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The Sandman: The Artifice of Comics and Power of Dreams

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The Sandman: The Artifice of Comics and Power of Dreams

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Abstract

Neil Gaiman's Vertigo Series *The Sandman* is an exceptional artistic endeavor. From "Preludes and Nocturnes" (1988) to "The Wake" (1996), Gaiman worked alongside a team of talented artists and graphic designers to produce an indelible work of revisionist mythology. This thesis will attempt to establish the framework by which our modern literary canon has celebrated classical Western myths while relegating graphic or visual forms of literature or outright neglecting comic myths altogether. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* will frame the discourse for pictographic analysis of Neil Gaiman's mythological revisionism of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in *Season of Mists*, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and *The Travels of Marco Polo* in "Soft Places." *The Sandman* is a playful modern myth that revives classical mythology within the comics medium, calling for a new kind of literary discourse that seeks to reverse decades of literary bias resulting from the 1950s Comics Code that has relegated the medium as juvenile. I will argue that given the comics flexibility, it is the only medium in which a transtextual myth of this nature can be fully realized.

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Introduction

For the great many who've not yet turned its delightful pages, *The Sandman* saga consists of ten volumes, written in monthly installments from 1988 to 1996. The series features the rotating artwork of some of the comic-industry's greatest talents, guided by Neil Gaiman's copious concept-notations. *The Sandman Vol.#3* "Dream Country" won the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Fiction, and a later spinoff of the series, *Endless Nights*, earned a spot on the *New York Times* Best-seller list, achieving yet another graphic novel milestone. Gaiman, a bibliophile with a penchant for the dark corners of a story arc and episodic synchronicity, has achieved literary celebrity as a prolific and genre-hopping author. *The Sandman* series centers on the Byronic hero, Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams, although he is referred to by a host of other names. Morpheus is part of a pantheon of immortal beings known as "the Endless," and each member of the family presides over an aspect of existence in the cosmos. Gaiman rewrites the original DC character by Gardner Fox and Burt Christman, a 1940s crime fighting hero. Depicted in a green business suit, fedora, and gas-mask, the original Sandman comic hero used a sleeping gas gun to subdue criminals. Gaiman's revisionist *Sandman* series helped launch the DC Vertigo label, a new wave of comics for a mature readership, employing not only the DC universe of characters, but also branching into numerous historical figures from Caesar to Shakespeare, paying homage to folklore, and pastiching classical Greek, Egyptian, Norse, and Chinese myths. Furthermore, the

series' numerous accolades and awards herald a new kind of literary discourse on seriousness of graphic narrative as a genre. (The origin of these particular genre prejudices will be explored further in the section *The Comics Medium*.) The series is comprised of seventy-five issues and *The Sandman Special: The Song of Orpheus* that are organized into ten volumes as follows:

Vol. 1: *Preludes and Nocturnes*—issues 1-8

Vol. 2: *The Doll's House*—issues 9-16

Vol. 3: *Dream Country*—issues 17-20

Vol. 4: *A Season of Mists*—issues 21-28

Vol. 5: *A Game of You*—issues 32-37

Vol. 6: *Fables & Reflections*—issues 29-31, 38-40,50, *The Sandman Special*

Vol. 7: *Brief Lives*—issues 41-49

Vol. 8: *World's End*—issues 51-56

Vol. 9: *The Kindly Ones*—issues 57-69

Vol. 10: *The Wake*—issues 70-75

There have been a number of spin-off issues, but when I refer to *The Sandman* collectively, I'm only referencing the above¹.

Identifying *The Sandman* by its trade volumes may be the simplest way to think about a complex work that otherwise defies the conventions of its medium and genre. Broadly speaking, the literary term “genre” refers to both the form and style of a given

¹ For in-line quotations, I will at times reference a particular volume, but for the most part I will parenthetically indicate: [Issue #].[Page #].[*(optional)Panel/Frame #].

work. Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* utilizes the comics medium, but it eludes a fixed genre, which is part of Gaiman's authorial wandering. Labels like "Gothic Fantasy" or "Speculative Fiction" may be accurate at times, but *The Sandman* is primarily concerned with myth--and specifically, with with the great well of unconsciousness that makes up our dreams. While no single literary genre accurately characterizes this literary work, *The Sandman* fulfills the archetypal purposes of myth while reinventing it by pastiching a wide range of authors/stories into a coherent whole, which Gaiman achieves only through the flexibility of the comics medium. Here, I seek to: identify several methods of comic book analysis, explore the intertextual myth-making of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, and deconstruct the prevailing literary biases that have formed against comics. The reduction of "comics" into a set literary genre, or as Bart Beaty suggests, as an appropriation of "comics" under the constructed identity of graphic novel, fails to account for the pictographic aesthetic, which requires a new kind of criticism (Beaty 175). Some scholars desperately seek to account for this shortcoming while also accommodating the technological trends in storytelling away from the paperback novel, referring to the current epoch as "Post Literary."

In the combination of pictures and words, there exist intersecting moments for language and image, each possessing distinct meaning of their own (morphemes). When combined, they create a new concept (a kind of pictographic syntax). While Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* identifies the interdependent relationship between images and words in the comic medium, it is graphic design that works as a third component in making meaning, and as of yet, no term exists for this synsemantic

phenomenon that is a notable aspect of the medium. This confluence makes even more sense with *The Sandman* being predicated on the notion of consciousness, the role of dreaming in our lives, and the nature of myths and intertextual storytelling. It is important to note that *The Sandman* is a revisionist myth that can only be fully realized within the comics medium.

The Sandman as Revisionist Myth

For a moment, let us recognize that Gaiman's writing style appropriates Gothic Romanticism in order to fashion his own speculative fiction. Borrowing something old and refashioning it into a new form that alludes to or critiques the predecessor form is the essence of genre-revisionism. Robert D. Hume's essay "Gothic versus Romantic: A Reevaluation of the Gothic Novel" compares the genres of Gothics and Romantics. Notably, Robert Hume divides the Gothic genre into two categories: Terror Gothic and Horror Gothic, classifying Terror Gothic as more pure in its aim to "expand the soul," whereas Horror Gothic tends to sensationalize monstrosity and repugnance; its aim is to shock and awe a reader. Hume analyzes the overarching aims of Gothic writing saying that of their most prominent concern is psychological interest. Hume writes " they move into deeper and more emotionally complex situations" (283). Another major concern for the Gothic writers was to involve the reader in a new way: the reader is invited into intrigue and suspense, as the writing seeks to arouse powerful emotion or imagination in the audience. He notes the four significant components of Gothic writing. First, the setting (space/time) is removed from the nineteenth-century reader in a way that creates a moral and cultural suspension of presuppositions. Second, there is a moral norm presented in the story. Third, action is derived from a complex hero-villain. And the fourth component is the confusion of evil and good that produces a non-Christian sensibility. Hume proceeds to say that the Gothic novel viewed in these terms is a treatment of the problem of evil. Moral ambiguity is part of the Gothic experience.

Hume suggests that this tone is what separates the Gothic from the Romantic.

Romantics turn to nature to derive ultimate knowledge and truth, using imagination to transcend reason. Gothic writing, according to Hume, is limited to the faculty of reason and never moves beyond what he calls "fancy".

Horror comics have a unique position in the literary development of the genre. In the 1950s, Publishers like E.C. Group churned out a number of provocative works such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror* that led to the infamous US Senate hearings and development of a Comics Code. Primarily, the accusations levied against the comics industry were intended to arouse public opinion rather than strict, literary censorship. As one father of that time claims, "Some of the stories, if one takes them simply in terms of their plots, are not unlike the stories of Poe or other writers of horror tales; the publishers of such comic books have not failed to point this out. But of course the barrenness of the comic-book form makes an enormous difference" (qtd. in Warshow 567). This bias against comics as "barren" literature continues today, circumscribed as "juvenile," or "[as] keeping students from reading books" (568).

While much has changed since the 1950s, and although comic book burnings in the town square are not likely to occur in America again, the medium still faces a residual literary bias. Cognizant of these formulations, Gaiman directly confronts the antiquated Comics Code. For example, under *General Standards B*, the Code stipulates that, "All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted." Episode 17 of *The Sandman* portrays a starving author, Richard Madoc, who after acquiring Calliope the

Muse, rapes and brutalizes her for years. It is a difficult passage to read, filled with both the image and language of horror,. To be clear, the revisionism of the genre in this episode confronts the idea that “comics” are juvenile. The horror is multi-faceted in that the rape of Calliope functions terrifyingly on the surface level, yet we as readers are titillated by the grotesque and brutal. It might be fair to say that the rape of a mythological muse can be read as a metaphor, therefore making the topic more palatable.

Second, Gaiman’s ventriloquism through Madoch initiates a kind of self awareness that suggests all writers’ search for inspiration, for new material, innately are a form of rape. Certainly, Gaiman’s craft borrows tales and repurposes myths. Last, the episode directly confronts the sensibility of what the Comics Code sought to stamp out, resurrecting the horror comic, and doing so with a kind of self-consciousness that calls reader’s attention to the artifice of the medium. As Gaiman writes in the preface to *Black Orchid*: “Tales of myth and horror are probably the easiest and most effective way to talk about the real world. It’s like they are the lies that tell the truth about our lives” (Gaiman 1991a, iv).

Before continuing to explore how historical prejudices have repressed the comic medium, I’d like to examine another example of Gothic revisionism found in Gaiman’s *The Kindly Ones: A Doll’s House*, in which Rose Walker visits the nursing home of her grandmother, Unity Kinkaid. Rose pokes around the place and looks inside the broom closet from which she first heard the triple goddess speaking. She ends up sitting with three elderly women, sharing tales about women seeking revenge. “The tale of the three

flying children” drawn by Charles Vess is an eight-page narrative/artistic intrusion that functions as a story within the story as well as a texture of art within the existing one. It’s a tale of horror, misogyny, and revenge akin to the dark fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen or the Grimm Brothers. The pages are penciled in fuscous chartreuse, and the modelling depicts both depth and dimensionality that makes the episode stand apart from the main narrative. The shadows are intricately crosshatched, emulating a Baroque style. The grotesque strangling of the wife is vignettted by Rembrandtesque lighting (coming from the upper left quadrant). This kind of artistic intrusion, underscores the nature of stories being just as real as anything else, as Dream expresses in Volume Three the of the series: “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” (19.21. Fr. 5). Gaiman’s writing often employs all four of Hume’s criteria for Gothic writing, but certainly moves well beyond the limits of rational thought in these scenarios. In fact, one might even say that Gaiman’s stories loiter in the darkness of Gothic sentimentality, accepting morose and psychologically disturbing story-arcs while equally celebrating plucky protagonists or the [at times] downright absurdities of life. Genre revisionism is readily apparent as Gaiman draws from a deep well of literary works to recast classical works of literature in the flexible medium of comics.

The Sandman as a Modern Myth Anthology

Given the outsider status of the comics medium, Clive Barker writes in his preface to *The Sandman* Vol. 2, that “it is perhaps freedom from critical and academic scrutiny that has made the medium of the comic book so rich an earth in which to nurture this fantastique and delirious kind of fiction.” In keeping with the style of Edgar Allan Poe, Neil Gaiman’s stories have a psychological and literary depth that deserves scholarly attention, as well as inclusion in the canon of mythological texts esteemed in the Western literary tradition. *The Sandman* series’ greater participation in mythological intertextuality lends it a literary, cultural, and educational importance. *The Sandman* Volume 1, *Preludes and Nocturnes* sets up a protagonist, Morpheus “Prince of Stories/Lord of Dreams”(although he is known by many other names as readers will come to find out), who remains a constant among the tangled narratives that unwind throughout the series. Dream’s realm, an interconnected, ethereal place, is the tool through which Gaiman is able to weave complex and interconnected narratives, fluidly moving between dream and reality—blurring the distinction between depicted reality and the dream realm is what gives the series such gravitas—. Gaiman sets up this plane of reality as all-pervasive—a madman’s phantasmagoria. Morpheus’ realm exists adjacent to reality, as well as functions as the existential basis for it. This is evident in *Preludes and Nocturnes* as Morpheus confronts the hordes of Hades and challenges the power of Lucifer Morningstar in “A Hope in Hell,” saying: “Ask yourselves, all of you.../What power would HELL have if those here imprisoned were/ Not able to DREAM

of HEAVEN?” (4.22). While his own realm, on an ethereal plane, is ramshackled and desiccated by the years of its master’s imprisonment, it serves as a repository of mankind’s collective dreams. It is figuratively, as I believe Neil Gaiman intended, a manifestation of the Jungian *collective unconscious*. Gaiman, in his afterword, claimed that volume one was not his finest work, but rather a place to establish his voice in the Dream Lord. “The Sound of Her Wings,” he asserts, is the vignette in which he felt his own narrative voice emerging. The juvenile despondency of Morpheus, having completed his quest, mirrors the author’s own next steps in drafting the subsequent tales.. Before examining Gaiman’s revisionist myth-making and evaluating the literary richness of *The Sandman* despite critical resistance to the comic medium, I would like to examine the role that myth plays in our lives, specifically, how it has historically been circumscribed and codified.

The Sociological Function of Myth

Myth holds a special and transformative power within society. The field of mythology has yielded some exciting prospects, both to the individual's quest for psychological wholeness and as a potential compensation for the maladies of our society at large. Rollo May wrote in his introductory chapter of *The Cry For Myth* that "Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it" (15). In an age of extremism, political corruption, and blatant destruction of innocence, myths serve as vanguard. They are manifestations of our primal dream, offering us sanctuary or self-annihilation. History is dotted with periods of xenophobic policy-making often arising from economic decline. This kind of scapegoating or communal distrust for an outsider serves a compensatory need, albeit a negative one. One such example of a modern myth serving a compensatory need is the cult of Santa Muerté "Saint Death" in Southern America. The rapidly growing cult has over twelve million devotees around the world. Scholars believe that Santa Muerté originated in the sixteenth century and is a product of syncretism between the Aztec goddess of death, Mictlantecuhtli ("mick-dee-kah-see-watt"), and the Spanish Inquisitors' Grim Reaper. The origin story of Santa Muerte of "La Niña Blanca" is a bit of a mystery, but her veneration grew under the Narco Satanists in the later twentieth century. The increase of drug trafficking, violence, kidnapping, and murder in South America propagated the myth of Santa Muerté. The normalization of death in daily life spurred the telling of a folk saint

who welcomed loved ones into both life and afterlife, and “her popularity stemmed in large part from the fact that she didn’t judge her devotees. That was perhaps the most salient characteristic that drove her wide appeal” (‘Sect of Nacozari’).

Mythology may hold the key to a culture breaking these psychological cycles, but putting a modern dress on the Dionysian versus Apollonian myth is a challenge. For reasons that I will explore later, fantasy and horror genres become a kind of dark mirror into the compensatory myths that need to be told, and the true poets of our age are those who give myths a modern dress. And if we can extend this discussion, I would argue that the comic is the most flexible medium to both pastiche old myths and craft new ones. Commenting on Carl Jung’s outlook of the function of myth, Wilson H. Hudson writes that “Modern man needs myth to achieve psychic wholeness and maintain proper balance between the unconscious and the conscious” (181). Jung has certainly contributed one of the most significant modern theories of myth. Insistent upon the psychological makeup of myth, Jung explored archetypes that are unquestionably mystic. Since these archetypes can never be made fully conscious, the theory is insulated against empirical criticism. In his essay “The Psychology of the Child Archetype,” Jung writes, “Not for a moment dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained or disposed of...The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress” (*Sacred Narrative* 253). With this in mind, the archetypes that Jung identifies seem to resonate with a kind of intuitive truth we all seem to know: the “psychic organ present in all of us” (253).

A necessary prerequisite to understanding Jungian archetypes is Jung's theory of the *collective unconscious*. It is no small hurdle to accept the idea of the *collective unconscious*, "a certain psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity" (Hudson 183). When humanity's conscious state becomes diminished, that is when the *collective unconscious* is allowed vocalization through dreams, fantasies, and visions. This great well of the unconscious contains primitive knowledge, or what Jung refers to as pre-consciousness, that is not ethnographic. Jung goes on to identify the psychic forces as archetypes. Archetypes expressed through various mythological tales express an essence of this pre-consciousness. These symbols or artifacts of the *collective unconscious* are unrepresentable per se; they can only be "circumscribed" over and over again (*Sacred Narrative* 250). Jung taught that there is an established interaction between individuals and the archetypes of the *collective unconscious*: First the archetype is *Constellated*, meaning it is consciously revealed. It then becomes *Numinous*, which is the process whereby it's assigned either a positive or negative relationship to an individual (divine or diabolical). The third step involves either *Inflation*, identifying the archetype with oneself, or *Projection* onto others. Next, *Deflation* brings one back to reality, and the fifth stage or end goal is *Individuation*, which one rarely achieves (Walker 32). *The Sandman* is predicated upon the anthropomorphized collective-unconsciousness of humanity; in this sense, it is a revisionist myth about wandering between all the disparate tales without necessarily seeking to unify them.

Structural Linguistics and Mythemes

In contrast to Jung, Levi-Strauss claimed that myths are composed of "gross constituent elements" or mythemes (861). These units can be analyzed and understood, but their value must be measured against their relationship to the whole of the myth. In other words, the meaning of any given mytheme is determined by the order in which it is placed in the narrative. In one sense, this unity of the whole reflects the idea in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he writes,

It is necessary that the parts of the action be put together in such a way that if any one part is transposed or removed, the whole will be disordered and disunified. For that whose presence or absence has no evident effect is not part of the whole. (Section 8)

The location of motifs within a particular myth reinforces its telling in a unified way, which follows some established prescription through each variant telling. Levi-Strauss further explains his mytheme theory by stating that these units function as "bundles of relations" that are linguistic in nature, and that can be combined to produce meaning (862). This approach, in conjunction with Jungian theory, creates a unique platform by which to understand the next circumscription of the mythos according to Stephen Walker:

It is the mythmaking artist, says Jung, who discovers the compensatory archetypal image that his age and the culture require for greater balance: 'the artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from the deepest

unconsciousness he brings it into relation with the conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers'. (20)

The Sandman Special provides an excellent example of mythemes function. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, taken from *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, which tells of a groom whose bride is bitten by a viper, cutting short their nuptials. Orpheus makes his way into the Land of the Dead, the only mortal man to do so besides Odysseus, where he pleads for Eurydice with a song of love. The song is so moving that all machinations of Hell pause: "The Furies' hearts were assuaged by the song, and the story goes/that they wept real tears for the very first time" (10.44-5). Orpheus's desire to return with his wife from Hades is granted to him under the condition that he doesn't turn to look back to see if Eurydice is following behind him. Lo and behold, what does he do? He looks. It's predictable. But it's also beautiful that Orpheus looks back. Eurydice dies a second death before Orpheus, who goes into exile, starting a cult of homosexuality. The next poems by Ovid are a collection of Orpheus' songs of love and passion.

Orpheus's catabasis into Hell (descent into the Underworld) is a specific structure that functions as a mytheme; it's a common one found across many mythological narratives, especially within the archetypal hero's journey. In crossing the threshold, the physical act is one of attrition. The hero becomes psychologically vulnerable: As Joseph Campbell observes,

And so it happens that if anyone--in whatever society--undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures (any one of which may swallow him)... 84)

This *catabasis* mytheme is ascribed value through its proximity to other narrative elements as well as to the fact that Orpheus's journey to Hell results in failure. Located between an arbitrary snake bite and Orpheus' cheating glance back to Eurydice, the mytheme reinforces a hierarchical social ethos--the Great Chain of Being. Even armed with his lyre (symbolizing art), Orpheus can transcend only momentarily, but not thwart the will of the gods. If any of the elements are removed or transposed, the interpretation of the mytheme might be reinterpreted.

What makes any myth valid is the age in which it participates. [In a footnote, Rollo May remarks that in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell has already provided an excellent survey of world myths, and that his focus will deal in contrast with only North American myths that shape the American psyche.] If a myth is still being told, it might be considered modern. As nihilism is the product of post-industrial revolution and World Wars—politically, morally, spiritually—so too are myths particularly resonant within their respective cultural times. As a case in point, the myth of Icarus originates in the Bronze Age, but that does not invalidate its relevance to modern audiences. The story of Icarus promotes an ethos of following the middle way, of respecting hierarchical socio-political structures. This myth of moderation will

continue to find value through its retellings. Gaiman's gift of *The Sandman* is that it functions as a compendium of myths and fables spanning many millennia and cultures. The myth of Dream and his foibles with humanities' consciousness, given its DC Comics Universe dressing, is a complex, literary tapestry of borrowed and retold tales: e.g., Lucifer Morningstar from Milton's *Paradise Lost*; "Orpheus and Eurydice" from Ovid; *World's End* stories modelled after Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; Eastern vignettes drawn from *The Travels of Marco Polo*, as well as two revisionist Shakespearean plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. The referential material may be vast, but the resulting tale of the Dream Lord is aptly a modern myth functioning as "cultural compensation" (Walker 20).

This idea of "compensation" is one of myth's primary functions. Addressing the link between myth and dream, Joseph Campbell writes, "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation" (1). The supposition of his entire study of mythological works and identification of various archetypal representations is that a myth participates in or fulfills an underlying need within humanity, an aspect of our unconscious dreams. As well, it gives credibility to the art of storytelling as a creative and pervasive source of shared human experience. The adaptive storytelling powers of the comics medium is perfectly suited to revisionist mythology because both comics and myth require an attenuation symbolism and intertextuality.

The Role of Intertextuality in Revisionist Mythology

Before extending our analysis into Gaiman's intertextual representations, it is imperative to establish a definition for what exactly "intertextuality" means. Tim Evans states: "Almost all his [Gaiman's] work can be characterized as intertextual: it is constructed out of a web of references derived from folklore, popular culture, literature, film, etc..." to weave a new modern myth (65). Evans theorizes that Gaiman's goal is to pursue human universals through this intertextuality. Put simply, "intertextuality" is just one of the aspects of textuality. Gerard Genette defines it as "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another" (2). It is one form of transtextuality lending significance to a text by creating a narrowly defined link. Furthermore, Michael Riffaterre addresses the key differences between "hypertextual" and "intertextual" stating, "Intertextuality is a closed-circuit exchange between text and intertext. As this closed circuit defines autonomy of the text and depends on necessarily perceived signs, it accounts for literary communication proper. That is, it accounts for a reader-response narrowly controlled by the text" (Riffaterre 787). Where hypertextuality is ever-expanding and connects a reader to every data point, even those irrelevant to the source text, intertextuality contains the connection between a text and its intertext. Hypertexts in the digital milieu of literature expand exponentially.

Although Riffaterre was primarily concerned with semiotics rather than whole text interpretation, I think his premise will serve aptly. For example, archetypal representations are a form of hypertextuality with any given archetypal iteration sharing

a philological link. A reader response criticism is free to create connections and [hypertextually] wander. However, if a representation functions as commentary with regards to a prescribed subtext, as a multitude of episodes in *The Sandman* do, then these ought to be more precisely labeled intertextual. According to Tim Evans: “Universals, for Gaiman, do not reside exclusively in literary or fine art canons or in folklore, but must be pursued, and re-created from, elements throughout the world’s cultures, genres, and art forms” (67). That is, intertextuality is a kind of currency by which a new myth can be constructed via cultural or literary appropriation. The risk of this kind of venture, if done sloppily, is that a cultural texture might be glossed over or lost entirely. For example, some Gaiman scholars have suggested that the artwork fetishizes certain Eastern cultures with what Edward Said refers to as the Western gaze. What insulates Gaiman’s craft from this subversive Orientalism is what “Gaiman scholar Chris Dowd refers to as ‘metafiction’: fiction that emphasizes its sources and recombinations of sources, its storytelling artifices” (qtd. Evans 67). To summarize, then, Gaiman’s work is blatantly intertextual, and it is uniquely expressed through the comic medium, lending to a texture that is as creative in the recombination of mythemes as it is referential to the original works.

In “The Song of Orpheus,” Gaiman explains in an interview with Hy Bender that he wrote a more straightforward adaptation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice because his readership was unfamiliar with it: “you can’t do jazz riffs and variations on a theme when the audience isn’t familiar with the theme itself. So *The Sandman Special* became a literal retelling of the Orpheus Tale” (qtd. in Bender 152). In the same

interview, Gaiman also claims that despite the issue's critical acclaim, it's one of the stories with which he is least satisfied because of the limitations he felt his audience had. The interview suggests Gaiman's creative choices on which transtextual connections he selected were informed by his readership. Therefore, some mythemes required a more didactic delivery.

Tim Evans also cites Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, in which he claims that certain texts cannot be understood apart from their peripheral illustrations, cover art, or commercial visuality. This cultural iconography has the power to create a bridge for language learners into the transformative power of a myth. A reader need not be familiar with Ovid's Orpheus, or the discourse of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in order to find meaning in the myth of Orpheus. Intertextuality provides readers with a self-contained narrative weightiness: introducing the Endless siblings' missing brother, or providing the alluded to backstory of Calliope's relationship to Morpheus initially introduced in Episode 17. At times, *The Sandman* seems to flit from one story to the next, even from one timeline into another, but amidst the seeming randomness it evolves into a coherent whole.

Not only does *The Sandman* fashion complex, intertextual characterizations, it also underscores its own visual artifice as a literary work. By the term "artifice," I mean whatever elements of the comic page that prod a reader to see the placement of the medium within the story's overall narrative. These kind of clever intrusions make the reader and artist co-conspirators in determining meaning. Comics represent the passage of time and movement through space as non-linear, as opposed to what one

finds in traditional Western prose. There may be several actions detailed on any given comic page that can be read in sequence, however, these actions exist simultaneously on the page, the reader's eye able to taken in the actions as a singular unit. For example, Haroun Al Raschid's descent into his palace chambers from *Fables and Reflections* (50.11) utilizes a classic 9-panel layout, but time is expressed through the lengths of the frames (*see fig. 5). Moreover, the page as unit expresses a labyrinthian path for the emperor. Time and space occupy the same page, and for this reason, the page becomes an important graphic design unit that functions distinctly within the medium. The overall effect is both visual and linguistic in *The Sandman*, intertextually exploring the spatial representations of the Gates of Hell, Edenic runaway anthropomorphisms (Fiddler's Green) hiding in soft places, Waking Cities, or preservation of Haroun Al Raschid's Baghdad in a snow globe. In this sense, the work operates as a profound, literary expression that underscores its graphic elements. Gaiman understands the unit of the page as synsemantic; that is, it takes on meaning only in connection with the the visual and linguistic parts of the page. *The Sandman* tacitly acknowledges the meaning of "space" represented by the comic page through these anthropomorphized characters. In doing so, the comic acknowledges its artifice and construction of meaning—a marker for any great work of literature.

The Comics Medium

Examining the structure of comics, interchangeably identified under the term “graphic novel,” requires a vernacular that bridges literature with the visual arts; therefore, a common definition of Comics is invaluable to the study of the medium. Scott McCloud expands upon Will Eisner’s definition of comics as “sequential art” to “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* has long been considered the comic artists’ gold standard; however, McCloud combines the vernacular of comics with cultural aesthetics and the history of the medium. His work is transformative insofar as it opens the discourse to a new audience in an easily digestible format that initiates a comics novice. In order to understand the genre, McCloud writes within it, guiding readers via his spritely, self-caricature. His narrative voice comes across as that of a tenured professor, albeit a post-textual one, translating concepts into a pictographic medium that opens a new discourse for literary critics.

Of primary concern in McCloud’s work is the intersection between language and art—between words and pictures. His approach follows Ferdinand Saussure’s distinction in linguistics between *langue* and *parole*. In comics, images and graphic representations of ‘sound’ as well as ‘time’ functions as their own abstract linguistic system. As in language, the sign and signifier are arbitrary in nature and usage defines meaning. McCloud refers to an individual’s use of these pictorial representations as “idioms” which one might correlate to Saussure’s concept of *parole*, and the

community's common use of these idioms (*langue*) is what McCloud refers to as "surface" (McCloud 171). A pioneer in comics is one who establishes a new idiom and pushes boundaries. Technological advances in the field of graphics continues to expand what is possible in the comic medium beyond the limitations of an artist's hand or a writer's use of language, and the genre in more recent years has garnered recognition and a respectability that is complicated. If there is one shortcoming to McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, it is in his lack of attention to linguistic morphology. He acknowledges that the interplay between words and pictures is evolving and continues to be pushed forward through the comic genre, but he tends to favor the visual aspect of this binary relationship stating, "When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area" (McCloud 157). In this sense, McCloud's work might hold special power in the hands of a language learner struggling to cross from translation and vocabulary acquisition into the more nuanced idiomatic representations within a given *langue*. Indeed, the centrality of images in the comic medium has faced scrutiny, but in the pages that follow, I will balance my literary analysis of both the imagery and language of *The Sandman*.

Jesse Cohn also has some insightful methods for examining the structure of a comic page, citing Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle's 1976 essay "Du linéaire au tabulaire," which shows how a comic page is viewed in a grid that examines "a rhetorical 'mise-en-page,' the shape of the page actively changing to accommodate the needs of the narrative" (Tabachnick 46). These artistic spreads and unconventional layouts break the standard 9-panel-grid (three frames across by three down—a reader reading

left to right, top to bottom). The result is an unregulated reading path in which the reader's gaze is allowed to wander. This one aspect of comic page analysis invites an aesthetic appreciation that can push readers to examine the interplay between image and text—yoked together in the likeness of a poem. The comic medium can be analyzed by giving priority to either the text or the image, and in this fashion, guide readers to think about narrative structure in new ways.

From Comic Books to Graphic Narratives—Comics as Literature

Comic scholar Bart Beaty comments on how the commercial success of certain comics has led to the co-opting of the comic form under the label “graphic novel”—or, the Modern Language Association’s preferred “graphic narrative.” The appropriation of the term “comic” under the guise “graphic novel” is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the term “graphic” denotes a kind of seedy, porn-parloresque nudity, or gratuitous violence. Second, the term “graphic novel” also subjugates the aesthetics of comics, distinguishing “graphic” as adjectival with “novel” being primary. As Beaty states: “Centrally, it privileges the literary character of comics over the visual. The term elides too much work produced in the comics form in an effort to ‘sanitize’ comics by positioning the literary as a marker of quality and by treating the visual as subsidiary in any formal analysis” (175). Considering that this thesis argues for *The Sandman* as a rich literary work meriting scholarly attention, it is important to first identify the historical biases that have formed against the medium.

Canonization of comics is occurring, in which some works are deemed high in literary value and labeled as graphic novels, a process that Beaty asserts, “is by no means natural...These kinds of judgments are always expressions of power and professional ideologies that deserve to be interrogated” (176). During the golden age of comics in America, the 1930-40s also bore witness to the Modernist critics canon of taste via New Criticism. One of the tenets of New Criticism is that a work of literature can stand alone, and it does not need to be read within any particular historical or

sociological context. New Critics saw a literary text as an isolated construction apart from any intertextual or subtextual representations; [the true business of criticism] as nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold said was “to see the object as in itself it really is” (qtd. in Barry 17). This precept of the primacy of the text is tricky. It’s important to acknowledge the impossibility of reading a given text objectively because a reader’s mind is not hermetically sealed. As language learners, we read and study the contexts and are taught to make value judgements based on these contexts, all the while embracing a kind of intentionality to be true to the text itself. For comics, one must read in a fashion that acknowledges the idioms of the medium and intertextual markers.

One of the lingering consequences of New Criticism was that the comic medium has been eschewed as ‘low’ art. Moreover, comics tend to celebrate their exteriority more than traditional prose, which require a kind of initiation into the methods of reading and evaluating the form. Comics don’t attempt to conceal from readers the fact that it’s a representational medium, and honest analysis needs to take this into account. In recent years, the established field of literary criticism has slowly begun to accept comics into its purview, backpedaling from previous value judgments against the medium. The problem is that comics are not, solely speaking, works of literature. English instruction inherently prioritizes words over images. Because of this, Beaty argues, the canon is like an exclusive club that is blinded by its rich history, which may ultimately put the medium at risk of being overlooked:

The necessary first step on this path has been the reduction of comics to a more narrowly defined “graphic novel.” The maintenance of that category,

therefore, ensures comics' marginalized "little brother" status within the academy, not as an area that will provide new and invigorating forms of scholarship that transcend artificial distinctions between visual/literary, high/low, national/transnational, but as one that only meekly waits its turn at the big table (191).

What the New Critics contributed to literary discourse was the idealization of the novel as the penultimate literary form, further distinguishing those novels meeting prescribed value judgements for "canonization." As such, the term "novel" was used to sanitize the comics medium.

Similarly, contemporary scholarship by Rocco Versaci in *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* offers a more nuanced view of language in comics in order to create literary converts. Versaci details the anti-comic movement of the 1950s, led in part by Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, which leveled accusations against comics claiming that they led to juvenile delinquency. In 1954, the "Kefauver Hearings" in the Senate investigated the negative effects of comics on children. Public sentiment soured against the medium after the testimony of Wertham and others such as Sterling North who claimed "'that comics were a poison' whose antidote lay in bookstores and libraries and that 'any parent who [did] not acquire the antidote [was] guilty of criminal negligence'" (qtd. in Versaci 7). Consequently, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) was created to enforce a "Comics Code," which sought to restrict the complex characterizations and mature topics that attracted mature readership. As Versaci writes, "The end result of the Code and

publisher's conformity was the mainstream juvenilization of the medium, which in turn caused the general public to equate comic books as a form suitable only for children" (8). These biases were sown in the 1950s while Modernists established a literary canon that relegated the comic medium, an idea that remains pervasive in academia almost 70 years later.

According to James Lethbridge, this history occurred in three distinct phases. The first was Fear, in which, "Experts continued to foster this dread by drawing correlations between the specific fear of comic books and the general angst of familial breakdown, subversion, and communism. By directing blame on the comic-book industry, Americans attempted to contain these anxieties within a predisposed framework" (*Comics As History* 113). Fear then led to the second phase of Containment and Scapegoating. The American public joined "experts" in blaming the entire comic industry for juvenile delinquency. According to Lethbridge, the third phase was a kind of Sublimation of the negative practice for perceived positive ones. As I have previously mentioned, this included the creation of a Comics Code to regulate the industry and promote a 1950s Christian sentimentality. Lethbridge acknowledges these prescriptive values when he writes:

Accordingly, the industry increased production of comic books focusing on love and domestic life, seen most clearly through Chester Gould's Dick Tracy stories. Using the popular crime-story formula, writers were able to provide entertaining stories using negative ideals, such as crime, kidnapping, and murder, to promote positive ones, such as family,

integrity, and fighting for noble causes...and then by producing educational comics, such as the award-winning Classics Illustrated series (113).

While these literary adaptations into comics employed some talented comic artists of the time, they perpetuated a view of comics “little-brother status,” distracting children from reading the “real novels.”

The distinction between comics and graphic novels should also be recognized as a marketing distinction. In this sense, “graphic novel” is a serialization of a comic story arc that spans a greater number of issues. *The Sandman* was originally released in monthly issues, yet the distinction “graphic novel” ought to only be applied to the volumes in which it was thematically collected. Mainstream publishers Marvel and DC Comics had a major role to play in the development of a graphic novel format as Weiner indicates: “Trade publishers allowed bookstores to return unsold books, but comic book distributors, when selling to comic book specialty shops, did not. This made comic book retailers somewhat reluctant to invest in the graphic novel as it was a new format, and the books were non-returnable at first” (41). In 1996, DC changed the whole direction of the comic industry by reversing decades-long practices and buying back graphic novels from distributors. This moved comics out of the collectible, monthly installment era and into a mainstream market. It not only opened the door to comic book writers, artists, and publishers, but also to libraries and academia. This commercial opening allowed the comic industry an opportunity to show readers a serious and engaging genre far removed from the Sunday funnies. Given this premise, *The Sandman* offers itself to readers as a rigorous exemplar of the comics medium’s potential. By the late

1980s, the major comics publishers are rejecting or ignoring the Comics Code altogether, and fittingly, Gaiman's writes a morally ambiguous tale of Dream descending into Hell.

A New Vision of Hell

With *Season of Mists*, Gaiman begins to develop the mythos of The Endless siblings. As in most pantheons, the Endless are a manifestation of human characteristics and emotions while also presiding over specific domains of human experience: Destiny, Death, Destruction, Dream, Desire, Despair, and Delirium. Their roles, according to Dream, is as “servants of the living,” an important precept from which to evaluate Dream as the series’ protagonist (16.23). Rather than functioning as elemental domains, as do the gods in many ancient pantheons, Gaiman’s pantheon is existentially more foundational. Episode 0 sets up the tension among the Endless and its function within the story arc through a confrontation between Destiny and the Three Fates. Their talk in the Garden of Forking Paths is the catalyst for what ultimately leads to Morpheus’ fate at the end of the series—more on this later. The motif of free will versus fate drives the story-line and Gaiman playfully includes a Miltonesque Lucifer Morningstar as a foil to the Dream Lord. Alisa Kwitney, assistant editor on *Season of Mists*, points out that: “The Sandman as he is represented in *Season of Mists* is the version of the character that first broke into the wider consciousness of the public [since *Dream Country*]” (74). *Season of Mists* is certainly the most cohesive story-arc of any previous Volume, each episode functioning in tandem with Dream returning to Hell. This story arc is pivotal to establishing a mythologically-weighted geography, albeit playful in tone.

This lightheartedness in concert with artist Kelley Jones' wide angle representations of Hell's landscape, and his attentiveness to an exquisite range of facial expressions in close-ups, provides for a sensational and other-worldly experience for readers. One passage that deserves a closer look is in episode two after Dream removes his helmet and agrees to stride the vastness of Hell with Lucifer. This tour of Hell is a brilliant work of sequential art. It seems that Lucifer has some loose ends to tie up before abdicating his kingdom to Dream, and the pair float above the vastness of Hell with the tattered dark cloak of Dream beside Lucifer's Christ-like feet. The tour takes Dream over cities and lakes and mountains. They hover over formless red waters that bleed into a skyline and a rugged and sandy coastline, before we first glimpse Lucifer loosely holding the key to Hell. He holds it with the same disdain he verbally expresses to Dream for having to preside over Hell. The key itself, made of bone, with gothic, razor-sharp edges is used to lock the various doors of Hell before it is ultimately bestowed upon Dream.

My favorite of these doors is what appears to be a gelatinous wall of organs with protruding orifices—a delightful revision of John Milton's "Thrice threefold gates. Three fold were brass,/Three iron, three of adamantine rock"(1.645). Throughout their walk, it is Dream who visually seems to better fit the landscape—he is drawn with menacing, beady eyes. Both characters are cautious and sly, but it seems that Lucifer is shedding his pride with his office, even to the point of ultimately conceding to the beauty of the Creator's sunsets in episode eight. Yet, the outstanding question remains: why does Dream take the key in the first place? It's almost as though he has no choice, which in

essence is Gaiman's presentation of Hell itself, or rather Gaiman's spin on Milton's Hell. In the episode preceding, we are shown Hob Gadling, a character who chooses not to die and so he doesn't, signing a Faustian pact with Dream. Likewise, the inhabitants of Hell are presented as feeling cheated if they do not suffer, such as in the case of tormented soul, Breschau of Livonia (2.2, fr.3). Even at Lucifer's offer of release, Breschau chooses to remain. Ultimately, Hell is a choice.

Gaiman isn't being coy with his allusions. As Harlan Ellison notes in his introduction to the volume, "Neil bangs us over the head with the information that the aphorism comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost* 1667." In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, Lucifer speaks with his mate, Beelzebub, about their condition of being cast from Heaven. Even though line 263 is often quoted, one must examine it in the full context of Satan's soliloquy:

The mind is its own place and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. 255
What matter where, if I be still the same
And what I should be: all but less than He
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free. Th' Almighty hath not built
Here for His envy, will not drive us hence. 260
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven! (1.253-263)

Line 263, an oft-quoted bit of *Paradise Lost*, is synecdoche for 254-5. Reality is our own doing in a sense. Hell in *Sandman* is a place that people choose to go to on some level. Characters either demarcate their own existence or blithely accept the pervading confines arising from religion, culture, myth, family. In this sense, the phantasmagoria of characters who flirt with the definition of “sanity” is a notable theme in *The Sandman*. Reality can be accepted blindly, dutifully like Dream does, or one can choose self-determination as with Lucifer abdicating Hell.

In Milton, it is God who allows Satan to get up from the fiery lake, leave Hell, enter Paradise, and almost fight the other angels (again). Satan’s agency is severely constrained by God’s will and overall plan. Gaiman’s revisionism plays with the motif of “free will” in much of his writing, (e.g., the image of Breschau of Livonia, skin taut with mazlegh, willing his own eternal damnation). He’s not being tortured, rather, he is willing his own torture. These literary revisions make *The Sandman* a myth more suited to modern audiences. Because the problem of evil persists today, good literature must examine, or rather confront, the basis upon which we label some as “monsters.” Addressing the literal and symbolic nature of monsters, Stephen Asma writes, “The monster is more than an odious creature of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*, employed in domains as diverse as religion, biology, literature, and politics” (13). Hell is a literary repository for the monstrous creatures of these *cultural categories*, just as the dark forests or murky waters represent the unknown of the *collective unconscious*. This premise opens a space for the comic medium to graphically place these monsters.

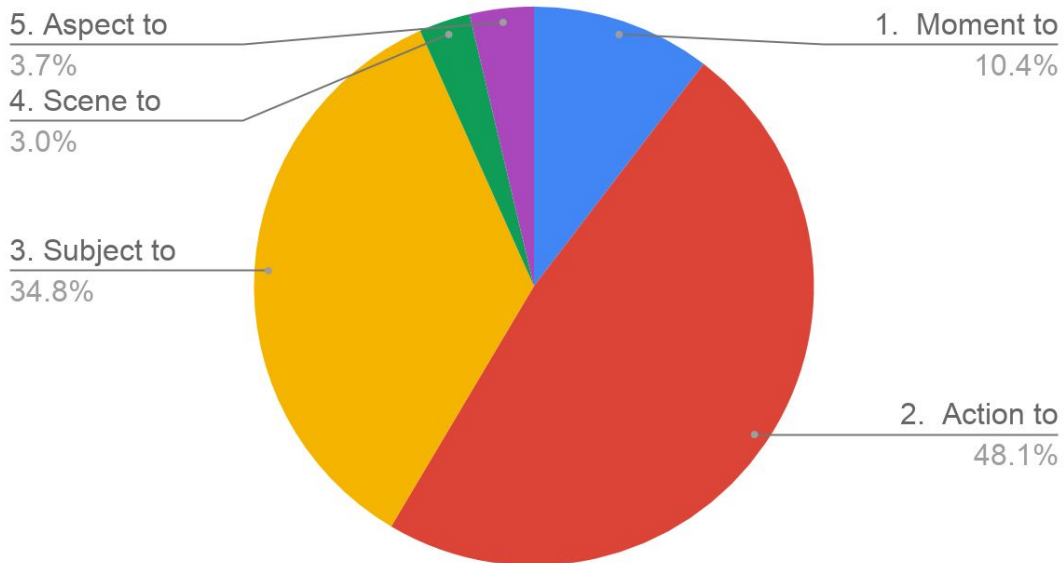
In order to do this, I would like to turn to structuralist examination of *The Sandman* using Scott McCloud's seminal work *Understanding Comics*. The space between the artwork of two panels is what scholars refer to as "the gutter." This inglorious label, McCloud claims, "plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics" (66). In graphic design, especially the field of typography, good design lies in the negative space between the marks on the page. And the same is true for comics. The spatial placement of frames allows for an aesthetic playfulness that McCloud asserts: "fractures both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67). McCloud goes on to say that what makes comics such a dynamic medium is the relationship established between a reader and the comic author in filling in the gutter, and these blanks come in all shapes and forms. In fact, the unknown of the gutter, represents a kind of terrifying potential when given the context of Hell because anything can happen in the space between the panels.

McCloud offers a list of six types of transitions between the comic panels: moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect, and non-sequitur. Organized in ascending order based on the involvement required by a reader, "moment to moment" requires the least amount of engagement from a reader, as it measures the smallest increments of time--think of those old flip books you made as a kid to animate a cartoon. Conversely, a "non-sequitur" requires a high level of reader involvement, as the apparent connection between the previous

panel and the next is completely unrelated. At this (experimental) level, the aesthetic abstraction of both aspect-to-aspect and non-sequitur are all about establishing a mood for readers, working to activate pre-conscious responses to imagery to synergize a story arc. McCloud then uses his “transition tool” to analyze the composition of numerous mainstream comics across varying genres. The consistent finding, with only a few outliers, is that Western/European comics only employ transitions 2-4 relying heavily upon “action to action” with an average breakdown of 65 percent action-to-action, 20 percent subject-to-subject, and 15 percent scene-to-scene. As McCloud writes: “If we choose to see stories as connected series of events, then the predominance of types 2-4 are easily explained. Types 2-4 show things happening in concise and efficient ways” (76). Demarcating the composition of Western comics from the Eastern tradition, namely with Japanese Manga, do we see that there is a clear difference. Eastern comics still heavily rely on action-to-action, but almost equally on subject-to-subject transition, and the most notable difference between Eastern and Western comics is the inclusion of transitions one, five and six. McCloud surmises that “Traditional Western art and literature don’t wander much. On the whole, we’re a pretty goal-oriented culture. But, in the East, there’s a rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art” (81). Without exoticizing the “rich” East over the “goal-oriented” West or overidentifying the East as “other,” McCloud’s structuralist examination of the traditions does indicate an artistic schism. I believe these differences arise from the comic genre having a longer history of acceptance [in Japan] within literary and artistic discourse.

Using McCloud's parameters, I've analyzed the transitions from *Season of Mists*, Episode 2 and found that Gaiman's work is a hybrid of Eastern and Western styles of comics. Based on Gaiman's extensive Hy Bender interviews, it is worth acknowledging that although Kelley Jones was the collaborating artist on this episode, Gaiman's extensive editorial notations clearly defined the artistic vision; thus I will be crediting him for determining the transitions of episode two. In my analysis, moment-to-moment transitions comprise 10 percent of the episode, such as the three panels dedicated to Dream's facial expressions the moment after Lucifer states that he has quit his job. These moments capture intricate points in time, significantly slowing the plot's forward action. They also indicate Gaiman's emphasis on the visual art, which breaks from the traditionally action-to-action transitions in Western comics. However, action-to-action still leads the transitions with Lucifer abdicating Hell as the primary focus, but the geography of Hell takes a very close second at 35 percent. These findings are consistent with an author who is equally preoccupied with alluding to the existing mythologem of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as with crafting his own revisionist view of Hell. Gaiman's subjective focus is driven by the intertextual richness of Milton's verse, ensuring that readers perceive both visual and linguistic cues.

Transition breakdown for Season of Mists-Ep. 2



Working in concert with the gutter of a comic panel is the frame—the hard lines that encapsulate a panel. The frame distinguishes a particular sequence or subject in time and space. The shapes of a frame, as with the size of the gutter, create a feeling of time as narrative action occurs spatially. This is one of the qualities of the comic genre that distinguishes it from others. Frames can intersect, or even spill off the page, a technique known as a “bleed” in which “Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space” (McCloud 103). Gaiman employs a bleeding frame that visually underlays the four subsequent panels. The bleeding panel escapes the boundaries of the page, echoing the dialogue in the panel: “Lucifer...it seems to go on forever. How big is Hell?” (22.10). It’s an aesthetically complimentary frame that creates an eerie timelessness.

The Anti-hero

In the 1980s, anti-heroes became quite popular in comics as Batman (via Frank Miller) turned much darker and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* gave readers an entire slate of heroes such as Comedian and Rorschach who were not entirely altruistic. Dream was born in the 1980s amidst these darker figures, and much as Frank Miller depicts Batman in his underground cave, brooding over his own sort of Hell, Gaiman casts a Lucifer and Dream reigning over their own respective domains. More broadly, these 1980s anti-heroes follow the literary tradition of Gothic Romantic preoccupation with the Byronic Hero (Bender 109). Lucifer Morningstar is humanized in his current fallen state, a statement that is more political than cosmically adversarial. Out of boredom at performing his duty, he simply leaves Hell; consequently, the concept of Hell as a physical place becomes a place of humanity's own making. Lucifer is depicted with a range of facial expressions, from maniacal to compassionate to agonizing--all made possible by the visual medium. Gaiman tacitly plays on our preconceptions of Satan by having Lucifer grasping a knife to presumably stab Mazikeen on one page and giving readers a dramatic couple of seconds to turn the page before viewing this pair in amorous embrace, the knife intended for an entirely different purpose (22.21-22). The image of Hell is as much a dream state as any, so in a sense, it's natural for Dream to accept the mantle of this realm, which is perhaps why Gaiman never bothers to deal with Dream's having any other choice other than accepting the key. Or perhaps the choice to accept the key to Hell is simply a form of pride. *Death of the Endless* refers to

Hell as “the most desirable plot of psychic real estate in the whole order of created things” (23 .13, fr.1), although it is never clarified why Hell is so sought after and all evidence would speak to the contrary.

In *The Graveyard Book*, Gaiman fashions Silas as a Byronic hero in the form of a guardian vampire. When Bod asks Silas about the nature of life and happiness within the context of suicide, Silas replies, “Wherever you go, you take yourself with you”(104). It’s this agency from which an individual derives a sense of self. As with the Dream Lord, the raw energy of the unconscious mind creates existence and meaning, as does one’s acceptance of a force beyond an individual’s control. Hell is the reflection of Heaven and one serves only to express the opposite quality of the other as the ultimate existential foil. Given an immaterial world, like the Realm of the Dreaming, the mind creates its own meaning. “The key to Hell” is metonymic for the choice one has in accepting life as it is.

Duty blinds Dream to all else, whereas Lucifer is quick to shed his responsibility over Hell. There are plenty of other mirrors for this theme throughout the volume such as with Destruction of the Endless, only referred to as the Prodigal, who abandons his role in the family. Remiel and Duma blindly substituting for Lucifer in Hell as other Angels fill their vacancy in the Silver City (28.2, fr.3). Even Nada, shortly after we learn that Duma has been replaced, asks Dream to abandon his duty to the dreaming, but the Byronic hero must suffer his obligations. It’s also important to note that Dream is drawn in the same “shadow” visage of Nada in these panels, imprinting the characterization of Dream as not entirely himself. It’s the characteristic of compassion and duty that

demonstrates Dream has changed for the better while also showing that he suffers the same fate as his victims. As an anthropomorphic, *Collective Shadow* that ultimately serves humanity, Dream cannot help but inevitably become more humane. His purpose for initially returning to Hell is to correct a callous act of cruelty with Nada, yet his apology is stilted because of his lack of humility. It was very deserving of a slap across the face, echoing the slap to come by other women. Dream's dutiful obligation to fulfill his role as Lord Shaper is epitomized in *The Kindly Ones* episode 10 in which Dream prepares to faceoff with the three Fates, declaring to Lucien: "We do what we do because of who we are. If we did otherwise, we would not be ourselves. I will do what I have to do. And I will do what I must." This syllogism conditions readers to accept the inevitable choice that Dream has already made, and because of this, readers must recognize Dream's role as a repository for the *collective unconscious*.

The Collective Shadow and the Archetype of Lucifer Morningstar

Jungians refer to the Collective Shadow as an archetype that expresses a collective evil represented by images of the devil, evil corporations, communists during McCarthyism, etc. The practice of projecting the image of the collective shadow onto an opponent is often a wartime practice that assuages a soldier's guilt for having to break (temporarily) with an existing moral code. Stephen Walker states, "The myth of the combat between Good and Evil often covers up a situation of moral unconsciousness, with inflation [over-identification] with the Good and projection of Evil the usual result" (34). This kind of moral binary is notably being stripped away in the twenty-first century,

owing a great debt to the bedrock of Enlightenment characterizations from Milton's Lucifer to Goethe's Mephistopheles. The wedge that religion has historically used to dichotomize the world into good vs. evil is being unraveled in a number of modern pursuits. Evolutionary psychologists claim that organisms are hardwired to fear death. Sexual drive or libido could even be viewed as an evolutionary incentive to replicate oneself for fear of Death, of Night, of Evil. From here, Jungians label the pursuit of "individuation" as a confrontation of the mythological archetypes which have constellated in the *collective unconscious*. Individuation is what Jungian psychologists hail as the ultimate attainment of psychological health—a state most may never achieve akin to Buddhist pursuit of Nirvana. Within the context of studying myth, the key to Individuation is cautiously relating one's Ego with presented archetypal material, a process defined as Integration.

The Shadow functions with prominence among Jungian Archetypes because of its strong connection to the personal unconsciousness. Without symbolic expression of the shadow, one risks psychotic dissociation. An aspect of Jungian Individuation is coming to terms with primitive psychological impulses. Among its many manifestations, the Shadow can be represented as the primitive trickster. It is god, man and animal in triunity, and the conflict between life giving and destructive powers that is exemplified in the Shadow Archetype. The Shadow tension can be seen in numerous classical myths such as between: Set and Horus, Prometheus and Zeus, Lucifer and Christ, or embodied in a single entity like Shiva, who both destroys and rejuvenates. The Shadow Archetype reconciles individuals and society in order to maintain dichotomies, without

which, Jung asserts we might collectively experience neurotic crisis on par with the Holocaust or Salem Witch Trials. This endless enactment of dehumanization is what David Livingstone Smith claims is a symptom of our humanity, as Smith states,

People believed themselves to be continuously stalked by ferocious specters; vampirelike, legions of succubae ripped open people's throats, drank their blood, and devoured their flesh. They dripped deadly poisons from their jagged maws; their razor-sharp claws were polluted and lethal. (134).

Because of the psychological importance for individuals and societies to integrate the Shadow Archetype, it becomes one of prominence in mythology, including in Gaiman's *The Sandman*. The way in which society dehumanizes those who commit atrocities, calling them sick or deranged, is a distancing tactic that insulates one from the reality that "genocidal maniacs" are perhaps not so different from the rest of us. Steven Walker writes in his work *Jung and Jungians on Myth*:

Acknowledging one's shadow and learning to deal with it honestly is one of life's great, if usually distasteful, psychological tasks. But in spite of the unpleasantness of the process, one must come to be able to say of one's shadow, as Prospero says of the monster Caliban at the end of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine' (35).

One way of viewing the Shadow Archetype in *The Sandman* is to see the Dream Lord, an anthropomorphic figure reigning over the collective unconsciousness of mankind, as

the manifestation of the Collective Shadow. Besides his very shadowy-like visage, as a character we see Dream drawn differently throughout the series (and I'm not referring to the various depictions because the artist changed). Consider the banquet during which various deities and mythological forms vie for the key to Hell in *Season of Mists*.

Readers should notice that Dream's face and clothing mirror those in the individual guests with whom he speaks. When speaking to Takehaya Susanoo-no-Mikoto, a powerful Japanese god of storms, Dream is depicted as Asian, whereas he appears feline when conferring with Bast, the Egyptian goddess of cats (25.18-19). Therefore, one way to view Dream is as a Shadow to other characters, having intimate access to humanity's deepest recesses of fantasy and nightmare. It is a juxtaposition of Lucifer, the usual Shadow suspect, with Dream, a revisionist Collective-Shadow.

The Triple Goddess Archetype

A second Jungian archetype, the myth of the Triple Goddess, also finds expression in Gaiman's *Sandman*—and again, the comics medium is ideally suited to depict this archetype. The Ninth volume of *The Sandman* saga is the longest, as Gaiman explains to in an interview with Hy Bender, “there were so many loose ends to tie up that the story just had to be that long” (Bender 104). *The Kindly Ones*, a 13 issue collection making it the Series' longest, is centered around Dream's central conflict, his humane and fatherly act of ending his son's life. The act of killing one's own kin is a violation of natural laws, presented by Gaiman in the classic Western tradition, thus incurring the wrath of The Kindly Ones (Aeschylus' Furies per “Oresteia”). Similar to

Orestes' murder of his mother being justified, Gaiman presents Dream's murder of his son as merciful and just albeit a couple millenia late. What makes this volume so delightful is the continuity with which Gaiman presents the triple goddess mytheme. The appearance of the triple goddess over the course of the series is notable if not Gaiman's primary myth. In the first issue of *Dream Country*, Calliope beckons with the triple goddess: Melete, Mneme, and Aiode. Another iteration then appears in episode two of *Preludes and Nocturnes*: "Imperfect Hosts." It's worth noting that Gaiman recognizes Dave McKean's cover art as, "The very basic design for the three" in his script introduction notes to artist Kelly Jones (*Dream Country* 15-16). The Fates debut with comic form, three heads springing from a singular, interramified form known as Hecateae. Episode two breaks from the classic 9 panel form, favoring vertical columns, and intersecting, oblique frames. This artform creates dissonance for a reader unfamiliar with the genre, not knowing which text or frame to follow in sequence. The three sisters are notably vignettted on the panels setting them apart. The art stands alone to indicate their grander role in the narrative, drawn in cartoon caricature.

Artists Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III present a more realistic rendition of the triple goddess talking to Rose Walker in *The Doll's House* (1.19). Gaiman develops the theme of the triple goddess as a Trinity, reflecting the previous spread of Unity Kinkaid reuniting with her daughter and granddaughter, gazing at their collected reflection in a mirror. The triple goddess is also anthropomorphized as owl, crone and cat in a totem. What is striking about Gaiman's second inclusion of the triple goddess is the explicit connection to a feminised image, not only Rose Walker as the vortex, but of

Hippolyta (Lyta) Hall, alluding to Amazonian myth. The comics medium is perfectly suited to overlaying these images without addressing them verbally which functions as a form of understatement that reinforces the archetype. Lyta Hall later becomes a subordinate aspect of the triple goddess in a quest for vengeance. In fact, the crux of conflict surrounding Rose Walker being progeny of Desire of the Endless puts Dream at risk of murdering his own kin. And while Dream narrowly avoids this trap, it is the same blood crime that culminates in *The Kindly Ones*. The triple goddess archetype is a consistent and recurrent in every volume of the series. They represent feminine divinity that according to Joseph Campbell, is the ultimate adventure and attainment for the hero's soul, "to unite with the Queen Goddess of the World"(Campbell 91). The image of the mother as life sustaining, nourishing and ever-virginal follows a cosmogonic cycle. Life and Death go hand-in-hand from the Hindu's Kālī, the devourer, to the Romans' Diana, a chaste huntress. In *The Sandman*, this image is represented by the blood-avenging Furies and the savage Bacchantes (*see fig.3-4), as Campbell states:

The whole round of existence is accomplished within her sway, from birth, through adolescence, maturity, and senescence, to the grave. She is the womb and the tomb: the sow that eats her farrow... The devotee is expected to contemplate the two [aspects] with equal equanimity (95).

Negative iterations of the archetype take the form of the witch or temptress which according to Jung are representations of the negative aspect of mother—the dragon. A hero's quest is to confront the dragon that stands in the way of psychological individuation.

Jung's later years were dedicated to the symbolic interpretation of Alchemy, central to which is the the myth of *hieros gamos*, the "sacred marriage" of Sun and Moon. Jung was raised in the patriarchal mythos of Protestant Christianity, but towards the end of his life in the search for *hieros gamos*, he found affinity with Roman Catholic dogma. Papal Bull of Pius XII's apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* taught the assumption of the Virgin Mary as a fourth component of the Trinity, a female one. This image of the Great Mother of divine wisdom, Sophia, represents a psychological integration of the feminine archetype (Walker 71). The sequel installment to *The Sandman Dream Hunters* published in 2009, presents the triple goddess as oracle—women of wisdom on the outskirts of civilization. The mother archetype in this edition is depicted as have many breasts from which to suckle.

Gaiman seems profoundly preoccupied with the image of *hieros gamos*. From Bast to Ishtar to Calliope, Dream seeks to unite with the myth of the mother archetype. While these figures are exploited sexually, they are never glorified. Ishtar's dance, while perhaps the most erotic entry in the entire series, is also grotesquely catastrophic. The power of Ishtar's dance summoning a dark force that subsumes like that of Kālī, the devourer. Second, the rape of Calliope is especially harrowing, calling condemnation on the patriarchal power structures that dominant literature, debasing the form of feminine power. Finally, Bast is the least defined character of the three, but it is clear that she is drowning under the dissolution of spirituality in the post-modern world. Her role in *The Sandman* is to destabilize the idea that any power lasts forever. Rollo May refers to the pursuit of feminine form as *Arete*, as in the case of Helen from Goethe's *Faust*. Greek

Men pursue this kind of virtue and courage (Hellenism) through the image of pure feminine beauty (May 244); Gaiman is obviously a proponent to the ideal of feminine form; it underpins the entirety of the series, a mytheme that speaks to our cultural need for self-actualization. Furthermore, Gaiman's intertextual motif of the triple goddess reinforces the idea that the oldest myths are inescapable. They form the backbone of the entire series' narrative, articulating an author's [Gaiman's] need to reconcile with the authors who have come before; ancient myths form the bedrock from which new narrative can spring forth, and each new permutation participates in recasting the myth.

“Soft Places” and Intertextual Myth-Making

When considering the dichotomy of myth into Western and Eastern traditions, *The Travels of Marco Polo* and Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* are germane to Gaiman's vision. Gaiman's sixth Volume, *Fables and Reflections*, is a collection that can be succinctly divided into three groups. It contains four stories of historical emperors, three stories about disparate historical figures telling stories organized in a collection under “Convergence,” and one *Sandman Special* Issue, “The Song of Orpheus.” Addressing the shared thematic material in this volume, Hy Bender states, “Another recurring theme is recognizing the distinct personality of a particular location...best expressed in ‘Soft Places’ by Rustichello, who explains the adult Marco Polo's genius was ‘being able to describe cities [the soul of the city]. What made it uniquely itself’”(140). Not only is this theme notable in this volume, but it's been consistent throughout the series—and again, it is the comics medium itself that allows for these revisionists myths to be fully realized.

“Soft Places” from *Fables and Reflections* is derivative of The Travels of Marco Polo and even more significantly Italo Calvino’s work *Invisible Cities*. Gaiman’s acknowledgment of these works in an interview with Hy Bender (Bender 148) understate the degree to which Gaiman drew raw material for inspiration, which is worth exploring in greater depth. In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan drink tea and play chess as Marco Polo enumerates the vast realms under his command. In one passage, the Khan notices the similarities between the city’s descriptions and presses Marco on the issue, challenging whether these places truly exist, to which Marco responds,

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else. (44)

Cities possess unique geopolitical textures, colloquial languages and ethnocentric foods, and continue to grow and evolve. What gives a city its personality is the conglomeration of people occupying it at a given point. Likewise, the reciprocal effect occurs in which the pervading zeitgeist of a community has the power to transform the individual occupants. Perhaps the best way to define a city is by establishing where one begins and ends: a metropolitan center reaching outwards; urban sprawl eventually spilling into suburbs with increasingly larger yards; suburbs and residential developments extending into farmland--the heartland; and finally, the untamed

wilderness. Obviously, this model is fictive in that it may not always be accurate, but more importantly, it fails to answer the question of where a city actually begins or ends. Does a city end when it touches the untamed wilderness? Like consciousness, the boundaries are indistinct, each side blending into the other.

Calvino's poetry masterfully employs imagery that personifies the ancient and mythological cities from Marco Polo's travels. Through the description of these mystical places, the world seems to hold a greater mystery and excitement. Although there are many poems from *Invisible Cities* that blatantly explore the connection between dreams and geography, section four, "Continuous Cities," is obviously the raw material from which "Soft Places" was inspired. In this poem, Marco Polo recounts running into a goatherd in the illustrious city of Cecilia. Polo is confounded when the goatherd asks the name of the city they stand in. The goatherd explains that while he can intimately distinguish between the grazing fields and meadows that his flock graze; cities all seem to blend into one another. Marco tells the Herdsman that he is the opposite, being lost in the forests, in which "each clump of grass mingles, in my eyes, with every other stone and clump." (153) This passage should be read in concert with the closing passage of the Khan leafing through his atlases as Polo says, "If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop" (164). Calvino uses the expanse of China as an inexhaustible template for meandering poetic imagery. The image is reliant on a Western reader's willingness to accept the expanse of China as a simulacrum for the human condition—limitless in poetic potential. After Polo's first

encounter with the goatherd, time passes and Polo runs into the same goatherd with a few mangy goats trailing him, although he doesn't immediately recognize the man.

Upon asking the goatherd where he is, he realizes they are [still] in Cecilia.

'That cannot be!' I shouted. 'I, too, entered a city, I cannot remember when, and since then I have gone on, deeper and deeper into its streets. But how have I managed to arrive where you say, when I was in another city, far far away from Cecilia, and I have not yet left it?'... 'The places have mingled,' the goatherd said, 'Cecilia is everywhere. Here, once upon a time, there must have been the Meadow of the Low Sage. My goats recognize the grass on the traffic island' (153).

As with the Dreaming, space and geography hold a magical quality in Gaiman's stories. Speculative fiction is a genre that explores the parameters of life as it is, versus what it has the potential to be. One of the prescriptive uses of Speculative fiction [either in writing or reading] is to dislodge one's mind from the timorous habit of blindly accepting that the way things are is the only way they can be. Fiddler's Green, a personification of Eden, states that soft places exist in the world, but not as many as preceded explorers like Marco Polo. Soft places are physical locations in which dreams intrude upon the geographies of the real. In these places, dreams and reality are relative to one another: neither is more real than the other.

The Sandman is littered with soft places, even though they're not always explicitly identified. The tavern setting in *World's End* is located adjacent an existential storm that is transforming reality. It functions as a soft place in which the real and dream

blend together, and what better place for travelers seeking haven to tell stories of other places? From Necropolis Litharge in “Cerements” to the Dreaming City from “A Tale of Two Cities,” soft places hedge readers in. In all of these places, characters are presented with the real danger of being trapped within the labyrinthian catacombs of Litharge or the cyclopean walls leaning in on Robert in the Dreaming City. It is reminiscent of Calvino’s trap city of Zobeide from *Cities and Desire*:

the white city, well exposed to the moon, with streets wound about themselves as in a skein. They tell this tale of its foundation: men of various nations had an identical dream. They saw a woman running at night thought an unknown city; she was seen from behind, with long hair, and she was naked. (45)

Each of these dreamers attempts to lay hold of this tantalizing beauty, only for her to escape their grasp. So they collectively construct the city like the one in their dreams, slightly rearranging the spaces and walls in order to trap the woman. Zobeide is a trap for a dream, very much like Gaiman’s “Soft Places” is a trap for both the living and the dreaming. It’s easy to see how Gaiman adapted Calvino for these particular episodes, but one must look a little more closely at Marco Polo’s central placement in the overall *Sandman* saga in order to appreciate the transtextual richness.

The Travels of Marco Polo is difficult to classify. Revisionist scholars have even challenged whether Marco Polo was ever in China in the first place, despite that his account was seminal in introducing Western readers to the image of the East. Polo’s historical accounts are nebulous at best, but perhaps this dark and mysterious figure is

what attracted Gaiman's interest for his series. Orientalism critic Edward Said would assert that *The Travels of Marco Polo* is fictionalized, and it truly functions as Occidental criticism. Case in point, Polo's cellmate and amanuensis, Rustichello of Pisa, was an established writer of Arthurian romance. Polo's account could function as a kind of vita for courtly politics, and without a surviving original manuscript, James Spence postulates that Polo's account was grossly subjected to numerous editorial changes:

If much of Polo's account was thus designed as a mixture of self-promotion and oblique criticism of Western meanness as contrasted with Eastern opulence and openness, then other aspects of his description may have had similar polemical or moralistic intent. His book might have been designed in part as a commentary on his own native city, as much as an accurate representation of life in China. (15)

Whether the account is accurate is not a concern for Gaiman's retelling. It is for pleasure, as a reader, to lose oneself in the fiction of a reality that is "other" than the one we know. In *Fables and Reflections*, Gilbert [Fiddler's Green] is the anthropomorphic myth of paradise. He is featured in "Soft Places" as an amalgamation between human consciousness and paradisiacal geography, his role much like that of the Dream Lord's in interacting with humanity's consciousness. Fiddler's Green is aptly expressed in the frames and panels of the comic medium given the exteriority of his character. In "Soft Places" Fiddler's Green explains his own identity to Rustichello and Polo, suggesting that it is inspiration for a tale to one day be told. One such passage from *The Travels of Marco Polo* is of the country of Mulehet. This is the tale of the Old Man, called Aloadin,

and the mountain. The place is described as a sumptuous garden paradise. The account of the gate being guarded, and the land flowing with milk and honey is blatantly Edenic. Given the Saracen twist, there is of course some perversion of the account to convey an oblique cultural criticism of Genoa. Youths are drugged, given to gratifying and sumptuous lifestyle and then re-drugged and sent on assassin missions in order to re-gain entrance into the garden. (Polo 55-6)

Fiddler's Green is the intertextual embodiment of this mythological allusion. He is originally placed in the narrative of Rose Walker, and he goes by the name Gilbert, amateur knight errant, having escaped the Dreaming to explore the human world. His choice to abandon his duty is reminiscent of Lucifer's abdicating Hell. In addition, Gilbert's compassion for Rose Walker is noble, even self-sacrificial, in contrast to the duty-bound Dream, rarely acting on his own impulse. This narrative twist to favor a character opposing the protagonist is part of Gaiman's secret weapon to setup his readers. To make readers skeptical of a protagonist who embodies humanity's collective dream amounts to a kind of self-loathing.

In order to see how the episode participates in the rest of the narrative, I'd like to turn back to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, chapter seven, "The Six Steps". These six steps examine the purpose behind a given art form. Understanding *The Travels of Marco Polo* and Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* gives one a better sense for Gaiman's first step: Idea/Purpose is first, which he describes as impulses, ideas, emotions and philosophies of the work's content. The form of artwork is the comic book, and much like Marco Polo's dubious historical account, the comics medium is a

dark figure facing the scrutiny of predecessor art forms in which a rich establishment of literary criticism wants to desperately reframe comics under the label of “the graphic novel.” I believe Gaiman shows an affinity towards for these mysterious literary figures as openings for revisionist myth-making. The third step in the production of comic art is Idiom [Genre]: “the school of art, vocabulary of styles, gestures and subject matter.” The fourth step is Structure: “How to arrange and compose the work,” which we touched on with our discussion of frames and gutters. The Fifth stage in the artistic endeavour is Craft: “the skills required and practical knowledge” usually honed over years until mastery can be achieved, and the final, sixth step is the surfacing of the art: “preparing the aspects most apparent and superficial.” McCloud credits the true or good comic artists as the ones who establish the idioms and are less interested in surfaces. He compares this to biting into a shiny apple only to discover that it is hollow. So, what makes a comic good art rather than just entertaining? McCloud states that if “ideas rule the work and determine its shape, comics can help plant those ideas far and wide” (184).

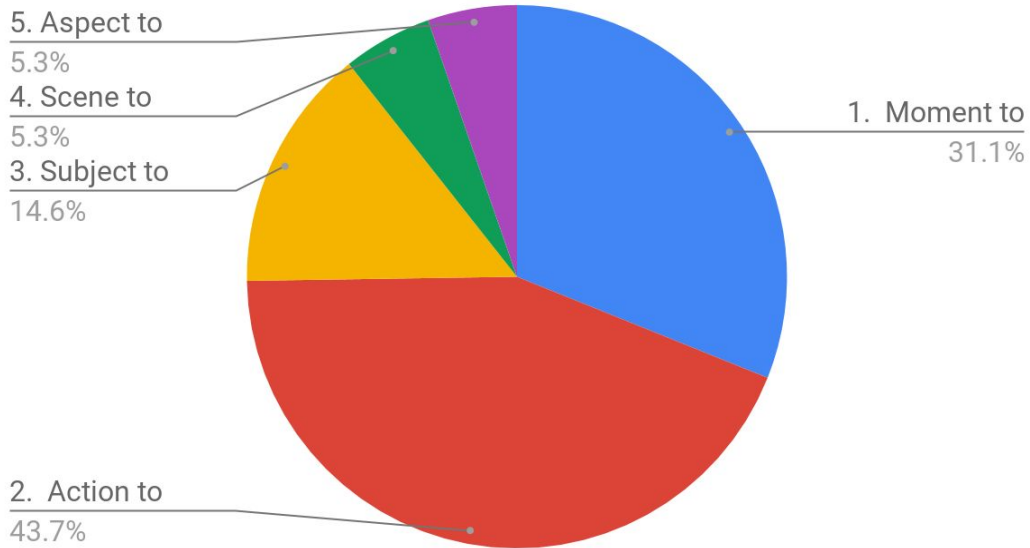
Gaiman, being so adept at spinning a tale and pastiching a myth, uses the ideas to propel his storytelling while relying on the artistic prowess of an array of illustrators and colorists. I believe that episodes such as “Ramadan” and “Exile” both participate in the seed of “Soft Places,” yet they were special in their crafting. As Gaiman explains: “I didn’t create my usual panel breakdowns for it. Instead, I just wrote brief descriptions of the action, followed by the text of the captions and dialogue, and let Jon break

everything down into panels himself' (Bender 223). For this reason, these episodes are unique spots through which a critic can observe Gaiman's craft of comic art.

For the purpose of my analysis, I would like to use "Soft Places" as the counterpoint to these two other episodes, as the idea behind all three episodes is consistent. All three borrow from Calvino's exotic poetry of cities, and an exoticized Eastern motif. Additionally, all three episodes share the thematic exploration, mentioned at the outset of this chapter, that geographic places have distinct personalities.

Artist P.Craig Russell, an established comic artist in his own right, was given free rein to construct the issue without artistic direction from Gaiman for "Ramadan." The episode opens with an invocation reminiscent to calling upon the Muse in Epic Poetry. Combining the Koran's "Shahada" and a mandala wheel forms a syncretism between text and art that prefaces the Arabian Tale. The text for panels are lettered in a Medieval cursive on banners that look like parchment. The blue skies bleed off the pages under golden cityscapes, complimenting the image of Baghdad in its golden age. The color palate is striking in primacy with panel transitions that significantly favor moment-to-moment actions over the traditional "subject-to-subject. The cumulative effect of this is a narrative that is slow and dedicated to exact postures and movements. The story feels like one frozen in time, perhaps referring to Haroun Al Raschid's desire to preserve the greatness of Baghdad for all posterity.

Transition Breakdown for "Ramadan"



The colors are bright, utilizing mostly prime colors with high contrast. This piquant palate helps to distinguish the city of Baghdad as one teeming with life and magic. The primary colors create a classic comic book feel, harkening to early American comic art panels like those of Jack Kirby for Marvel Comics, e.g.: the splash on page 24. It elicits a sense for readers of a golden era of comics that correlates to the narrative of the golden age for Baghdad with its mystique and grandeur living forever through the eyes of a child listening to the storyteller.

Orientalism in *The Sandman*

In Renata Sancken's essay, "The King is Dead, Long Live the King: Orientalism, *The Sandman*, and Humanity," she explores whether or not Orientalism occurs in "Ramadan" and "Soft Places." Sancken acknowledges that, on the surface level,

“Ramadan” presents an exoticized vision of the East. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* seeks to identify ways in which the Western image can dominate, encapsulate and restructure the East. Sancken argues against these comics participating in Orientalism, citing the characterization of Houran Al Rashid as one of wisdom, with the ability to self-determine. She claims that this places him, and by extension the work itself, outside Said’s critique that Westerners often portray Easterners as “irrational, depraved, childlike” (*The Sandman Papers* 58). While Sancken is correct in asserting that Gaiman’s work falls outside of a kind of Imperialistic Orientalism, she fails to acknowledge how latent Orientalism is often expressed in literature.

To examine how this occurs, let’s return to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which seeks to examine canonical texts that have contributed to “a style of thought based upon the ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). One of the chief characteristics of these Orientalist works is to dominate and restructure the Orient. The literary scope to which this theory ought to be applied is where Said makes the distinction between latent and manifest forms of Orientalism. Unconsciously, if you think in the Western sense, any attempt to frame the Orient or to fictionalize it, is a kind of Latent Orientalism. Said also states that latent Orientalism “also encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world...women are usually creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality” (Said 207). Given this view, “Ramadan” indisputably possesses these latent forms. Readers have to look no further than Houran Al Rashid’s wife, Zubaidah trying to comfort him when she says: “Come with me. Let me anoint

your forehead with warm oil, and stroke you with my soft hands. I can make you forget your troubles between my breasts; I can smooth away the darkness in your soul between my thighs” (7). And it is not just the depictions of the feminine that present latent orientalism, but the presentation of Baghdad itself as vulnerable and needing protection: “a feminine penetrability, it’s supine malleability” (Said 206).

Professor Zhaoming Qian presents an alternative way in which to understand Orientalism in his Prologue to *Orientalism and Modernism*. He focused on Ezra Pound and W.C. Williams’ poetry, in which the East is not seen in terms of its shortcomings or differences with the West. Qian claims that these poets were attracted to the Orient because of their perceived affinities with ‘the Other,’ rather than ‘the Otherness in the Other.’ For the Modernists, self-actualization requires ingratiation with the image of the Orient: a celebration of ‘the Other’ as an act of crystallizing the understanding of oneself akin to the Jungians concept of integration with the Shadow. Given this view, Dream’s preservation of the city of wonders is to transmit its opulence for all posterity rather than to confine its borders. Baghdad doesn’t need to be reified, its memory just needs to be celebrated. Herein, the comic medium risks becoming restrictive. After all, it is only one individual’s ethnographic representation, and insofar as the artist seeks realism, it will always fall short. In this case, the plasticity of the comic medium allows for more abstract representations. These cartoonish drawings achieve a level of abstraction that underscores their own artifice. This kind of self-consciousness within the medium acknowledges, even celebrates its representational shortcomings.

This brings us back to “Soft Places,” which plays with the idea of borderlands. The character of Polo is, as a youth, plucky and inquisitive, which is contrasted with Rutchello’s desire only for wine and women. The actual account of *The Travels of Marco Polo* is rife with Orientalist thought, from the villainization of the “Tartars” to the glorification of mythological Christian potentate, Prester John (83). “Soft Places” contains none of these original textures, and functions as pure revisionism, striving to use the historical figure of Marco Polo for Gaiman’s exploration of traversing the borderlands. John Watkiss’s artwork creates an oblique motion of sand as tiers that intersect the panels. The color tones and modeling add depth that compliments the blur of the soft place. The palate is quite the opposite of the heavily-saturated primary colors in “Ramadan.” The reason for the colorist using muted tones is to create motion. Objects in motion appear less distinct and less colorful given the aperture of the human eye. It’s only the brief couple pages in which Polo speaks with Dream that colors appear more vivid contributing to a tone that Dream intentionally guides the explorer.

A return to the desert soft place in “Exiles” shows a completely different artistic vision while utilizing shared thematic material. Jon Muth uses black and white with minimalist splashes of brushstroke-like color. Speaking of his inspirations for “Exiles,” Gaiman said,

I also wanted to continue our experimentations with form...Jon skipped the pencilling process and did the story using only ink. Jon also handled the coloring himself, and again in an unconventional way--instead of using

paint or watercolors, he glued down various swatches of fabric and different kinds of paper to create the colors and patterns. (Bender 223)

The new form, including the first and only computer-generated font used in *The Sandman* (*see fig. 8), opened up the door to explore new idioms, albeit in a collaborative manner. Gaiman continued to use ideas that were inspired by the Western gaze such as Ezra Pound's poetry. The new technology used for this episode opened new forms, like full page spreads overlaid with textures and lines bleeding from frames. Also, Muth abandoned the traditional speech bubble in favor of arcing lines to spatially orient the conversations, abandoning what McCloud refers to as the "most complex and most versatile of comics' many synaesthetic icons in the ever-present, ever-popular word balloon"(McCloud 134). The dissolution of word-bubbles synchronizes sound with visual texture that simulates the blurred distinction between the world of dreaming and reality, but this is only achievable because of the innovation of computer-generated font.

The comics medium continues to evolve alongside such technological innovations in a way that traditional prose cannot; furthermore, as revisionist myth, *The Sandman* can only be fully realized within the comics medium. It is perfectly suited to reimagining myths for modern audiences; the interdependence of image and language read within the graphic design of the comic page (*mis en page*) dreams a myth onward. As such, it gives myths a modern dress. For Gaiman, this is a literary phantasmagoria of stitched together fables, myths, and historical accounts. The lines between time and space are intentionally misleading, and the format is perfectly suited to this kind of

story-telling. In fact, I would say that it is the only medium for it. Although I am sure that some Hollywood fat-cat producer will one day capitalize on an adaptation of *The Sandman*, it will undoubtedly fall short in capturing the essence of Gaiman's work. The universe from which Gaiman can select material to incorporate is limitless, the stuff of dreams, and this is why even now, I am not sure whether I've selected the best passages to critique. At least, I will endeavor to open the door a little wider for other serious and scholarly English students. Henry David Thoreau in "*Walking*" wrote about how mythology, more than any other form of literature, comes closest to expressing a true yearning for the wild. He compared it [specifically Greek myth] to the soil in which all other literature springs forth, like a great dragon-tree of the Western Isles. He envisaged a time in the future when "The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East...[when] the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology" (qtd. in Feldman 527). *The Sandman* is a singular work that propels the medium of the comic into a new literary strata, fulfilling this prophecy by Thoreau. Archetypal representations explore a range of mythologies, retold in a medium that celebrates its own exteriority and artifices. The effect of reading in this medium is such that it lowers the reader's guard, if just a little, freeing one to explore the power of dreams to supplant reality. At its core, the costs of telling great stories leads one to become increasingly isolated, and in Morpheus' case, obliterated (*see fig. 7). In the closing panels of the series, Morpheus muses over Will Shaxbeard's *Tempest* saying "I wanted a tale of graceful ends. I wanted a play about a King who drowns his books, and breaks his staff, and leaves his kingdom. About a magician who becomes a man. About a man who turns

his back on magic” (75.35.fr.6). These lines are germane to Gaiman’s purpose in writing his own series ending. The power of the narrative over both the writer and the audience is a kind of contract that comes to a graceful end. There is so much to explore in *The Sandman*, and if the comic medium can be freed from historical prejudices spawned by the 1950s Comics Code, and if we can adapt our analysis to be inclusive of a new pictographic syntax, then *The Sandman* will undoubtedly challenge what it means to be literary.

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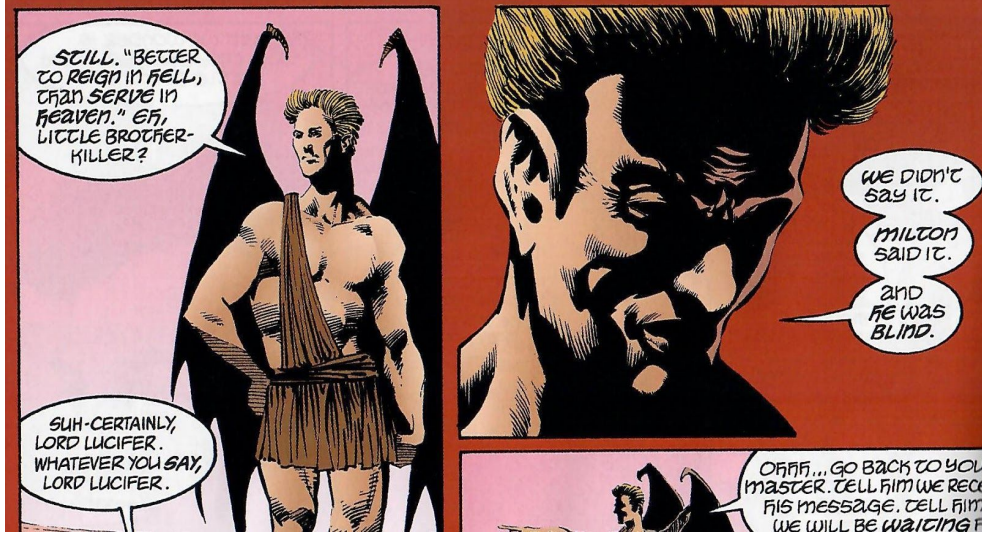
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Illustrations Index



(fig. 1)



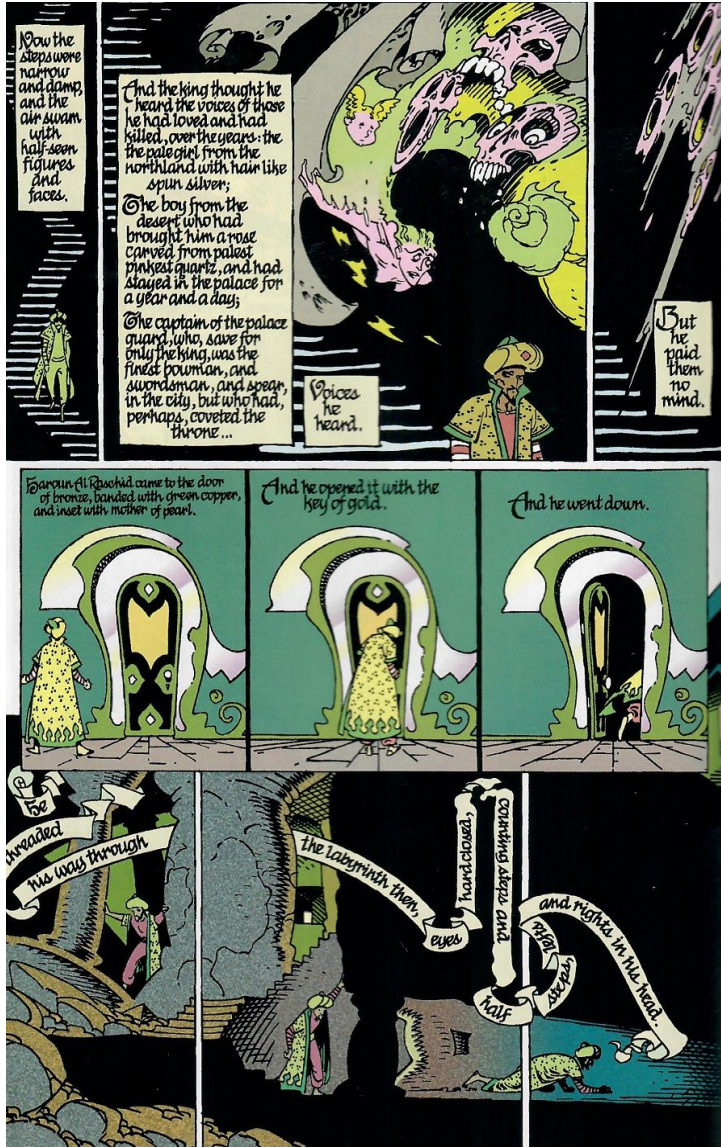
(fig. 2)



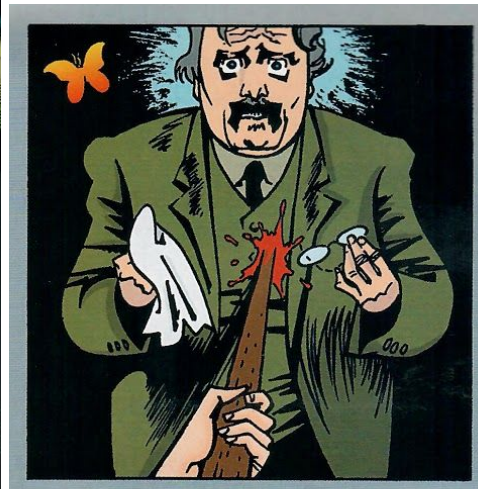
(Fig. 3)



(Fig. 4)



(Fig. 5)



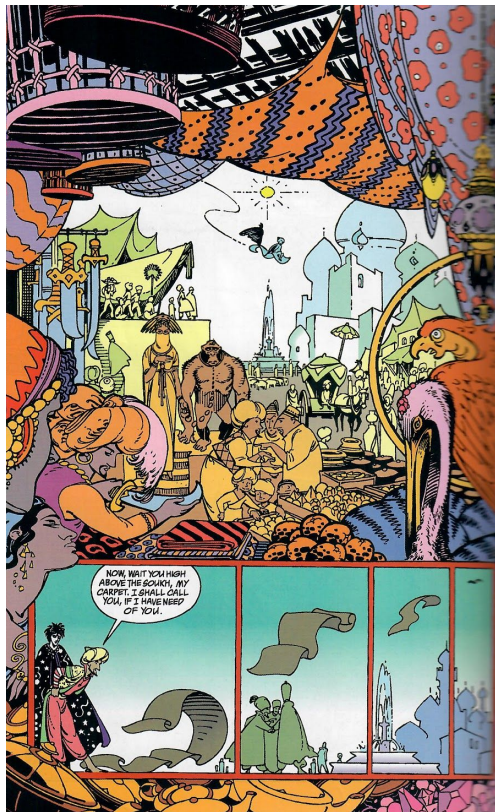
(Fig. 6)



(Fig. 7)



(Fig. 8)



(fig. 9)