier (the primacy of the speech balloon). In this way, the frames of both the metapanel and individual panels serve a syntactic purpose.

Semiotic background

The three main elements underlying a semiotics of comics appear to be an open narrative (which relies upon the reader's contribution); the creation of the hyperreal (both by blurring the signifier and signified, and by creating an inconstant audience perspective); and the visual strategies that are used to limit and structure the text (in terms of either replacing or using prose techniques such as chapters and so forth). Many of the narrative features of comics identified thus far stem from these underlying processes – for example transformations of gender (1991b, 3.4.1-3) or items such as Barbie's painted-on veil in *A Game of You* (1993a, 6.8.1), whose depictions are indistinguishable from the real thing.

Such strategies make explicit the freedom of interpretation allowed to the reader and also would not be possible without the hyperreal setting.

Similarly, the ironic counterpoint (or punning) created by a juxtaposition of words and pictures within the same panel allows a further dimension of structuring to the text: creating a thematic syntagmatic structure (see for example Appendix 6.3, panel 8). Gaiman comments that this is 'one of the most powerful features of the comics medium' (Bender 1999, 86) and it serves various purposes. Here (as in Ed Fraiman's 2005 updating), the application of Shakespeare's lines to characters and settings that he could never have foreseen emphasises the adaptability of his work (see also 1991b, 3.20.1-4 for a reinterpretation of Theseus' speech at the start of Act V) and that of literature more generally.

In the concluding pages, the events both within and without the play merge: after showing Theseus' speech at V.i.354-6 (1991b, 3.22.1) and the Puck's recital of V.i.374-8 (3.22.2), Gaiman's Auberon (rather than Shakespeare's) then speaks, summoning the rest of the fey to leave the mortal plane (3.22.3). The Puck's refusal to return with them is followed by Shakespeare's sudden realisation that he has unwittingly been observing the 'real' Puck in his play. The blurring of semantic story levels in this way is aided by the syntax as, due to the dying daylight, all the panels are depicted in the blue tones that indicate the faerie folk. The result, in keeping with the subject of *Dream*, is to blend notions of reality and illusion completely.

The next page, showing a solitary Puck giving his epilogue, may as a result be read either as sheer reality or sheer illusion – as befits this type of Shakespearean epilogue where the actor both remains in character (in referring to himself as 'an honest Puck' (V.i.421)) and also steps outside it (in acknowledging the play's fiction and asking for applause).⁹⁹ In duplicating the character and actor Gaiman's interpretation successfully maintains this tradition, although it may be argued that the double-coding necessary to do so encourages a reading of *Dream* as postmodern in this regard. In this way the comic's

⁹⁹ The epilogues of *The Tempest* and *As You Like It* in particular also make use of this sort of double-coding.

syntax merges with its semantics, as previously noted: where a textual hierarchy creates syntax while visual elements inform its semantics (a hybrid semiotics, perhaps). This results in an interpretation of *Dream* that both comments on and coheres with its surrounding visual tradition. The combination of text and image to this end demonstrates comics' use of a hybrid semiotic structure that I would argue is distinct from that found in both linguistic and visual language theories.

Conclusion

My examination of *Sandman* #19 has produced a number of observations of the semiotic functions of comics that may, I believe, be roughly summarised as the three-point framework noted above. This exists within a hybrid semiotic structure that is created by the merging of (textual) syntax and (visual) semantics and, as such, is distinct from a purely visual language. However, in comparing this case study with those of previous chapters I am forced to conclude that the options available to the medium are too wide-ranging to form any more restrictive framework regarding its narrative construction. Nonetheless, in returning to the simplest semiotic structure of signs, signifiers and signified I hope to have preserved the integrity of the literary, linguistic and cinematic parallels I have made.

I also hope to have avoided the trap of cinematic semiotics; in which, beyond the fourfold distinction of frames, shots, scenes and sequences, interpretative frameworks differ wildly and frequently provide only crude parallels with linguistic semiotics (where a frame corresponds to a word and so forth). As such, my conclusions regarding the value of comics to literary discussion should not be read as a step towards such an arbitrary and specific taxonomy but, rather, exist at a more general level, as follows.

In contrast to the linear, closed nature that characterises many canonised literary texts (Chandler 2001, npag), we may now define a different field of 'creative' texts as those that have an open narrative where multiple interpretations are possible (Eco). Nowhere is this better shown than in comics: where the narrative does not even exist in a linear form until it is read, and requires reader contribution in order to cohere. Continuing along these lines,

Chandler also suggests that the drive towards formal seamlessness in traditional academic writing is an attempt to replicate the authenticity of lived experience, which I would contrast with new academia's more exploratory criticism and discourse (as seen in the critical and metacritical work of theorists such as Eco and Derrida). In this context, comics' use of the hyperreal may be read as incorporating this seamlessness into a postmodern metacritical form. In this way many of comics' displayed qualities align with those deduced from the deconstruction of creative and metacritical texts.

However, comics may also be aligned with casual discourse; as evidenced by their simplification of both image and language, together with their potential for use of multiple, fluid strategies in place of the order, regularity and control of literary headings and prosaic description. Casual conversation, for example, is an open-ended form of discourse that, in ostensibly progressing towards no certain goal, is non-linear. If we define literature not as a transcendent quality but as a strategic value at a specific historical moment (Derrida 1992, 25) that is subject to constant change, we may then begin to see how comics can inform our changing perceptions of what the term means, now, in its current postmodern situation. This is how comics may inform our understanding of the discourse of literature versus popular culture: by bringing a syntagmatic structure more usually dominant in popular culture or casual conversation into the realm of literature.

Conclusion

Over the last fifty years, both the material properties and public perceptions of comics have changed. The comic book is now a graphic novel: invoking notions of permanence, literariness and artistry. The qualities these new comics share with creative and metacritical texts, together with their applicability and usefulness in redefining multiple literary models, situate them within the realm of literature. However, the narratology and visual style of comics have in many ways stayed the same, and the comic-as-object remains within the realm of popular culture: as a mass-produced artefact, a facsimile with no original. It seems that the changes comics have undergone now mean they are situated somewhere between the two, incorporating elements of both pop culture and literature.

While exploring these changes, I have aimed to extend the number of critical models available to comics and to refine their use. To this end, I have treated the comic book as a literary product; focusing primarily on its narrative. I have attempted to tackle both its form and content, by applying and adapting both linguistic and literary models. In terms of the former, I have defined the structure of comics as one made up of hybrid signifiers (the panel, combining both words and art), and used this model to illuminate discussion of narratological theory in general. The literary models I have used have also been modified as a result of their application. In each case, I have used Vertigo's postmodern redefinition of the superhero motif as a starting point and this has, in turn, enabled me to redefine many of these models in similar terms.

I would propose that future criticism, rather than limiting itself to simple analysis of comics' motifs and themes, might instead continue to use these in a similar manner. The application of further genre models drawn from literary criticism would hopefully build a fuller picture of other motifs common to the medium of comics (which might include the treatment of female characters, the supervillain figure and so forth). These will in turn suggest fruitful areas for study. Similarly, application of theory from other media (such as film, television or radio) may help illuminate the particulars of a hybrid narratology that, as

I hope I have shown, cannot be reduced to either visual language or prose.

Overall, I would summarise my observations as follows. The authorship practices of comics today rely upon collaboration and reproduction. While the emergence of the author function aligns comics with literature, their creative processes and production situate them within the mass media. The self-conscious attention paid to this dichotomy by the texts themselves encourages critical perception of both areas.

In terms of readership, the narratology of contemporary comics demonstrates reader response theory, intertextuality and modern hermeneutics (multiple interpretations limited by context). The conditions of fictional truth and the pleasure principle are illuminated by comics' combination of the visual and the verbal. Further, their mobility of narrative techniques overtly illustrates the reader's acceptance of these. Narrative identity, specifically in the context of postmodernism, is also informed by the medium's conventions; where juxtaposition and inconstant, multiple points of view abound. Finally, the situation of comics in a post-present state, as neither disposable nor canonised, informs our understanding of notions of re-reading and literature.

The ongoing acceptance of comics as worthy of critical attention shows the erosion of borders between literature and popular culture. The opposing current perceptions of comics-as-popular-culture and comics-as-literature also serve as a discourse between popular culture and literature. Essentially, their mixed status informs this debate on both sides and arguably testifies to the fact that there may be no intrinsic difference between popular culture and literature. Texts exist in a multiplicity of interpretation, the freedom of which provides that one person's literature may be another's trash. Within the uncertainties of postmodernism, without recourse to a grand ruling narrative, literary status now comes from the intersection of authorship, reading and critical practices. I have used comics to show that these are subject to constant change. As such, it would seem that the boundaries between literature and mass media are less impermeable than we might think.

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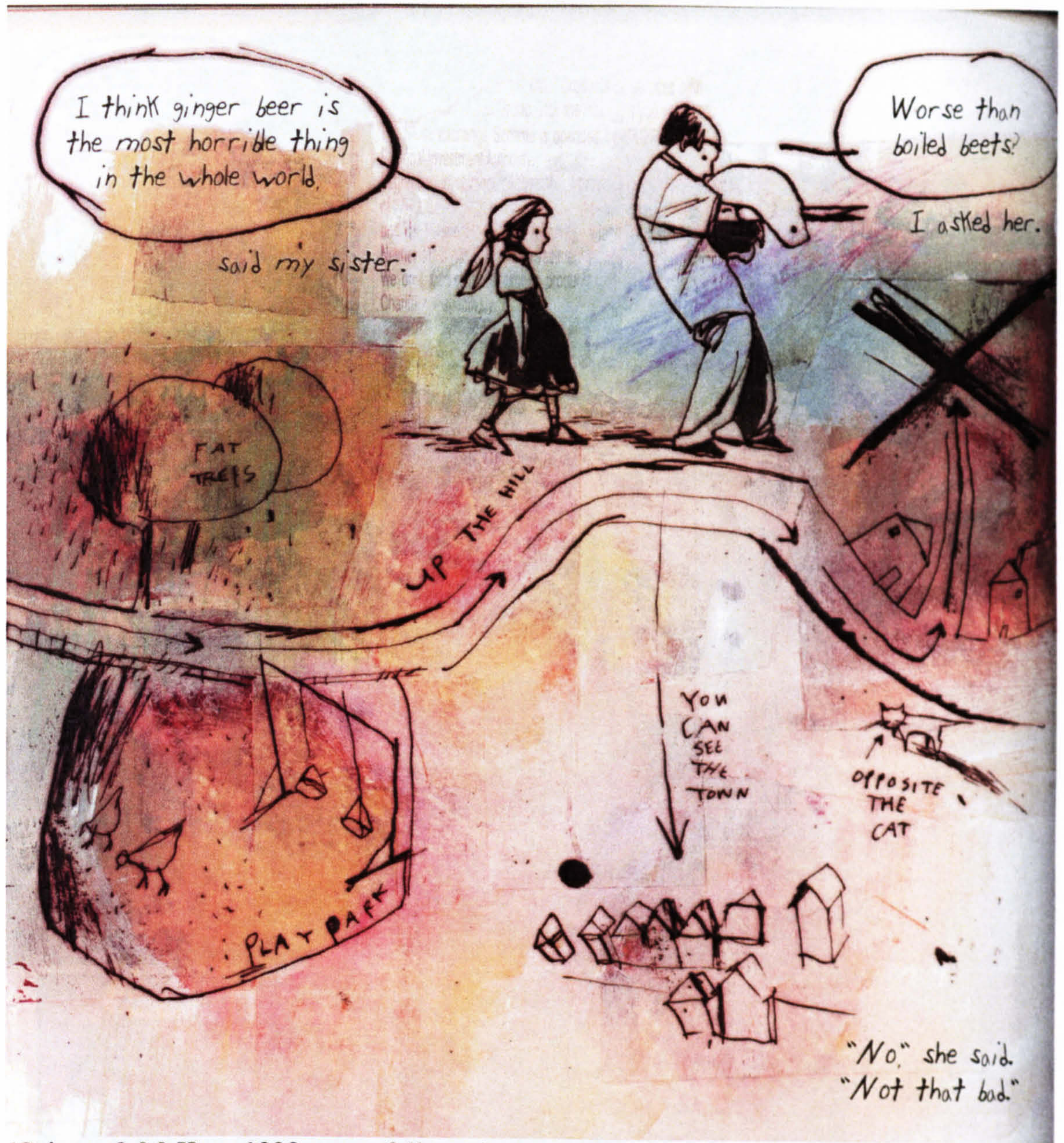
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Appendices

Appendix 1.1



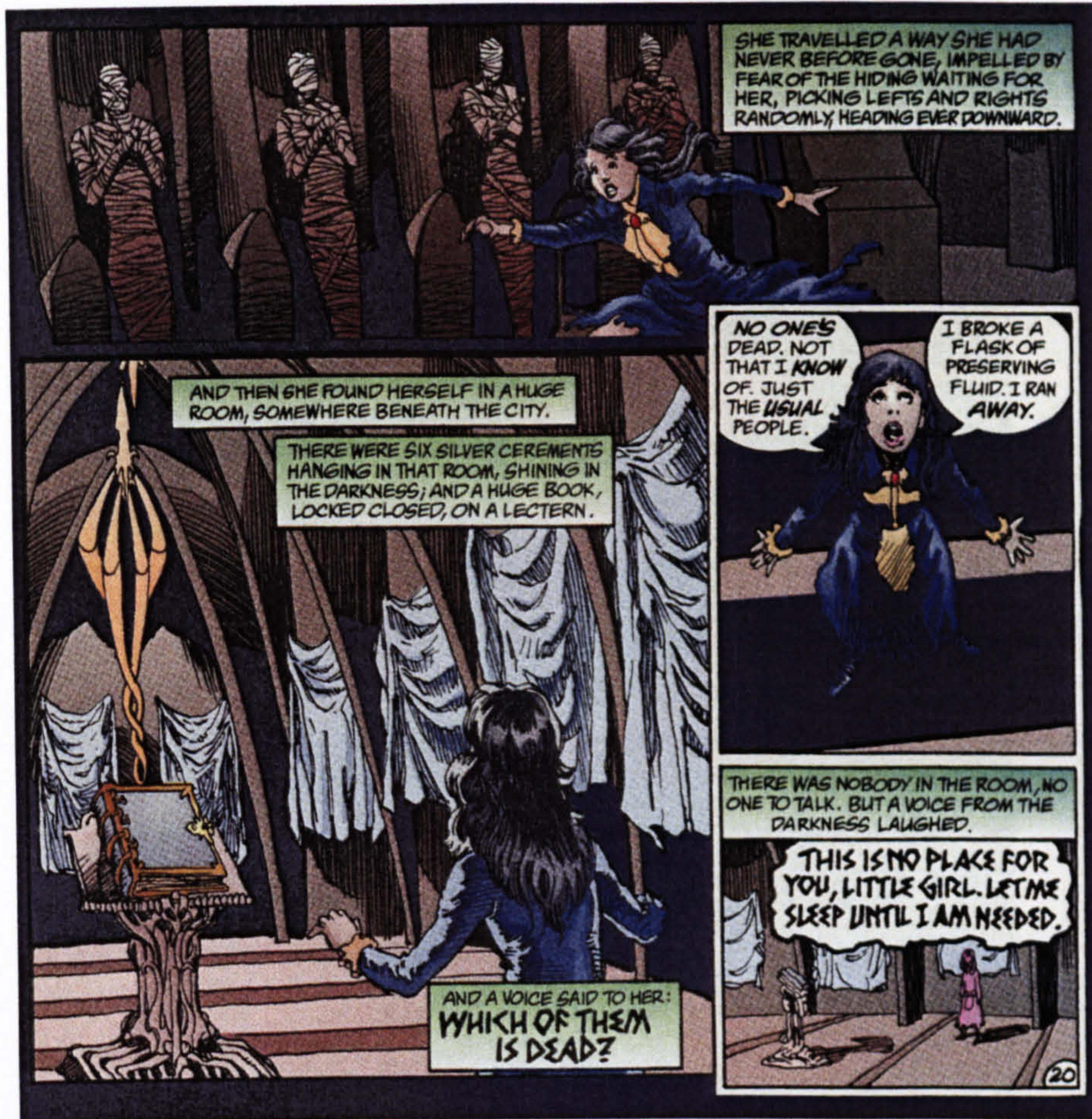
(Gaiman & McKean 1998, npag, full page)

Appendix 2.1



(Gaiman 1994b, 5.8, full page)

Appendix 2.2



(Gaiman 1994b, 5.20.3-6)

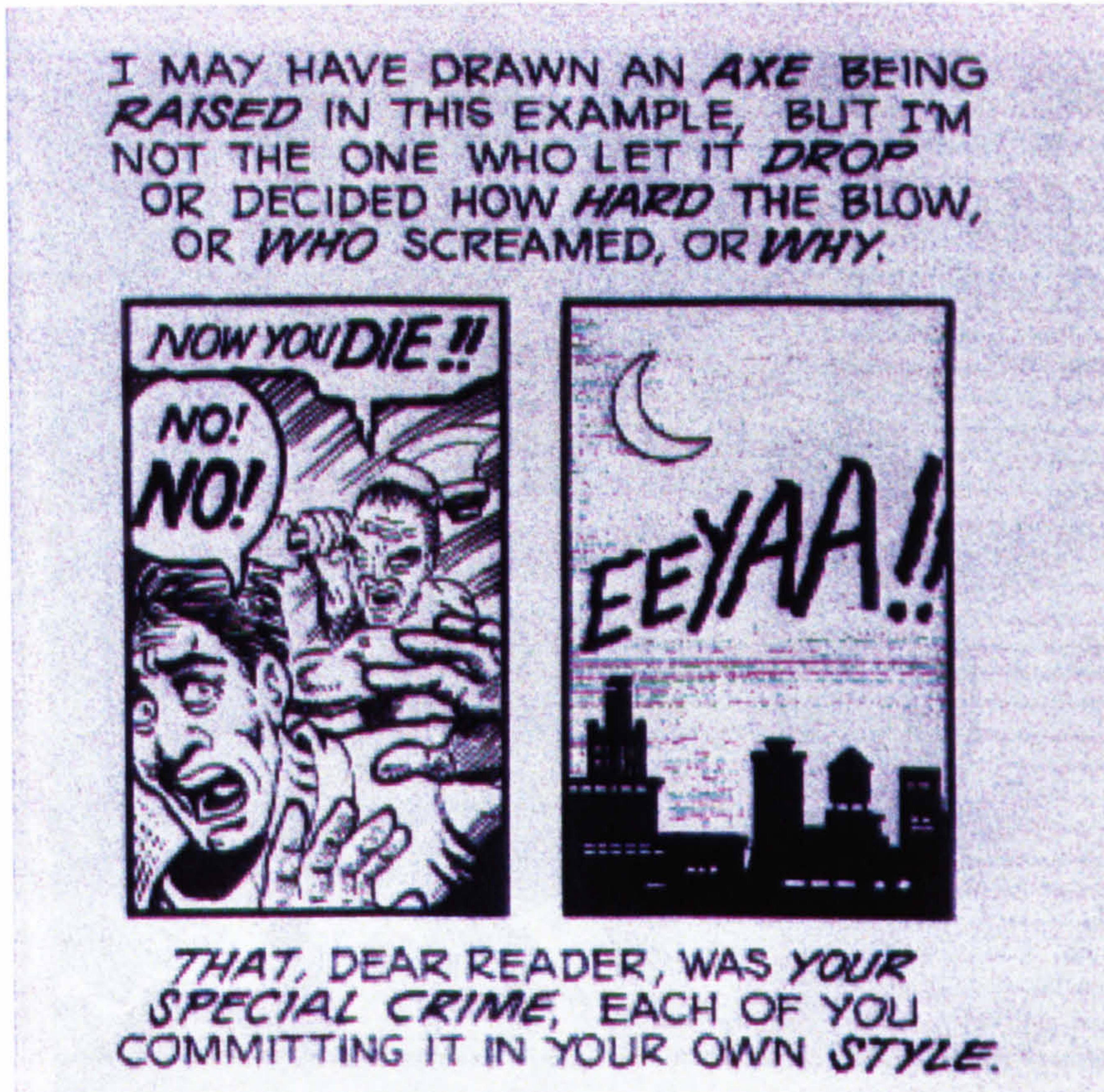
(Gaiman 1991c, 144-5)

Appendix 3.1



(Gaiman 1991c, 14.4-5)

Appendix 3.2



(McCloud 1993, 68.5)

Appendix 3.3



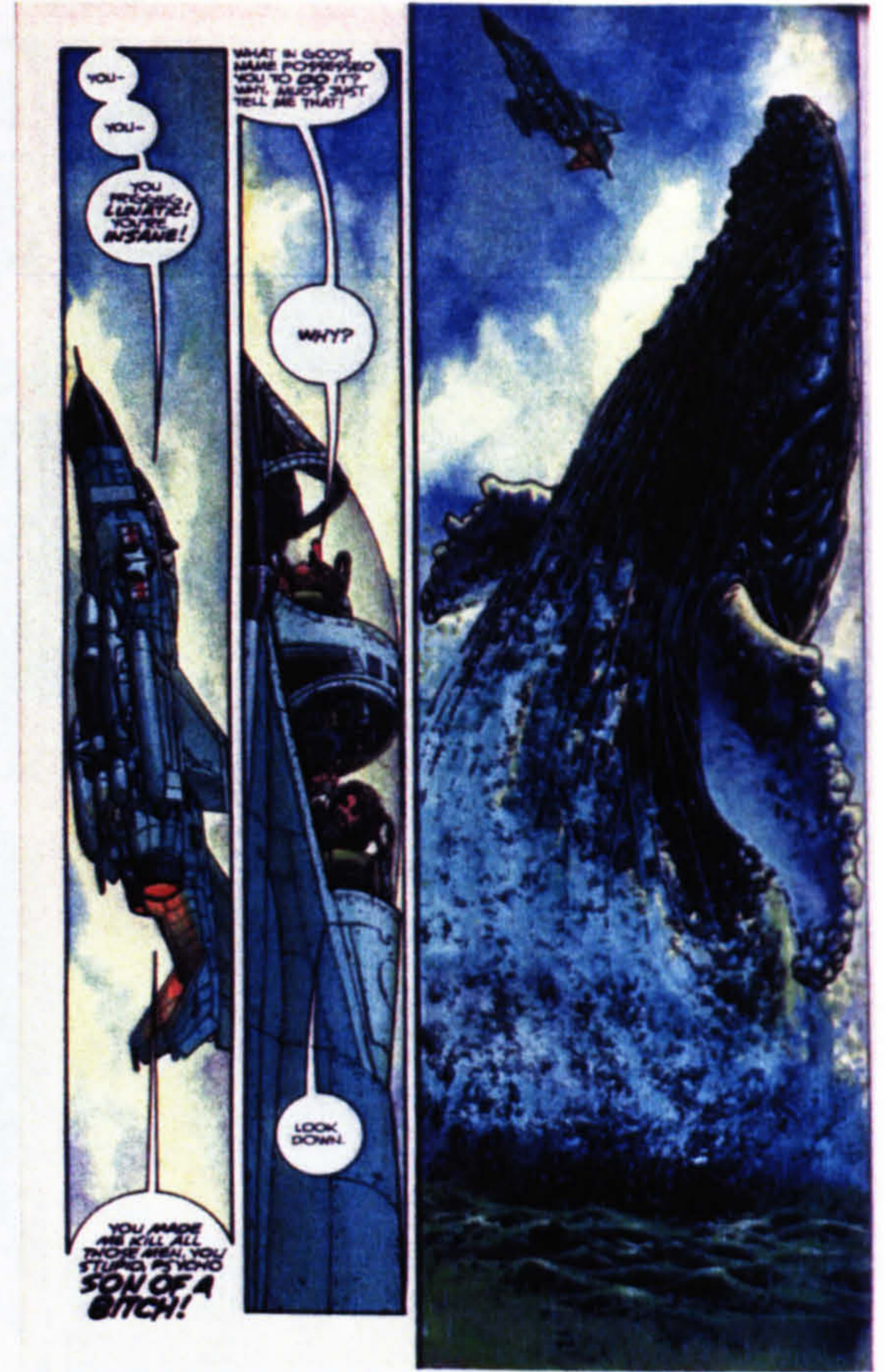
(Ennis 2002a, 11, full page)

Appendix 3.4



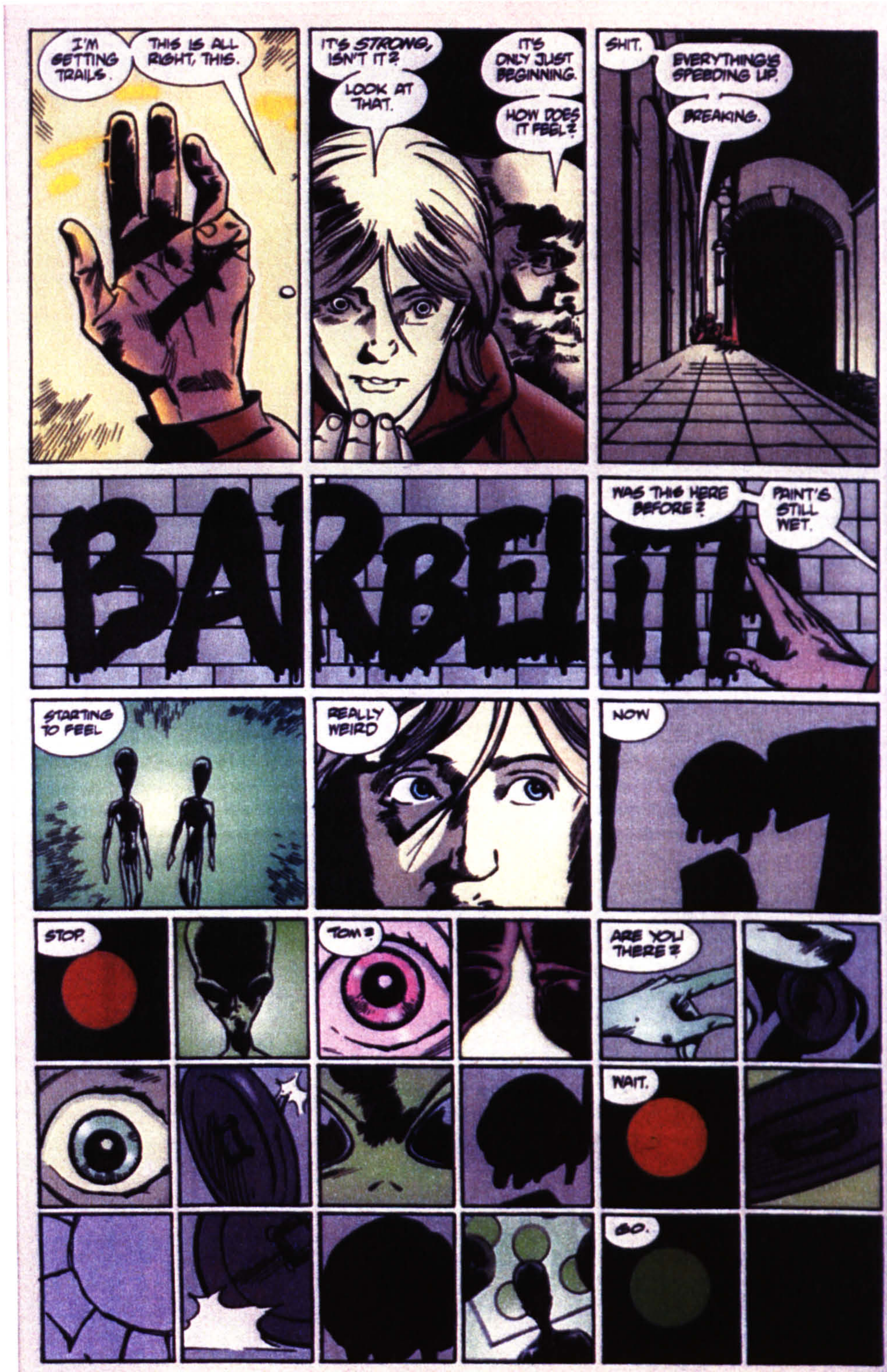
NEXT: BLOODY GOOD FUN WITH THE BUTCHER BRUVVERS

(Ennis 2002a, 64, full page)



(Ennis 2002a, 174, full page)

Appendix 3.5



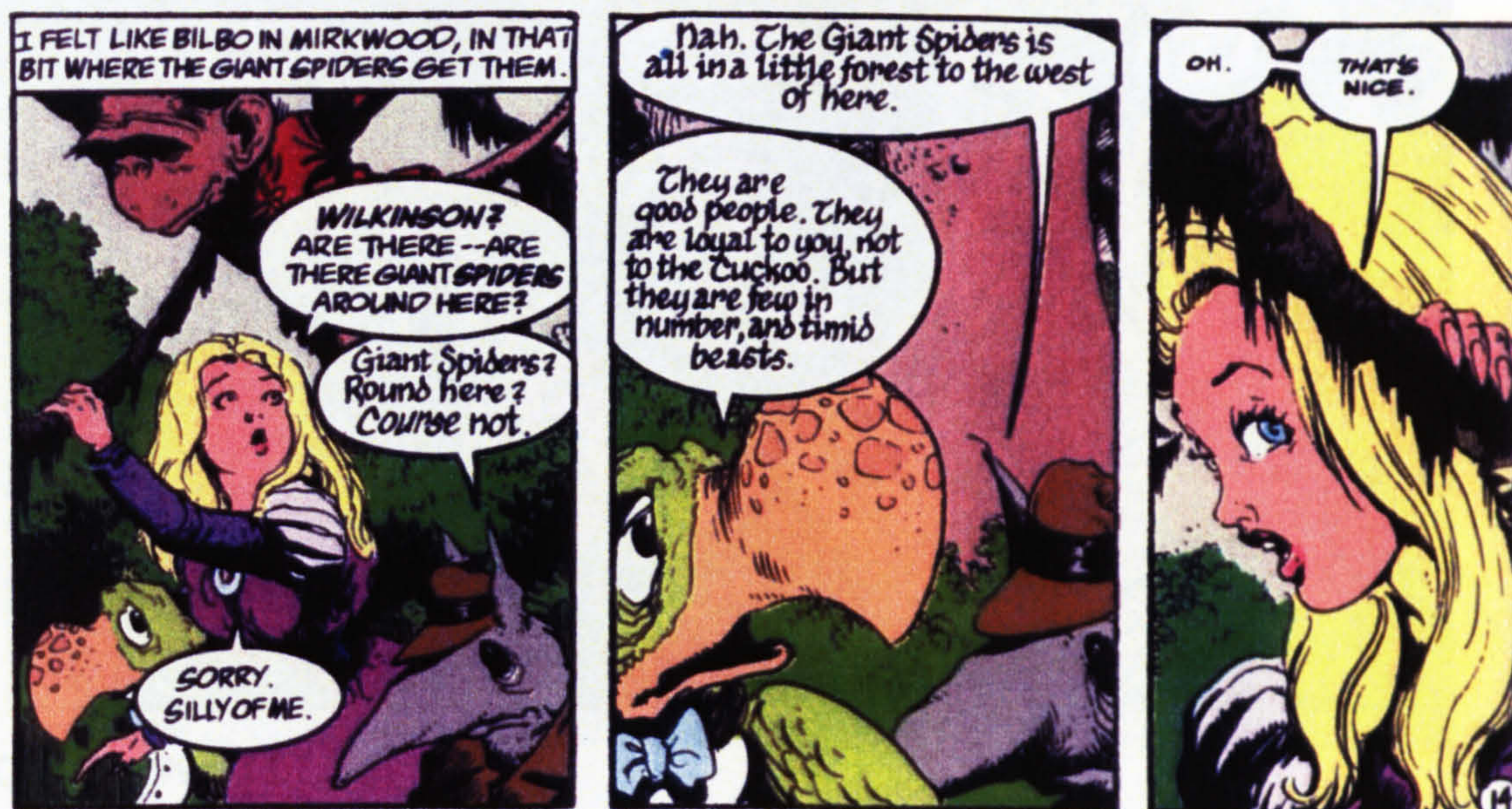
(Morrison 1996, 66, full page)

Appendix 3.6



(Ennis 1997a, 1.5)

Appendix 4.1



(Gaiman 1993a, 6.14.3-5)

Appendix 4.2

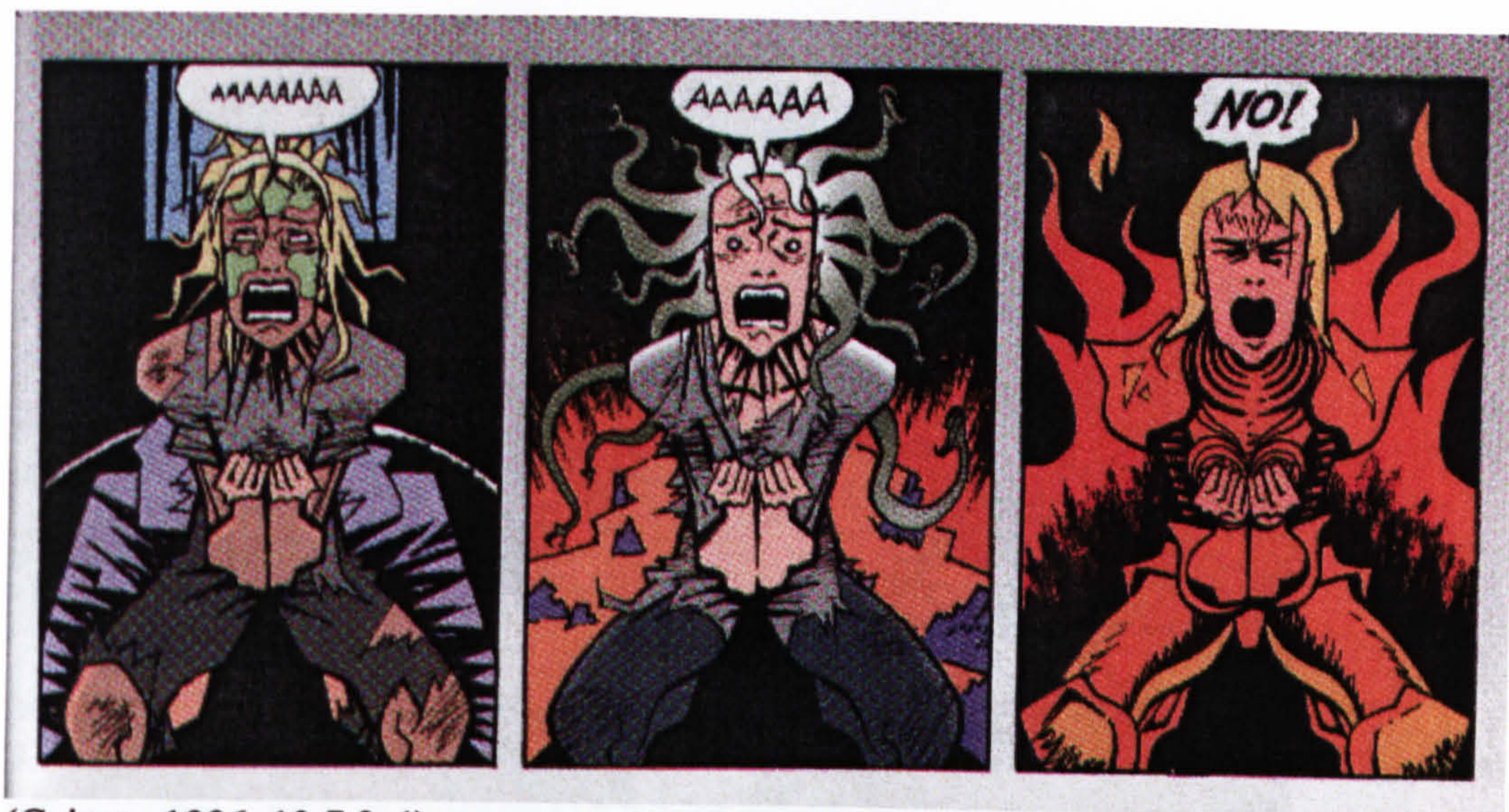


(Gaiman 1993a, 1.9.6)



(Gaiman 1993a, 6.23.6)

Appendix 4.3



(Gaiman 1996, 13.7.2-4)

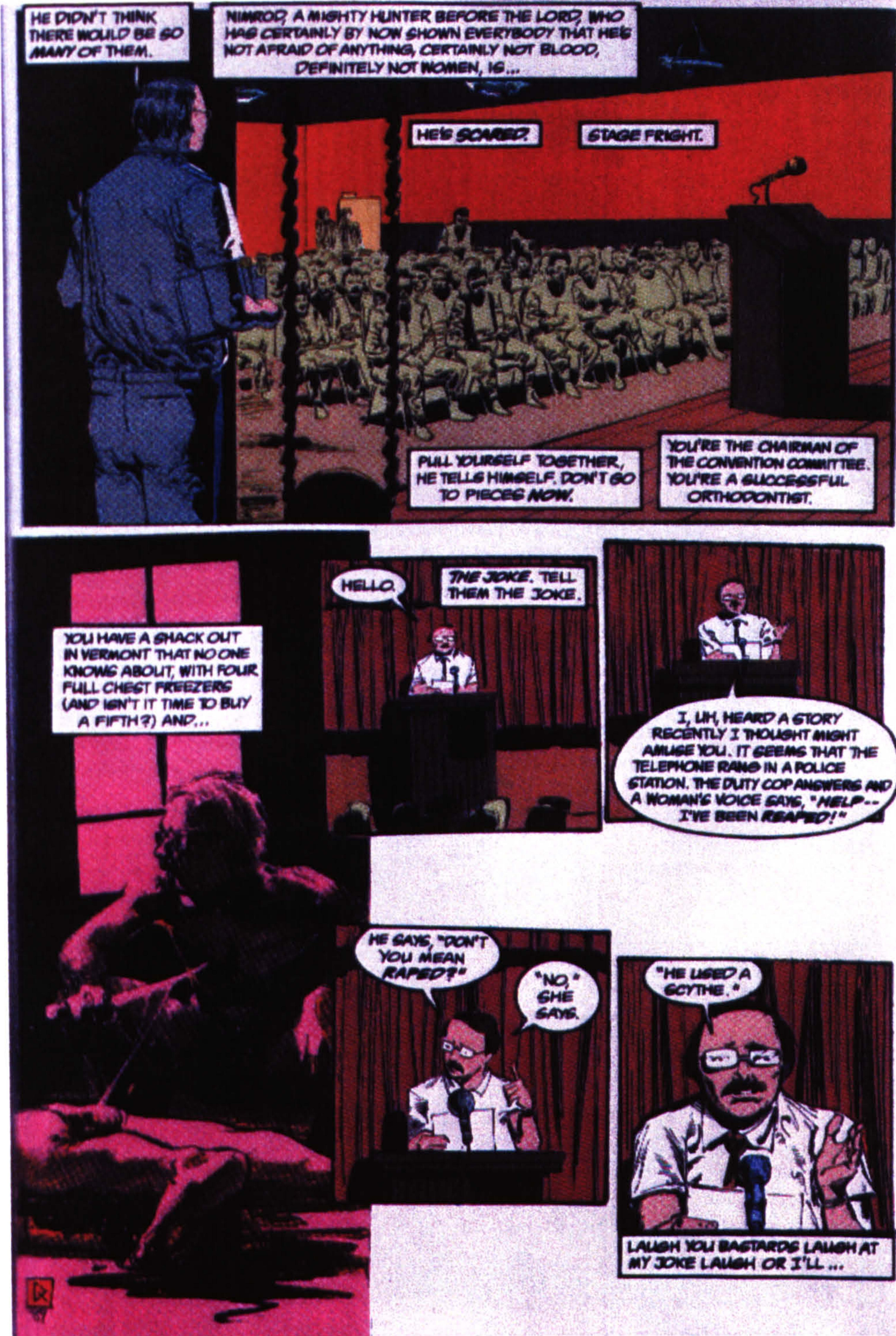
Appendix 4.4



(Gaiman 1996, 4.19, full page)

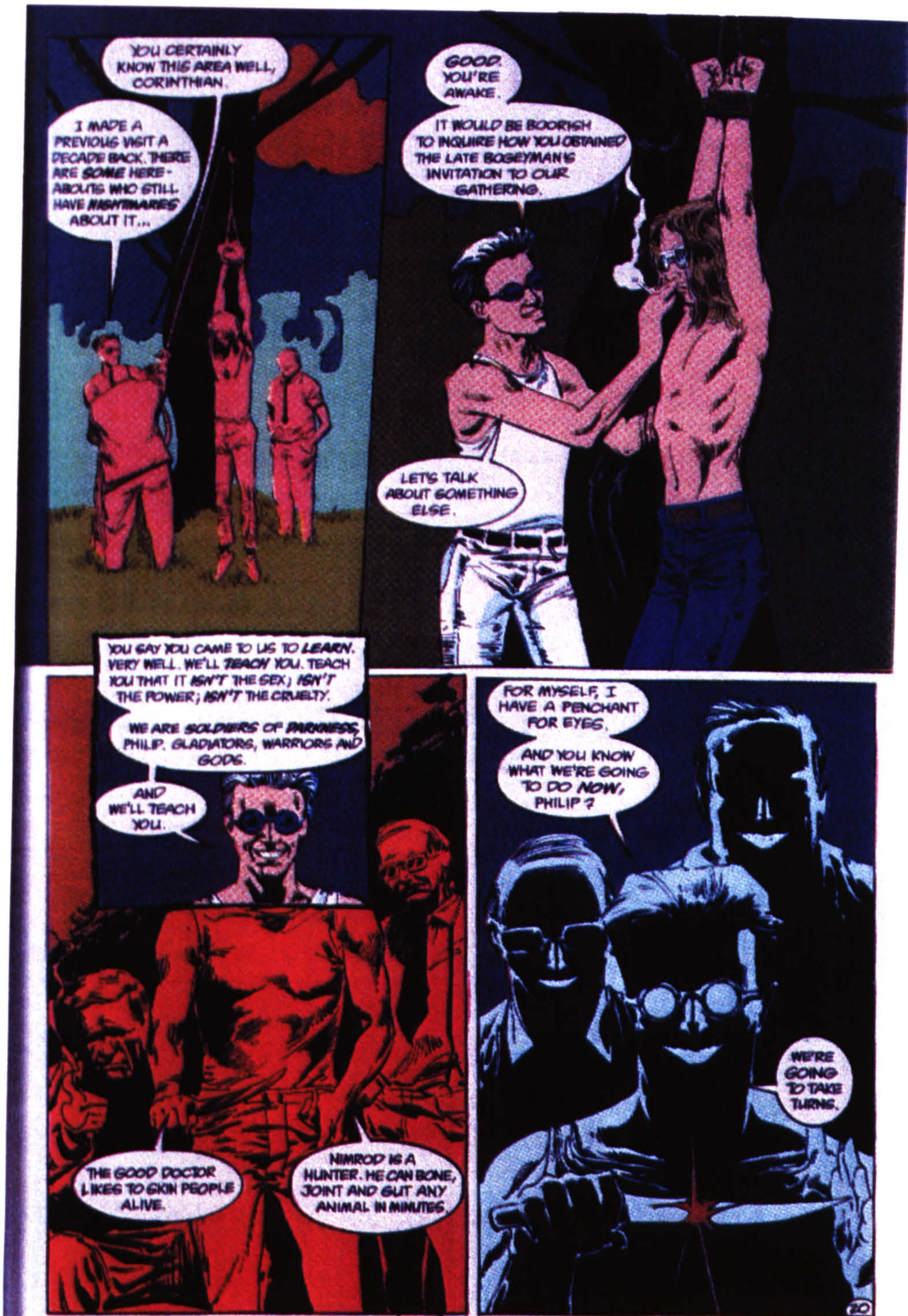
(Gaiman 1996, 4.12, full page)

Appendix 5.1



(Gaiman 1990, 5.12, full page)

Appendix 5.2



(Gaiman 1990, 5.20, full page)

Appendix 5.3

Fig. 1: simple pictorial



(Ennis 1997a, 128.2)

Fig. 2: complex pictorial



(Ennis 1997a, 17.3)

Fig. 3: simple hybrid



(Ennis 1997a, 128.3)

Fig. 4: complex hybrid



(Ennis 1997a, 71.1)

Fig. 5: complex pictorial via context



(Ennis 1997a, 73.1)

Fig. 6: complex pictorial via context, in series



(Ennis 1997a, 33, full page)

Appendix 5.4



(Ennis 1996, 22.4-5)

Appendix 5.5

Fig. 1:



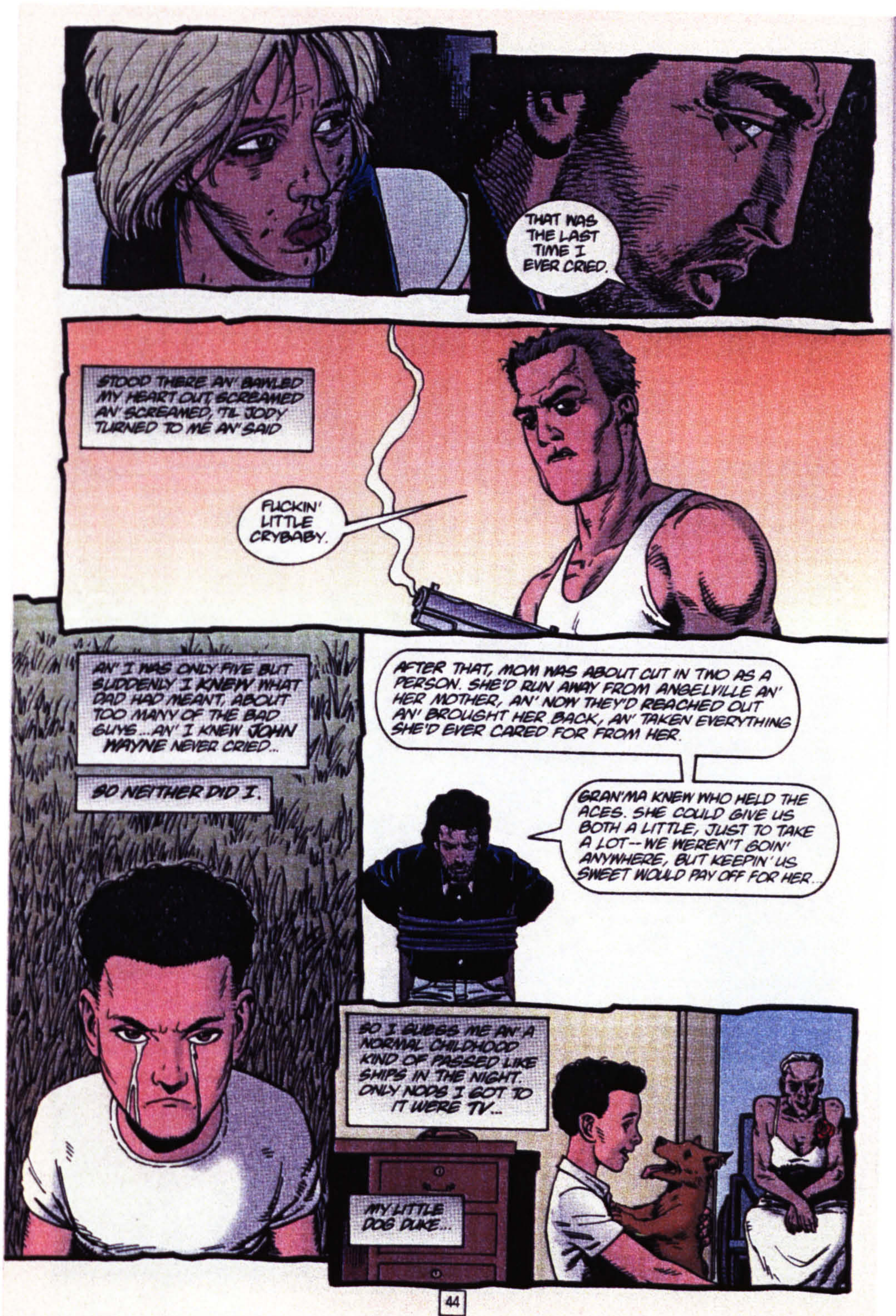
(Gaiman 1997, 92, full page)

Fig. 2:



(Gaiman 1996, 'Prologue', 8.1)

Appendix 5.6



(Ennis 1997a, 44, full page)

Appendix 6.1



(Gaiman 1991b, 3.6, full page)

Appendix 6.2



(Gaiman 1991b, 3.17, full page)

Appendix 6.3



(Gaiman 1991b, 3.7, full page)

Appendix 6.4



(Gaiman 1991b, 3.19, full page)

Appendix 6.5



(Gaiman 1991b, 3.11, full page)